

1-1-2013

The Seeded Underground

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THE SEEDED UNDERGROUND

by

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Bachelor of Arts
University of South Carolina, 2009

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

Creative Writing

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2013

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Debra and Jerry Blake

ABSTRACT

The Seeded Underground explores the grave intricacies of identity and emptiness. Using the haptic experience as a focus, this work subverts plot in lieu of the individual experience in the seemingly mundane seconds of waking life. By questioning the physical as well as the mental, The Seeded Underground tunnels down into the dark and voided corners of the individual, makes meaning of their sordid lives and opens wide the darkness surrounding the world and nature.

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CHAPTER 1

Craig

I'll walk until I find Ruby or someone who knows Craig. No one lines the streets or sends shadows down to me from the windows above so I stand on the sidewalk, watch Mark drag across the bridge. The last of Craig folds sweat-streaked in his palm from where I tried to scratch it away. When I move to follow, my body jerks forward, but doesn't inch further behind him. Wooden pole creaks, splits on my leaning for support. Cement secures the straight of it down, tethers it to the roots spread from the tree. Splinters pierce the thick of my callouses, splice them open when I grab for support to stifle a choke. No blood beads atop them, and as I gaze on my empty hand Craig comes up, expels in a liquid splat through my pinched lips. It stains dark the light gray of the sidewalk, voided and dry where parts of him landed in my palm. Checking for missing outlines, I see the shadow mark of my hand wave to me, pushed slight by the wind. The liquid of Craig waves hello, goodbye. The clear mess of him, the greasy acid film swirling in unmistakable blues and purples on the walkway spins me lost, and I shake my own arm side to side to return the gesture. I reach down as it swims into and around itself. It doesn't spill outward or down the slant to the gutter at my feet, but only careens around the mark, never breaking the boundaries of the void. Cool to touch, I give in to the buckle of knees, finger him back into my mouth, rub rough on my tongue and gums, wait for him to absorb back in, direct me.

Everything hurt. But it hurt worse to know he'd never release me, let me go.

But this is the end. The beginning is what matters most.

* * *

Bare branches stood stiff in the air over the hill. There was no light, no noise when I approached on knees and fingertips to peer over. Smoke from the tops of buildings lifted thin in inches above its source, masked the sky in a bleached fog. From the outside looking in to the center, dust swirled vortexed around a bench, lofted debris from the ground to the charred lids of roofs. Through broken windows shone shadows of light, short flickers from the shallow bottoms on candles. Rain fell heavy over me, slicked down my clothes in thin layers creating a tremble in my knees and elbows. Winter lynched humid around everything, made dew freeze, thaw, freeze again within moments. My skin itched, and the rapid bursts of breath rattled against my empty pockets, wrinkled them flat to my sides. Smoke or steam or mist escaped in tufts from my mouth, flew away from me out into the night, out onto the empty streets to mix with the air. Watching breath fleet made me think of the pills, the ones that took the pain. They were gone, snatched away from me in a fit of grips and voices, a rough kick, an angry push. Eyes blurred and I pushed my thumbs to them, pushed hard until I didn't remember the empty anymore, until I could see clear again. Rustles from behind whispered faint, touched modest at the curve of my neck, the wet of my ankles in grass, so I pushed off and walked down the slope. I thought the rain would make me fall, but I put one foot in front of the other and walked down the muddy hill, to hear my feet sound solid on the street.

Clouds painted smooth against the night sky as I eased out toward the sidewalk. The clouds and I stood watching each other, one looking down, one looking up, neither breathing or motioning. The haze of mist I exhaled whitened the gap separating us, made

the puffs disappear. White on white, white painted on black, I imagined myself a part of them, something looking out over the vast of everything, something to be studied or ignored. Rain stopped then, turned frozen mid-fall, crystalized to snow. They landed weighted on the ground, gave off the sound they would if they remained liquid, if they were still heavy. Certain spots remained dry, and the one I was in produced nothing, no rain, no sleet, no hail. Standing in the null I watched the frost and fog and haze rise up around me, mask me in a cold cocoon, welcome me. A path parted for me to follow, and I did.

I hadn't been there long, long enough only to sneak in from the side, creep up a back stairwell and walk in the first door unsecured. No one came in the hall when my footsteps echo-rolled down length of it, knocked on the doors and walls to announce me. The brightness of the inside surprised me, made me hold my breath for fear of being seen out in the open. But I knew no one would come out and ask me where I came from or cared I was there. For whatever reason I knew they wanted to be left solitary just like I did, wanted to wallow alone in whatever baggage that followed them. I licked my lips before stepping, listened to water drip off my hair, stroked grit of the walls when I finally rounded the corner. Before I touched the first knob, my hand refused it, lingered in the space as if it would be burned by the offense. Knob turned easy though, door swung loose at the pressure from my shoulder when I leaned into it, bumped light to force closure free. Lights from the hall flickered then, burnt out in a muzzled sizzle and even in the dark I was too afraid to enter a room not my own. Not until minutes after I heard a crash behind me did I go in. Clay covered walls spread out before me, steadied me, held me firm on my collapse into the room, kept me from falling through to the other side. Floor finished,

walls not, I paced around the span of it, saw once yellow string marking area plans; desk in front of the window, bookshelves along all the walls. An arrow under my foot pointed right to an arched doorway, symbols curved up from floor to ceiling and back down ending at a used instrument on the other side. Hot air blew from the vents in each corner of the room, shot down on me in quick veils. Sweat made clothes stick harsher to my skin, pulled me down until my shoulders hunched at the weight.

I leaned to the window, watched rain turn to snow then rain again before hitting the ground. I fell asleep to the anomaly of smoke bleaching night.

Talk in mumbles came from under the crack in the front door. There were footsteps in the hall, shouting down below from outside, noise compounded on noise, but it was the wind that woke me. The itching in my arms spanned wide across my chest and stomach and I stamped soundless with my foot to halt it, to push it away. Sensation of urge was heightened by the clothes fit dry upon me, raised stiff in peaks from my position. I didn't try to ride it out or scratch it away like I had been before I came. I left, went back through the hill and grass to find relief.

The day warmed my legs like bath water, splayed nerves silent, unmoving. I found nothing in the city. No one knew what I needed or even wanted to help. At first the place was empty and then people bleed out onto the street from the buildings. Suitcases knocked against my arms and legs, shoulders nudged me to the outskirts of the sidewalk. My "excuse me's" and "hello's" went unnoticed. Bright orange of the sunlight glared my sight and faces became blurs, blobs, shadows on bodies. I left after being knocked to the street seconds from being a stain on the road.

I moved against the grain as people made their way further into the city and the farther away I got, the less people cluttered around me. The bridge lurched clean as I came around the corner, shirt puckered at my back from gliding between people. Nothing flowed beneath it, but trickles of water came off the side, landed in the mud underneath. Cupping my hand to catch it, the clear of it reflected the pieces of sun not obscured by the clouds. Uneven drops turned to a steady stream and I leaned further over to bowl both hands to drink from. Face echoed leathery when I brought arms up and I thought back to when the water I used swam dirty in potholes, in the pools at the bottom of rain gutters. After taking a sip, I opened the bottom of my hands, watched at what remained drop below, mingle with the mud and rocks at the foot of the bridge. Concrete sounded as I made my way across, and the bridge moaned in short gurgles or long deep wails. Each step produced a new sound and I zigzagged over, anticipated the noise, listened close for the pitch. Men on the other side eyed me but didn't move. One scratched hard around his nose, flicked pieces of what came off toward the handrail. The other rustled fingers on the inside of his pockets, shifted back with his foot ready to run. Neither of them approached me, asked me what I was doing. They only watched until I was out their line of sight, but even after I passed, I felt a stare out the backs of their heads.

Shade from an alley beckoned me in and if not for the heavy sighs, the smell of breath as I walked, I would have never noticed her lurking. She wore jeans baggy around the knees and ankles. White top fitted tight across her chest and waist, hung low at her shoulders, a shift away from sliding off. Hair flung wild behind her, tangled and knotted from middle to end, base to tip. I didn't know her, but I knew her, knew what she was, knew what she did, knew everything I needed to. She was different, stranger, but she

reminded me of my old Ruby Blue who took care of me before. The galley dark shrouded her in slits of light from the lamp at the end. Heated breath from her mouth allowed the curled ends of hair to stick to the corners of her lips. She leaned forward, bent at the knee as she stood. Either she shifted or the light from the end of the alley did and part of her shone pale, the other part still hidden behind blue darkness. Inside curves of her eyebrows linked and separated with her face twitching, adjusting to better see me. I saw her, but didn't see her and she asked me who I was, but I didn't answer, so she asked again, pointed exact with each word.

Ruby Blue lived hard, snorted off tabletops, off foreheads, off anything. When others set fire to the world, Ruby liked to watch, so did I. We'd smoke cigarettes, release the vapor out our nostrils then get fried in the dank of an alley while the others scattered energized and clumsy. Ruby was quiet and this girl reminded me her, careless, unhindered, layered with desire and deceit. Dark from the too close walls shrouded her, bulged something out one side of her pocket, cast it in a haze of gray dimness. She spoke out the corners of her mouth where spit cluttered heavy and protruding, where the hair gathered. V. Vieve. Genevieve, she told me, but all I could see was Ruby and then Ruby V.

Behind her, both hands slipped flat out the back of her pockets and Craig appeared dusty behind her, smooth as fresh paper.

“What is that,” I asked.

“That depends on who you are,” she responded, “depends on what you’re looking for.”

Turning away proved pointless. My legs locked immobile as if planted into the cement, molded with it, hard on hard.

“Who are you,” she said, “and what are you looking for.”

Powder coated thick to the rim of the bag, but when I motioned for it she snatched it back, clutched it in her hand. Her other hand slid into her jacket, a click sounded from inside.

“Do you know what this is,” she asked

“No, but it'll have to do for now.”

“You just get here,” she asked

“Yes,” I said, “well, not really, I just.”

She threw the packet at me before I finished stumbling over my words, before I had a chance to tell her my story, to tell her about the pills.

“Welcome home,” she said.

“No,” I said, “just here for now.”

Laughing she nodded, sniffed, spat on the ground. Her eyes bombed, glossed under the light of the round moon now above us. Patter beat in my stomach and I wanted to feel again, to feel something other than pain and itch, and Ruby V gave me that. Blood rushed from my groin to my head, and stepping forward, my wet hand slid from my folded arms and I pressed into her. Cold against my cheek, her lips pursed into a kiss as I ran my hand up her arm to grab Craig. She stepped back and stood full under the light.

“Remember who took care of you,” she said.

I mouthed an “okay” just before my face met hers, then someone ran past me, knocked me to the side, obscured her from view and then she was gone.

After that I didn't search for her. I only rubbed my shoulder from where brick met bone, peered Craig dusting the inside of the bag in white coats. The bench in the center met me on my way back to the clay-lined room and I couldn't want to wait that long. Lined rows stacked stiff along the slats of the wood. Shadows of people stood in their windows as dark cutouts behind the glass and I imagined them paper figures, imagined myself inside a cardboard box. When I took all of Craig to my brain, licked residue off the wood, I waited for the numbing in my mouth but it never came. I felt Ruby V came up behind me, felt her smooth hair back from my face, felt the bend in the bench when she down, but when I turned she wasn't there. As I looked up to the sky, Craig filled the empty spaces in a deep burn down to my toes. He ran in the spaces between my fingers and I moved when he moved, my head left when he moved left, right when he moved right. Ruby V moved too out the corner of my eye, fast and slow simultaneous.

“Feel good Little Sister,” she said.

And I smiled, gurgled, tried to follow her shadow circling around me.

I had a dream, and Ruby V was there watching.

A man sat stoic in the backseat of a car. Fever came over me and I tore his clothes off, pushed him down, down. His blank face didn't change, but he stared at me, cried. Tears streaking the cracked leather of the seats, tears soaking into the foam of the cushion, tears soaking into me, being sucked up by the sizzle of my skin, I mounted him, grabbed firm at his bare shoulders until my nails latched in as a lock.

Craig spoke from the sidelines, told me what to do.

“Break him,” Craig said. “Break him down.”

My body rocked. The man's pelvis shattered at my weight, at my bouncing but even then I didn't stop. Pieces of him broke off, fell into the floorboard of the car, turned to dust under the compression of my body, of my feet, but Craig shouted on. Ruby V smoked cigarettes, watched in the rearview mirror, crossed her legs in the passenger seat, a face floating in the rusted roof. Fear came as power in a quiver through my legs. Even after the man was gone, laid in piles beneath my feet, in the creases of my fingers, I kept moving, kept stomping him down into the carpet turned brown.

“Until you die,” Craig whispered in my ear. “Until you burst into pieces.” Condensation misted the windows, rolled down and misted again as I went on. It wouldn't stop and the release was more than far away, incomprehensible. Dust caked to mud, car turned to sand and I pounded with my fists until I found myself in a hole too deep to climb out of. Hours were minutes, but it didn't matter that I was pouring in sweat, making humid the air I breathed.

Above me Craig, Ruby V sat on the bench suspended in the air above my head, shadowed the hole, kept me digging.

“Don't stop,” I mouthed to myself. “Don't stop.”

* * *

I woke in a beanbag chair and the high-lows of sirens far in the distance. Someone strummed arpeggios in the corner, but eyes wouldn't focus so I could see. Dry mouth made me cough, ache sandy and raw in my throat. The day was almost over and light beamed crooked through the window, landed in diagonal lines on the floor by my thigh. Muscles stiffened as I got up and someone called me Little Sister, but it wasn't Ruby V.

“She wakes,” he said laughing.

Legs dragged beneath me as I walked over to the window. Pulling back the curtain to see the streets below took more effort than it should, made my arms shake useless. Handfuls of people grouped together around the entrances to alleys, some sat on the bench I remembered, sat in the grass next to the tree, shadows moved behind windows higher up. Through my own I saw the door hunched forward into the apartment, cracked from where I didn't shut it behind me when I left. I wasn't strong enough to make the short walk across the street, but I didn't want to stay among the arpeggios pounding my head. Room colored dark as soot and so did he. When he moved, I moved and the deep clouds over my eyes formed heavier and blinking them away made it worse. Pushing my fingers into my eyes was the only thing that halted the ache, but soon after I started a voice asked me to stop.

“How long,” I struggled asking, “what day is it.”

“Day six for you Little Sister,” he said

When I turned he stopped strumming, black fingers still curved over the strings. Placing the guitar down, he came over, floated on the shadows, stood over me and put his hand on the window.

“Craig took you down,” he said. “Tell me about it.”

I still felt it in my body and Craig didn't let me go, and I wasn't sure if I wanted it to. He told me about what happened, how Craig stayed with me for two days and for two days I strummed arpeggios on the guitar, strummed until the stings went flat and my fingers went raw and bled. He told me that even after he took it away from me, my fingers still moved, strumming over and over. On the evening of the second day, V came back in a streak of light in the doorway, he said and I thought I remembered, thought I

remembered her asking me if I wanted a sandwich. Thought I remembered I was already asleep before she got back from the other room.

“More,” I said.

And it was given from the hand next to me that wasn't mine. I heard little sister again and slumped in a corner, snorted, pushed my fingers to my eyes until Craig told me what to do.

* * *

Neither of them were there when I woke, but nausea resided in Craig's place. Empty spaces called out for him in a throb. Parts of me missed him, needed him to point the way to turn the itch to burn, to send the hurt away. The crawl to the bathroom scraped away at the tissue layers of my palms and arms. Dust irritated skin, dug through to the inside, sailed away with the blood. Light from the darkness hurt my eyes when I came in the room. Porcelain bottom of the bathtub cooled the heat on my skin and I laid there, let cold water pelt on me as I shivered and rocked. I waited to go back down, but all I felt was the pull of sleep heaping heavy. Water pooled in the curved sections of my arm and legs of my huddle. It overflowed and sent sweat down the drain. I wondered how much of Craig lived in the sweat, how much of him was wasted.

“Hey,” a voice said groggy, harsh.

“Ruby,” I said rolling over.

“No, it's Mark,” he said. “Who's Ruby.”

Concern riled his face and he stooped, put his arm in the stream of water, let it soak into his sweater. Bent over to touch me, I didn't understand his words as he spoke. He stoked soft my arm, stared down at me as if I was lost somewhere or unrecognizable.

Standing there longer, he said nothing as he ran his index finger across the curve of my collar bone, the dented half-moons under my eyes.

“Who's Ruby,” he asked again. “Where's V and Denis.”

“Denis.” I said eyes closed

“With the guitar.”

“I don't know.”

“Rough few days huh,” he said smiling. “What's your name,” he asked.

“I don't know,” I said. “Little Sister.”

Mark pat my face with a cloth. Looking in my eyes his mouth moved but I only heard half his words, only saw half his mouth when he smiled to me. He asked my name again and I told him what was given.

“We can find you something better than that,” he said. “Denis gives the worst names.”

He looked at me, dropped his arm down to his side letting it land against his leg in a smack. Cool water streamed down in droplets ending at his fingers before soaking into the cloth. They flew through the air when he flicked his hand away to dry them. He licked his mouth, pulled at a scab from the corner and ate it, smiled, sat against the wall, stained it.

“V should have stopped you from doing what you did.”

“Where is she?”

“Don't know. Denis is gone too, so is all their stuff.”

“Denis has more,” I said.

“You don't need more,” Mark said. “Denis also shouldn't have given you more.”

“What do you remember,” he said turning to me.

“Nothing,” I said.

Water turned warm after Mark adjusted the temperature. He kept his elbow on the edge as I slept under the flow. Every once in a while he shifted his position, rounded his back to place elbows to knees. He helped me dress, made me a sandwich, told me to eat slow so I wouldn't get sick.

He ate too, smacked between bites, watched the door when we heard footsteps come up the stairs.

“I remember Ruby V sitting in the car, her and Craig above me in a hole.”

Mark, stopped chewing, put his food down to remember the question he asked before. When he nodded, understood, remembered, he chewed again, sighed.

“Craig,” he asked, “Not Denis.”

“No. Not Denis,” I said. “Why would Denis be above me.”

Shrugging he didn't answer and I understood.

“So now what,” I asked.

“Why do you call her that,” he asked. “You call her Ruby V.”

But instead of answering, I asked my question again.

“Now nothing,” he said. “We wait.”

So we waited.

But Ruby didn't come back and we were left to ourselves in an empty apartment with no Craig and no food and no anything. Days grew longer and my eyes bulged from staring out the window day after day. Mark talked about leaving but the only thing I like

about myself involved Craig. Tangled up in him, tangled up in Ruby meant I could never leave, and Mark stayed with me, but I didn't know why.

* * *

All we had was time and nothing else. Mark passed it by taking care of me, making sure I ate and didn't keep my thoughts to Craig and Ruby. At night we pressed our bodies to each other, and one night while he slept, I went out, sat beneath the tree. Bark curved into my back as I leaned against it, pushed harder where knot lumped in the center from my wanting. Rain from the clouds didn't avoid me as they once did. It fell on and around me, dented the dirt by my hand, by my legs, turned limbs to mud and roots. Thoughts wandered with the twisting of the wind, the bending of rain in front of me. Mark had told me to avoid Ruby V if she ever came back, to forget her because of her lies.

“She'll lie and steal,” he'd said.

“What.”

“Vieve. She'll get on her knees and beg you, but it's all pretend.”

“What are you talking about,” I said.

“She's not what she seems, is all.”

But I didn't believe him and even when parts of me knew she probably wouldn't come back, the parts still feeding off Craig told me to wait, told me it's better to feel pain than nothing at all. A person moved through the sheet of rain falling and I thought I saw them go down the alley I first found Craig. I screamed her name, tried to swipe the rain from in front of me but it only came down harder. Shadow drifted further down the alley as I entered it but it didn't slow or stop in my calling.

“Ruby,” I screamed, “please stop.”

Sharp stabbed my palm when I fell again, splashed my hands in a puddle of water next to me. Ache came back from deep inside, and even though my hand bled, mixed with the dark and the puddle and the rain, I ran after the shadow until I got lost behind alleys intersecting alleys.

When Mark found me, I was screaming, pushing my thumbs into my eyes because I knew I wasn't going to make it. Forearm met my mouth to silence me and after I bit down on him, he pinned me, knee to chest, hands to my wrist to stop my flailing. He had something in his hand, something balled, pushing out from his fingers. After I stopped moving, welcomed the rain from above, the drench of water at my back, he held it over my face, let me up, pushed me away from him to a wall. Our heaving misted the alley, heat the space as a soaking humidity hanging, slowing the fall of rain. Brisk walking back to my place, Mark talked the entire way, but his words couldn't penetrate the whirls of my thoughts, the calling from deep inside. The door still parted half-open and as I pushed my way through, made my way to the syringe under the symbols. Mark came up behind me, ripped the bag away.

“Where did you get that,” I asked. “Is she back, where is she.”

“I had it,” he said. “Or found it,” he finished looking away from me.

“When.”

“After you left, I woke up and remembered Denis and this place he used to keep things.”

“Okay,” I said handing for it.

“And I was at the window lining rows and saw you headed for the alley.”

Hand clutching tighter, Mark's eyes squinted, lips tensed and I knew what he was going to do, so I lunged for him.

Our compromise was physical and while he stretched to put his shirt on, I saw the clay marks line his back from where we pressed against the wall, slid down to floor all while he clung tight to Craig in his grasp. Tongue wiggled, smeared inside the bag as Mark licked powder, snorted off the back of his hand after he poured some out. From the bed he watched me in the second room, watched me use his too long shoe string for my arm. He told me not to, didn't help me when I begged him nice on my knees, when I rested my face to his thighs and fake pouted. Nothing worked. The veins in my arms and legs, the ones in my neck were all small and ran black up my sides after I blew them. Even the large ones in my chest meshed into a dark blob against my skin, patched me purple, green. Craig back-filled, swirled dingy as pond water, but I still tried, cracked the syringe open with my foot, licked it from the floor. Mark's head waved side to side in my haze. My own tongue thickened, swelled in my mouth until I couldn't breathe, until the back of my throat pinched shut.

"Help me," I wheezed to Mark.

He stroked the top of my head and tried to pull me by my armpits, but I didn't move. Cold fingers traced the outline of my face, counted the freckles dotting my cheeks. Dilated, he saw me as something else, looked at me different, touched me as if he had never seen me before. Mumbling another please, he put his hand over my face, asked me if I felt the pulse, if I could feel the rise of Craig coming to swallow me up, but I couldn't and I told him so. Mark backed away when I reached and I trailed him out the room,

down the stairs onto the street. Scratching at his hand, I ripped the bag and some of Craig drifted in the wind onto the street and Mark pushed me down.

I didn't know I was screaming until I saw my face in a puddle of water. By the time it registered to run after him, Mark was already a blur crossing the bridge.

CHAPTER 2

NA Cycles

Parker sat bruised and swollen in front of the group. Stinging rose beneath him, welt in straight lines across his arms and legs, one shallow on his face. They didn't ask him what happened or what he used because it didn't matter to them. What mattered was that he didn't fade back into habit, that he didn't gloss over his mistake as a mere indiscretion. What mattered was that he survived and came back to them shamed. Parker spoke slow and quiet, used words like disgrace, guilt, regret. At times, he moistened the crack in the corner of his lip with his tongue and continued on as he sat on his bandaged hands rocking back and forth, side to side atop them. Head low and swinging, Parker stifled the tears forming in the dip of his eyelids and spoke sometimes low, sometimes high. Group members looked down at the bow in their feet, at the wall behind Parker, the untouched pinkish patch of skin on his forehead. They waited for the peak of tongue-tip from the dark of Parker's mouth, for the rubbing of tongue on cut lip. Only a few, the ones not ashamed for him, the older members who have been where Parker has been, looked directly in his eyes as he spoke, smiled at him as a way to comfort, to say it was okay because he came back. Parker didn't know what happened that night. He remembered leaving a meeting in town on Wednesday and waking up on the sidewalk a few days later. He thought maybe he saw friends at a bar on the way home, thought maybe he went inside, possibly had a drink, maybe someone said something to him, he

couldn't remember even when he tried. Novice members looked deeper in the floor when he told them how bruised his body was, how his shoes were missing, pants ripped. They sat tight-lipped when he talked about the marks between his toes, on the top of his foot, the broken skin behind his elbow. Florescent of the room reached down on them, kept them in perpetual haloed glows of artificial light. It was quiet after he spoke except for occasional clearing of throats, movement of chairs along the neat waxed floor.

“So,” Parker said tongue to lip. “I’m back to day one. Maybe I got too comfortable with all this, maybe I don’t know. But I’m back to day one and I can’t wake up like this again, so I’m going to walk home and focus on today, focus on day one and not using. I’m not using today.”

Parker held his head down when he said thank you and everyone clapped.

The walk back through the city wasn't as bad as Parker imagined. He got in the rhythm of knowing where he would ache when he moved or shifted weight. The throb became part of him and he adapted his breathing between long strides and short bursts of pain from origins he knew well. He hugged his shirt close to his chest as he closed in on the bridge, listened as the footsteps behind him turned away left and right to avoid it. He found comfort that no one ever crossed it, that city people were somehow afraid of those who went out of their way to avoid having to leave. He thought maybe it was only the respect that kept them away, the feeling of understanding for the situation. Parker wanted it to be something other than the fear people have of things they didn't understand, of things that prefer the dark to the light. He couldn't see all the way across, but the buildings appeared taller than they were, newer, not as frightening as they were the day he first approached them. A figure at the other end waited to greet him as he passed and

Parker shoved fists deeper into coat pockets when he nodded, turned back to see if any followed. Loosened steps slowed him to a halt and Parker leaned over the brown rusted bridge rail. He thought about retreating, walking back into the city, getting lost in the swarm of people on the crowded streets, but instead he took that painful step toward his place, toward the things that made sense. He didn't make eye contact when he stepped off onto the pebbled asphalt, exhaled to see if breath would form. The coated man gave another head-nod, took a step at him and Parker side-stepped to avoid him.

“Are you looking for someone?” he asked.

Parker kept his eyes low, to the right. He shook his head no and walked on steady, swift.

Inside, he sat and listened to the beat of his heart, the loaded footsteps down the hall, saw the shadows of bodies casting voided light under his door. Parker wanted out of this place, but he always came back to his couch in his space, to what he could control and not what controlled him. No matter who tried to get him out or how many places Paul offered him in the city, he always came back creeping in through the dark, easing the door shut behind him, itching, shaking, well into the night. Memories of the days displayed themselves on the wall in stains of retch and sickness, sweat and blood, nail marks, teeth marks. He settled into the ache of his breathing, closed his eyes, tried to recreate the nights before but he saw nothing but the orange tint of his eyelids insides. So Parker mucked through the things he had looking for temptations to rid his space of them, to free himself. He found not a bag, not a point, not the dusty excess, nothing. He rubbed at the bruise of his ribs, winced when he himself was too rough. The lonely came and went in waves as he stood holding himself, pressure easing pain. A picture hung crooked and he walked over, straightened it out, watched the two images drop fishing poles in the

water, a state of composure, forever. He remembered Paul, his laughter filling any room, his anger transparent, physical, lashed out. Fingers numbed cold when he lifted his arm, placed hand to image, obscuring faces smiling. It fell when he removed his hand, landed in sharp cracks splitting wood, denting the floor. He didn't put it back. Instead, he thought again of Paul who once told him to never shit where he eats, so he raked everything he had into plastic bags, set them in the hall as trash.

* * *

Pieces were missing from the whole and Parker sat on a cool metal chair crumpling and uncrumpling what was left of his statement. In his place he was secured, assured as he wrote scribbling everything he could remember, every incident, every girl, every wrong opportunity taken. He inventoried on napkins, receipts, take-out containers, anything he could find. The peeling walls around him stiffened straight, held firm against the sneaky air from the outside always pinching through the holes in the outer brick. He felt safe there, realized. He wrote again when he transferred it to a piece of paper, cringed again when he read it back to himself, shame in the air he breathed. But now, the churls in his stomach made him heave as he shifted back and forth in his chair, the bones of his backside rolling smooth against the grained surface. He thought deep breathes but they came labored in the quick rise and fall of his chest, flare of his nostrils. The wrinkled paper, soft under his fingertips, limped in the corners, in the middle, on all sides. Words smudged into each other, palm sweat mixed in with the ink. He wanted to run from the cast of strangers in this group, but a wide-eyed girl looked at him, was comforted by him as she stood in the center, told her testimony, pulled small at the frayed edge of her shirt when she spoke unblinking. Hips swung left, right when she moved to touch her chin,

rest hand to back, hand across her touching shoulder. Parker rubbed his pasty palm through his hair, shook his leg, crumpled his paper as he listened, her indiscretions as many as his own. When he rose as she sat, he eyed again the exit sign flickering above the door, but his foot lusted lead in the center of the circle, so he turned, coughed, smoothed palm in hair and told out loud the confession he had not long ago written down for himself only. Those words didn't move them like they had the others. No one avoided his gaze, nodded when he spoke, understood his nerves, the shake in his voice. One man, tall, thick in the neck, sipped from his paper cup, stared down into the brown of his coffee, made faces as he drank.

“So that's it,” Parker said. “I'm starting over. Might as well do it here.”

The claps came few, muted, automatic.

Outside cigarette smoke twisted up into a black sky before disappearing down the street. Parker watched while the others gathered, rocked on heels, talked about their boring nights, their trade of one addiction for another; caffeine over alcohol, junk food over drugs. He wasn't sure why he waited, what he thought would happen with these new people in this new place. Before, his first group took him to dinner, told him the best sponsors, the best people to call in a pinch, but here no one came to him, wanted to help. Eva would be waiting but he couldn't decide if he wanted to skip dinner with her and go back to his place or if he should finally gather up nerves and face her to apologize and mean it. The thought of her downturned face, her corner eye points pulled low to the floor in grief urged him home, but he knew he had put it off long enough. And what would Paul think.

“Parker right?”

He turned, allowed his thoughts to be interrupted, broken, allowed them to mix and flee with the smoke. Not remembering her name, Parker thought about her wide eyes, her hips moving beneath her clothes. She stood long, frail, inches from his face huffing in night air loud through her mouth. He stepped back, slipped off the curb, shoved his scarred fists in his pockets. She asked again, pulled small again the jagged edge of her shirt.

“Yeah,” he said.

“You did a nice job, nervous though right. Me too. I had a few drinks before I came in and even though I don’t think I’m supposed to do that, to me that’s not breaking the rules because it’s not like alcohol is a drug, drug.”

Her eyes widened more when she said the second drug, extended it out unnatural, the u lingering longer than it should. Parker raised an eyebrow, wiped the back of his head, looked around for somewhere to go, someone to come.

“I haven’t seen you here before,” she said dangling an unlit cigarette from her mouth.

“No.”

“Right, because I’ve been coming here for some time and I would have remembered you. Smoke?”

She offered the one from her mouth, tip curved from the pressure of her lips, moistened from her tongue, teeth marks pinched square the end. Her extended arm hovered in the air close to his face and she stepped forward to him arm still out, cigarette coming for him.

Others came. The man with the thick neck patted him on the back with congratulations, welcomed him to come again, asked him about a support system, about

where he lived. The words “support system” produced more shame and it washed over Parker. The shame of not being able to speak to the group who helped him out time after time, speak to the ones who witnessed him at his lowest, spoke him down from pay phones, let him crash on the couch while their children and wives slept upstairs, unknowing. Parker wished he had more courage to face them, to explain and have them understand, to have everything be right. Coughing choked the feeling down, pushed it back to the pit of his stomach.

“Well, welcome,” the man said

“Thanks,” Parker said nodding.

“If you ever need anything,” he began “coffee, to talk.”

“Right, right,” Parker closed.

“I’m David. Dave.”

“Parker.”

“I’ll be seeing you Parker,” David said.

She kept talking as others came out, talked as if no one interrupted her conversation, as if she saw no one. Most all gave her a cautionary glance or tried to push her onward and away from him, to get in between them or call her away. He wondered why, but she talked, turned her back and talked until they left.

“This isn’t my first time around either. I’ve worked them before, but never gotten this far. Usually I just get to a couple and then it’s back to the routine, but this time I’m sure, it’ll be different and I’ll make it. You know? Smoke?”

She waved her arm in his face, extended her fingers to dip the filter toward his mouth, but he backed away, wondered about her candor.

“Yeah,” he said. “And no thanks.”

An age she didn't have wrinkled on her hands, in her exaggerated expressions and Parker followed them along her face as they ran into each other all the way down and back up to its beginning. She took a step, rocked along the edge of the curb continued on. She was more than drunk and Parker mimicked the ticks in her face to cipher the drug but couldn't. He checked his watch, considered going to another meeting on the other side of the city, maybe one with the people he knew. He thought about reading again his statement but decided against it because he didn't have it in him to feel the shame rise again. Soon, Eva would be sitting, waiting for him to come. They would stare at each other, let the silence fill the awkward spaces and memories between them. He would go to her, explain himself, apologize for things he didn't remember. Eva would accept or she wouldn't, but he prepared himself to meet an empty seat at the restaurant.

“But it's not my fault if they failed at sobriety. That's not my fault right?” she asked.

Parker nodded, eyed the long string of ash now dangling on the edge of her burnt out cigarette. Staring, waiting for it to drop it hung on even when she stepped down to run her fingers through his hair, blow smoke in his open mouth. She asked him if he wanted to leave, go to a place she knew around the corner. He shook his head in a slow yessing no but he wanted to leave with her, wanted to see her before him pulling more at the tip of her shirt. She'd blend with the colors on his wall, be molded to the scratches in the floor, fill the spaces he couldn't reach. And that's how he saw her, another picture to put on the wall, to touch and obscure.

“What's your name?” he asked checking the time.

“Erin,” she smiled.

“I can’t go with you Erin.”

“And why is that?”

“I’m meeting someone later,” he said. “I have to meet with someone important.”

“Really, someone,” she backed away.

“Someone I have to apologize to.”

Ashes fell at her feet, dusted the tops of her boots. She pushed hair back from her eyes, licked her lips, looked away.

“Right,” she said, “I get that one.”

“Bye, Erin.”

“One day at a time right,” her voice honest.

“Yeah. One day at a time.”

He smiled and she smiled back.

* * *

Eva sat with her back to the window circling the rim of her coffee cup with a nail-bitten finger. Parker folded his napkin over and over in his lap, they both sighed at the same time, smiled under low lights at the same time. Whenever he looked at her Eva glanced away, drank water, pursed her lips together, wrung her fingers. Parker leaned forward in his seat, reached for her hand, but she pulled away, sat back, tucked them under her arms when she folded them. It wouldn’t be easy, he knew it wouldn’t be easy for him, especially for her, but he told her how sorry he was for everything, but most sorry for missing Paul’s funeral. Her shoulders bounced heavy up and down, but she sobbed silent hiding her face under the space between thumb and forefinger. Parker held

his head low under the table's candlelight. Bounce from the flame sent pulsating rings of flush to her cheeks, changed Parker's breathing to match it. He reached to pull her hand to his, but the bright green crook of a vein under her skin caught his attention and he let go. Palm fell light on the black table cloth and he smoothed out a wrinkle, smoothed it again, again, but it wouldn't lay flat. He thought about her veins and how beautiful they were under the hum of light above them. He wondered about the heat her body would feel once the fire went through her, about the color her skin might turn, the vividness of them both.

"You were there Park. Out of it, but you were there."

"No. No, I woke up the next morning at my place. I was wearing my clothes, but I didn't make it. I wasn't there and I want to tell you how sorry I am for not being there for you."

"Parker," she said still hiding her face, irritation growing.

"I'm sorry. For everything I did to hurt you or Paul."

"Parker," she said.

"And you don't have to forgive me right now, and I know it's hard, but I'm sorry. So sorry."

"Parker," she said dropping her hand, hunching her shoulders low so no one would hear. "You were there. You played with Lizzie on the grass, swung her in the air by the tree. Remember? Lizzie asking you if you would stay with us and you hugging her at his grave."

"No."

“You kissed me on the forehead, walked us home, told us you would be right back.”

He looked at her far across the table, a sea of black material separating them from each other. Her face, a deep reddening pink, pumped heat, warmed their table. He thought back, remembered getting dressed, walking toward the bridge, being stopped when he got there. He spent his money, snuck back through the cold hallway to his place, moved only in the shadows. In the dark of his bathroom he slumped against the wall and fell down and away in a glint of light. He remembered night bending backward, slipping away from him in a haze of dank smoke. Parker remembered this and waking up in his clothes the next morning, mouth dry and pupils amplified. Eva didn't talk, only stared at him as he leered out the window behind her, seeing his fractured reflection through the rain that fell along the glass. She leaned in, caressed his face with her fingertips, pushed a lick of hair from his eyes.

“Did he know?” he asked. “Did you ever tell him?”

“Know what.”

“You know what. About what we did.”

“No. He didn't know,” she said.

Her sigh slipped from her lips effortless, tired.

“Nothing really happened Park it was a kiss. We were both really...it was a kiss as far as I remember. He didn't need to know.

“Yeah.”

“I'm his wife. You're his brother. He loved us both, helped us both, but you remember Paul. He would have never forgiven us, either of us.”

“Right.”

“So, he didn’t ever need to know.”

“I’m supposed to make amends at some point. Paul should’ve been the first of them.

“It’s too late Parker. You waited too long.”

“You think so.”

“Just do the right thing. Whatever that is, just do that.”

* * *

A man on a lawnmower spun quick circles over the faces of graves. Wet grass spit out the side, landed across names and dates, nestled on the tissue paper of bundled flowers. Parker tried to wait for solitude, but couldn’t find it even when the man rolled down a back isle into the trees with only the sound of the motor to place him. Looking around, Parker felt the presence of all the others surrounding Paul’s grave and he wondered if dead things could speak to each other, keep each other company. When they were younger and when their parents fought Paul would lift Parker up, drop him careful out the window, tell him to run in the woods, wait for him to follow. They’d talk through the night while the sounds of nature crept around them. After it was safe, Paul would carry him back whisper quiet through the front door, sit with him on the couch until morning.

Parker sat, dug a hole, buried his finger-wrinkled paper and smoothed the earth over, securing it with a flat pat of the back of his hand. Stubborn grass refused to lift and Parker strained to pull it from the root. He bit his lips when he had to wrap the tough grass around his thumb to force them loose.

“Paul. I think I slept with Eva. She says we didn’t, but I think I did. I hope you’re not too mad.”

He fell back in the grass, let the hardness flatten out the arch in his back and he spoke in the air to whatever essence was left of Paul. Wind carried his voice along the row of stones and decay and even when he whispered he could hear himself in the distance mottled in the sound of the mower. He pulled a red chip out his pocket, let it stand on top of the small mound of dirt.

“I can do it this time. I don’t know what happened, but it finally clicked in my head. I’ll move too. I’ll find a job and save and move.”

He stood, put hands in pockets, tilted his head to the wind, chewed on the grass.

“Who’s going to keep you company while you sleep.”

He thought of the picture on his wall, how it would be the only thing he’d pack.

“Sorry I missed your funeral Paul.”

* * *

The yard of his mother’s house hadn’t changed since he left. Gnome still fallen over under an oak, planter boxes still lining the front windows, the yellow door Jack painted after his father left, buckle in the garage from the night she called the police. Parker stood on the sidewalk across the street and remembered his home the way it was, watched his mother in the kitchen wash dishes, dry them with the towel flung over her shoulder. It had been a long time, too long and he stopped himself from crossing the street, knocking on the door, walking right in as if he still lived there. Bare wind carried scents of the neighborhood, pitched them in the waving trees, in the crevices of lawns. Their last conversation went wrong. She told him how looking at him was like looking at

a picture of her son, something she could only see and not touch, the casing of Parker but not him. His jaws clenched remembering the rage in his fists when he shoved her to the floor. He stole her things, screamed at her with garish hate, felt remorse when he called later to apologize and heard Jack in the background, the punching silence when Jack pulled the phone out the wall. The silence when her voice went dead.

“Don’t come back,” the last thing she said.

Parker spat in the street, tapped the steel pole of the stop sign with his foot, shaking the remains of dead dirt free. She talked to an unseen person, laughed until her head fell back, soapy hands held her face to hide her blush. He turned, walked downhill through the line of his and Paul’s secret trees.

Rain misted on his way back, layered in a thin film on top of his coat, beaded on the strands of his hair. He looked ahead, moved in instinct toward the bridge across the stretch of variations of asphalt and concrete. The walk around his old grounds was supposed to calm him but he felt the pull of the old familiar in the air, so he walked faster, zigzagged across the street, hummed a made-up song. Fingering the keychain in his pocket, the smooth ridges on his chips eased stress, gave a solid understanding, reminded him where he came from, where he was. Parker rubbed harder with his thumb, rubbed white, yellow, green, blue in sequence past alleys and byways, men with nylon puffed coats. He came to the face of the bridge, didn’t cross it, turned left toward the bars, the music, the stale dark. The sandy grid of the riverbed, the whistle of noise moaning in the pipes paced his stride. He halted in a cast of light coming from the inside of a bar masking itself as something else. A figure eased closer to him, but Parker, fixed, couldn’t move to greet it.

“Hey, man.”

But Parker peered more into the building, tilted his head to better see.

“Hey,” he said touching Parker’s shoulder.

Stare broken, Parker turned, saw David before him both arms on his shoulders asking him if he was all right.

“David, hey. Where did you come from.”

“Just out. About to catch a meeting. Saw you here. You live around here, right.”

“Yeah, just right over,” he stopped

Inside, Erin sat, drink in hand, skin flushed red laughing on the glossed wood bar. The arch in her neck unnatural, Parker felt a pain to watch her, but he kept on tracing the length of her leathered leg to jutted hip. Music from the inside spilled on the sidewalk, down across the divot and the sand into nowhere.

“Hey,” David said. “You don’t want any of that.”

“What,” Parker asked not listening.

“I’ve seen you. I mean, I live over the bridge too, so I know.”

Parker regret it as soon as he put hand to door, but he went in anyway. Scents of smoke and beer rushed up his nose and he closed his eyes, took a step back to leave, but closing door stopped him. On the other side, David stood arms wide open, hands motioning for him to come back, mouth moving but unheard. Parker took his hand out his pocket, the keychain fell further inside on the floor, colored chips breaking free. When the door clicked shut behind him he didn’t notice, saw only Erin warm with alcohol, skin flushed bright, glistening with sweat. She came up to him when she caught his gaze, engulfed him immediately, pulled him more inside.

Parker succumbed to her, succumbed to the place and the feeling having never found the moment to secure himself in the next step.

CHAPTER 3

Ansuya

At night Suresh wound Sue's hair about his wrist so he'd wake whenever she tried to get up or away. She kept it braided and long letting it fall deeper down past the floor, etch weighted in the groove of her back. She said Suresh would unloose it, dig his index through and wind his wrist with the three sections until his fingers bulged and turned. When she told me this, I did the same knowing she wouldn't be able to sleep unless we were tethered down, together. "Like this," she showed me with her hand, "Do it tight like this," and I did. Soon after we lay down, her sounds became shallow and broken as I moved about the mattress. Her hands would reach for my skin, would graze a thigh or an elbow, clutch tight the coldness of my thumb. I never sleep and spent most nights staring at her, drawing her face in the air above my head, listening to clear marks in her breathing as she moved through cycles. As I pinched them her wrinkles peaked. I shifted them, stretched them flat against the shallow bones of her until she appeared only as the dust of a mask or tissue paper. She never stirred when I did this, and I did it every night while I waited for Suresh to appear through a crease in her dreams.

It started with the muted sounds, the slight tilt in her head, the clutching of the sheet, the mouth open and webbed with thickened saliva. Arms flailing wild, she'd screamed and kick not letting me touch her, not letting me calm her because all she'd hear was him calling her names, lunging at her with heavy palms, with rounded objects as he tore her clothes. The wall along my back stabilized me while she crouched and swung,

crouched, swung again. At times the length of hair wouldn't be enough to keep me safe, but I learned to never hold her down, to let her fight him, and claw and bite until she woke or until he finished slipping back out through the crease he entered. To see her made my muscles seize, but I couldn't stop watching her fight with the dark in front of her or behind. Sometimes she cried after and I'd know he had won, that he forced her to submit in some way her bruises later wouldn't tell. As she laid in the wetness of her tears, I'd cling to the side of a wall and listen absorbed until morning.

She had the worst dreams on the nights it rained. Screaming one night, her sounds became words, "Penetrate me," she screamed, "penetrate me Suresh." Those shouts rattled the bedroom before spilling into the next, but she didn't hear herself, so she didn't stop. Fists balled, she jabbed at the nothing in front of her, grunted and jabbed until her hands bled and pooled semi-solid between her fingers. She stepped over dead space when it was over. Pausing in the doorway, she looked down at the floor behind her. Hair pulled tight at my wrist when she walked away then slackened and unwound from me. It followed behind her, smeared the mess in a tacky glistening trail.

By morning, she laughed and caressed the half-moon marks in the center of her palms. Aside from her forced giggles, we sat in silence while watching sky appear and disappear behind the rain. Steam from the mugs of water warmed our faces, waved the space between us before misting us in a glow of gray dampness. Sue peered down in her steam, and the vapor lifted up to her eyes spreading her pupils across the whites, blackening them dark as the water under her chin.

"Ansuya?" I said, but she didn't look up. "Ansu?"

"Sue," she said, "just Sue."

The taught in her face smoothed away the excess skin and she looked younger than she was, more alert.

“Changing your name doesn't change anything Ansuya,” I said taking a sip.

“It's Sue and only Sue. Only ever Sue. I don't know who that other person is.”

Lips rumped as she closed them, but I opened mine to speak again.

“Okay.”

“Only ever Sue.”

“Sue. I got it.”

She grit her teeth, snort air before knocking hot water to the floor and stomping off.

“It's only ever Sue,” she screamed. “Only Sue.”

And that's how it went until she left.

* * *

Her speech was slurred and broken when she first tried to tell me her name. I told her not to, told her she could only stay with me for a night or two but then she had to leave so names were irrelevant, but she told me anyway, asked for mine. Before that, all she was was a flurry of fabric and hair thrown out of an entryway. Passersby's stopped to watch when they heard the shouts, saw the thin pale blue material eject from the dark, saw Suresh kick her, punch her face. For three days she lifted and fell in that spot until she was gone, transplanted in the hallway outside my door when I tried to leave.

“Please, help,” she muffled.

Pants gathered around my ankles when she grabbed them as I walked over her. Pleading again, she gripped harder using both hands until I stopped resisting, placed my foot back to the ground.

“Ansu--,” she said pointing to herself.

“Don't,” I said. “I don't know you, I don't want to, I don't care.”

“Ansu--,” she said again.

Her mouth quivered when she cried and the knots in her hair clung around both her feet and mine, cloaked the tips of my shoes up the laces. The ridges from his fingertips printed along her arm and leg from where he gripped to fling her and I remembered. She soared beautiful before dropping like a rock, and she showed all of it in the fractured movements of her limbs, the mess of her everything. Her whimper when I stepped back pinched my ears, tensed my throat, but I didn't care, not even when she reached for my shoes only a breaths length away. The strain she mustered to make contact bulged as a raised vein in her neck, on her forearm, sweat in her wrinkles. Watching her try to get to me, try and make contact sent a chill through a place I couldn't locate anywhere inside myself. All I knew was that I shouldn't keep her, shouldn't make her part of me, but I wanted to, wanted to become the shadow of her shadow, of her hand, of her hand's shadow. Before she touched me I stepped away, shifted my foot back and she crumpled under her weight without even having the strength to lift her head and curse me

In the dark hallway I still saw her outline when I returned. A massed ball of flesh and hair carpeted my doorway, but she was worse than before from whomever else rejected her as their paths crossed. Eyes swelled shut, she tilted toward me, mouthed noises I couldn't understand. The smooth of my jaw bled as I chewed, let her pinch tight the curve of my leg. There were footsteps on the stairs and her panic, the pain of it, amassed in me as well.

“One day, maybe two,” I said, “and that's it. You have to go after that.”

“Ansu--,”

“Don't. Two days. No more.”

Armpit cupped in my palm, I pulled her in behind me before the footsteps rounded the corner.

I put snow over her eyes and when they opened she placed her hands on my face and pulled mine to hers. After she let go she told me her name.

“Ansuya,” she said lifting a wobbly hand to her chest. “Ansuya.”

Skin paled to the ice as I packed more over her, covered her in it. She didn't flinch, even when hair stood on her arms, when her fingers reddened cool to mine on the touch. She fell asleep then under the ice, but didn't stay that way for long. Before it even melted, her eyes shot open, cracked the snow packed over them. They were wild, blackened, spreading over the whites from corner to corner until nothing remained but the blacks of her eyes and the brown of her lashes.

The dreams started soon after. The first night she slept sound stirring only to shift position on the floor, to push hair from her mouth. I couldn't help but to watch her, watch the braid tangle around her waist, through the split on her thighs, tickle the heels of her feet. Knots wrenched taut in my throat and I wanted to put her back on the sidewalk or wrap her in blue, hang her soft in the air again. But as the weeks passed and I continued to ignore her, she moved closer and closer to my door frame, slept lighter until one night she came in hair looped about her arm like fabric.

“You don't sleep,” she asked.

“No. Not ever,” I said, “it's a condition or something.”

“You don't get tired. When's the last time you slept.”

“I don't know. I never did, when I was younger maybe.”

I moved away from her, but she followed my angle taking two steps to my every one until she boxed me by the window. Dark circles under her eyes highlighted the tan of her skin and she smiled natural when she saw my face in the light. She asked me something in a language I didn't understand and I stared at her unmoving, without response so she asked it again.

“When are you leaving,” I said.

Outside, wind blew hard and the tree struggled to keep root. Ansuya said winter would come early, that it would be unforgiving, that I didn't have enough to make it through. When she said it, she looked at me, checked to see if I believed her.

“I could get things for us,” she said. “I have things I could get. To keep warm.”

“I'm fine,” I said. “I'll be fine.”

She looked out at the tree, at stones pelting against the bark, at leaves being ripped away by the force. She told me about Suresh, about how he hit her even while she slept. Once, she poisoned his tea with leaves but instead of dying he came at her loud and flaying ripping her hair to slow her.

“He grabbed me here and here,” she said holding her arm and leg. “He caught me that time, and he threw me there.”

Force from her pointing bulged the shallow of her arm muscles, made them twitch. The smell of dried things traced the side of my face when she stretched her arm to point more out the window. Her brows didn't furrow like I thought they would after I told her I saw him do it, saw her head bounce once, twice. Instead, brows moved further apart when she

relaxed her face, eyes readjusting to the dark. We both looked back out, let quiet whips from outside send drafts up through the floor. I knew she was right, and she knew I knew it when I turned to her and still said nothing.

“I could get things,” she said again. “Suresh is gone. I could go get things.” Wind blew harder, picked up trash from the alleys, sent them whirling past the bridge into the city. On the nights I got tired, I'd lean on this window, look down below to the people passing, to the bark swaying back and forth, to the thin moonlight trying to emerge out the clouds. There were never many clear days here, days when the sun was high, when a fog didn't linger over everything. But with Ansuya standing next to me, with her leaning against the window, hand flat against the pane, it seemed clear, clear enough to see to the other side of the darkness hovering.

* * *

After the first nightmare she made soup in the morning. I shook water from the melted snow off my boots and saw her pacing, mashing, tearing green leaves as I closed the door behind me. She mumbled again, moved along the walls as she walked to and from something boiling on the burner. Face over steam, a sharpness burned my nose, made me throw my face away, raise tongue to the roof of my mouth to stop it from going down. The same bitter smell wafted through the room, clung light on the counter, on my face in a film. The taste stung peppery, strong in a warm kiss, and I thought of a place I didn't remember or have ever seen. Asking her what it was would be no use, but I asked anyway, followed her while she hung her head low, mumbled louder. When I reached for her, skin skimmed skin but she didn't look up or stop or acknowledge the spread of tickle inching up my arm and hers. Hair picked up dust and stray dirt behind her, but she

continued on dragging a bag of weatherworn tomatoes at her side, heel knocking each time. It took some time for her neck to jerk after stepping on the tail of her hair, but she still didn't come back.

She screamed his name over and over in the corner, covered her face and ribs with matted hair until she fell asleep.

The burner sizzled and popped matter on the ceiling. Thick green coated the bottom of the pot as I brought it to my face. Leaves inched out a bag on the counter and I ate one, let it glue pasty to the roof my mouth, mix smooth with my saliva. Adding water and her tomatoes lifted the scent and steam at me. Weightless in the blank of the room, it still carried in a stream toward my chest and face even when I moved away.

Even after hours she hadn't woken or stirred. The ball of her heaved forward when she breathed in, rocked back when she exhaled. Mites itched through her hair, strolled lazy along the length of outside strands.

“Hey,” I nudged with my foot. “Hey.”

But she didn't wake, not even when I called her name, kicked her soft in the side.

Soup continued to appear out of nowhere and always the same. I'd come back to the pungency, the acrid scent of over-ripe tomatoes, the green she later told me was basil. She never said where she got it from and I never once saw her leave or heard the wood creak from an exit, but after the nightmares there was always soup. Ansuya would hum and stir, smile at me while she danced, lifting the end of her sari across her face, bringing the tip of her toe to the arch of the other foot. Cooking made her dance and before she left she told me how cooking awakens the life in people, teaches people how to live together.

Whenever she told me about where she was born, she talked as if I knew already, used words and phrases like water, spilling them out into the room without explanation.

“Do you know this dance,” she asked in a language I didn't speak.

“No,” I said.

“Are you sure,” she said. “I watched my mother dance this when I was young.”

“I don't know it.”

“Maybe a song will help.”

And she sang it in that language, sang loud enough for others to hear and when I called her the name she wanted, when I got up and tried to make her stop, she kept on moving, kept stretching sari end around her, kept tapping on the floor with her feet.

“Ansuya,” I said to her, “Ansuya.”

With her back to me she stopped, let the thin cloth fall away, folding, unfolding on itself before it settled in layers against her.

“Don't do that,” she said, “that's not my name.”

“I told you I don't know it,” I said, “that I don't understand or know and you keep going.”

“I'm only trying to—“

“Stop trying to do anything Ansuya.”

“You're upset. You want soup?”

“No. Ansuya. I don't want soup, Ansuya. I want you to leave.”

After the bedroom door slammed behind her, I poured the soup down a hole in the floor, crouched over it and sent it steaming down. I heard her in the other room, leaning against the wall clicking in disapproval at what I'd done. Whenever I called her Ansuya

before she clicked, pushed the flat of her tongue to the roof of her mouth, slapped it down to let me know she didn't like it. Muscles in her face scrawled, her lower lip in a quiver, eyes squinted in glare, she'd click, click again, clicked until I got up and left. Clumped drops from the tomatoes clung to the sides of the jagged corners of the hole, refused to go down when I blew on them. Soundless as it came out the pot, I used my nail to push the hot of it down. Once, after I did this, I told her about it, told her I thought there was no bottom, no place for the remains to seep or pool. Even though she was mad, she nodded, understood and I think it's because we both wished for it, wanted there to be no end. Behind the closed door I imagined her making the face. Even between the clicks, when there was only silence, I heard them in my head.

Rain poured out the sky and I couldn't leave. Water, dense as metal dropped in sheets, reflected the buildings on their surface as they plummet to the ground and shattered. Even if I wanted to, I wouldn't be able to keep the weight of it from pulling me down, so I stayed.

I started the soup again, remembered what had been done and repeated.

She said I burned the soup and I wanted to push her face to the coil of the burner, but I asked about Suresh instead and she sobbed with dry tears into her bowl. We sat in silence spooning warm liquid in our mouths, blowing cold out and heat in. It coat the insides of my throat and chest when I swallowed and I couldn't finish with the lingering bitter sting of burnt green, the knowledge of what she told me about Suresh.

“What's wrong,” she asked.

“What other things did you use when to poison him?” I asked dropping my spoon.

“Not this,” she said looking away.

“Hmm.”

“And you made this,” she said.

“I don’t even know where you get this stuff,” I muttered.

“I used to make this when I felt sad,” she said. “My mother taught me. How did you know what to do?”

“I didn't. You were dragging that bag behind you the first time. I just guessed, makes sense that's what it was for.”

“Did someone teach you?” She stirred with the side of the spoon, looked down into the steam. “Someone from before?”

She didn't believe me when I told her no, so I said I didn't remember and she sighed under her breath, asked me questions I didn't know the answers to. Her fingers darkened the tighter she wrung the tip of hair. Skin stretched against her jaw the more she pulled the it around. She reached for my hand across the table and I smacked it away, balled my fist, waited for another reach that wouldn't come.

“Suresh called me Ansu,” she said. “He would call sweet sometimes 'Ansu, Ansu' and I would come and he would stroke my face and wind my hair from wrist to elbow and then he would smile at me, show me love. Then he would start, and he'd have me and I couldn't get away.”

When the tears fell in quiet putters inside her, those are the only ones I saw.

“What will you call me if you hit me,” she said. “Ansu is taken.”

“Nothing,” I said dropping my arm. “I won't call you anything.”

Later that day she came out soon after I'd come back. She was brushing the length of her hair, had it parted in sections; front, middle, back. Atop her head sat a knot

hanging down touching one of the parts and she looked like a statue I once saw in a room I hadn't been in. Streaks on her face from where she cried stained her skin partially, curved at the bottom of red splotches where she wiped them away. I wanted to tell her that I'd never hit her, that I would never do that, but all I could do was look away, stomp wetness from my shoes in the entryway.

“Where do you go,” she asks.

“What.”

Her hands let go of hair and it landed in a thud on the floor while she gestured, looked up to the ceiling to find the words she wanted. Nude sari clung to her, gripped light the bones along her ribs showing them faint beneath the material. She gestured, half-circled with her hands in the air. Draped in the straight of hair across her shoulder down to her bare feet, she whispered in a hush, let her words slip quiet in front of her. A stream of light came through from a cloud, hit the floor in front around her legs. I raised my hand to reach out to her, but she didn't see, didn't notice the light inching in waves toward her toes.

As she stepped forward the light disappeared, cut short by the wind pushing the cloud to cover it.

“Where do you go when you go,” she said clicking wondering if what she said was wrong.

“To the city,” I said to her, to the window, “the city across the bridge.”

The light didn't return, but I waited for it, waited for it to come down on her, burn her silhouette in the floor. Silent, I begged her still, wished she would stand there forever, wished her a statue for me to stand in.

“City?” she asked.

“Across the bridge,” I said.

“Not this?” she asked pointing down.

“No,” I said. “Suresh never took you there?”

“No.”

“Well, how did you get here if not through the city.”

Ansuya pursed her lips, thought about before, thought about how she came.

“I don't know,” she said. “I was only not here, and then I was here.”

Shrugging, she began brushing again but only the ends. Her face lifted in confusion, stayed there with eyebrows arched to one spanning from corner to corner. When she mouthed words, she shrugged, wrinkled her nose, but kept her brows high, blinks away from vanishing in her hairline. I wanted to tell her I would bring her with me next time, let her see the slate blue of sky over the buildings. She'll look up, eyes filled to match the scale of the structures in front of her, to both sides. Before we'd leave, I'd wind her hair around my wrist to keep her from wondering too far away. If people stared at us, she wouldn't notice. For a while, there would only be us on the sidewalk, her ahead of me, me a few steps behind. I'd wait until just before noon to bring her and when the people flood in droves from the buildings, swarm at and around her, I'll fall back out of arm's length to watch her flounder. But she won't get washed away from me. I won't let her.

Ansuya kept brushing, stroking the tail ends of her braid as I dreamed about where I would take her. Touching my shoulder as she walked by, she went to the window, looked across to her own building. When she mumbled, I asked her what she said but she just turned to me, smiled. Palms warm, fingers cold to my arm, she began

twisting hair around me, began coiling it up to my elbow, back down again. She didn't say anything, but she moved her head side to side, parted lips to mumble again. After my arm numbed, sent pains up to my neck, after I winced and drew away, Ansuya only took my arm back, continued coiling until there were only inches between her scalp and my hand.

"Are you tired," she asked.

"No," I said

"You look tired," she said "come lay with me."

"It's the middle of the day," I said.

"Come."

If I called her 'Ansuya' I knew she would rage again, but for whatever reason instead of storming off I saw her beating me, screaming at me as I'd try to free myself. So I didn't say anything and followed her to the room.

Sun set and she had been stroking the top of my head.

"Close your eyes," she said, "tell me about this city."

And I told her about the alleys and the windows and the people, but I never closed my eyes. She stopped asking questions when I rambled on about the color of the walls at night, how the reds and greens are more so when the lights on the street go out, when the people are not around to distract you. My head turned, met quietness in her sleeping. As always, I waited but Suresh didn't come to torment her. Face pallid, she breathed normal, had a hand across her stomach, the other resting on my free elbow. Wrinkles still peaked, stretched when I played with them and even though Suresh didn't come her, face still pulled flat in a mask. Shuffling, I wanted to rouse her, wanted to go stand at the window,

but she wouldn't wake. After time, I managed to loose hair from me except for the pieces at my wrist. Night dipped and rose around the crest of the moon in waves. My head bobbed in sync with the motion, sunk down, pulled up until covering it in complete darkness.

When I opened my eyes Sue was gone, but her hair remained looped around my arm, bundled neat at both ends.

* * *

The last time I slept I was a child, living at a house with people I didn't know. It was only me, the woman; the other mother, a man; the other father, and their large rooms. When they came to get me, they told someone that I would be good for them, something to talk about when their friends came over. They clothed me in dresses, big bows flopping over, sticking off to the sides at the back. Calling me down the stairs the first night, the shoes I wore flashed with the lights at the landing, beamed back parts of my own reflection as I leaned over them. Cold railing under my grip, sent cool in a spread through my face and neck, made me glad for the warmth in my chest. Faces filled the room as I rounded the corner where they sat, wine-warmed, full, golden in their clothes under the light.

“Look at her,” someone said, “just darling.”

The mother came over to me, hugged me tight, readjusted my hair from where parts of it had fallen. Another person asked if I ever smiled, but I didn't, not even when they offered me candy if I appeased them. They talked about me as if I weren't there, asked the father and the mother where my parents were, if I talked at all, if I had said anything since I came.

“Not really,” the mother said. “She won't even eat the food. Has only said a few things we didn't understand.”

“No English then,” another questioned.

“She just needs time to adjust,” said the father. “New surroundings, new people.”

“Kids are resilient,” someone said, “she'll come around in a few weeks. Pick up it up in no time.”

“She really is gorgeous,” someone else said, “Just gorgeous.”

“Can you say a few words for us honey,” the mother asked.

“Leave her alone,” said the father.

“Just a few and you can go back upstairs,” she returned.

So I spoke for them, said words that didn't make sense; dog, water, tree, bread, wind, eye, rain. Later I learned that if I said them fast enough they would think I actually spoke real sentences, actually said something real.

“It's a beautiful sound,” someone responded.

“It'd be nice if she could hold onto it for later,” someone else said.

“Give her a leg up over some other people,” said the father.

“Good job, honey,” the mother said stroking the sides of my hair. “Take whatever you want out the kitchen.”

Her eyes dropped gentle after she kissed the top of my head, held me longer than she ever would afterward.

“Really is gorgeous,” said someone after I turned to leave.

I only ever ate their bread and took it back to the room they gave me when I first came. Different colors dazzled every wall, suppressed, highlighted emotions stamped

deep down within me, so I spent most of the time looking out the window. There were only buildings, barely any sky to look at. Lights burnt on, off, others flickered when shadows passed before a window, turned off never to come back on. On nights I couldn't get to sleep, I counted them until I ran out of numbers, until I lost track and had to start over. On the night I stopped sleeping I had a nightmare.

A thing had come for me, had been only arms and legs and hands and had come to take me away through a door. When I fought back, swung mad to scare it away, it grabbed hold of me, choked me and I couldn't get free. I woke to the mother holding my arms, the father holding my legs. They looked scared too, told me to calm down, rubbed my legs to wake me full, but all I could feel was them pushing me down, not letting me get free. When I screamed, sent the shrill pitch through the room, they let go, only to cover their ears and run away.

A mirror broke on their way out, but not before I saw myself; a black mouth swallowing my reflection.

* * *

I go to their apartment when I think about her, bring the hair along with me. If I don't have it, don't keep it on my body, cold chills run rampant under my skin until I put in on. In the darkness of their room, I lay on the bed; on the side I imagine hers to be, and I wait. The two views of their apartment sit on opposite sides of the place. The one from the bedroom overlooks the backside of the building, the brush beneath the hills. They lived on the top floor in the corner and I imagined the scene, the bruises along her from when he dragged her down the mass of stairs before tossing her out to the street far below. When I replay that over in my head it becomes more memorable than the throw

itself. Shiny of her sari wrinkles under my palm, catches in the dry ridges of my fingers and I see it again, would have done the same as Suresh except I'd have thrown her in the bush instead of the street, let her obscure under the bleak of plush soil, the blanket of stagnant fog. Dark clouds cover the sky on this side of the building, casts bluish shadows inside the trees, along the edge where flat meets rolling grass. Sun from the other room shines bright, heats the space from ceiling to floor, heightens the absence. Before stopping short at the entrance to the room I'm in, it mingles with the cool of the dark, hovers humid in the doorframe. The bed was made when I entered, and I unfold the crease at the corners, pull down blanket to expose starched sheet at the top. Noise from my shuffle around their things doesn't spill outward but bounces off the walls, lurches back onto itself and silence doesn't come until well after I've halted. Quilt folds into me when I sit. It bunches beneath my weight, leaves a dent when I rise. Without noticing I trail her garment behind me, but it remains clean at the ends, untouched, unwrinkled. It drapes slim across my lap when I sit again but I barely see it through the growing dark of the room, the reach of the clouds further across the back of the building. My own vague image disappears, get wiped away and I clear my throat to sound, to assure myself that I'm not gone again.

Vermilion dusts the tops of bare skin across my feet after I drop the tin. Powdery, it seeps into my fingertips, smears after I rub it, trying to wipe red away. After Sue left I found myself wondering over there, waiting for her to return but she doesn't. When I say her name out-loud, I hope she returns, comes from the other room to lean with me on the window to watch the rain fall over the weeds below. Sometimes, I trace the soft ends of her hair in the vermillion, use it as a paint brush down the side-part of my own.

As I stand in the glow of living room, look into the dark of the other I imagine Sue drained, tired from the conflict of emotions of the sweetness, sadness. In her kitchen she kept herbs, some I'd never known before and wondered which one, if any, was used to poison Suresh. Stains from my fingers print them on my touch and I wait for the leaves to wither away and die because of it. Both her names tripped off my tongue and I wince at the first, feel relief that she wouldn't come angry. Couch cushion folds into me as the sun darkens behind out the window. I think about tomorrow, about coming back to try on her clothes, to hum and cook and dance until she returns. Sleepy from the yellow scent from one of the spices pulls heavy on my bones, pulls me further down into the fabric.

Praying for the clicks, I think I hear one snap from the dark of the other room, but I'm about to fall asleep so it might just be the sound of lights turning off, the sound of her hair slipping away from me, thudding to the floor.

CHAPTER 4

Shadow Men

Croy's stench vapors the room he sleeps in and Chris opens the windows he can to alleviate the burn of his nostrils. There's a cough and a never-ceasing clatter from Croy's side of the boxed room. Chris paces between the thresholds, sticking and sliding along the frame of the walls, entering, exiting, entering again. Side-glancing, he alternates from looking at his feet shuffle along the floor to Croy's lift, imprinting a death mask beneath the sheets. Chris waits for the coming release, for the last heaved foul breath to discharge and be snatched out the open window. He beckons it, opens wider the window melting frost on the pane from the heat of his fingertips. The bones of Croy lurch into the air as he wakes. Liquid soars free from his mouth, specks shiny on the floor. Chris saunters over, wipes the spittle from his brother's chin then wipes the sweat from his own brow. Chris talks, mutters in his ear, but Croy weakens from the effort to speak and falls asleep even as wanted words lay on his lips. Croy mumbles, tries to wake himself but can't. In sleep, his head jerks up, slumps down. Noise slips between mouth barely moving. His dreams come in dim images flashing swift, blurry. He strains to slow them, lids flutter wild, face snakes up and down. Pressing his nose to Croy's nose, his cheek to Croy's cheek, Chris leans close.

"Sleep." Chris whispers with heavy hand to forehead. "Sleep."

Croy's head rolls when Chris shuffles the pillows under them. Rank from the wounds drafts up Chris's nose from the motion he creates and he turns his head, exhales,

coughs under breath. As he sits the bed gives, but Croy doesn't move, even when Chris slides the sheet down off his face, off his chest. Fingers to rib bones Chris pushes and counts, childlike with head bobbing forward with every touch; one, two, three. The bones are bruised, sponge in and out at with each incantation. Thumb to collarbone, he clamps his lips together, puts weight behind the force, listens for a break. He grabs a tuft of Croy's hair, pushes down on the head. Chris clenches his teeth to restrain himself. He thinks Croy is dying and welcomes it by pulling the sheet off Croy's body. A muffled groan of pain sounds out Croy and Chris reasons it part of his brother's dream. Slick strands glide between Chris's fingers when he lifts his arm away. Hair lies woven in in his grasp. It greases the cracks and ridges of his hand, crosses diagonal the dark lines of his palm. He kneels down thudding the floor and places that hand in the air above Croy's face. Moist breath struggles, fleeting into the room, instantly colding, instantly chilling the air. The slight brushing of Croy's exhale on his taut skin preempts the shaking of Chris's hands and he raises, walks to a darkened corner, sobs silent.

It's bath day, and instead of the usual hand-wash in the room Chris decides to take Croy outside and speed decline along. The silver tub drags behind him as he moves down the back stairwell into the dead grass behind the building. He lays the tall grass down in a semi-circle, checks the rocks settled in the hardened dirt from a season of non-use. Everything crunches from the winter, from his repositioning, from his walking and dragging. Digging a deeper well to set the basin in, he scratches, beats hard on the frozen ground with the edge of a handle-less shovel. The words he promised Croy replay in his mind and he regrets having ever said them, so they fade out behind the sound of his grinding teeth. Beating, grunting, clenching, he pounds and the ground gives way,

placates him if only for a moment. Fist-fulls of grass fill the uneven hole and he throws the rocks on top of them, strikes the match, sprays the kerosene. Waves of heat coil the view on the other side. Fumes send a warm glow through his chest, face meeting gray on the lift. The basin smothers the flame, buckles into place when he puts it on top. Dirt loosens. Frost melts at his feet. Thawing earth sinks under his weight and Chris steps away to retrieve water from the creek.

Muscles in his jaw loosen when he opens wide his mouth, snaps it shut, exercises the wrinkles of his face against the cold. Waist-high grass strokes the hairs on his arms and Chris smacks them out his way as he moves, but they sway to him again, stroke him again, tickle whatever skin exposed they find. He hears the rush of water before he can see it. The whirrs of it swim, flow clear through his everything making his body prick at the memory of washing in spring. Swirls run clockwise in the cold water and Chris rubs his finger joints before retrieving the bucket buried in the brush. Sloping it in disrupts the current, but water finds its way inside the plastic, finds its way on Chris face and arm and shirt. The bucket swings weighted in his hand, knocks his legs, wets his pants in streaks from knee to ankle. Heat rises in the space over the basin wrinkling the air with waves. The first splash slants the basin rear, water cascades on itself, sizzles at the edges, bubbles form small on the bottom, disappears in a silent pop at the surface. Back and forth Chris treks spilling water behind him, sending steam upward when he fills, crunches ground in his coming and going. His fingers go numb from the chill, but he continues until the basin is full and warm and ready. He strikes another match and sprays more kerosene and leaves for Croy.

* * *

Croy woke gasping and grabbing at his throat. Though his body felt tired, the sleep invigorated him, took the ache out his neck and back. Something scuffled loud along the floor, tapped and scratched with its nails on the walls and bed. He called out for Chris but got no answer, so he waited. The thing scuffled again and Croy turned to see a fur spiked rat rear up against the wall and hiss. A pillow fell short on the throw and Croy frowned, wiped his mouth, felt behind him for another. The rat reared again and hissed moving closer to the bed, whiskers rigid. Croy stretched, felt a hotness in his arms when he waved them, but the rat moved closer, stood on the pillow, claimed it. Croy squinted his eyes, lifted his neck, hissed back.

“We’re going to eat you later, you little shit.”

Croy wriggled his body in the bed sheets in efforts to sit up and the rat ran, disappeared through the wall. When he moved bones cracked, muscles lynched into place, sockets bent to accommodate. The minutes it took to maneuver into a sitting position materialized a smell base and petrified. His heave produced nothing, but he held his breath to stifle the scent. Mirror in front of him reflected sores open and wet on his back. He wrinkled his face, look away from both the drain of mucus as well as the thick smell rising. Bone met him when he placed his hands on his legs. He glared at the wall where the rat vanished. Bone met bone on the short walk from the bed to the chair, agonizing him all the way.

“Maybe I’ll eat you later myself. Little shit,” he said glaring at the hole.

He positioned himself by the open window, picked up straw fallen from the pillow, rewrapped himself in the sheet. He hadn’t seen the view in some time, thought it different than the one he remembered. Alleyways, paths, rubble announced themselves to

his memory. By habit, Croy wove the grass in his hands, knot them careful to one another, over, under, in a row until the thin pillowcase was empty. Below, a man stripped the remaining leaves off the tree and Croy leaned in to see him. He heard the crunching of them in the man's hand, the sound of the limb as it whipped back through the air splicing silence and scene. He crumbled some, put them in bag, shoved others down his shirt, in his shoes, in the open spaces of his coat. Behind him there was nothing, but he looked still, looked up to Croy in the window, looked in all directions as he stripped. For whatever reason, the man moved nervous and fast. Croy observed with him, felt his own anxiety rise and peak in the crumbling of woven grass in his lap. Outside, crumbles also fell free, gathered in the creases of the man's face, the tops of his shoes. But he kept stripping, watching, crunching leaves in crevices. Croy knew to warn the man if someone came to harm him, but in the meantime, the tree kept whipping back and splicing the air and the leaves kept crumbing at feet. Croy fell asleep watching, anticipating, listening.

Wrinkled pieces of dried leaves had fallen in piles at Croy's bare feet, but he was in the middle of a coughing fit when Chris returned, and his convulsing sent them across the room in slow drifts. With warm water to soothe him, Chris tapped the wither of Croy's arm, pulled his back straight to the chair. In his clutching and retching he spilled most of the liquid on the floor, but Chris left and reemerged with a stiff towel to clean both Croy and the spills.

"Thanks," Croy said after.

"No problem," Chris returned, "the water outside is ready."

"Outside?" Croy said, "it's freezing. It may have been awhile since I was out, but even from in here I know it's cold."

“The regular way won’t due,” Chris said. “Those sores need cleaning,” he pointed.

Croy saw a flicker behind his brother’s eyes, a flicker he recognized, ignored.

“I saw that rat earlier,” Croy said, “thought maybe we could catch it, eat it.”

Chris nodded, lifted his eyebrows in an attempt to show something other than, but Croy knew better, and instead picked at a knot of leaves with his toes. He coughed up pink spittle, watched it land heavy with mucus on the sheet. Chris patted ineffectual on his back while looking away.

“You’ll be fine Croy,” Chris said patting. “Things are going to be fine.”

Croy sat up, looked at the clouds out the window gray and engorged with snow. When Chris strained to pull Croy out of the seat he had no assistance. Croy sat motionless as Chris repositioned himself to gain leverage, lifted from in front then behind, broke sweat and sat down defeated. In the end, Croy rose on his own having rocked forward, stayed bent momentarily before straightening his back, gripping floor with the clammy flat of his feet.

They took breaks as they walked, but Croy felt stronger than before. He propped himself against a wall and coughed, spat on the stairs when he looked down. The prattle in his chest muted itself behind words when he spoke, when he breathed out. Voices on the street under him crept upstairs and he could see the vague shadows of those passing fast and slow. Chris pushed him along, told him he could take another step if only he stopped coughing and learned to control it.

“How exactly do I control coughing,” Croy asked sharp spitting foam.

“I don’t know,” Chris said. “Hold it in.”

Croy's sigh pushed up a rising in his chest but he didn't expel it. Chris brushed past him to walk down a set of stairs and held out his hand for Croy's balance on the decline. Croy held his breath descended the set unassisted and then another, another until he collapsed. Across the street some watched and some carried on, but Croy saw them all, ushered them through the pathways to their destination. The man who stripped leaves came toward him, made eye contact as he kneeled down.

"Here," he said pressing palm grass to Croy's hand.

"Thanks," Croy said fisting the green.

Chris stood on the edge of the curb, stared down at the man who dissolved in the haze of two nearby buildings. Quiet held firm in the air. Croy tucked the tough grass through the collar of his shirt, steadied himself on the stair and waited for the cool of light to reach him.

Neither spoke when Croy undressed, shivered pale then blue while Chris poked and sprayed under the basin. Croy's wounds retracted as his skin curled into itself. Sores exposed themselves wide and deep and Croy lifted his head, arched his back allowed the breeze to numb the pain. Chris agitated the flames underneath, eyed Croy eyeing him, and steam from the water rose, obscured them both. Basin shifted and small pockets of air trapped at the bottom shook and bubbled to the top, silent as they burst.

"I think it's hot enough," Croy said.

"Just making sure," Chris said not turning Croy's way.

* * *

Chris stands idle near the water while Croy washes. Plucking stalks of dry grass he winds them around his fingers at the joints until the tips redden, bulge, purple from the

lack of blood flow. He can't see him, but he hears Croy readjust in the tub, moan and sigh. The light lapping of water onto itself in the distance soothes Chris, stills the uneasiness in his bones and he loosens his finger bonds. His breathing steadies to the lick of water over a lodged stone. He stoops down at the water's edge with the bucket and pushes it under with the flat of his palm. The bucket resists, tries to float up or downstream, but Chris pushes harder, grips harder, forces it to the rocky bottom all the while thinking. Wrist bones chill and crack but he doesn't submit and bobs the bucket up and down in the stream letting it empty and fill, empty and fill. When the needle-piercing pain in his hand rises up his arm to his face, he breaks and lets go. The bucket empties itself, rides downstream before disappearing behind taller grass and frozen ground.

A bare arm appears and disappears at the hard curve of the bend. Chris allows his head to fall right as the arm swoops down, scoops water with fervor letting it splash up and land where it wants. He walks cautious alongside the flow. Sounds guide him closer while he steps soundless, direct over the soil. Heading toward it, he scans behind him, listens for Croy's adjusting, to the twist of the basin over the dying heat. Satisfied in the soundless around him, he advances. Glisten from the smooth on the arm replays itself and he slips his hand through blades of grass to part them and find the owner of it and send it away. Crouching behind the stalks, Chris peers through, folds his arms into each other, rests them on his knees. Skin, bare and cold-pricked radiates in a fading cream against the dark of the ground. A spread towel beneath her keeps her feet dry as she too crouches slant, leaning to stare at her reflection. Chris bobs to steady himself, to reposition. He turns back then forward to listen for Croy unmoving. She hums, and her chest tightens with the deep inhale, the seeming holding of breath, the escape of noise through her nose.

The tune carries past him upstream, against the current to where he once stood. When she stands, when drips of water seep out the ends of her hair down the groove in her chest, Chris looks away, scratches the hair of his ankle with a thumb.

She's redressing when he approaches and his head moves with her hand as she dries her arm shoulder to wrist, again and again until pricks give way to smooth. A shift in the wind sends cyclic scents up his nose; trees, warm soil, grass or watermelon he doesn't know which. He crumples his feet to feel the loose earth cushion the balls, jam the spaces between his toes. Instead he feels thumb caressing thumb under his sweater heating his hands. He unlocks his fingers to wave away the smell, but stirs it around him more. Her hair, straight-stiff, moves when her head moves, lifts when her forehead lifts. Behind her, his bucket thumps, rocks against the ground, but he ignores it. He wants to ask her about the cold from the water, about her washing, about bare feet on frozen ground, but there's a chill, and four impressions appear on the back of his hand when she touches her own.

"How do you do that," he asks.

The corners of her mouth curve up when she sees him, but all he notices are her bare feet and unmoving hair.

"Your brother's not dying," she says wringing out her towel. "I hear him through the walls, smell that smell, but he's not dying."

"He is," Chris says, "it's fine though."

"Just because you will it, doesn't mean it's true."

Towel drips water back in water. The shallow dips are gone from his hand, but light-blotched skin reveals their placement. Cold spreads up his wrist, up his arm, chases the

warm away, but Chris steps closer to her and it stops. The nearer he gets the stronger the scent and Chris scans the ground in front and behind her for soap but all he finds are green grass and soil moist and black.

“I saw you with that bucket,” she says. “I hear you crying. Hear him groan when you stand over him breathing.”

“What are you doing,” Chris asks, “what’s in the bucket?”

But her movements, small as they are, heighten the smell and Chris blinks the sting of it away, tries to wave past it. He moves to her, feels the heat around her. Sting and fog soak into his eyes, so he stops after he speaks to her, waits for the blanket of it all to fall over his legs. Despite everything she continues to pale and shiver.

“I’ve seen you, both of you. You both stand there in those swollen coats and you watch us.”

“We used to.”

“You still do.”

She flicks water away from her, lets her stare rise from behind the cover of her iced hair. Every few moments she dips her foot in the water at the edge. Reflective droplets swing through the voided space of them whenever she lifts her leg and Chris thinks back to Croy’s saliva spinning dense through the dim in the room.

He remembers her, maps her with the cut path inching by the arm she wipes. She crossed hooded. The same length of hair fell across her face, but it moved, swung back and forth with the wind she created in her stride. Croy pushed tight with his hands on the wrapped packets in his pockets. Chris took Croy’s arm, inspected the wound growing, spreading, told him to wash it when they got back. Croy didn’t see her, had his eye on a

man pacing back and forth on the other side of the bridge. But Chris watched her. Her arms swung high in front of her, her strides long, rapid. The sound of metal ricocheted around her when she hit her arm on the rail. The sound pulsed in his ears, she checked her arm; red. It'll bruise next to another bruise he thought. Croy slapped his shoulder, pointed across, took his hands out his pockets. Chris turned away, turned back and she was gone. They advanced, stood in the center waiting, eyed the pacing man who saw them, but he rethought then shuffled away.

“The both of you still do,” she says flicking water, warming the air between them.

* * *

Croy gripped hard on the basin's edge as he submerged his body and head in the water. Heat singed his pupils when he opened his eyes but he kept them wide and stretched. Sky above him waved back and forth, clouds left and right as he moved his body inside torso floating up, floating down. He opened his mouth, inhaled and fought the urge to rise up to breathe in anything but water and infected water. He blinked away the waving sky, felt heat on his back as he pushed himself deeper down, deeper into the bottom. Fire shot through the exposure on his back, but he plunged further watching his shaking hands on either side mold into the material. Mouth relaxed, he exhaled the last from his lungs and saw a cloudless sky twirl in each wave of the water. A leaf fell toward him, slid smooth along the nails of his clenched fingers. Another landed discreet on the surface, spun in careless circles. With the leaf he waited, waited for comfort to arrive, for the slip away to be part of him, to learn to embrace it if he ever had to, to lapse into one of those thoughtless circles. A darkness cooled the water, and Croy opened his eyes, heard a muffled voice question him. Ice seized his lungs when he reemerged and Croy

stifled a cough, strained to see clear. Chris's face mirrored in the water when vision corrected itself. Croy pushed it away.

"What are you doing," Chris asked again.

"Nothing."

Croy sat silent. Goosebumps appeared in a wave, rippling down his arm, rising on the tops of his thighs peaked outside of the water. He wiped his face, slicked his hair back, wiped warmth on his skin. Ridges continued to lump atop each other as he rubbed.

"You finished," Chris said.

"Yeah."

"We have fish," Chris said lifting the bucket in his hand.

A fin flopped over the lip. Croy couldn't see the face, but the fin struggled, flipped up and bent then rested back down on the side. It jerked violent for seconds, rested, then jerked. The bucket moved about, but Chris held tight on the handle and stared at him. Croy saw it when he rose out, mouth opening, closing, eyes rolling, gills sucking then not.

"When did you become a fisherman," Croy asked.

"When you became useless."

"Well, I don't want that," Croy said.

"Well this is what we have. This is all we have."

Croy's thought about his rat, about what trap he would lay down, about the rawness of the meal, about the word useless. He knew Chris wouldn't help, would watch him move frantic through the room as he waited patient for it to poke whiskers out and

show. Silence allowed both of them to think about the other, but even in the hot of bath Croy noted the warm coloring in Chris's face, the smell of spring.

"You cold," Croy asked, "ready to head in."

"Yeah," Chris said false shifting in his clothes.

"Remember when we were kids and you fell in the gully," Croy asked, "and I stood there for a while before jumping in?"

"I remember," Chris said.

"I meant to."

"I know."

* * *

Building the drop basket took more care than Croy initially thought. Chris gave him palm leaves but wouldn't tell him where he got it or where he got the fish. The weaves in between the blades were tight, and they buckled alongside on another, released glossy oil between the knots. Chris did watch him, watched as Croy tied the thin clear wire to the end of the stick, watched when Croy laid the rotted meat under to lure it. Chris watched and wished, wished it wouldn't work. Behind the single bed, Croy laid flat, ear to the floor, fingers still and ready. Chris, in the doorway, chewed his fish, picked at his teeth, cleaned under his nails with the bones. They both gasped when it appeared out the hole, nosed around the basket on hind legs. The sneeze came out vigorous, loud, but accidental and Croy grit his teeth at Chris, squinted slow to make sure the rat didn't startle. Its mouthy smacks on the meat overtook it and Chris slid down the wall, motioned for Croy to pull. He balled his fist jerked back with his elbow, mouthed aggressive, but Croy widened his eyes, shook his head. Not until the rat had finished, had stood up again

to sniff the palms did Croy flick his wrist and pull the wire. Success made them both jump up. Chris slapped Croy on the back, went over to put his foot atop the basket squealing, shaking. Hand met a cruel pinch when Croy reached underneath, but he grasped again, pulled it out by the neck, bashed it along the floor until it stopped resisting. Chris rushed out, came back with a dull knife. Both their chests heaved when they bent around it, and Chris held while Croy tore into it.

They look out the window as they eat. People move paced through the square and Croy traces their path with his finger first in the air, then on the pane. Chris follows with his eyes knowing each course they'll take, which room they'll end up in. Fingers and eyes move in unison across the window as they puppet the people below to their destinations both to and away. Steam from their cups mist the window and when they finish curved and straight lines chart streams, buildings, alleys, bedrooms. Together they stare and together they wipe the glass clear. Long and deep the bridge groans, the sound of it lifting debris at the base, shaking stone and cement free. Chris and Croy turn in sync to see no one coming, no one leaving. Unmoving they stare until the room darkens and pale night fills their bedroom casts muffled streaks along the walls and floor. They feel a pull and wait silent.

“Remember standing there?” Croy asks.

“I remember,” Chris says.

“There was that woman who had that rock in a jar,” Croy says, “She always smelled like almonds,”

“Cyanide.”

“Who'll stand there when we're gone?”

“I don’t know,” Chris says. “Two sisters maybe. Maybe just one.”

“Or maybe only one of us.”

“No,” Chris says, “one can’t be without the other.”

“We’ll see.”

* * *

Thin material comes up over Chris’s skin. Couch hugs him down into a divot so he can’t roll, but he’s comfortable, asleep. Dreams bleat black and not even the ashen light through the glass penetrate his pinched lids. Fists clamp closed under his back as if holding on or catching water. Croy’s face is near, can feel the lax pant pushing out between sleeping parted lips. He puts his nose to Chris’s nose, pushes firmer, firmer still, inhaling to each exhale, reclaiming each breath given to night. Chris’s struggle is slight, he barely moves, barely wakes, never rolls. His moan gargles, scratches at his throat as he swims in the blank of his sleep. Light from a streetlamp drops sending unwanted stripes into the room. It glows Croy’s face and back, falls inside the creases of his body, in the wounds now closing. Chris rattles when he breathes. The sound rings louder in his ears and his lids flutter violent, hands grasp grave at empty air. A wrenching pain twists in Croy’s lung, and he releases, turns to the window, cranes his head to view what’s coming. Chris wakes. His body arches, chin lifts, mouth gasps, arms bend back as his spine curves in a backward C. He grips Croy’s arm sticking out through the dark, thumb meets sore and he drives it down, expels odorless liquid from inside. Croy leans, helps to pull Chris up, ignores the pop in his shoulder, skin stretching to accommodate. Chris staggers ahead, rests to the wall, fills his lungs, looks out to see a shadow crossing. It

advances at a crawl, steals to the side of the bridge in the darkness, but Chris and Croy follow still. Though it's unseen, they pace it until it reemerges, stands still on the rail.

Distorted, weak they wait for him on the edge. As he staggers about crisscrossing over the structure, tie swinging from his hand, he mutters drunk to himself. He stops, turns around, takes a step away to the city lights, laughs loud, looks for the source of the echo. Chris, Croy advance, don't take their eyes off him, but he stops again not knowing which way to go. Wisps of cold air form in their breaths, float toward the man, surround him. They step, breathe together, meet him staggering in the center.

“Hey,” he says wobbling, eyes barely open. “I um, I just wanted to um... You two got any um...”

Their heads fall left.

“No,” they say together. “Not anymore.”

“But I bought from here before,” he says. “Maybe I should cross, find someone else.”

They stare unblinking shoulder to shoulder, shadows merge to one stretching end to end across the pavement.

CHAPTER 5

The Seeded Underground

They bomb wild and reckless. Blast terrain away from itself, into itself. And as the sky clears and as the dust settles, they marvel at the blotch of land they've mapped out for themselves. Light inches through the blanket of haze, but even as it struggles for ground, another blast blots out the sun, momentarily blacks the sky in the roots of a dismembered earth. Billows of dark clouds obscure them, erase them, replace them with the wispy shadows of smoke, the fine uncatchable ash of sand. No one rescinds from the deafening roar of sound or the sharp quiver of terrain beneath their feet. They stand immobile and undaunted as what they once knew erupts around them, reshapes into what's wanted. Land spools loose down hills, from around oversize stones engraved neat in the patted dirt. But the carelessness of the disorder doesn't startle the surroundings or destabilize the branded absence it seeks to fulfill. The caked mud, the sooty air, the shattered trees and mounds patiently delay their drive. In the end, the demolishers stand elbow to elbow watching as the last of shrunken trees fall weightless to the ground. The backdrop of a setting sun canvases the sky, repaints the scene, waits.

They hold their socks and boots above their heads as they wade across crunching gravel between their toes, staring at reflections echoing withered faces back at them. They talk in shouts and screams between the bleating of hammers on stone, the grating of shovels against trunks, the raking of tools obliterating, carving, molding. The noise spreads through the tendrils and branches of what's left abandoned and the wind blows

discreet sending the remains of powered dust below to collect at moist bare ankles. Sweat collects leaving rings about collars, loose curls at the base of necks, the tips of temples. It smears in the dust on noses and arms and when it streaks red-brown or black-gray or tan-gold it's washed away before the skin can singe and turn from the heat of the sun.

The bridge manifests quick and quiet. The sun set and when it returned it was there, jutting solid across the clear stream. Glint off concrete begs for trespass and they give it stampeding across, shuffling feet, carts dragging behind them etching their path. A single pillar stoic in the center of the riverbed endures the weight, endures the chopping of water against it, again and again. Lapping and leaving. Lapping, leaving.

Muffled sounds disappear into the woodland skirted to the rear of the cul-de-sac'd plane. The bones of buildings etch high over the willow lone and weeping in the center, waving hello, goodbye. But before the breeze can stifle, the structures loom, the people rush to fill it, the city erects, rapid as a word. Kissing each other hard, open-mouthed in the rain, they walk, run, wade in their success. But the bustle lasts longer than it should have, and before the comforts become home, they swell and spread as infinite as particles of dust and it's outgrown. The river runs dry with their consumption, shrivels to less than a taste until it's graveled and dead. Smoke puffs both high and low around them until sight is lost and only sound remains and then sound gives way to silence as they disperse leaving only what they couldn't carry in hand.

Without the courtesy of a look back, time passes and passes again, but the buildings remain and the wind remains and the lone tree weeping remains, all waiting, all watching.

* * *

The first, David, came in on the eye of a storm. There was no one on the street, but he ran for his life as if someone chased him. He told himself to keep moving, to never stop. His soaked clothes whipped away from him, pushed him back but he ran ahead, saw the dark outlines of buildings in front of him and ran forward. He didn't remember crossing a bridge and he didn't remember the unlit shell of a building. He didn't remember running at all. David merely remembered his clothes being whipped away from him as he moved, the sting of rain as it pelted against his skin, his own voice in his mind telling him to move until he collapsed and then the feeling of no wind and no rain and no movement. Falling through the glass door, he clutched at the pain in his chest as he hit the floor. He looked back to see if he was followed but wasn't. After catching his breath, he thought to voice a greeting but decided against it and knew there would be no answer, so he stood bent over in the entry and listened to the prickly sound of the water from his clothes land on the broken tiled floor. David squinted to adjust in the near pitch dark, and he placed his hand on the wall, ran his fingers along the letters of a name, slid his tips along the dusty wall for balance, for texture. He waxed, waned between wishing someone to be there and wanting to be absolutely alone and couldn't decide between the two. Above him, glass ceiling arched in a peak. Lightning made quick flighty pliéés from one point to another in the sky, and for the first time since forever he felt secure in the darkness, with himself.

Despite his sprint, his heart beat steady under him and he inhaled, exhaled to the rhythm of his own making. Winding up the staircase he held on to the wooden banister to further sturdy himself, but it shook at his weight, came loose from the plastered wall, fell clumsy at his feet. He clinched his jaw at the reverberation, waited for the stir of footsteps

to come investigate, but none came. Only his breaths, the heavy escapes of it, could be heard disturbing the stale air and he eased the tension out his muscles in the dropping of his shoulders. He didn't remember why he ran at all, but he knew it didn't matter now. He would never have to run again and he knew it now watching the swinging dance of light against glass above him.

David waited out the storm there. Knees pulled to chest, head down, he hunched in the only dry corner of a large office and waited for damage to pass. There was no sound but only pulsations under him, shaking his interlocked fingers loose. He waited another day and night and lifted his head only when he felt the sun on his hands, heard the soft resistance of trees being pushed back and back by the wind. A large withered desk centered a wall-sized window and David stepped to it, fingered meaningless papers, looked out and down over a cityscape broken. Tall buildings mirrored on both sides, a bridge to the right he didn't remember crossing. A bustling unyielding world on the other side of it. Woodland on the left marked the edge of the forgotten, and David pressed his body against the glass, tested the strength of it as his eyes roamed over the structures. Glass bent but didn't break as he leaned pressing the full weight of his body. He saw his own image in the bank building across from him. He waved a lazy wave, and saw the muted outline of a man return it.

It was the tree that made him venture out his office building. From overhead it appeared gnarled, low-hanging and barren with only the few surviving leaves at the bottom left to fend for themselves. Once he approached it, he saw the clustered green beginnings of fruit weighing the branches low, the thread thick arms of it twisted into and behind the trunk, the leaves large and open wide as his head. Standing before it, he parted

the network of branches to position himself under or inside it. Its' arms net around him, cast his image as a hefty stray moving against the breeze. With hesitant hand he reached up, twisted, pulled at the firm pod hoping he committed no offence to the tree's significance to the place. He used more force than he wanted and closed his eyes when the sound of the release appeared in the white liquid forming at the tree and fruit now alone in his hand. Green smell invaded his nose and he wrinkled his face to stifle it, but it continued deep down through his buckled knees. Palming it he gazed around, saw the shadow from the buildings on the street, the shadow from the tree as it devoured parts of his. Warm hands melt the residue leaving sticky drip marks along his arm, up the point of his elbow. He raked the back of his hand against the bark, scratched until he bled.

David spent his time wondering in and out of the dark buildings getting to know the layout and innards. He sweat, and after he wiped it away in his hands he'd smear it on whatever building next to him. Most days he sat under the tree reveling in the only natural element not overgrown, or pushed out to the sidelines. He buried scribbled-on paper beneath it, left spoiled food from rooms and whenever he came back the next day, it would be gone. David held on, waited for the lost of what loneliness brings, but it never came. He passed time thinking to himself, to the structures, to the tree. He picked bulbous fruit when it finally changed to the rich swirled green-purple, and he handled it easy, rolled it around in small circles, threw it in the air, inspected the bruise the impact left. When he mustered enough curiosity to try it, the softening flesh give under the slight pressure from his teeth and for a moment it felt good to him and he wanted more. When hard seeds popped juice in his mouth he retched forward, spit, wiped juice and pulp from his chin. Tongue swelled forcing his mouth open, his lips shiny from pooling saliva. Red

liquid darkened the road at his feet, flowed down and under into the storm drain. David squeezed out juice in one hand to smell sweet. When he was done he peered down the drain and pushed the remaining fruit and seeds between the metal bars. He waited for the din, for when it landed underground, but none came.

At night, when the only light available was led off from the neighboring city and the moon above, he would sit in the corner of whichever room in whichever building received the most light. He listened and watched and ate fruit from other trees and bushes he found along the way. David tried to imagine the people who once lived there but couldn't form a clear understanding of who they were or what they did or why they left. He walked, cut a path through the tall grass to the creek bed, he experimented with circuit breakers, read the mail left behind, wiped dust off the pictures of smiling families, gathered the food abandoned in the cabinets, settled into a space of his own. The flashing of lights over the bridge irritated his eyes, the shapes of the faceless people maneuvering up and down crowded streets irritated him. Everything across the bridge irritated him. With his own streets empty, David envisioned the people who would come. They had no faces, but he would know them because he would know their stories. He populated the spaces above, below and next to him. He sketched them into the grass, on the benches, standing by the bridge, walking the path he cut in the brush. Gazing about the rooms he's already seen, already prepared. David littered his space. He littered the alleys and buildings with images of people like him. People whose present is darker than the past. And the lonely he was waiting for finally came.

* * *

They start working as soon as they step off the bus.

“You call me Alexander or Al and nothing else,” he says. “You understand?”

He grabs the boy firm at the shoulders, staring hard into his face. The boy shakes a no, looks away from Alexander up at sky, down at shoes.

“What about you? You’ll need a name.”

But the boy doesn’t respond just stares back at Alexander unblinking, breathing slow and unaffected. Alexander tries to ignore his lost expression and tightens his mouth in concern. He strokes the boys head, pulls forehead to meet his own, tells him it will be fine. The chill of the boy’s skin worries him, but Alexander doesn’t ask if he’s cold or hungry, sick or scared. Part of him doesn’t care.

“What about Evan? You’ve never been an Evan. Evan could be fun.”

No response.

They follow a man in a business suit holding a briefcase until he stops. Evan runs ahead of Alexander, arms focused and tense in his stride, small legs bending and straightening fast as flutters. He stops in the middle of the intersection, the same lost expression painted on him. Alexander shouts at the businessman, points forward into the street, screams convincing. The suitcase drops open, releasing papers on the sidewalk but no one sees, all eyes on the vehicle approaching. Alexander takes some, leaves some while the man scoops Evan into his arms as a car passes. Alexander catches up, hands him the now lighter suitcase, removes a wallet when they share the grateful embrace. He pretends to reprimand Evan as he drags him up the sidewalk. They do this twice more before nightfall and say nothing to each other in-between.

Out the corners of his eyes Alexander watches their waitress push scraps from plates into a bag. She tries to be cautious and Alexander mimics the hunch in the

waitress' back as she gathers once-bitten bread, leftover meat, scoops bland vegetables off counters. Evan keeps his head low as he shoves large pieces of loaf into his mouth. Alexander pats his head, wipes stains from the side of his boy's face whenever the waitress passes, but they're both aware, observing. The waitress returns just as Evan finishes and pushes his plate away. She asks him if he enjoyed it, and he affirms, nothing else. No one but them fill the space, but foot traffic from outside sounds the room, makes them jump when someone passes. A black and white television flashes quiet images: big-bellied children eating rice from bowls, flies on their foreheads, on their lips, pale adult hands resting heavy on bony shoulders. Alexander spins away, eyes the empty plate and then the waitress; her chafe mouth open, her own eyes dilated, veins blown and dark snaking up her arm disappearing behind sleeve, peaking again on the back of her neck. Alexander smiles as the waitress looks up, but doesn't receive one in return. She tells Evan he must have enjoyed it, rubs her thumb in the thin sauce rimming the plate. Her voice rises unnatural, cracks on the fall whenever she speaks. Underneath the drowse of her stare, eyes gloss waxy and Alexander restrains from reaching up to touch her. She and Evan scan each other and he locks on the plate tipping toward him, gathering remains. She asks smiling if he wants to lick the plate. He nods and her grip firms lifting it up back at her. Her hesitation when letting go makes Evan pull firmer than he should but he refuses to release.

“Hungry,” she says.

But Evan only brings the plate to his face, lets drops of clear liquid fall off his chin to his lap. Grains of rice hit the counter and she reaches for them, pinches them tight in her fingers before looking at Alexander.

“He doesn’t talk much,” Alexander says.

“Right,” the waitress says while walking off placing fingers to mouth.

Evan leaves also, sits on the curb in front of the glass door, stretches his feet forward. Alexander watches. He watches Evan’s back erect, watches the movement in his shirt when a car passes, watches the awkward shape in his small stiff body. He doesn’t fidget like a child his age should and Alexander watches waiting for the L-shape of him to fall over. A high-hanging street lamp flickers, pale orange rings of light douse him before blanketing the ground. Alexander closes his eyes but still sees Evan’s image emanating bloated glows. When he opens them, a man passing on the sidewalk slows down, asks Evan a question gesturing with his hand up the walkway, across the street into the dark. Evan doesn’t acknowledge the stranger even when he inches close enough to feel the air off his lips. Alexander sees the movement in the man’s mouth and squints to read them, but can’t. Alexander dips his head to see them better, but flat and tipped handprints from previous customers smudge their appearance in the imprinted ridges. The man touches Evan’s shoulder and Alexander falters before walking forward and pushing the door open enough to lean his head out.

“He’s with me,” he says.

“Oh,” the man responds with a jerk in his direction. “Yeah. Just wanted to make sure he wasn’t lost or anything. He’s pretty close to the street.”

“He’s with me,” he repeats.

“Just wanted to make sure,” he says turning.

Alexander steps outside, walks toward him and the man backs away from the curb pressing the base of his spine against the pole of the lamp. The man’s face is wind-swept,

worn, but between the dense wrinkles lay the note of concern, but Alexander steps nearer making him look down and away. He's clean scent swarms them, makes Alexander aware of his own smell, the permanent ordinary of outside.

"I'm watching him," Alexander says firm.

"Yes, right," the man responds looking up then down and sliding away.

Alexander seats himself close to Evan, sniffs, smells nothing. He asks him if he's cold or if he wants more to eat, but the only response is a slow turn to look at him, an involuntary blink of indifference. Taking Evan's face in hand, Alexander strokes Evan's eyebrows, the transparent hairs on the sides of his face.

"This was the only way to get you to fall asleep. Remember? You would come to our room and lay next to her and she's wake just enough to make room. You'd look straight at me all night. But as soon as she rubbed your face..." he says.

"She'd reach her hand over and rub your face."

Mimicking the motion, Alexander continues hoping to get a response. Evan blinks, but says nothing and Alexander squeezes Evan's warm cheeks together in a light controlled frustration. Alexander coughs instead of cries, pulls at the tender skin around his wrist to quell the want to scream. Rings of light pulsate around them and through the mild semi-dark, Alexander brings chin to chest, strokes slow, slight across his eyebrows.

"I'm getting tired of this okay. You have to talk, you can't not talk. It's done, it's over, what happened happened and we left. It's time to grow the hell up and move on. So, you're either going to start talking right now, or I'm going to have to just go on without you, because I've had enough. She's gone kid and all you have left is me, so that's what it is right now. It's me and you."

Evan turns from him, pulls his legs in, wraps his arms around them says nothing.

Alexander pushes him, pushes hard enough to disrupt the shape of him, hard enough to make him fall over if he wasn't real, but Evan rocked back and forth then remained still.

“Fine then,” Alexander says walking back inside.

At the counter he keeps his back to the door while gathering his things. The waitress reappears and asks if he needs anything else. Her eyes are wide, sore-red, marbled. She sniffs, rubs a limp arm, pulls her sleeve down. Alexander exhales her burnt smell as he looks out the window behind her. Out front, darkness meets him and nothing else, but his gaze drops sudden to gravel and concrete in the distance.

“Places to stay? Do you know of any?” Alexander asks.

“No. I don't,” she says.

“What's over there?” Alexander asks pointing out the window.

“Nothing,” the waitress responds after a pause not even turning to look. “It's nowhere.”

“Right,” Alexander says. “Is there a way across?”

“No. It's unfinished.”

They stare at each other, each waiting for the other to submit. Alexander outlines the blue-green veins in the woman's face, the bruises peeking above the collar of her shirt, the grayness of her complexion and hair. He sees a familiar in that face and steps back, continues with his things. She wipes clear mucus from beneath her nose, dries her finger in her apron, continues to stare him down and Alexander feels it.

“Right,” he says giving her another look.

Outside, he stands behind Evan and shifts in his clothes before walking away from him. Alexander passes a streetlamp and then another. He pictures Evan turning sad-faced and tear-streaked to watch him, but he's not so Alexander leans forward, quickens his steps. Sidewalk ends and Alexander crosses the empty street but the road is short and soon turns to gravel and dust. He stops only when the surface in front of him disappears, drops sudden off into more gravel and dust, dust then cracked riverbed. The air is cooler than it should be and Alexander cinches the loose material around his neck. Though there's no wind, no movement, but the coolness continues on his arms and ankles, through his hair, through his clothes. Behind him, he doesn't see the light or Evan's figure sitting, and the pierce of lonely highlights the unmoving cool. He sees black night on the other side. It reflects off the windows of buildings, the empty still of the surroundings, drives deeper the dark of alley entrances, of building facades. There's a cabled pull through Alexander's feet, an easy push from imagined wind behind him, a child's warm hand brushing against his hand. Alexander doesn't squeeze Evan's hand, but wants to, wants to affirm he's not alone. Alexander eyes him, but Evan's gaze is toward the bridge. Down the dry embankment a rock tumbles, smaller ones following the same path. Alexander holds his breath, wonders whether a rage of water will rush to stop them as they cross. Evan releases leaving air in Alexander's curved hand. He starts before Alexander has a chance to stop him. He runs across the flat terrain, turning to see the surge come wash him away before he can reach the other side. He's out of sight, but Alexander can hear his leaps for some time and then hears nothing, panics. Heart beats sound in his muscles, vibrates hot at his fingertips. Tensing, he braces to follow, but out the darkness he hears the sound of rocks rolling and, a slight figure emerges crawling up

the side before disappearing behind a mound. Alexander exhales, motions forward, but backtracks and takes the bridge.

David sits in the window, waits for the woman to emerge out the darkness with her low-hanging bag of food scraps. It'll knock against her rippling her stride, jolting the tame out her in an irritated arm shake. Her muscles will twitch as she walks making her movements broken, erratic and David watches, waiting to sharing the displeasure. In anticipation his own body reacts as hers, seizing tremors whenever he shifts, blinks, leans solid to the wall. Heat from behind him warms his back. The coiled burner pops remnant foil on the surface, sparks light from unwound wires in the socket. They speck across the floor as they land closer to his leg. David reacts only by wiping the impact away, pulling the singed hairs from his skin, releasing them to the floor. His head skims left and right, from bridge to woods in search of her arrival.

She didn't come over the way he did, but through the tall grass and debris. He was cutting seeds from fruit and when he looked out the window there she was coming through, not even taking one of the paths he made. Her face distorted then flattened as she tripped over herself, skid hands across glass and pavement. David moved slow to blow out his candle, but he still watched her as she moved through the center, passed his tree, touched the branches with the tops of her sunburnt shoulders. She picked dirt and glass from her palm as she walked, dropping them alongside her, leaving a trail he would follow despite his seeing. David couldn't tell if she bled so he dug his heels in, crouched lower, closer against the window. When she got to the bridge, she stopped, adjusted the bag on her other shoulder, backed up, whipped her head from side to side. Scratching at the landing with her foot, she lifted herself to continue on, but didn't, and dropped down.

Hair echoed on the ground when she turned violent, and from high above David saw the glisten on her face before she wiped them away, smudging dirt on and under her eyes. He watched her fit back to tree, watched the simple task of spooning water, the patience of knot tying, the million frustrated misses, watched the one needed hit, the lazy drop in her head. David knew then she wouldn't be capable of leaving because they were the same. Inside she was ugly, ugly like him. He anticipated which building she would choose on which floor with which memories on the wall, and as she rose stumbling, touching building, feeling them through her fingers, through her everything. David felt the slick of glass on his face, checked his palm for the scratches.

Still watching, waiting, David sees a small figurine crawl up the side out the embankment. It sits facing forward, legs swinging in sync. It looks behind as if waiting for another to cross David imagines the flood of figurines to follow, to spill over the side and rush into buildings to occupy them. But a single man crosses. He clings to the left side of the bridge unsure of his footing, and the figurine stands to meet it.

Alexander stepped down, rested his hand on the top of Evan's head. They both looked around the darkness, felt the coming day emerge in the wind that blew, in the silence and still of their breath. Evan started and Alexander followed down the street. Their footsteps, low and flat wrinkled easy under their weight. Pausing, Alexander turned, inhaled, let the sting of air fill him until a small ache itched his throat. Arms languid, curved open he stood unmoving letting pillow smooth night ring silent in his ears. Evan came back for him, grabbed tight Alexander's rough hand. Moisture from the grip made its way to the cracks in Alexander's skin, matted in the fibers of him until neither could tell one from the other.

“You don’t have to talk if you don’t want,” Alexander said low.

Something disturbed the air behind them and they vanished into a doorless building.

Light from a room above illuminating the way.

There’s not much left of her. She’s wasting away but doesn’t care. It hasn’t been long, but the feeling is grating and she jars to stamp out the sensation to gnaw her arms with her nail bits. Returning isn’t an option, so she shuffles forward to fight against the calls in her blood. She’ll eat, drink water, but it won’t keep, but she’ll keep trying until it does. As she walks after work, she remembers the good, thinking it outweighs the bad. It doesn’t. Every time she crosses the bridge she thinks he’ll be on the other side wading in the dark. He won’t. At times, she smells him pungent in the side streets but when she veers, she meets no one. The voices come gentle, and she listens for his purring, but all she can hear are her own and she cries heavy into herself on counters, in customer’s food. Tonight, she stops midway, watches short and tall saunter into her building. The panic isn’t great, but it’s enough to make her retreat to the edges of the bridge. Rust peels off, lifts from the rail, sticks to her clammy skin. Hums inside sizzle from her neck into the air, crisping, steaming before disappearing in a white vapor. A candle burns in a window she’s never noticed before. Someone stands against a wall staring down on her, staring into her building. Their palm stains misty glass when it’s removed, reveals bare chest and arms. She grips hard on her bag as if someone’s trying to take it from her, pulls it close to the groove in her thigh. Nails dig against her hand, but she doesn’t release. Quickly she moves to an alley never misplacing the candle in the window.

David props himself upright, carves three lines in the wall. Back at the window he looks for her but she’s already gone. Soup from the can still emits steam but it’s already

cold. Squatting, he continues to eat, swallowing more than chewing. If he remembered how to smile, could will it back from times before, he would have.

CHAPTER 6

Rob and Lou

Lou hears Jude barking and grabs for the knife.

The weight of it makes her left hand hang low by her thigh as she takes deliberate wet steps down the hall toward the living room. Lou breathes steady, grips hard on the plastic handle, fears it will break under the pressure. Jude continues barking all the while and she can hear the saliva foam at his mouth, fall in globs to the floor. Between the wall and the opening she raises blade to face, takes a deep breath, lessens her anticipation. Quiet, slow, she inches it around, takes another deep breath, licks wetness from her upper lip. Turning the corner she stretches her arm out steady. Her naked body and face are both tense and relaxed as her fingertip reaches forward to balance the steel.

“Lou,” Rob screams looking at Jude’s mouth ready to strike him.

He notices the silver pointed at his throat before he notices bare body. He flinches, takes a quick glance before averting his eyes back toward the still barking dog. Lou’s hand drops. The muscles in her neck pulsate as she grinds her teeth, jaw muscles twitching. A brown bag is gripped like a wine bottle in his hands.

“Did you get it all from them?” she asks loosening more on her grip and turning for her bedroom.

“Almost.”

She tosses the knife on the bed and pulls a camisole over her still wet chest. It soaks the water off her, blots in heavy patches pulling lace away from her. As she pulls on a pair of jeans, socks, and boots, Lou shakes water from her arms. While towel drying her hair, she looks at the snow falling over the neglected city. People skulk around, pick up loose cans, pack torn newspapers into their holed coats. A tree stands tall in the center of what once was a park, but is now littered with her addicts and their syringes. The fleece turtleneck she stretches over her camisole rumples across her when she pulls her hair into a low ponytail at the base of her neck. Small baby hairs frame her oval face but get tucked behind her ears. Lou stands at the window, peers around to see the bridge. Two figures pace at the foot of it, one kicks rocks, gestures loud with his arms while the other nods, waits for the people to cross. She sighs before sitting on the bed, taps the knife on her leg, rubs thumb over the inscription etched on the handle: To My Lilou, Love Bàba.

Point jabs sole when she slips it down her boot.

Jude is licking the floor at Rob's feet as he attempts to read the handwritten symbols lining the inside of a book. Rob palms a worn copy of another on the sofa, inspects the withered face of the statue sitting ankle to thigh, arms stretching out from behind him.

"Put that down please," Lou says walking out.

"Sorry," Rob says. "Sorry for before. For seeing you. Like that."

His voice trails off when she ignores him, walks to the couch, lifts one of the cushions.

Lou sends her reach down a tear in the material. Her face contorts when she can't find what she looks for.

“You don’t have to go,” Rob says. “I can handle this myself.”

“Really,” Lou says. “So can I.”

Her eyebrows lift hard, arched as she pulls her hand out with the bag. Counting them, Lou checks palm-sized bags for holes before placing them on the cushion next to her. She pauses, turns toward him, scans his body as he set the book on the table in front of him. Lou thinks of something to say that won’t come off harsh or forward.

“What did you mean by almost?”

Rob looks down at Jude.

“They said the lady who lives in the old bank building didn’t have the money. But I can handle that, that’s what I’m saying.”

Lou raises her hand to silence him, eyes shrink back into her flat face. Teeth grind again, send noise and a vibration down her throat. Lips protrude thin when she sucks her cheeks in, thinks. Taking a black backpack from under the table, she fills it with the clear bags, rests them neat into one another.

“Doesn’t she owe from last week? Didn’t you tell them last week that if she didn’t pay I would...”

“I did tell them,” he says cutting her off, “but they said her kid was there and they didn’t want to mess him up or whatever.”

Lou steps away from the couch, stares out the window.

“Hey Lou,” he says.

“Rob.”

“How long have we known each other?”

“Long enough for you to know how to do your job,” she says, “long enough for everyone to know how to do their job.”

“Right. I’m just saying, we don’t know each other on a level other than this.

That’s all.”

The snow has stopped, but the sky blankets sheet-white and Lou wonders where she will be when the full of it finally falls down. She imagines it as it cloaks the branches of the tree, the slats on the bench, the tops of buildings.

“It’s time to go,” she says.

Rob follows Lou through the kitchen while Jude sits obedient, whines eager to go with them. Rob exits first after she opens the front door. She thinks of something personal to say to him, something with meaning. The words feel strange in her mouth, roll around as soap or soft wax. She rests them on her lips before letting them go.

“I’m allergic to pineapples.” Her ponytail swings back and then forward as she whips her head. “Jude. Come.”

Outside the air is thick with cold. Ice has formed along the broken sidewalk in front of her building. Sun shines high over the entire space, makes the snow glisten in off-colored hues. A woman leans on the fig tree, nods to Lou, waves to Rob. The missing patches in the matted fur of her coat blend with the blonde hair of the woman. The holes in her stockings at the knee have crooked runs coming away from them and Lou turns to Rob, looks for an expression on his face. Jude runs over to the tree, sniffs, lifts a leg. The woman makes a face at Lou, but quickly adjusts it before leaving. Rob and Lou stand in front of her building for a while, watch Jude roll in the fresh powder. Rob lights a cigarette, offers her one, she declines. Lou watches him take a slow first draw, watches

him puff smoke out of his mouth and nostrils. His cheeks redden from the cold and matches the red tips in his full beard. Once, he fell asleep on her couch and she asked him if he dyed it. When he didn't respond she left her bedroom door cracked, and went to bed, but didn't sleep. She waited for him to come in, practiced asking the same question over and over in different tones.

“Do you dye it,” flat. “Do you dye it,” pitched. “Do you dye it?” an overstated question.

He never came in, and she never asked him again.

Rob's eyes shift from left to right, and Lou holds a smile as she imagines his mouth on hers. Jude's barking brings her back, and she turns to see him jumping up along the bark at a squirrel. A warm hand touches against her ear and Rob replaces those hairs. Lou wants to lean into his touch, wants to linger there until she's warm all over, but she doesn't even turn to look at him.

“Let's go,” she says.

People in their way move without being asked or told to do so. Lou walks ahead of Rob adjusts the backpack on her shoulders, counts her steps. Rob looks everywhere she does not and someone is following them on the other side of the street. He moves closer to Lou and places himself between her and the street while Jude walks a full block ahead, the hairs on his back already on end. When they approach the bridge, the two figures stiffen, one with his arms still in the air.

“Hey. How's it going,” one asks.

“I don't understand,” Lou says. “It's not that difficult.”

“Her kid was there,” the other said.

“Look,” Lou says. “We give you the bags. You sell the bags. You collect money for the bags. You give the money to us.”

“Lou,” Rob says.

“No,” she responds. “At no point did I say to give away the bags without collecting the money. That makes no sense.”

The three stare at her then try not to. They see the tension in her face, the tight pull of skin about jawline, the conclave of her throat as she holds her breath.

“Now I have to go into the city and do your job,” she says careening her neck.

“Then I have to come back and handle this woman the three of you can’t.”

“Lou,” Rob says, “I told you I would do it.”

“But you didn’t. You’re all wasting my time.”

Lou crosses the bridge, creates her own wind in her stride enough to water her eyes. Rob moves to follow but Jude barks him back.

* * *

Lou approaches the old bank building and checks for noise. The people across the street silence, disperse through side alleys as they see her go inside. She pushes past the no longer revolving doors, peaks around the corner, reads old flyers on the wall. Before she reaches the top of the stairs, she hears the lines being snorted from the floor above. No light from above guides her steps, so Lou closes her eyes, lets the noise bring her to the correct room. Hands in pockets, she waits, listens for any heavy footsteps. Though the door to the manager’s office is light, Lou uses her weight to ease it open, quiet as a hush. A pile of red stringy hair leans forward across a white tiled table. Lou walks inside, calm, fake clears her throat and stands in the entry. The woman doesn’t notice Lou, and she

inhales the third line in the grooves between the tiles. Eyes enlarged, the woman rocks back, rubs her teeth, pulls at the collar of her shirt. But looking up and seeing Lou, she jumps to run, but Lou catches her by the hair, slams her to the wall. A stained mattress lies in the corner, and the woman crawls to it on hands and knees, balls fetal in the center. Infected sores on the red-heads arms catch Lou's attention; a yellowish crust on some, light green on others. Some are black flesh eaten away.

"I'll get the money," she cries. "I'll get it I promise."

Lou bends, grips the woman by the face. The red-head flails, but Lou grips harder, until the woman stops making noise. Clear bubbles pop from her nostrils when she exhales and Lou counts them; five, almost six. Tears stream down the red-head's face, mix in with the clear of her nose, loose hairs sticking in it.

"I'll get you the money," she says through pinched cheeks.

Releasing, Lou blows into her hands, rubs at her knuckles, sits on the end of the table. Flakes fall and glide gentle to the ground, cover Jude's messy play in a dusting. She wonders why they left only one tree, why build the city around it. Before he left, her father had once told her a story about it, about the people who lived here, about the company her family owned. Gazing out the window, Lou tried to hear the weak whisper of her father's voice, but all she could hear were the cries of the woman to the falling of the flakes. Stepping closer, bending down inches from the woman's face, Lou pulls the knife out her boot. A glint of sun catches the silver, flashes against the burnt glow high of the woman's eyes. Cries and mumbles roll out from between clenched teeth while Lou looks straight at her, silent, tapping the butt along tear-streaked skin. The unzipping of her bag makes her stop. Lou whips to see a wide-eyed boy staring back at her. Mounds of

red in curls loop endless over each other taking over his head. Curls tilt forward, back, left, right, into and out of the loops. Lou wants to be lost in them, but she doesn't relax her grip or her finger as she walks to him.

“Get your grimy hands off my stuff,” she says, jaw twitching.

“Please, don't,” the red-head says.

He motions to touch the tip of her knife, the tip of where her finger is stretched to balance it. Lou's hand shakes. She grips firmer, purses her lips to do so. His small hand hovers in the air above her wrist and when his cold hand meets her warm skin, he smiles and she sees herself stoic in the glossy of his eyes.

“Get me my money,” Lou says to the woman.

She grabs her backpack and walks out.

She stops short of her building and sets the bag down. Her knuckles pale and for a moment she doesn't recognize them. Lou has been followed since she made the drop and she knows, and when she looks away from her hand, she sees him walking into the alley. Rubbing and stretching her fingers brings color back, lessens the pain in her wrist. There is no one on the stairs so she stops halfway, leans back to the wall, tries not to think of red curls and cold fingers.

Rob sits in her sofa with his feet on the table. His eyes are closed, her worn words rest open across his chest. The curved tip of her knife pokes him in the gut.

“You can't keep letting yourself into my apartment.”

“If I was someone who wanted you dead you would have been the second you opened the door. You didn't even notice I was here until it was too late.”

“I'm tired.”

“Sit.”

His eyes don't open and he locks his fingers placing them across his round stomach. Lou hesitates before sitting down next to him and sets the bag on the floor. After shifting to become comfortable, she decides stillness may be better. The brown crumpled bag from the morning is out of place on the table and she leans to move it but changes her mind. Listening to Jude drink water from his bowl in the kitchen, she rubs her knuckles and thinks about the brown paper bag. She opens and closes her mouth to say something testing them silent on her lips, but she can't find any words.

“Where did you go?” he asks

“What?”

“You left and didn't come straight here. Where did you go? I can't do my job if I can't find you. You shouldn't have left without me.”

She reaches to replace stray hair behind her ears, but feels her lobes instead.

“I was ready to go. Those two weren't getting the job done so I went and did it myself. Why didn't you follow me if you were so worried? Why didn't you do your job and follow me?”

“Jude didn't want me to follow. Did you want me to follow?”

“I don't need you as much as you think I do,” she says.

“You sure.”

Lou doesn't answer and his face falls soft when he smiles, pulls straight the lines around his mouth. He takes her hand to examine it and she flinches to snatch back but he looks at her from underneath and she stops resisting. A warmth in her chest spreads when he bends her fingers one by one. Lou breaths slow, feels a balmy sensation swarm in a

circle in her chest. She exhales to get rid of it, and it wafts hotter into her throat before escaping. Changing positions, his knee touches the side of her leg in a fine smooth skim.

“It looks fine,” he says. “Why do you keep rubbing it.”

“I went to get my money.” Lou says matter of fact adjusting her shoulders.

“And?”

“I didn’t cut her if that’s what you’re thinking,” she says looking at the back of his shaved head.

“The brothers’ are out of material. They’ll need more for the week.”

“I don’t want to work with them anymore.”

Rob doesn’t ask why or nod, and Lou doesn’t know if she wants him to, doesn’t know if she should make him leave or stay. Jude comes over, forces his nose under her hand, forces his head under her arm when she doesn’t pet him.

“You named a Saint Bernard Jude?” Rob asks after a steady silence.

“He bit me once.”

A small cluster of slits mark flat on her forearm, discolored fresh as a burn. Rob reaches over to run his fingers along them, but Lou pulls back.

“I would have shot him,” he says. “Any dog that does that,” he didn’t finish

“Yeah,” she answers. “But he’s not any dog.”

* * *

Sleep comes down on her and she staggers to close the wall-sized curtains of her bedroom. Looking out at the sleeping city below, the branches on the tree knock together and she imagines she can hear the minute clicks of it. Narrow light from the half moon beams down from between winter clouds. The lighting deadens the silhouette and Lou

watches it not move yet sway against the snow shroud. Her head limps to one side as she watches, wavers in its shadows and believes it's not bad to be left behind in a broken place.

A black and white picture from her dresser fills her hands. A flat faced man in a white lab coat holds a little girl, only one smiles. The little girl has the flower of a plant. Lou thinks she sees the bright red of the flower and closes her eyes to bring back the memory of it, of the stories and a Bāba's whisper voice.

Lou falls asleep with her thoughts wisping away from her, slipping frictionless through her fingers even as she clutches air to hold them.

Jude slumps his body onto her chest in the early morning, licks her face to rouse her. She sits straight up to scowl at him, then falls back down on the opposite pillow feeling her knife's impression hard against her face. Jude barks and Lou rolls over putting the pillow over her head pretending not to hear. He climbs onto her, paws the pillow and the back of her head, lets his weight press dead on top her lungs.

"I just got to sleep," she mumbles into the sheets.

Frigid air gusts around her, engulfs her, makes her body to shiver. When it happens again and her hair covers her face in a flurry, she swings violent to push it back. Staggering lazy, she waits for Jude to return but he doesn't. As she walks unsteady into the park her feet drag behind her, leave shuffle marks in the deep snow, chill the exposed skin of her ankle. Standing closer to the tree, she looks between the branches, at the moon trying to poke out from the clouds. A crunch resounds behind her and she reaches into a boot that isn't there. A sharp blow to her face makes her fall to the frozen dirt, powdery snow. The ground forms solid when she lifts herself, and Lou blinks to steady her sight.

The crunching of more footsteps inflates both fear and rage in her chest, more fear than rage. A faint shadow of a person approaches her lifting her from the ground by her arm. Tingling in her face increases as her eye swells, but she ignores it, squints through the darkness. He grabs her throat, forces her against the cold bark of the tree, grips her neck. The crack of bone on bark makes her sway and slacken her body against his for support. Fingertips press hard at the soft places on either side under her chin, and when she coughs he digs them further. His mouth moves but Lou hears nothing but the beating of her own heart in her ears. But when he leans into her, she presses her head back against the tree then lunges it forward to meet his in a blinding blow.

Snow drifts up around him when he falls and Lou rushes forward punches his face, screams for Jude sitting in front of the door.

“Get up,” she says.

And he does. He comes for her again, again and Lou defends, attacks while Jude watches, head cocked to the side.

“Get up,” she says a last time.

But he doesn't and she kicks him anyway.

* * *

Lou is in the bedroom struggling to pull a shirt over her head when Rob arrives. Holding her ribs with her right hand, she half-dresses before stopping to rub and shake the pain away. Tongue to cut on her lip, she listens to Rob struggle with Jude, to the sound of blood rushing in her ears, to the clicks of bark on bark. Her right eye is an amalgamation of deep blues, bright purples and she cups her hand around it to block out the light from the window. The bedroom door is still ajar from where she entered earlier

and as Rob pushes it open wider, Jude runs in before him, slams Rob into the dresser. Lou pulls Jude's shoulders down, falls into Rob on a clumsy trip. His scent fills her mouth, mixes with the taste of blood in the back of her throat where her tongue can't reach; flickered heat of a lighter, the first draw of a cigarette, something else. Taste lingering, Lou struggles to find the something else. She licks her cut again to will it forward, but just when she's about to find it Rob interrupts, sets her down, inspects the condition of her face and arms.

Hair stiffens in quills along his back and Jude positions himself between them again, clamps down on Rob's arm, yelps away when Lou screams his name.

"What happened to you?"

"We should get ready," she says. "I figure we can make the runs ourselves from now on."

"What happened to you?" he asks again.

"It's nothing."

Through the thinness and wetness of her shirt, he sees the bruises, the scrape marks lining the groove in her back when she rises. He counts the rings in her spine bruised darker where they rubbed the bark of the tree. Damp bath towel to arm wound, Rob applies pressure to the bites, wraps the extra around his arm because he can.

"I want to head into the city early today?" she asks.

"Okay," he says inspecting the bites on his arm.

Lou pulls bags of blue pills from the other cushion of her couch. He doesn't help when she sits painful on the floor or when she starts forcing the bags in one of the backpacks. She sees the question forming in him, but she sighs and nods for him to pass her another

bag. The bleeding on his arm has stopped and Rob shifts his weight, throws the towel down, stretches at the skin around each wound. When finished, Lou sits down careful, the pain and struggle in doing so wrinkling her face. They both watch Jude move to the window, watch him lick glass, watch him flop down, a flurry of dust coming up from beneath him. Dust drifts in partial waves, one side higher than the other, one side landing first then the other. It rests in a light halo around Jude, extends through the length of his fur outward in a ring. Rob continues watching, Lou looks away. The wounds swell in a pink puff and Rob removes the blonde arm hair from them then looks up to Lou licking the cut on her top lip. Tongue tip caresses light along it, rubs in an idle motion hiding it, exposing it. Sections of hair has fallen over each shoulder making the front of her shirt wet and he can see the fist-sized bruises on her chest bone. Clinching his own fists he folds his arms into one another, grunts. Lou raises her eyebrow, masking the cut beneath the fold of skin when she does so. Red of his beard grows into the brown of his hair and Lou scratches the cushion of the couch to satisfy the urge to run her fingers over his scalp.

“I’m going to need you to carry one of these today,” Lou says placing three backacks on the floor.

“You get into a fight or something after I left yesterday?”

“Something like that.”

Lou zips each bag. Looks at him twisting her mouth.

“With who?”

“Some guy,” she says as if she doesn’t know who he is. “Some guy in the park last night. Jude had to pee, so we went out and I got into a fight. Just let it go. It’s over.”

“It’s not over,” he says. “Just tell me who.”

“I’m going to need you to calm down.”

His face is pasty, blank except for the lone freckle dancing on the end of his twitching nose. He pats his back pockets for a cigarette pack and pulls out his last one. It breaks. The front end falls soundless to the floor.

“Who,” he asks again.

“This guy that was following me yesterday. Some guy,” she says looking at him, away from him.

He lights the broken cigarette and loose tobacco scatters in the current created in his walking to her. The first draw isn’t as slow as usual and he paces along the length of the wall, grumbling low, loud, from the gut like an elephant. Lou feels the rumbling come through the concrete floor and into her chest vibrating her heart, rattling her broken rib into a small tickle.

“Okay,” he says. “Okay.”

He takes the last puff and stamps the non-flame out with his index and thumb. He throws it away as he walks through the kitchen.

“Where are you going? We have business and I need your help.”

“I’ll be back later. You’ll have to go without me. I’ll meet you afterward.”

“Are you serious right now? It’s fine,” she says. “I told you I can take care of myself. We weren’t working. You look after me while we’re working, Rob.”

“Lou,” he says.

Her tears well when he looks at her, but anger keeps them back.

“What,” she says.

The door is still open. His footsteps ricochet down the hallway as Lou stands alone in her apartment.

* * *

It’s dark when she comes back across the bridge. She’s silent, lessens the pain from the day by counting steps. She drags one of the bags behind her. The moon is nonexistent under the clouds of the navy blue sky. The knapsack on her back weighs heavy on her, and she leans forward to alleviate some of the pain rubbing rough at her neck and ribs. Before she steps down onto the sidewalk, she notices Rob standing under a broken streetlamp. Half-lit bulb wrenches to force a beam, flickers off and on as a caution light. Smoke streams thick from his cigarette, float into the blue night lingering momentarily in tender wisps before fleeting. She steps forward pretending not to see him, but the blood on his cheek in the flicker of the light draws her near. His face is cut, bruised, almost matching hers and he flicks the half-smoked cigarette onto the sidewalk. The red of insides mingle with the natural redness at the tips of his beard. They stare as the dancing of the light becomes more of a dying pulse. When the next stroke of darkness should come, it delays, illuminates them alone on the street. Lou raises her hand to touch the cut on his lip, but pulls back and touches her ear instead.

“Follow me,” he says.

“No.”

He grabs her arm as she pasts him to leave. Her forehead rumples and her neck disappears when she shrinks her head back. His grip to her shoulder, he pulls her close, and Lou feels his warm breath on her face blanketing it in steady comfort. The taste of licorice swarms the back of her throat and the smell wraps around her as the cold breeze of winter engulfs them in a cocoon of snow just fallen.

“Follow me,” he says low his mouth close enough to kiss.

“No,” she says struggling and not struggling to break his grip.

When he releases her, she takes a step back to regain her space but still close enough to touch him and she wants to. Rob moves closer, grabbing her face turning it to his. The swollen knot on his head throbs red-white with the intensity of his breathing. Scabs try to form over the lacerations on his cheek and lip, and Lou licks at hers with the tip of her tongue, rubbing it over the hard coating, smooth then tough on the edge.

“Do you trust me?” he asks stroking the misplaced baby hairs with his thumb.

“Lou. Do you trust me?”

The darkness of the other side of the street swallows them as they step into it, their shadows disappearing through the night. Rob holds Lou by the hand first with interlocking fingers, but as she slows to a lag to look around, he takes her by the wrist, pulls her like a toddler. The silhouette of the tree looms darker from that angle and Lou stops to see, stops to stand beneath it, but Rob pulls her on. Above, she sees the light in her living room and makes out the swishing of Jude tail in the window. Turning away and then back, she sees him pushing and barking at the window as he peers down to her through the night. The dim alley sucks away the warmth surrounding. Before stepping back to it, she watches Jude frantic at not being able to reach her, barking mad, silent,

useless behind the glass. Halfway down, Rob releases her arm and stops in front of an open door. Rust stains on the bottom of his shirt match the color of the ones of the ones on the wall. When Lou faces him and caution blinks through the scars and bruises on his face, she thinks to smile but can't. Hair slips down from behind her ear and he twirls them with his finger, loosens the ponytail at her shoulder.

“I did something and I want you to see,” he says.

“Okay.”

“I think we should leave. We can do this anywhere.”

Moon peaks through a hole in the clouds, shines down on them in an ashen gloss.

Outlines of a story rush through her head and Lou only remembers the whisper voice telling her to stay, to continue on.

“I don't want to leave,” she says.

“What?”

“I'm staying.”

“Okay,” he says.

Rob takes a knife from behind him, pats blade in palm before handing it to her. In the darkness behind him something falls and Lou steps forward to enter inside, stops when Rob looks down, away.

“You killed him?” she asks.

But he doesn't respond and Lou grips the handle when he hands it to her, rests her finger joints in the curved spaces made for them. Without thinking, she feels for the inscription on the other side, but it's not the same. Looking at Rob she turns it in her hand, peers down to find what is missing. Her thumb caresses over the letters on the blade: To Lilou.

Words smear from the oils of her fingers

“Why would you do this for me.”

But he doesn't answer and she knows it doesn't matter anyway.

CHAPTER 7

Four

Bishop visits and pale purple scents from next door fill my apartment densing the space around us. He's stiff on the edge of my loveseat, eyes clamped shut. His lids wrinkle in pain then release and smooth. The Indian woman on the other side of the wall bangs dishes together quickly preparing dinner for her husband Suresh. He screams for her to finish and a tin pan tings against the floor, she scrambles to stop it. Face to wall, I listen with my eyes closed, let the sounds of her movements echo through the wall, through my fingers to rest colorful inside me. The words in the song she sings are foreign, but her voice, high-pitched and fluttering, comforts me, brings my heartbeats down to a steady rhythm. When he screams, she stops mid-word, rushes to attend to him and my own calm slips away back through the dark of the wall. Bishop shifts behind me, flops his legs on the cushion of my sofa creating a dust bowl twisting in my direction. Standing in the corner, I turn my back to avoid it.

"What's that smell?" he asks raspy voiced into the ceiling.

Below a little girl picks dead flowers out the grass. The back of her skirt wrinkles yellow from where she plays, eats, sleeps, urinates in that dress. I imagine this is what I looked like from behind when I was her age, small, unsuspecting, clueless. I hunted crickets under the porch of our house while my sisters ran between the looming sunflowers, my brother watched our mother from the porch, elbows pushing hard into his

knees. Darkness would fall and I would still be hunting, my mother's voice rising and falling.

My number. Laurie, Three, always found me first and coaxed me out with bundles of lavender she picked from the neighbor's yard. It warmed in her hands and the heavy scent floated me from the dank of our house's under, wrapped me, lingered on my clothes through the night. Three, Laurie, braided the stems in my hair while I slept. She died in a rushing whirl of water.

“It's strong whatever it is,” he says. “I can taste it on the roof of my mouth.”

“Lavender.” I say “Her husband brings it home, for the rice.”

“They have you over for dinner?” he says, pops a palm chalked pill in his mouth.

“I can hear them talking all the time.”

“They're not speaking English.”

“Yeah,” I say.

Bishop sits up, stares at me, turns to listen behind the wall, the spikes of his low shaved head pricking light. I picture the woman, hunching over, hair twisting flying in a tail behind her as she scurries about her kitchen mixing bright yellows and greens with slotted spoon. When they first came she tried to come over, stood at my doorframe with a flat basket of dull colored nuts and dried fruits. She smiled, talked low through the space between door and wall. She pushed the basket up, pointed with her chin to a loaf cooling beneath her arm, the scent of anise rising. I shut the door in her face, her smile cut off in the flash of dented wood and metal. I didn't care. I still don't. During the day when Suresh is away, she goes across the hall through another shut door, the flick of her hair rushing in last as a blur, but she's always back in time to start his dinner and she doesn't tell him

where she goes. She scurries today because she ran late, didn't come back until hours later. Suresh will know she left, her face will reveal her betrayal and he will beat her until she stops crying out. After work I'll fall asleep to the sound of his fist thud and smack against her small frame. I'll listen while she cries herself to sleep and I'll cry too.

“You work tonight?” Bishop asks.

“Yes,” I answer still looking out the window.

“You can get me in, let me drink at the bar?”

“I'm not at the bar tonight.”

“Dancing?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I watch?”

When I turn around he's picking out all the blue pills, putting them in the inside pocket of his jacket. The bowl on the table is half empty, mostly large and white and those speckled ones he brings that look like candy. His smile is pointed, sharp on one side as he scans my body picturing me in next to nothing or only nothing. I knew already. As always, He would stand in the dark by the bathroom and pull long drags on a cigarette. On slow songs he would pay one of the other girls to get on stage with me, pay the manager to keep the strobe lights flashing even though it bothers some of the other people. Smoke will loom in the corner even after he leaves, a small orange will smolder on the black floor from where he drops it still alive and burning.

“Don't leave me those big and speckled ones. They don't do anything. I hope you don't spend money on those.”

“Free,” he says.

“Do you know why?”

“Because they don't do anything.”

He smiles again, walks over to me at the window, looks at the girl now hunting for leafy clovers or insects. Hair whips around her as she leaps up, falls to the ground, giggles to herself. No one walks around her, minds her while she plays, throws broken syringes out the grass. Bishop's fingers graze light against the cold pane and he rests his sweat misted forehead on the back of his hand. I've been popping skittles since before he came, tempting courage for work later when different sets of eyes, hands, bodies rub against mine. Bishop's breathing shallows as the concoctions mix together in his blood stream, send sweat pouring out his skin. His eyes saucer, pulse in and out like neon stage lights. He leans, sways to the pulse and the mix. I'm not sure if I feel anything.

“Would you ever have one of those?” he asks spinning around, squeaking the glass.

“No. I'm not built for one. Bad blood.”

“If any dog can be a mother,” he says, “so can you.”

He strokes my arm, runs against the grain of light hairs up to my shoulder. I say his name but he doesn't stop, doesn't look at my face. When I push him, he sways back, hand gripping air for balance. The girl is gone from below but the flat grass leaves the oval shape of where she lay searching.

* * *

One night, I opened my coat, let cold air whip and crack against my frame. Ringing in my ears drilled deep to my brain but I kept walking, listening to the crunch of frozen rocks beneath me, letting the wind push me forward. It rolled across my arm,

pulled goose bumps and hairs out of line, sent numbing cold down into my hips. Pain, sharp, unnerving, shot up my spine, through the base of my neck, out the silence of my mouth. It blast down through my face, my groin, the tips of my toes, but it wasn't from the cold, and when I crossed the bridge, my kidneys lit fire and I slouched in the alley between my building and the next, bobbing to send pain away, up and down to make it stop. No one lined the street, no one stood watch on the bridge, but the trees swooned in my direction, let leaves drop slow to the ground, branches touching branches. The intensity twisted my skin until it hurt too much to scream, to blink and I placed my hands on the wall in front of me, pushed my hips to the brick behind me. Huffs of hot air rushed in and out as I gapped my mouth open, chill aching loud in the back of my teeth, nails pulling, scraping hard. I twisted there for a forever time, waited for someone to hear me, someone to help, but none came or moved behind the shadows of their windows. I crouched against the wall, pleaded for something to make it stop, but relief came only after it came out nestled warm, unmoving next to my foot. By then it was too late. Even in the darkness of the alley I knew what it was, so I wrapped it in my coat, carried it home, put it in a box on the counter, and went to bed. I threw the coat in the trash and slept until the next night.

Soon after a girl came down the hall. She barricaded herself in with cinderblocks and metal chairs. I heard her scrapping up the floor as she dragged them, letting them knock against the door and walls. She was young. Not as old as I was when I came, and I tried to picture her face; hair stringy, maybe blonde, maybe brown, but I'd never seen her because she never left. Some days I whispered through the door, told her to go home, told her she doesn't belong here, that there can't be worse than here, that she can't sit alone in a

cold room, but something made her choose here, so I stopped whispering that. Dim of the hall made me feel useful, sent the chill of cold away. I'd sit, lean, scratch on the wall to occupy myself, to let her know I was there. Stories about the demons under my mother's house ended her tears, and she'd crawl across the floor to the door to listen and sigh. I left the groceries I wouldn't eat at her door, followed Suresh to the store to find the lavender to put in the bags, and I never said anything but made sure to rattle them so she'd know they were there. One night I heard her banging a can on the floor. She threw it against the wall and then gave up. When I bought groceries the next week, I left a can opener in one of the bags. The week I sat humming, she spoke.

“I'm afraid,” she whispered.

I got up and never went back.

* * *

My mother called me Four. She brushed my hair at night, whispered “Four” in my ear while she stroked tender across my bangs. The tang of ragweed filled the room, made my eyes water when I hugged tight my pillow after she left. We listened to crickets chirp, some in jars some free under my bed, and I pretended to understand what they said. Whenever I chirped back, squeaky and out of pitch, she brushed harder, fake giggled. My head jerked back and I stopped making noise, stopped moving. Winding and unwinding the length of her hair about my wrist, I once asked her about someone named Ronan who lived under our house and she froze, gripped tighter on the handful of hair she had. I told her about a rock, wide, flat, the name Ronan etched crooked across the top. It felt smooth to my skin when I rubbed back and forth, but the name scrawled deep and jagged into the mass of stone. I didn't tell her about the tiny bones that snagged my socks, scratched my

legs, matched the length of my fingers when I laid them on my dusty palm. She grabbed my shoulders, snatched me from under thick covers and told me never to go under the house.

“There are demons,” she said. “Demons that will hurt you.”

“No,” I said shaking my hair tangled. “There are only crickets and dirt.”

My shoulders scrunched tight under her grip, and I felt my skin whitening where her fingers pressed deep, harsh, violent. I moved to pull away, but I couldn't and she shook me light, almost invisible, but the back and forth motion made me nauseous, dizzy. It wasn't until I whimpered, letting tears fill my eyes did she release me, lift her hands in the air as if it wasn't her who did it. Killian came in then, stood tall, filled the yellow-chipped door frame of my room. He looked at her and then to me rubbing my shoulder, crying into my dress.

“There are demons,” she said again before rushing out.

Killian came over, sat on the edge of my bed, asked me if I was okay.

“She said there are demons under the house,” I said, “and that they would hurt me.”

He brushed my hair, but didn't smile to comfort me.

“There are no demons,” he said, “but she buries things there.”

He brushed the same spot over and over, brushed with one hand, smoothed with the other and looked out the window. Night shone deep purple, obscured stars behind the hue. Killian careened his neck, got lost in the masking of hills and sunflowers and grass. Only the noise of the river was the same, washing, washing over itself in the dark.

“She buries things there,” he said again.

* * *

On stage, I hum when my insides hum. We drone together me and the hums, let the music pulse us to the light. Spinning and more spinning, I feel my hair flying weightless in the air, the silver of the pole slicking smooth against my palm, stage and wood, solid beneath me. Shoes off, feet numb, I walk with no purpose, move and breathe and hum to the music I can feel but not hear. A man with a red beard finger scratches the edge of the stage, holds folded money up for me to see, and I go over to him, do my dance, touch soft my body, flick my hair quick across his face and he smiles, touches me where I touch myself. Someone I know mirrors behind his face, waves and hands for me but the humming and spinning give the wet faces of my sisters Three and Five. Laurie and Cassidy.

The image of Cassidy blocked out the faces waiting for me stop, waiting for me to remove more clothes, to dance for them, to feel fluid on my skin. She splashed clear, and water thickened her curls, weighed them down to her chin. I called out to her but she didn't hear. I screamed "Cassy, Five," but her own splashing and twirling drowned out my calls. Birds circled her overhead, dove down in swoops but the water kept them at bay, kept them high, dark blots against the clear blue. On the hill, I watched her, hunted crickets, ignored again the calls of my mother and listened to Cassidy spin and sing in the water, handfuls of it coming down on her. Flutters itched my hand crickets jumped trying to escape, trying to wiggle free. I caught another, cupped my hands together, put it to my ear and listen. Grass bent flat when the wind blew. It lifted my dress, pressed hair into my nose and mouth, knocked me down as I stood wobbling. My mother came, strained forward against the wind. She pulled Three behind her and Cassy saw, stopped

spinning, singing. Birds swung down around them as she pressed them under. Cassidy, Five, was the first to stop kicking.

I feel a touch, but as I open my eyes the bouncers drag him away, snatch money out his hands, throw it on the stage. They tell him not to touch the dancers, shove him out the door in a screech of light, of cars passing fast, of feet stumbling to avoid him in their path. Thuds of music echo hard against my heartbeat, pound like a fist or a struggle for air. His dollar bill rests on his corner of the stage. Bishop comes, picks it up, rubs with his thumb against the dollar's face.

“Let's go,” he says

“No,” I say, “I'm working.”

“Let's go.”

I move but only to extend my arm to grab the pole again, drop my body to swing. He pauses, furrows his forehead, clenches he jaw.

“I'll wait,” he says.

He crumples the bill, throws it back on stage. Laurie and Cassidy don't come back.

* * *

The guy with the red-beard comes in town, and there are times when I think he glances my way, but he doesn't because he only talks to a couple of people and I'm not one of them. He spends most of his time following her around, walking behind her when she straps the pack around her frail waist, walks across the bridge, returns without it. She moves away when he stands close to her, close enough to touch, but he always returns the next day to follow behind her, to move men away who get to close and most times she doesn't even notice. I've never been in her building, and she occupies the entire thing and

I don't know how, why. I trace his steps up to her loft until I see his figure in her living room thumbing her books, sitting on her furniture, counting money with her until dark. Once when he came, her body glistened with water, inched naked around the corner and I looked away. When they argue his face pales, matches the gray of morning, and she leaves the room, sits on her bed, stares at a picture on her nightstand.

Some nights he's still perched at the edge of the stage when some of the girls dance offbeat, slow. I want to walk up to him, but Bishop watches from the dark and some part forces me to walk by instead and ignore him. The last time he was there Bishop grabbed my arm when I rounded the corner, his eyes throbbed and burned quick as those green dragons he leaves in my bowl.

“Bird's flying high,” he said.

“Bishop,” I said twisting my arm away.

“Bird's flying high.”

He squeezed harder, left a bruise on my wrist.

* * *

When I'm too tired to sleep I stare out the window into the park. Fog rises in translucent billows, makes its way up to twine themselves in the clouds. Under the longest branch of the tree, a patch of grass grows greener, dies blacker than anywhere else and the change comes quick, one day green, next day black. During the spring, wind ruffles baby grass in all directions, into and away from each other. On bad nights I hear scratching on a window in the kitchen, and nothing is there, but I'm too scared to go and check. Sometimes, a small whimper eases under the door to my bedroom, but I close my eyes tighter and listen to the sounds outside or the ones on the other side of the wall.

When the scratching first started, I thought the branches of the tree were long enough to reach my window, but later, after the day woke, I saw that it wasn't. When I look out during my days off, I wonder if anyone knows me the way I know them, but they don't so I just sit and wait for the blinding black nothing of night, wait for the change I know will never come.

Warm air brings more people out, but we never look each other in the face or make conversation. They move without direction, stroll in and out of buildings, from behind bushes and weeds. Even I move with them when I shouldn't need to. The bench creaks in a cold strain under my weight, but it holds strong and I settle into the missing slats, pieces of wood piercing flesh. The too green grasslings called me out from the window and I smile aloud to see something natural growing again among the trash. Even the people who walk by maneuver around it giving silent recognition. I bend down to touch it, but draw my hand back afraid I'll break it or kill it. My hand trembles in front of me, sends the vibrations up to my head. The wind blows and the baby grass they all nod in approval and I nod too.

* * *

Next door, Suresh calls her to come help him make a sandwich. Her limp drags across the floor, but it's better than it was a few days ago. She doesn't sing when she makes dinner and she hasn't made the rice. Every day Suresh comes back with bunches of lavender. He stands in front of my door, knots them with yarn before walking over to tap faint on theirs. His words whisper sweet to her, but she doesn't respond. After he leaves for work she brings the bunches across the hall to the cracked door of her secret. She sighs more when he sleeps next to her, and when I lean against the wall, I exhale when

she exhales and in that moment maybe we're the same person sharing the same pulse. She knows I listen, that I'm there with her in the walls, but I don't care and I hope she doesn't either.

She cooks with something spicy and yellow and the yellow heightens my high, makes me sweat in thick greasy globs, makes my necklace lay heavy and stick to my skin. The air too is heavy, hard to swallow and I have to sit to stop from choking. Bishop tries to grain himself with the wood on the floor by inching up, laying flat. He writhes along letting his bare back pick up sand and old dust, his slow scraping motion reminds me of a thing I once saw in the dark. The speckled ones make my heart race if I take more than four at a time, but they don't do anything so I take handfuls until I'm numb. Blur hazes my eyes, blunts my hearing and I feel the lazy in the motion of my arm when I reach toward the bowl again.

“What's the worst thing you ever saw?” he asks.

“What?” I say watching my hand fuzz when I wave it back and forth.

“What's the worst thing?”

“I don't know.”

The faces of Three and Five flash inside my eyes. I close them, blink it away and see red seeping pink down the water, dust in the palm of my hand. When they open, Bishop has stopped writhing and breathes hard in a struggle, chest sinking down past his backbone. I'm too tired to drag him to the hall if he dies so I leave him and say nothing, remind myself to put him in a box later. His eyes don't open and I wonder why I can't close mine.

My mother, her hands on my shoulders, her sitting on my chest that's why I can't breathe. A rock named Ronan inside the house.

"I was at this house once," he says. "This girl came in. Her and these guys. They all go upstairs. Next thing I know, she's screaming and comes back down. They drag her in the other room and run through her. Just like that. I didn't do anything either, just sat there zoned out."

"What?" I say sitting up, rubbing my face clear.

"I didn't watch or anything," he says "I wanted to. I mean, I wanted to. But I didn't."

"Those speckled ones," I say. "Those specks."

I can't get up when I try and the floor pops yellow flowers and baby grass, covers Bishop in a mound of it, dew moistened.

"How many did you take?" he asks laughing from beneath it.

"I don't know. Five, six, seven. I don't know."

I think he calls me Four, but he doesn't. He sits there looking at me, then blurs with the yellow of the spice, the black of the grass.

"What's the worst thing you ever saw?"

"I don't know," I say. "Worse than that."

"Tell me about it."

There's a wet red blob on the floor, but no box to put it in. Ronan's in the water, but that's not right either. Someone grabs me, puts their hand across my face and runs us away from the water, runs us down the grassy hill, away from the house.

"Tell me about it," he says. "Tell me. What's the worst thing? What's the worst?"

* * *

It was two days before I planted it under the tree in the park. Frozen earth fought back as I dug the hole with hands and nothing else. It leaked, the box, but the smell wasn't what bothered me. It wouldn't stop scratching at the door, whimpering in the night. Sleep came only with the fever, but whenever the throbbing thud in my ears, marked sleep coming down, the scratching would drive it away. Bishop came, brought me food and things, wiped sweat from my face as I mumbled in my sleep.

“What's wrong,” he asked.

“Make the scratching stop, please.”

“What scratching,” he said.

“I'm tired, make it stop, please.”

“You need a doctor,” he said.

But he didn't come back.

I would be able to see it from my window if I ever looked out and I wondered what would grow there in the spring. Even as I dug, I hoped for flowers even if they turned out to be white weeds to dislodge and blow away. Fingers frozen, thin, brittle, I dug until my force knocked me back to the ground. Wet dripped from my clothes as I knelt not noticing the rain, not noticing the cold. Black hole begged me in, but it wasn't big enough to fit me, cover me with its sour. Before I put it in, I thought to look, see the fingers which kept me awake, but decided against it. My hand left smudged when I ran my palm against the top of the misted lid. Inside me felt bare as the hole and without knowing why I thought of my mother. I planted it under a tree and hoped something would grow in the spring.

* * *

I have memories in dreams and it's Killian who drags me away off the hill. We walk until I cry, and even when his feet hurt or he can't breathe he carries me until we both collapse. Dirt from his fingers stain my dress when he slides me off his back and he stares only ahead because he doesn't know where we're going. He doesn't look back when he grabs my wrist and pulls me forward, forward to the rain we both see approaching from the hills. I want to say something, but nothing matters anymore. She never called him One, but from now on I alone will have a different name. We'll try not to think of our house or Ronan or Laurie or Cassidy or our mother, especially our mother. He'll always be Killian, but I'll have to find a different name.

“Come on,” he whispers as if someone will hear us.

“I want to go home.”

“There is no more home,” he says. “No more.”

He draws a sharp fast line in the air between us. Muscles flex on the sides of his face when he clenches his jaw, and he grabs my wrist, pulls me forward. My tears fuzz him out of focus and there are familiar noises in the distance.

In the night, I'm not sure which parts are true and which are made up. When I can't fall back sleep, I go to the window and see if anyone is out, listen for the Indian woman's noises, the scrapings of cinderblock on wood, sometimes even for the scratching. On those nights maybe even the scratching would be a comfort.

CHAPTER 8
Scars and Sins

Maxwell paced his cooling loft space. He walked from window to door in an effort to stop the approaching urge. Morning hadn't peaked yet, but he woke early, started the black coffee untouched from yesterday, sat on his loveseat, and waited. Bottom lip pinched as he bit at it, denting the skin with the tips of his teeth. It wasn't long before he felt the sleepy surge of a waking itch stir at his legs just under the surface. He handled the tickling, the slow march of mites up and down him as they crawled from tiny toe to mid-thigh, as it wriggled its way around soothed only under the cold touch of his hand.

Maxwell rubbed it down and away until his palm turned red. He rose from his stiffened position, bent forward, arched his back, but he didn't know why. The outline of the old tree cast half-shadows against his floor. He stood at the peaked end of a shadow branch, extended his arm, forced his elbow unnatural and watched as he blended into the image, as the beginning started with a crooked finger and ended with an arch of his foot. Pain from the position quieted the thoughts, bayed them for a moment and he relished in it because he didn't have to fight. Moving only his eyes, he pieced the shadow together, turned flesh into bark, head into trunk.

It still looks artificial he thought. Everything looks artificial.

Pleas manifested into a grate, and Maxwell jumped up and down to lessen the stir. Bouncing the silence of the morning into a solid rhythm, he let the full weight of his

body land flat footed against the concrete floor. He kept foiled pieces of chocolate in his sweat pants, but not even the slow melt of it on his tongue calmed the lurching and biting of things unseen on his chest and arms. They chewed at the pink fleshy insides devoured what was left of him. Maxwell imagined them crawling feverishly through him, pinching and nipping away until he'd be swallowed from the inside out until nothing was left. Fingers cracked when he pulled them, chubby toes popped as he dug them to the floor with each landing. Up, down. Again and again. He muffled a scream, coughed to keep it deep inside. Warm saline tears rolled dry, clean-streaked the filmy barriers of his face as it painted a sorrow-mask on top of the natural one. Sun raised higher, a sliver of light glint across his iris, but Maxwell turned his head lost, more a mistake than a reaction. The well-kept seat unfolded rich and summoning under the rays, but Maxwell ignored this thinking it momentarily useless and retreated to the bathroom to stop the heaving of want. The porcelain bowl cooled his body when he leaned his arms across it letting the spread of it reach as high as the crawl would let. Yellowed water from his first wake rippled from the center grew larger and larger until the sides of the toilet stopped them. His stomach contracted, pulled into itself, tried to push through his back, but the only thing that came out was stale breath. He tried to free himself by undressing, by watching clothes drop to the floor around his ankles, by kicking them away. He covered the vanity mirror with a blood streaked towel. Pale red streaked in speckled dots from where it absorbed into the nodes. It patterned the towel in diagonal designs and Maxwell removed it, folded it to a clean side, ran his forehead along the white side to stain it brown. Running his fingers across his stomach, he closed his eyes, felt the motion of his caress dip and dive on and around the raised parts, the canaled parts. With three fingers he

plucked away at the peaks, pulled light across them like guitar strings, let his fingers hang in the space to allow the escape of sound. Standing there, Maxwell hummed himself into a sway and put the mites to sleep.

* * *

Coffee bubbled thick and black in the bottom of the container. Maxwell poured an open bottle of water into the tar and set it back on the crusted coil. The sizzle screeched out the sides, ran as cooling liquid onto the counter. When it ran into each other, it pooled together, quickened the momentum of the spill and Maxwell flicked it away through the air. Milk from the fridge lumped tan into a mug. It swam lazy around the curdled masses of itself, but Maxwell scooped the chunks with his fingers and threw them on a dish struggling to sturdy itself in the sink. Though cold, he wrapped his hands around the mug to warm them, moved it slow to his mouth, tested the sour. The once coffee hovered over the mug in a semi-solid pour. The slowness allowed Maxwell to daze toward the chair now under the full heat of the sun. Dust floated up and around it, rose as specks, fell in a way that never reached the ground. He wondered if he would be part of the dust after the mites were through, if he would float listless in the sun, if he would be allowed even that. The faded sections of the chair, the ones cracked and thinned from poor maintenance shone dull against the sleek luster of the rest. The day before, Maxwell sat there, rubbed the back of his head against the dull, felt the slight tickle of hair as it brushed against the chair, the bare warm of the setting sun putting him to sleep. Maxwell thought of this, thought of the tingle as blood rushed back through his arm, the tingle of his head, the feeling of a loving hand through his hair, moving amorous across his everything. Hand gripped tight on the handle of the coffeepot as he remembered the flash and burn. The

coffee mass still had not reached his mug, so he took a spoon from the dingy water and raked it in the mug. Tempering hot black in chilled tan, he stirred.

He shook and sweat over the chair. Lines on his forehead from where he wiped molded with his perspiration, faded away in the pores of his skin, the neck of his frayed shirt. Only a bit of light rested on a dingy-colored cloth stretched out across the floor as it crept into the rest of his space. Holding the mug with both hands, his mouth mumbled as he stamped the soles of his feet on the ground again and again to kill what lived and bubbled under his skin. Maxwell set the mug on the cloth in front of him as he sat, wiped greasy sweat and misplaced grit from his face.

"We're not going to do thing again today" he started. "I have control, I am control and we are not going to do this today."

With unstable hands Maxwell brought the edge of the mug to his lips to drink. Splashes from his shaking spattered his fingers, stained them brown against his paling skin. He struggled to finish, but continued even as the sun and dust abandoned him for the other side of the room. Once empty, he set the mug next to him and balled himself next to the chair.

"I can do this," he said, "this is okay." Eyes closed, he rocked and shook. "Pain is weakness leaving. Weakness leaving."

Lost in the beat of his chant, Maxwell rubbed down and away on his arms with one hand and scratched the top of his leg with the other. A fresh mark scabbed his leg. It swelled from infection, from his picking almost healings as he slept. Fingers numbed as he ran fingertips brisk then slow across it. Chocolates melted in his pocket, pressed flat to his hand when he groped rough for them. The chair tipped forward on his lean against the

seat and Maxwell fumbled to steady it back but couldn't. In his fidgeting, the chair reeled on top of him, sent a thudded echo in the room after it rolled off to the floor. He hesitated to look, didn't want to see what escaped from out the cushions, from out the pouch he tucked next to the tattered arms. Light brown remnants soaked into the cloth he knelt on, swelled it, stretched it further along the floor, but his balled body curled tighter, tighter still when it absorbed with his pants. Through the silence something landed and rolled, knocked once on the baseboard next to him and Maxwell flinched, relaxed, lifted his head. Clear tape was what he saw first and Maxwell remembered the day he threw it against the wall in his frustration, the crack, the impact made down the numbered sides, the elixir wasting on the floor he wanted to be inside him. He stood, turned, grit his teeth when he saw the bent handle of the spoon, the lighter standing on end. Chocolate spread out between his clenched fingers, sweet scent wafting up through the bottom of his pants. Rifling his pockets for another, he licked his hand, face dropping sullen when he turned his pocket inside out showing empty.

“They’ll need chocolate,” he said.

Maxwell wiped his face in his shirt, pressed material to forehead to darken his sight, to think. He’d made his own notches on the belt once his arm got too small for the manufactured ones and looking at it now, edge poking out the side pointing to the needle on the floor, he thought he felt an itch.

“I’ll do that now,” he said. “Go get that now.”

Grabbing a sweater from the kitchen, he left. The door hadn't banged against the wall before he was down the stairs and on the street.

* * *

Outside was cooler than he thought it would be, but he hugged himself to keep warm and to keep the mites from forcing out and spilling onto the street. Unprotected, his feet stung under the pebbles littering the sidewalk, under the bits of broken things drawn to him. Crisp breeze smacked him in the face, knocked his head sideways, his body back. A Styrofoam cup peaked the walkway, rolled across his foot and down a peopled alley. Sky spanned oxidized, patchworked above him, moved with him zigzagged and random. The grays and greens of it wove distended, obscured clouds behind the nasty hue. Strain in Maxwell's neck as he looked up sent pulsating shocks down his spine and sent the itch outward, away from the rawness of his core.

This happened before Maxwell thought. Itch disguised as purpose had driven him out before into the wind unprotected, into a storm.

Hungry bites had woken him then. His eyes popped open, his skin burned. The smoothness of it pulled tight and pink from the sunlight pouring heavy from the naked window tinting his pallid body a deep crimson. A hairy hand rubbed sleepy up and down his leg and Maxwell shifted, let the man hand drop dead to the floor. It wasn't his hand, and he held his in front of him, pulling them close to his face to see them better. The wrists were brown on this other hand, finger prints blotted in circles on the thick arm. Scattered between elbow and shoulder, bite marks indented or puffed, reddened the closer Maxwell got and he didn't know who this was. Bruise paved a path to the hand mark on his own neck and he pushed and smoothed to flatten the swelling. A mouth drooped open and Maxwell watched a man struggle for air as his chest rose slow, dropped fast in an exhaled cough. There was fat and dirt and a bald head, but Maxwell couldn't focus to see the face. The wedding band on the finger tarnished as it tried to disappear beneath two

swollen rolls. Maxwell covered himself with a coat that wasn't his. He walked over, looked out the window of the room, saw the black of clouds approaching the city, moving away from the buildings in the distance. Bodies coursed the sidewalk in droves. Swarms of them came, stopped in front of the window and Maxwell waved but they didn't respond. With the snore of a stranger behind him, he watched traffic lights change, watched the groups of suits and pants panic to cross them, watched until the rain fell on their heads and they dispersed. The fingers groped for him when he brushed skin by accident, but he didn't submit, only watched out of reach. Darkness from the storm shaded the room, covered the man in a cloak of heavy shadows. A coolness bit at the surface of his arms and he thought it one of the mites, froze to confuse it. A broken syringe showed itself in the corner; a quick flip of light calling Maxwell from the window. Hunched, he inspected it for remains, pulled with his thumbs to pry away the sides. White powdered the floor next to what remained of the needle. He drew a mark with his finger picking up dirt and dust, ran finger and nail across his dry gums.

No noise entered the room. No rasps from the water on the window, no moan of the building settling under its own weight, no breaths from the stranger. Maxwell rested face to window, let the absence of sound crawl through him, let the silence of want sleep sound.

After the storm passed, Maxwell searched the stranger for powder. When he found nothing, he stepped over him and left.

* * *

Maxwell didn't remember walking across the bridge into the city, and the hum of life alarmed him, jolted his senses to the point of pain. The swirls of memories past

mixed with the bare feet of now, the bareness of before. The swarming of his skin pushed focus away from him, sent it fleeing with the wind, and he didn't know if he was going in the right direction, but he let the crawl guide him forward, push him, urge him. A small tinge of sanity swelled up, compelled him to go back across the barrier to the underground and his empty loft, to his covered mirror, but he refused it and listened only to the other. Almost winter gnawed his toes and legs. The clean sidewalks of the city invited him this way and that, but Maxwell needed warmth from the cold and remedy from the want. People nudged him as he walked by, told him to be careful or watch out, but he stayed forward; one foot in front of the other until he stopped. He knew he only needed to walk a while further to reach the candy shop, but he couldn't will the steps to come. Maxwell told himself to remember the purpose, to remember why he left the false safety of his building, but only blankness came to his mind.

Music billowed, summoned him in from the street and he followed it into an alley shop, let the hot ginger scent of incense swarm and heat his insides and outsides. Hand-painted symbols drawn thick and black decorated the red walls. Small bowls of stone, and clay stacked on books, on stands, on the counter next to the cash register. Even in his core he could feel the warm, could feel the scent washing in waves through his blood, over his skin, over the scars outside and in. A man's voice floated from the back room, pulled him close to listen from behind. Half-closed curtain fell thick and in crumples, draped the tops of Maxwell's dirt-dark feet in a mass of red wool. The tattoo was what Maxwell saw first. He followed the curves and points up and down the flat stretch of olive skin. He traced it in his mind, seared it there to cover a band of emptiness. Smoke from the incense drew lines around the flesh, fell upon it as chants were whispered, songs were sung. Bruises

under Maxwell's coat acknowledged his stroking with an ache. He wondered if the smoke would soothe them, heal them if he prayed over fire, if he let smoke and ash soak deep into his skin. He wondered if it were possible to heal his insides. He wondered too if it would kill the mites, smother them with a quiet rage, dull them for at least awhile.

Pouring something into the bowl, hands lifted, head bowed down, and Maxwell mimicked the motion, pushing curtain out into the room he dared not enter. Flowers bright and flourishing grew out of a pot located behind the arched alter, petals caressed slight on the stone. He saw them wave to him in a push of air from the low hanging ceiling fan, saw them too bow in worship, but not to him. Maxwell placed his hand on a book for balance in a forward lean. The slick glossy surface felt good to his roughed touch, smoothing over the nicks of his fingers. The cover was familiar, recent and Maxwell looked back to the room at the tattoo now standing, glistening under sweat. He pressed the book against his naked body underneath the coat. He imagined it a part of him, imagined he would wake to find a new mark on his body, one he didn't put there with rust or points. Slipping it in the inside pocket, he backed away careful not to let his feet smack along the floor.

A bell he didn't remember clanged at the front. He pulled the heavy side of his coat more to him and crept back onto the street.

* * *

Broken brick etched the front of the building he visited many times before, before things like the scars. No one stirred when he looked around, and he raised his hand placing his flat palm on the surface of the wooden door. His heartbeat ran rapid, and he hoped Jo would not be behind it. The M-shaped grooves of his hand pulsed solid in a

stream of speedy thuds when he put it on the wood. The door opened but he didn't knock, and his hand slapped the hurt on his leg after the solidness abandoned his touch.

She stood taller than Maxwell remembered, but still the same. Bending she rested against the cracked door frame, arms plunged deep into her pockets. Her head lowered hard into her bony chest and she looked at Maxwell from underneath her eyes. He stared sullen into what would be her stomach waiting for her to move aside to let him enter. Jo's mouth opened, but she didn't speak and Maxwell looked up, got lost in the black of her throat. Stomach caved as she rubbed the bare of it, brought goose bumps to the surface. She licked her lips, used elbow to steady her lean, scanned him up and down. Feeling her gawk penetrating through his clothes, Maxwell rubbed down and away until his arm heated and colored despite his the cool of his touch. The whites of her eyes burned cherry and Maxwell force-feigned a smile to entice her, to persuade her, to settle the itch screaming.

“Hey Jo,” He said.

“Haven't seen you in some time,” she said eyes half closed.

“Yeah,” Maxwell answered, “been busy.”

He stepped forward then rocked back off the chipped stair as she blocked the scarcely lit entrance with her body. Maxwell smoothed his hair back, twisted the ball of a foot and watched her. The wrinkles around her forehead bled into hairline made her look older than she was. Maxwell counted in two's the indentations dispersed about the glue-white of her face. He thought about the fights she must have been in to create such inverted scars; fights over women, fights over men, over words, over what's hers, fights over nothing at all. Jo lit a cigarette let it dangle stuck and unsecured on her lower lip,

looked him up, down, smiled a toothy smile. Hair grew blonde and long under her arms and Maxwell pictured the spaces between her fingers fitting cozy in the spaces between his. The first time he saw her she was fuller, softer even, but that was before when she needed him. Maxwell walked up two of the stairs, but she still didn't move.

“Forgetting something?” Jo asked, flicking the full cigarette at his feet.

Ridges burned and smoothed on the smoldering ash when he stamped his foot on it. The shock of it sprint through his skin, but nothing showed on his face. Reaching in his pocket he produced his last two candies. Wrapped silver and yellow he offered them to her and she laughed until her head fell back. Maxwell stared at them ineffectual, slanted his hand to one side, watched as they hit and rolled off the side landing in a dank filled pothole in the street.

“I remember when your first taught me that,” she said with another smile.

“Do you,” he said.

“We were trying to get in that den off First and Maple,” she said looking away, “and all we had were those damn chocolates.”

“It worked then,” Maxwell said. “It got us in.”

“They thought we were so crazy for trying that,” she laughed again.

Gusts of wind slapped her oily hair against her lips. Maxwell half-turned, looked back up the street into the city. If he squinted hard enough, he thought, he could see into his loft. He felt her staring at him, burning a gaze in the side of his face. Maxwell wanted to be strong enough to pull her out the dim of the door, strong enough to take her back with him, but he wasn't. The fleeting thought of repentance brushed across his mind, and the scars on his stomach pulsated, reddened, blistered as a sign. Rubbing through his

pants, he felt the one on his leg rise in a heated welt, but as Maxwell straightened, stepped down to the walkway, he didn't retreat. Not even when Jo pulled gentle and loving at the knotted strings on his pants did he think to back away.

“We paid in other ways,” she said.

“I remember.”

Webs came off the corners of her eyes, blended with the crooked lines of her face and Maxwell wanted to splash her with water, wanted to follow the streams to see where they pooled. She smiled to him again and he considered singing to her, sing a song he didn't know the words to or even the right pitch. He believed he could reenact the feeling of it from long before when it infused into him and latched onto the parts that needed it most.

Palm down Jo extended her hand, letting her fingers droop in an arch just enough for Maxwell to place his. The desire of want devoured the burning of discernment, of song, and Maxwell imagined the mites fierce and deadly eating away at him, at the book nestled to him, into him. He imagined them a meat-eating hoard covering, suppressing, erasing as they urged him forward into the cloudy frame of the entrance. Jo took his arm, pulled at him, walked backward into the shadows when he finally gave in.

"You can offer other things to me," Jo said.

Maxwell nodded, bit his lower lip in an attempt to scratch.

* * *

Jo had left him naked there after pawing and scratching the smooth skin between his scars.

“You shouldn't,” she had said.

“I know,” Maxwell responded.

“You should stop.”

“I keep trying to.”

“Max.”

“I keep trying to stop everything.”

“Max.”

Her voice trailed when she said his name, let it slip in the space between his skin and hers. Maxwell squeezed her arms, wished her real and his. He felt her open her mouth again. Lips caught dry across his stomach and she exhaled, sent hot wind rolling down his legs. She moved to speak but the open and close of motion had woken the sleeping mites she herself had put to bed. Before she could speak someone had called from around the corner. They called her away and she was gone leaving what he came for behind.

“Are you coming back,” he asked when she rose.

Jo moved her arm around the corner and the dark of the house amplified against her paleness, amputated parts of her the further away she moved from him. Maxwell asked again, but she dipped away to the calls of her name. Her hair waving was the last thing he saw.

His clothes piled miserable in a corner from where he stood as she undressed him. Through the mirror he saw the red in his eyes blaze bright lighting the space around him in an unnatural blush. He didn't want to go home so he stayed and released white cloud after white cloud through his mouth and nose. They billowed high and even in the almost dark he saw them lingering above his head as the center churned and dipped to the edges.

Inner became outer as they swirled round and round again in a meandering loop.

Maxwell blew and watched until they dissipated leaving only a faint outline of where they died, the cutting aroma of sour metal shards around him. He blew clouds between his toes to fill the empty spaces where he believed more of him should be. With the itching put back to rest, Maxwell sat idle, unruffled on the floor in the foyer.

Apologetic moans from the other room seeped through the walls and Maxwell blew a cloud in that direction to force the sounds back and away. Lips wrapped firm around the smoggy glass and he flicked a lighter, whirled his hand around the ballooned bottom and let the discolored liquid bubble and smoke until fumes filled the tube. There's something in the clouds, he thought while stretched across the rutted wood, something genuine, natural, true. Maxwell plucked at the raised lines on his side and released clouds until the liquid sizzled black and no longer formed as an apparition in the cylinder.

Walls braced his body as he eased along it down the hall toward the door. The noises from the other room loudened as he passed, came through in sputters to vibrate against his ribcage. Some force called silent in the back of his haze telling him to pause, so Maxwell flopped forward, threw his numb torso across the hallway, slid down the damp sticky wall to the dry barren floor. A door was opened only wide enough for him to peer with one eye. Candles huddled in a corner, were grouped in no order but melted together as one with heat emanating from all the others. Maxwell saw the ropes first, saw them spooning each other resting close, intimate, relaxed as if they didn't lead somewhere. His eye followed their shape on the floor, followed it to a corner where they wound round each other knotted rough about an emaciated wrist. Maxwell thought it was dead because it didn't move, or breathe. There was no lift under the sheet that covered it,

no switch of the legs from discomfort or pull of the chains from despair. But then it sighed without having inhaled and Maxwell envisioned a death mask painted on the other side of the makeshift shroud. He stared at it, watched the candlelight wave across where the face and neck would be, light then dark, up then down, sea-like, rolling forward, back. Voices made his eye dart right, but the shady edge where the door cut off his line of sight was all he that remained.

“Please,” it said low, “give me something. I’m so thirsty.”

Maxwell’s head rolled smooth along the walls surface when he sat up. The words ricocheted through and around him, bounced off bones and mites, launched into his mind to awaken the drugged nerves of his mind. The voice wasn’t Jo’s but he wanted to know if she were there in the room. He wanted to know if she assisted, if she drugged, if she were still the Jo he wanted to know. The words came again, slower, softer. They blasted out in a silent choke from Maxwell and landed on the floor in the beam of light next to his leg.

Steadied footsteps planted silent when he walked back to the foyer. He put on his clothes, left out into the night, easing the door shut behind him and listening to those words over and over again.

* * *

The chair had split up one side. It lay slanted still, jagged at the base from the impact but not quite broken. Maxwell picked it up, positioned it back in the corner so when day came the light would find it again. The liquid pooled in the corner didn’t swirl with the dust particles but set silent glowing gray on the surface where sidelight from the moon gleamed down upon it. Blanket had dried flat and hard as papier-mâché. Stained

brown edge continued to curl up when Maxwell stepped them down with his foot over and over.

“There's not enough of me left,” he said, “Their going to wash me away.”

He stuck his hand in his pockets, felt for the chocolates then remembered them falling down the stairs, remembered the book, and the music and the ginger and Jo and Jo's warm breath. Searching his coat for the book, he threw it wild after he found nothing inside. Maxwell squeezed the thin of the material of his collar, squeezed it until all he felt was his own flesh pinching itself. White moonlight came in through the window and Maxwell went to it, stood in the slanted light, wished for a shadow tree to form for him to stand in. The storm had rinsed the pavement clean. The wind had wiped trash and debris away and as he peered around the newness of the night, he saw a figure stroking the bark on the tree below. It wasn't until the hair blew did he know who it was and even then he didn't believe what he saw. Jo looked up to the sky, over to the bridge, behind her to the brush and woods all the while rubbing gentle on the bark. When she turned, Maxwell saw the bag in her free hand. Jo sat on the bench, untied the bag, removed the book, thumbed through the pages, smoothed her hand over the cover. She pressed it to her chest as the wind blew and Maxwell watched as the branches of the bare tree swayed, as Jo swayed too. She reached in the bag again, unwrapped something, put it in her mouth.

Maxwell wanted to go to her, wanted to hear her say his name, wanted to squeeze her real, but when he made it outside she was already gone. A bag of chocolates rested on the bench.

Bathroom light wafted into his bedroom, sprayed out sloppy hues of fluorescent light. It crept onto his bare mattress, stained his old torn curtains, seeped into the cracked

closet door. Before doubling back into the bathroom, it grew thick then inched its way closer to Maxwell. His body flushed yellow with it, radiated nothing, shone nothing, but it appeared to.

He set his makeshift altar piece in the sink. He removed the stained towel covering the mirror, let it drop at his feet, but it didn't cover them. He had brought a colorless alabaster box with him from the closet and held it firm to keep it from falling. Crooked razor blades clung to each other. Rust stained the inside from bone white to rotted orange and it shined apricot under the light when he set it down. Fabric clung to his sweaty skin as he removed his shirt. He glared at himself in the mirror, searched for a soft place to house the wants of both drug and scars. He felt the mites humming in unison, rubbing next to each other in pairs just underneath, resting calm by the still fuming clouds sedating them. Cold glass greeted him as he ran his fingers over the scars in the mirror's image. He seized a blade, pried it away from the others and dropped it down the toilet.

“There's not enough of me left,” he said, “I'm thirsty too.

One by one, Maxwell threw his blades away. Before letting each drop he repeated his words, mimicked the motions he saw from the man earlier. He cried, repeated his words, drank his tears when they poured into his mouth.

* * *

Cold night filled his bedroom. His chair blocked the exit from where he tried to drag it into the room, got tired, stopped. Leaning against it, he tied his arm off, pulled cord tight along his teeth when he moved his head away. Blood flashed back into the glass of the barrel when he slid the tip in, went away when Maxwell pushed liquid back into his body. Orange on the floor from a streetlight lit a small section of the room,

replaced his physical things with the partial image of building's shadows, sky shadows, tree shadows. Chocolates both open and wrapped littered the space around him, melted into him and the chair and the floor. He rocked a slow forward, a forceful back. He struck his body hard on the wood edge of the chair. He felt the mites stir and slid deeper the needle of the syringe.

Even when it hurt, he pushed deeper and watched, waited for them to crawl up, out, away.

CHAPTER 9

Hard

Joan is not a victim.

She whispers this to herself every morning after steam fogs the bathroom mirror, after it fills the locked room she stands in. It thickens, but not before coalescing in a misty swirl around her then seeping out beneath the bathroom door. The lies she tells herself are enough to get her out the door in the morning, enough to able her to walk stiff down the street to work, to buy coffee and a bagel from the shop around the corner. These lies are enough to get her to do that, but not always enough to get her out her own bathroom most mornings. Joan's tall, tense as she watches her masked reflection in the mirror. Crow's feet surrounding her eyes are new and Joan stretches the skin around them, pulls it back to make the lines disappear, to pull her eyes back to blur her sight. When she looks at herself again, she tells the image that her mind is strong, focused, armed for the day. Real Joan, mirrored Joan, nods to affirm it. Water still runs in the shower, gurgles down the drain and she imagines her mind the same; free flowing and unclogged, spilling down into dark and rusty pipes. The cars cranking from neighboring driveways jostle her and she swallows hard, presses hand to stomach to settle it, to know she's really there. Shoulders lift, drop to the rhythm of sounds in the bathroom. Arms swing back and forth, elbows lock, unlock and Joan tells another lie, brings thoughts back to the secure of the misty bathroom. She careens her neck from side to side until it cracks, until she sees muscles just under the skin, until it hurts. When she wipes the mirror, she

only sees herself for seconds before it mists over, but she wipes again, again until her hand drips from the moisture gathered, until her arm stops shaking, until she can stifle the tears back.

Joan is not a victim comes last in the strict vocabulary of phrases she has at hand throughout her workday to keep her going. It stops her heartbeat from quickening when a stapler falls in the cubicle next to hers or when her boss Victor slithers up from behind to talk about monthly reports and conference meetings, a late dinner. Joan is not a victim, keeps her from fleeing when he brushes coy against her shoulder as he leans over to read what she's working on or when his breath washes down her neck. In these moments, Joan tells herself to stop and focus. To always. Always be ready. In the bathroom, Joan bobs her head, reassures herself with mock confidence, control. Joan is not a victim is last before she brushes her teeth, pulls her work clothes over her skinny body and heads out the door.

Joan walks the same path every day.

The well-lit street she was on the night it happened is walked in short, paced steps every morning, every night. While she walks, she thinks. She reimagines the Joan she thought she wasn't; the Joan who had drinks with co-workers that night. The one who mused under the scant lit lights of the bar, the Joan who flirt with her rail thin boss. The Joan with Clare who works at the end of her cubicle, them sipping pale ale, munching fusty peanuts, gossiping about the women they don't like; the ones who look like men. This Joan allows her wavy hair to fly around her as she moves, talks about the fat woman with the greasy face who never puts the paper back in the copier, the man with body odor who always reheats his Indian food in the conference room. Joan reimagines the Joan

who, rank with beer, cheap liquor, crust on the bottom of her flat shoes, came out in the night, laughed with Clare, stumbled out onto the street. She thinks of the Joan who wished her friend a lucky night with the guy who bought them drinks until the bar closed, of the Joan who stumbled over the curb drunk and ready for the weekend. This Joan took the minute walk up the grassy hill across the train tracks. She passed away time by humming a song she didn't know all the words to. Grass beneath her hand as she climbed over to her neighborhood made her giggle like a child.

Joan slouches forward, aware of the no one following her and she frowns. The Joan who hummed home as she had done many times before always without incident causes Joan to stumble in her step, to forget her breathing and pace, to squeeze tight her toes in her shoes. Someone had followed that Joan, had waited for her in the night. He must have been at a stranger's distance Joan thought recovering her stride. He must have waited until that Joan finally unlocked the door after fumbling, giggling to herself when she couldn't open the door. Joan wonders why that Joan never left the porch light on, why she turned wrong the deadbolt through the keyhole, why that Joan is so inferior to her.

Joan thinks about this night every day on her walk to and from work. With each deliberate heavied step she thinks about it and wonders if anyone notices her bent forward, head down, never looking up.

The path leads her past the counseling center she attended. Though Joan only went for a few weeks, she attributes her new attitude to the women she met there and she left thinking she didn't want to be anything like them. Metal chairs had cooled and pained the skin beneath her pants. The still fresh bruises, the anal stitching gathered taut

whenever she sat. Pine scents filled the room, reminded Joan of the ambulance attendant who held gauze to her gashed forehead, picked ceramic tile out of her wound, bandaged her forearm. Joan wrung at her hands, crunched them swollen and white. When other women told their stories, cried at the flashbacks, held hands to comfort whoever spoke, Joan cracked her knuckles, balled her hands into a fist, quivered alone in her chair. She didn't want to be like them, crying, placating, wondering. Joan wanted to be powerful, in charge. If she has to relive her attack every night, Joan thought, it would be on her own terms and no one else's

“Would one of our new attendees like to speak or ask questions?” a woman asked looking straight at Joan.

The woman smiled at her, positioned her hand palm up, pointing first to Joan, then sweeping her arm around the room to others. Chairs scraped wax from the floor as they moved, bent the circle oval when people adjusted into it. Silence gave way to coughs, averted eyes, the breathy exhales of those who had already spoken or the ones who always do. Joan didn't need to look up to know everyone stared at her. The looks ached the tender of her skin, made her tremors worse as the feeling of exposure took over. Ceiling far spun in crooked circles above her. It could fall at any moment, Joan thought leaning away. She imagined the slow drop of it on top of her, the rush of air created by the people next to her moving away, dropping to the floor to cover their heads. Joan wondered if any of them would take her down with them, to at least try to push her out the way. When it drops, she thought, she would be still and wait to see if anyone would run to throw their bodies over hers, to save her from the blow. People tucked their hands into their sleeves after the fan came on, and the woman across from Joan took

another shirt from her bag, put it on, bulking further her body. She knew it wasn't the temperature that made them retreat into themselves. It's the touch, she thought. The unwanted, unwelcomed touch. The shaking in her body came from deep within, a mix of both hatred and fear each battling for rule over her.

“I just laid there,” a voice called out from next to her.

“You did what you had to in order to survive,” responded another woman.

“What if it happens again?”

“Survive,” the counselor said.

“Have you been attacked,” Joan asked.

“I once sat where you sat,” The counselor said, “been where you all have been.”

“And this fixed you,” Joan asked

“You're not broken,” she said, “this place is just a platform for those who need it. A place to start from. And yes, it helped me, made the nights a bit less scary.”

Women looked around the room, tears streamed down their cheeks. Some contorted their faces a petrified mask, others nodded in consent, a unison of nods dipping up and down like loose neck dolls. Joan shifted down in her chair, crossed her arms to distance herself from them.

“What if it happens again,” someone asked.

“What links us together is that we're all survivors,” the counselor said turning.

“You survived your attack. Do whatever you have to do to survive.”

People nodded again, dried their faces, whispered to one another. Women next to her held hands, stroked each other's hair as the color came back to their faces.

“You mean get raped again?” Joan asked.

Words gunshot out Joan's mouth. The recoil knocked her back in a slouch in her chair, but she recovered, sent a crisp look in the cool space of void between her and the woman. Joan rubbed her cut swollen hands on her leggings. She licked her lips, pushed her slick hair back and sighed. Turning again to the woman next to her, Joan saw the tears free-flowing down to the concrete floor. Her shaking ceased and Joan took hold of the hate reigning over her fear.

“You do. Right,” Joan said again. “You mean lay there and get raped again.”

High pitched squeals emanated from the metal chair as she scrapped it against the floor struggling to stand. No one spoke when she walked through the oval of chairs to the front door.

Stepping out after that meeting, having cold breeze slap against her face and arms, Joan decided then she would become something else. She would become hard.

Air whips around her as she stands by the building remembering her experience there. Her reflection in the mirrored glass isn't the one she's been working on, so she adjusts her face, tightens her lips flat, hunches her shoulders. Deep inside, she sees a new circle of women sitting, talking about what happened to them, but there isn't a sense of sameness for Joan because she thinks she isn't one of them. Cupping her hands against the glass, she peers in again, tries to find the chair she sat in, tries to see if she recognizes anyone. The counselor stands in the center, has hands lain gentle at her stomach, turns slow to address everyone. There's a pause when the counselor sees Joan's face to the window. She nods quick, continues on with her words, placing back to window. Eyes deflect before Joan has a chance to respond.

Steady strides mosey her forward to work. She reminds herself to hunch and when she walks.

* * *

Joan works out every night. She bobs and weaves around and under the workout bag that hangs high in her bedroom. Left hook to a kidney. Jab. Jab again in the chest. Light on her toes, she dances around the swinging bag, lunges into it for a punch when it advances toward her, roundhouse kick to the temple when it rocks back. When they came to hang it, Joan smiled when they looked her up and down, crumpled tight the blouse gathered around her neck. They asked her about the height, about the use, about the proper level for safe workouts. But Joan told them higher, and they listened, advised against, but listened. After, she stretched herself until her leg could reach, until her muscles knew to react before she had the chance to think. While she sweats to her movements, she remembers the other Joan, the weak Joan who let this happen to them. She tries to find a way to get rid of her, to make her disappear from memory. More training becomes her solution, but this is only another lie she tells herself to continue on. Joan doesn't know what will work. She only believes that moving is better than not moving, that hard is better than soft, better than drunk, better than giggling

Joan won't use any of these techniques if the opportunity creeps to her again, but the ability to fight back, keep up, be on guard surprises her, makes her play fight with her reflection in the mirror. Before showers, she'll jab jab at her face, punch punch her bladder, take her head and smash it with her knee. In the mirror she flexes, runs fingers over the new muscles, pokes them to test their density, their strength. But Joan's plan

doesn't involve punching or kicking for her life and she knows this. While warming up in her room she whispers between breaths.

“Not again” she whispers on her jabs. “Be precise,” on her lunges. “Be methodical,” when she kicks.

Up-close, personal is Joan's new strategy.

“Wait until they get close,” she tells herself. “And he will get close.” “Wait until the lean for a sniff or a lick and let him have it.”

* * *

She gives her taser away, goes up to Clare at her cubicle before lunch.

“Here,” Joan says. “People are crazy nowadays.”

Clare jolts up from her computer, slaps hand to heart.

“I didn't even hear you walk up. What is this Joan?” Clare asks taking it.

She palms it around in her hands, flicks one of the switches, sends a shrill pitch through the rows. Clare drops it, fumbles to find the right button to turn it off, to stop people from looking at them. Joan spreads her shoulders back, tries to be the Joan she isn't.

“Thanks, Joan,” Clare says. “What about for yourself. You have one too? You have something to protect yourself?”

“Oh yeah,” says Joan, “this one is an extra. Buy one, get one.”

“Hey,” Clare whispers dropping the heavy metal on her desk. “Want to go out for drinks after work tonight? We haven't been out in such a long time.”

“On no,” Joan says. “I don't drink.”

Clare laughs guttural, has to stifle her mouth so she doesn't draw attention to their conversation. Joan doesn't laugh with her, just places her hand on the top of the cube section, rubs dust off with a finger, watches it land gray and clumped to the floor.

“Gosh, Joan,” she says laughing again.

“Well, Clare” Joan says, “I have to get back to work.”

“Hey,” Clare says again leaning forward. “Victor's been asking me out, the cad. And I looked right at him and told him I knew about you two, but he denied it, said you started pretending as if nothing happened. Did something happen between you two?”

Clare's eyes shine waiting for the spill she won't get. The cat batting a ball of yarn on her sweater makes Joan think of the knitting needles in the basket in her basement, and she reminds herself to go find them later, to make good use of them. Clare speaks low again, asks about Victor again and Joan listens, feels the warm air against her face, hears the northern drawl escape in Clare's o's and e's.

“No,” Joan says. “And I really don't know what he's talking about. I would never talk to someone like Victor.”

Clare beams a cherry in her face, laughs without wanting to, wheels her chair back under her desk to finish papers.

“Joan,” she says, “you really say the craziest things these days.”

“Right,” Joan says.

“You know, we haven't been out since I went home with that guy and for a moment I thought you were jealous. But I mean, you do have Victor,” she whispers. “And when bonus time comes around,” she continues.

“Really have to get back to work,” Joan says cutting her off.

“Right,” Clare returns, “and thanks for this.”

After Joan walks away, after she leaves Clare giggling to herself waving the taser in a goodbye, she thinks back to her knitting needles. After she first moved in, she took up knitting, made oven mitts for the kitchen, coasters for the living room, a blanket to cover herself while she read on the porch. Once, she forgot she left the needles and yarn in the bed and she came in after a shower, flopped down right on top of it. Rubbing the indentation on her side through her shirt, Joan thinks them as weapons, thinks about other weapons she could use. Joan spends the rest of her day putting plans into action, thinking about what else she'll need whenever she traipses out in the night. Something small, handy, she thought, something she could control with her hands, something she can hide in her clothes, whip out in a moment. The knitting needles would be first, she thought, but she would need other things too.

Knives and razor blades fill the green basket under her arm at the store. As she checks out at the register, a teenage boy raises an eyebrow when he scans them, checks her arms and face in a smooth motion.

“You a swimmer,” he asks.

“What,” Joan says digging through her pockets.

“Swim,” he says again. “My brother is on the swim team and he has to shave his arms, his back too. People think it's about aerodynamics, but really it's to give you a heightened feel for the water, more sensitive or whatever, something about dead skin cells. \$13.82.”

“What,” Joan says her nostrils flaring, neck disappearing under her sweater.

“\$13.82,” he says.

“No, about the sensitivity, about the feel.”

Joan goes straight home, shaves from her neck down.

* * *

A letter opener is filed to a sharper point and Joan uses it to secure her hair in a tight bun. The marbled end curves into her scalp, but when she bounces up and down to test it she gets used to the ache of it. Knives hide in the military boots she's never without now, one down under on the sole, just beneath the rubber of her heel.

“Add weight to yourself. You're small, but tough. Be a fighter, don't stand down,” she says to the mirror behind her bedroom door.

She's made pockets in her clothes for her weapons, sews them in a loose stitch for easy access. Coats, pants blouses, jackets, they're all armored in every pocket and seam and Joan knows where to place her hands for each outfit. Stretched across her bed, Joan maps outfits for the week. Every Friday night, she starts again, rotates pants and shirts, more armor on Friday morning, less on Monday. Careful in removing them before washing, she sets them in straight lines on her bed, counting them as she places each down, calling out the outfit it accompanies, where it's located within the fabric. Hand sewing them in after ironing, Joan tenses her lips in the down motion, relaxes them to a pout as her hand comes up.

“Look meek and frail. Be a target,” she says hand going down, going up.

This is what Joan thinks as she arms her wardrobe, when she walks her path with a lowered head in subjugation, when she can't sleep at night and wonders across the bridge hoping to lure someone home.

“Joan is no longer a victim,” Joan says.

* * *

All the doors in the house are closed except for the one to her bedroom. Naked, she lays on top of her sheets both sleeping and not sleeping, drifting in, out. Honing in on all the noises of deep night takes patience and Joan exhales to the beating of crows wings, fills her lungs to the thud of late nighters returning home. On the hour, when her clock chimes, she eases an elbow under her pillow ensures her blade still houses undisturbed, within capable reach. Joan doesn't sleep most nights. She replays the night in her head, reviews her mistakes, perfects her strategy. Relive, she tells herself, learn from it, watch again. Bare back to downy comforter, recalls flips through her mind in scenes, broken down to those exact moments. Watch, she thinks to herself, watch this victim person so you know. Heart doesn't flutter, skin doesn't moist from stress in the memory, but she recalls it, eyes open wide she recalls while her lids flash wild at the ceiling.

When she ran upstairs that night, her body betrayed her, hesitated at the top of the landing to look back, to make sure it was happening. Legs trembled, brain told her to move, but eyes wanted to see, didn't want to believe the rest of her. Truth only came when he closed and locked the front door, came up the stairs behind her. Joan ran past the telephone in the hall, past the drawer housing the taser she bought and never used. After he grabbed her, whispered in the ruddy accent, he pushed her forward, dragged rug under her when her feet resisted. Flesh tasted as iron on her tongue when she bit down on his arm across her neck. Hair from his arm tickled her dry gums, stuck to the sides of her mouth when he yanked away. He groaned called Joan a dirty name, pushed her forward in mid-step and she fell face down on the stairs leading up to her bedroom. After he

dragged her up, kicking, not screaming, he opened her door, stood in the frame, stance taking up the entirety. He threw her inside, her head hitting the soft bed edge in a snap. Joan didn't move to the window or run into the bathroom. She sat crouched on knees, pleaded.

“Please,” she said. “There's money in the can on top of the fridge.”

Joan's hands shook as she pointed out the door, her voice lifted, fell octaves above and below her speaking voice.

“Please,” she said again, “take it.” Her eyes closed, voice verging on tears.

But he only tilted his head, looked past her.

Joan sat sobered at the foot of her bed, panted heavy, grabbed rough at her chest. The thought to run happened quick, but the slow of her body's moving made him react before she got up. They scuffled about the bathroom, the bedroom and she fought hard, hard enough to scratch his face, bite the side of his neck, but the punch to her throat choked her and Joan knew she lost. By the window he cracked her head against the drywall, removed her clothes while she tried to rouse herself to consciousness. The dizzy spin of the room rushed away from Joan, made her grope weak to touch at the walls, to feel them solid at her hands. He spun too, came in close enough to smell, far out enough to think him a shadow.

It happened at the window seat where she paid her bills, painted her toes, towel-dried her hair after a day's work. Joan sat there, watched neighbors mow their lawn, wash their cars, play or scold their children. In the evenings, Joan waved when neighbors saw her, smiled when they smiled. When she saw them, she always told herself to go over the coming weekend, formally announce herself even though she had lived there for a year.

The house was a gift from her father after her divorce. Her father hugged her in this room, sat with her in the window, later helped her pick fabric for the seat. Of all the places in the house this was Joan's favorite, the room she had grown the most comfortable. But while he worked at her, he peered out her window just as she had. Peeping his head up, he checked to see around the yard. He used Joan's shoulder as leverage to peer down onto the neighborhood, to the man walking drunk through back yards. No emotion showed itself on him, only work as he pushed away her face, leaned along the short of her hair, arched angled in a finish.

* * *

Joan treads her path when she can't sleep, when the stir of thoughts become too much. Her slur of phrases didn't work after the remembering and she found herself a victim, weeping in the fetal position at the edge of her bed. So she walks. Fingering her weapons in the pockets of a sweat suit, she pulls the sound of her steps silent, lifts her chest, rises the noise through her legs into her throat. Joan only exhales when changing direction, when she can plan ahead the intensity of her step, the pitch of it flat as she lands on the ball of her foot. The night welcomes her, encourages her to thrust forward into the darkness. She doesn't look back, but she's aware of everything. When a boy shadow points up to the sky on the roof, Joan doesn't follow the length of his arm to see. Her gaze stays on his stunted figure until she no longer sees him out the corners of her eyes. At times, she stalks up to someone on the street in front of her. They don't hear her and she's glad, excited when they finally turn around, feel the warmth of her exhale on their cheek, jump back. Some apologize, some stare at her as she passes. On the inside, Joan smiles for her ability to startle them, to make their heart quicken sudden, and in fear.

On the outside, Joan peers them down, turns head while her body moves forward, her face behind her until they look away. The rush in this is what keeps Joan moving, keeps her pacing nightly through the woods, across the bridge, through alleys. She thinks she knows it better than anyone, wants to. So even at work, even while she staples paper, while her nails click heavy on her keyboard, she maps out the underground. Hood keeps rampant heat swirling snug around her face as she shuffles through the street, head down. You're not a victim, she believes as people pass slow beside her, cloak her in a puff of cigarette smoke when she floats by. The calm she feels at doing this opens her path, awakens her, enables her to trust her body, her instincts. Wind slips as water over Joan's skin and she thinks she feels the danger coming from all directions. Weakness she associates with her house dissipates and Joan thinks she senses it lifting away from her, sinking down through her feet into the pavement. The further she positions herself from home, the more she shifts sadness into anger, into action.

She clues in on footsteps far enough behind her, and she readies herself, smooths her thumb along a fresh razor tethered to a string in the pouch of her hood. Another, sewn to the elastic of the pants at the small of her back nicks the top skin with each left step. Sharpened letter opener secures her hair. Joan's ready to make a victim. Slowing her pacing, she crosses the street, glances back with a trained scared eye at the two following her. With purpose Joan angles toward a dead end, turns right into the last alley, feels the crunch of rocks beneath her. She settles on the knife tucked under her bra, palming the sleek of it between her fingers. Halfway down the alley she stops, listens for their wanting behind her.

Her shadow bulks over them when she turns, backs away further away from the light. Hand to wall, Joan strokes her fingers along the brick, glides her tips through the grooves between them. As they move to her, one on each side, she whimpers slight, darts eyes back and forth, looks up to feign escape. Not until they move again, stand in the scant glow does she see them, short and messy haired. The boys look back and forth to each other, mouth to ask her if she needs anything, if she's lost. But Joan backs again, phases invisible to the corner where two buildings meet. Lids fall closed, she checks her breathing, listens intent for their feet approaching. One pushes the other, and his arm reaches, splices in darkness. Fingers wave slow in search of her, push further even when cold wall meets his palm.

The corner of her mouth flexes taut as Joan hears the skid of her tennis shoes on gravel, feels the storm approach in a gust of wind.

CHAPTER 10

Guilt and Tomorrow

After six years of silence Matt calls me. He says they're tearing down H Street Bridge and then says nothing. Gritty static fills the silence, but not a full six years' worth and I don't have anything to say to him, so I rest the phone on my ear, pull the curl in the cord, hold it straight. He wheezes through the phone and I imagine him bundled and layered while the chill of winter reddens his cheeks, stiffens his joints in those fingerless gloves. I run down the list of people who would have given him this number and I only come up with a few and only one of those who know my phone is turned on. The connection breaks again when he clears his throat, but I still don't respond because I don't know what to say. Inaudible my mouth moves, forms half words and phrases and the cord slips tighter between my fingers.

In front of me, my son reads aloud a book translated from German. He stretches his arms away from him as he reads, crosses his swinging legs. My eyes travel with his seamless motions, my breath matching the pulses. He doesn't stumble over the curse words or flinch when a horse and rabbit murder the thief, but he smiles as if pleased, runs his hand across the last page, nods in affirmation. He knows more than he should at his age and I can't decide if I'm grateful for that or not. He closes his book and looks out the window into the park, thuds his head as he presses it to glass. For a minute, I think he's trying to push his body through and parts of me will it to happen, will him to push through and float away, but he turns from it, smears the window with his sweat. Moving

toward me he smiles before walking out the door taking a browning apple with him, book tucked under arm. I listen for his muted steps down the stairs until I can see him from the window. The cord tenses further as I motion forward to see him below. Walls strain to secure the base and paint flakes, falls to the kitchen floor, but I finally see him on the walkway slinking past people, through their conversations. Across the street, he places the apple in the lap of a woman resting on a bench and he sits down in the grass across from her. They stare at a dark patch on the ground as if waiting for something to happen, waiting for something to emerge and I stare also, wait also. On the other end of the phone I hear Matt pull a long drag off his cigarette, his voice raspy when he asks "Hello?" I'm quiet for another few moments and pull the phone from my ear. The woman leans forward, twirls a tuft of my son's hair, but he doesn't react. He opens his book again, reads a passage to her and then leaves. Matt pulls another drag and I tell him I'll be there soon.

I'm the only one on the road and I prefer it this way. The drive should take six hours, but I know I'll make it in five, possibly less. Before I left I placed the bread on the counter, put the blanket and pillow in the corner by the undraped window then walked out. I expected him to move towards me when he saw me head for the city, but he didn't. He nodded in affirmation and went back inside. When I found the car I sat heavy in the seat, saw people stare at me as if they knew it wasn't mine. Even before then, hoards nudged me on the sidewalk as we passed each other, pushed me back to the shallow streets, but I went on, deeper into the swart of the city. Driving now, I doubt my decision to leave him alone, should have taken those nudges as clues, but I'm grateful because he knows things he shouldn't and he'll be fine.

It's darkening in the mountains, and all the memories I buried inside greet me on the way in, fog the windows of the car, caress my hands in the breeze when I release the pane separating me from the outside. Everything becomes second nature at the base of the rock and it's a feeling which hums all over, accumulates in light sweat in the dip of my upper lip, the crease of my arm, the inside of my wrist, my neck. Swerving the road in the dark, I take the handwritten directions off the dashboard and turn them face down in the passenger seat. I lean back, one hand out the window, one hand on the wheel. The headlights glow against the sheets of fence on either side of the car. They buckle in lazy attempts to hold up pieces of rock that have fallen from above. They strain as if to stop earth from closing the path I'll need to take on my way out. The air is heavy, thick, but despite the humidity the change in temperature cools the moist hairs on my arms, the warm of my face. A blue and white welcome sign shines through my window and I pull over to a nonexistent median, jerking the car to a halt. Something crunches under my feet, but it's too dark to see whether it's road dirt or something else. With the lights off and the car silent, I listen to the soft outside, smell the metallic rock scent hovering in the air, moving about me. Heat from the engine warms from underneath and I lay on the hood, lean back against the bowed window. Even from hours away the sky is the same and I imagine my son on the graveled roof of our building looking at the same night. He'll trace constellations with his finger and fall asleep against the wall searching for more. No one will look for him there, and I can't call to remind him not to go or to lock the door behind him. I close my eyes to the heat of the car and a trickle of mountain water down some close phantom stream. I'm carried up and away from my body and I see him as if I'm there standing behind, watching his figure dot and trace the sky. Moving forward, I

lift my hand to show him another, but when I look down he's gone leaving only the flicker of starlight behind.

The whir of a passing car wakes me. I don't know how much later but it's still dark.

For the first time in forever Matt tells me the truth about something, except it's still a lie because the bridge is already gone and I know it takes more than a few days to dismantle a bridge connecting the North and South of any two worlds. Naked pylons receive me on my approach, wave white construction material in my direction. There's more wood buckling on the ground than I imagined there would be, but it's the smell of steel and wet concrete that pulls a tightness in my muscles planting me in the spot. I'm not close enough to feel the spray, but I recall a half memory of the cool water on my skin, the emptiness of my palm. I lean forward in the wind as if over the ledge and wait to feel coy mist against my face. The water down at the rocks don't lap at the shoreline, but wave, moving forward and back, and I ball my fist when I want to wave at them. Black murk of the water invites me and I think back to those who dared me to jump and I never did, not even under the guise of grainy powder courage. Once, I threw something in the drone of the water below, but I can't remember what or if it even happened. The void across the skyline leaves a white clouded streak, and I re-sketch with my eyes every detail of the bridge or where it once was, looming, jutting. I feel nothing or try not to because it didn't belong to me alone. But even so, everything aches in a slow creeping moan, so I sit on the side of the hill, run my fingers into it and loosen a small section of earth, fingers searching for what was lost. Rich soil pushes back under my fingernails, but I don't stop. I run my hand back and forth next to me until deep ravines form wrist

high. Knots of tears choke my throat and I ignore the weighted sensation of something absent or something not remembered. The skyline's ugly, bare, but closer to the surface as the insides of H bridge lay unmasked and broken, but not agitated. Paper waves again and again in the breeze and down below I listen to the delayed echoes of past conversations.

Once still, I remember old wishes to feel nothing at all instead of everything at once.

When Matt walks up, he's quiet for a moment before asking me a series of yes, no questions, but he doesn't ask about his son. In the silence we both look out over the water, watch the vague spirals of an undercurrent spin debris toward the lights of the Sunsphere. We continue on in dank quietness for some time and share a cigarette as I look at the leaves change color and fall light at my feet. The shoes I wore when I left share a likeness to the shoes I wear now. I nod as I squeeze my toes because they even feel the same, steady. Matt also looks down, runs his foot next to mine marking a divide I'll try not to cross. Clearing his throat to get my attention, he tells me a story that happened on the bridge one night and asks me if I remember, but I don't and he tells it again. My body stiffens when he touches the inside of my hand, calls my middle name, tells me I was there and I should remember and even though I remember his touch, I don't remember the story.

"We were standing there," he points with our cigarette before offering me a pull.

"I don't remember," I shrug, flick ashes toward the waterline, shake my head.

I squint my eyes in the direction he points, recall the intricacies of that place on the bridge; the bent rail, the initials of a stranger scratched in the steel, smeared brown

lipstick. He looks at me as if I'm not telling the truth, but he knows I am and instead he asks how long I'll stay. He hands for the last drag, but I don't give it.

"Here?" I ask gazing the bank on the other side.

"In town."

He turns toward me, raises his hand to the side of my face and I pivot to stop him or meet it. I don't know which.

"You look the same," he says. "Your face. The shape of it."

Matt traces my face, draws imaginary lines from one misplaced freckle to another. I don't smile when he does, and he stamps out the orange ember when I throw it at my feet. He's told everyone I came or might come and I think it another lie, but as he walks away from me up the hill his footsteps go silent only after a couple steps. It's dark, and I take a look at a stretch of stars once obscured by the length of a bridge. Something flicks close in the water so I step toward the sound to feel the soft mud give under my weight, but he calls my name and I turn my back to the water and walk away. Without the trees to block it, the wind whips stronger bringing cold air into my lungs.

"I'll drive," he says. "The roads are different."

He struggles to open the passenger door and I rub my arms to warm myself. Matt looks at me and grimaces and doesn't offer his jacket.

"I think I've told you this before, but if you rub your chest and sides you'll be fine," he says.

I don't recall from when he said it but he has. I remember the cold in my arms once. It spread all over, even down inside.

Mikey, Vic and C.A all give me tight hugs when we arrive. They don't believe it's been as long as it has and tell me I look the same, thinner but the same. We sit in the living room, let smoke and vapor blur the spaces between us, and the four of them retell stories of the things we did before I left. When I inquire about Gin, C.A takes a drink of something brown from a glass and the room crawls silent. Everyone pretends to watch the muted television, and I lean forward to question him again, but don't. Matt pulls hard at my arm and my ear touches the tips of his mouth. His breath is cool and heated at the same time as it rolls down my ear onto my cheek and lips. The painful surge of wanting shooting up my spine is something from before, something I needed.

"After you left, she left too," he whispers. "We still see her, but," he shrugs, looks away.

I don't lift my head to face C.A, but eyeball an empty beer bottle on the table, tap my nail against the surface, use my thumb to pick at my other fingers. Her seat in the chair next to him is still empty and I recognize we're all sitting in the shallow spaces we used to. Vic breaks the silence by pulling a brick and a razor out a bag resting next to him on the floor. Mikey rakes the empty bottles off the glass table and I flinch without knowing why. When they fall to the floor, crash unbreaking into one another, I think this a wanton dream manifest into the life I try not to want. Everyone sniffs before the foil is opened and I don't know if they were doing it all along or just started. Skillful, patient, focused, they all cut vertical lines, except Matt who mounts his horizontal, neat, thin, high. He pushes back his hair, wipes sweat from his eyelids to make sure his lines are straight, razors the ones which are not. Pulling at the skin around my nails, I glance and point out leftover residue to Vic and he retraces, licks, licks again. C.A. offers one of his

lines, tells me there's more than enough, but I can't stop staring at the trail of saliva glistening like oil in water. I reflect on the past million days since my son was born where I wished for a single guilt free day or at least a guilt free tomorrow and one never came. And now it has. Vic and C.A. whisper back and forth between lines and Matt nods in my direction, scratches his cheek with the flat of the razor.

“Hey,” he says to me, “remember that day you left...”

“No.” I interrupt.

“Well, before. We were all here and you brought that wrapper with you,” he adds.

“It was double wrapped,” Mikey says. “In cellophane and something else.”

“Right,” Matt says. “And we tried it here and then we all left.”

“But you brought it with us,” C.A. adds. “It was in your hand when we left.”

The room warms under their staring, under the heat from the upturned lamps. Fidgeting, Matt slides closer to me, raises his eyebrows waiting for me to acknowledge. Mikey and Vic bow their heads, but still look at me from beneath. C.A. eyes my pockets, waiting for me to produce it. That night I did come but with what I don't know. Foil tinted the clear of the cellophane to a nimble brown, sun kissed brown but we didn't smoke it, we only left.

“No,” I say. “I don't remember.”

They get restless and I disappear outside. They'll smooth it out after and I don't want to be there when it emerges, rounded and blue. On the top of Matt's car, I listen to the stillness of stale air. It's colder, and I grind my teeth to drive the shiver away, to drive the want down. Noise leaks into the street, runs the quiet somewhere else into the trees. My back is turned from the door, and I struggle to keep myself on the car so I look

up, but even the sky is lonely and unmarked by light and constellations. Clouds wane and I catch glimpses of a dull moon in the shallow distance. Breeze brings the cool familiar scent of fresh rain and I think about where I live and how it only snows and never rains, always winter. When I face the scent, lightning marks the night and I wait for the slight tremor of thunder but nothing comes. Matt's hand on my shoulder startles me and he laughs for no reason, tells me a joke, but messes it up and laughs again. He's quiet too when the wind blows and tells me it won't rain until tomorrow.

"You should come inside," he says. "I don't know where they get this stuff." He laughs again. "You should come, relax a little."

"I needed the air," I say. "I can't breathe. I can't function."

"It's fine," he laughs, grabs his neck, bounces in place. "When I told them you were here, Vic went crazy apparently. Got all sorts of colorful shit I've never seen."

"I'm leaving soon. I came and I saw it and I'm leaving soon."

"Where are you going?" he asks. "To the bridge again? To find it?"

"What are you talking about," I say.

"Stay here. Let me take care of you. I'll take care of you. You know that. Didn't I take care of you? We took care of each other, all we had was each other, that's all we have."

He's said these words to me before and they were not true. I think of my son, one green eye, one blue, a mess of curls. I see his face in Matt's and I turn, close my eyes to look away from them both.

"That usually turns out to not be the case," I say.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s too bit late to take an inventory of all the things you have not done.”

He stiffens, parts my knees with his leg and steps into me, sliding me off the car. My breath seizes when I see his eyes dilated pitch as dark. Pushing my shoulder back with his hand, he tries to speak, but backs away clenching his fists, then checks his pockets for a lighter. The ground rumbles, but there is no lightning.

“I sat with you at the hospital,” he says.

“Don’t lie to me. You didn’t even know where I was. I had to go through it by myself.”

“I fished you out the goddamned river,” he screams pointing to the bridge. “I fished you out, I brought you back, I carried you to the hospital.”

He throws the unlit cigarette, walks back into the house, unaware we’re having different conversations.

I hear the rain in the distance, small patters on the tops of roofs and cars, and I don’t move to go back inside. It swallows me in deep downpour, obscures the lit entrance to the house, so I walk until I know what he’s talking about, but all I have are lies and dark spaces of half memories, buried artifacts.

When I meet Gin she asks me not to call her that and it’s not hard to call her Jennifer because her face and freckles and everything is different, even the way she speaks; she looks, speaks, reacts the way a Jennifer does. She tells me I’ve lost weight and asks about my son, but I deflect and she tells me about something else. I don’t listen when she speaks.

Airplane jets agitate the building we're in and they feel closer than they used to, as if I could reach up and skim my fingers along the underneath as it passes. Jennifer keeps smiling, talking about things other than what we used to do. She twirls her curls in her fingers, lets the hairs slide between thumb and forefinger, chews on the ends when she pauses to think. Out the window, the street stretches long as the runway it mirrors alongside. No cars, fast or slow, are in sight and it reminds me of the abandoned road leading to where I live. We're out of food, so my son probably walks the road now. He'll saunter over the frail bridge, cling to what's left of the rail with one hand while holding the book I left with the money inside with the other. The two men waiting at the foot nod to him as he passes on the other side, but he won't return it. No one where we live will bother or talk to him as he crosses over because he belongs and they know it.

When I interrupt her with a question about C.A, she pales, looks into the dining room of the restaurant, pulls dead hair off her tongue. It's awhile before she answers and she speaks with a hunch in her shoulders, crouching over the table to whisper as if ashamed. She waits to speak and whispers for me to meet her halfway across the table. Crossing my arms, I dig my elbows into the grained wood as I lean. Jennifer lets more hair loose, lets it fall over her shoulder to cover her mouth as she talks. She looks ridiculous, eyes wild and darting. She looks the way Gin used to, the way she should always.

“I got tired of everything you know? Things just got way out of hand. Not just with C.A, but with all of us. After it happened and we pulled you out we just dropped you at the hospital and went home like it wasn't anything.”

There's a minute when I see Gin, when tears form in the corners of her eyes, and she blinks them back, pretends to sneeze. Tensing to reach my hand across the table, I stop and watch a plane disappear in the low clouds and fog before landing. After I tell her I don't remember what happened she says it's good since the whole time it was happening she was afraid because she wasn't afraid. I don't tell her that I don't remember anything from that month or year, that all I have are blank spaces, but instead I nod as if I know how she feels, then I squeeze her arm, force her to tell me what happened.

“You fell over. You fell over, or he pushed you, or you jumped. But you went over and Matt, he swam for you, and we took you to the hospital because you wouldn't wake up. Your eyes were open, but you wouldn't wake up. And we argued in the parking lot because we didn't know what to do. So we dropped you off and Matt told them we didn't know you, that we went down and found you there. And then we went home and we were all panicking and my heart was racing. I thought it was going to explode and Mikey had some stuff and we mellowed out some and waited. We waited for you to walk in like nothing happened.”

“Right,” I say leaning back in the booth.

“And,” she starts, “But before we left you, we checked your pockets for that stuff and your hand was clenched tight and I thought Vic was going to break your fingers to get it loose, but it wasn't there. So we went back to the bridge and the water and looked for it, but it wasn't there.”

Through the window, rain falls in splashes on the road, and I replay a memory of the rain splashing on water from the bridge, but I can't remember which. Gin stares at

me, asks me about the guys, about the house, asks me if C.A still wears the hat she bought him. She's chewing harder on the end of her hair and our booth smells ripe with heat and saliva. I stare out the window while she talks and chews. I try to remember from which bridge the rain falls.

“How do you get to the other side without it?” I say.

“What?”

“Without H bridge. How do you get to the other side?”

“The roads are different, so if we have to we drive around. But no one wants to go over there anyway,” she says. “Other than us, who would want to?”

Matt smirks when I walk up, hands me warmed liquor, asks what time I got out of bed, but I don't answer. His forehead wrinkles in the light from the sun, from the chill wind, from the sound of the crows. His head hurts from last night, but he lies when I ask about it and tells me a joke I used to laugh at.

“It's cold on the water today, but at least the rain stopped,” he says. “I told you it wouldn't rain until today.”

He repeats the same story from before except this time he glances at me out the pointed corners of his eyes, overemphasizes when saying “fell.”

“So. Did you really sit with me at the hospital?”

“No,” he says. “But later, when everyone passed out, I called and told them what you told me earlier and then hang up.”

“About the baby.”

“Yeah, about that,” he says staring ahead taking my cup and drinking from it.

I pull cigarettes from his pocket and smoke two without offering him the pack or lighter or even a pull. On one of the pylons a crow calls and the answer comes from somewhere deep in the trees on the other side. He reaches for me, mutters my name again and again, but I stand unmoving and looking out over the deep mud-colored river.

“Do you miss it here? Do you miss anything about it?” he asks.

I can't answer without lying, so I remain silent and hope he forgets he asked me, and I gaze around the wood and the water wanting to tell him that he's a part of me, a stone in a shadowed corner in the pit of my stomach, but I clench my teeth and exhale blowing smoke toward the mountains until I think of a response. But all I can think is to tell him we're the same. We're both stones in dark corners.

“It's mostly like where I live,” I say. “The buildings, the air. It's like there except we have a bridge with no water and no one knows each other and we could die and go unnoticed. So it's the same except for the water and the people and the bridge.”

“That sounds exactly like here,” he laughs.

“At night, if you look silent enough, it is the same. It's exactly the same.”

We're still for too long so we sit on the cool ground in an even cooler shade and he recreates stories of things that happened after I left and sometimes I laugh and sometimes I want to cry. When it's too quiet again we both look at the undressed space in the sky and sigh at intervals or together. There's still dirt under my nails so I use a twig to pick it out and Matt watches. Though the emptiness looks far away, the construction material raving with the breeze is close enough to touch, but I doubt I'm quick enough to catch it if I want to or strong enough to hold on. Across the bank someone stands lost and

we both stretch out necks to see them. They call across, cupping hands against their mouth to echo the sound. I think the name they call was mine, but it's not and I bite my lip, stare against the current, clutch dirt until my nails push back. I want to call back in answer, find a reason to fling myself into the water, flail as it washes over me, pull me down to the boggy bottom. When I lift my head further, when I lift it to call out no one is there.

"How long has it been since you stopped?" he asks cutting silence

"Long enough, since I left. Since I had to because one of us had to."

"Do you know where it is?" he asks. "Did you throw it in the pylons or near the rocks? If you tell me, only me, then we don't have to tell the others we found it."

"It's buried," I say.

"We looked here. Didn't find it."

"It's buried under a tree where my son reads, where a woman sits."

In the distance light brown gleams off a rock and Matt crocks his neck to see it. He digs a well in the soil at his side, fills it with loose rocks and clumped mulch.

"What color are his eyes?" he asks

Light fades, day into dusk, and the sky is clear enough to frame the skeletons of stars. I see his face in my son's face, but I don't turn toward him when I answer.

"They're brown. Like mine."

There's miles of empty black sky, but it's still not enough to fit all the lies between us.

I park the car where I found it and walk until road gives way to gravel. The closer I get to the bridge the less people there are in the streets. Structures lurch in the

foreground, jut angled into the air as if pushing off to leave the ground. Standing to the side, I see familiar shadows pacing circles around the grass, shadows hovering close to the landing of the bridge, shadows on the roofs, in the windows, the two figures at the foot. My skin pricks as I run my fingers along the chipped concrete of the bridge's side. My body pulls as I watch dark figures hover sly on the horizon. Sloped hill draws me down and I wander underneath the beams, reach up to touch the underneath meeting only air. Chest muscles strain as I strain to reach and I catch my own shadow bent back, unnatural, disfigured. There's a jagged support beam lying in the center of the riverbed, and as I straddle it a rush of warm air sweeps up to my face, through my hair, in the caved spaces between my ribs. Water should follow the surge. It'll sweep around the sundried bend, swallow debris and rotted wood, foam pale white at the front, create the clear divide. I wait for the swell and swallow and my heart pounds in my ears, but nothing follows the warm air except the rolling gravel at my feet, the dust in my face. The moon allows it to cast its own shadow, but it's shrunken in comparison to the size. Looking above me, I believe it would nestle quietly in the empty sky by the river. The intricacies would be wrong, but this one would fit.

We did walk across it one night. There were no cars and no anything except for the six of us, the dark, the bridge. We stopped and he grabbed me, ran his fingers down my face, asked me if I was with him, asked me what I was going to do about it. I didn't smile when he smiled and the hard lines in his face faded as he turned away. We ran back and forth between lanes feeling the air grow thick with humidity, feeling the wind struggle to soothe us. Even when we couldn't breathe, we ran in the lanes, stood tip-toed on the ledge, stroked each other's faces. I was lifted, seated on the curved roll of the

handrail. The slick cool of it under my palms sent a chill through my neck and I laughed, we all laughed when I shuddered and called out. It was moist in my hand when I pulled it out my pocket. Matt reached for it, but I jerked my arm away, dangled it over the side. My voice echoed when I called out again, and I heard myself shout from both banks in reply and I laughed, heard my laugh spool down into the current, return to me with the spray. The black water whirled, but I couldn't hear it so I turned, leaned forward, to feel the mist again, hear the whirl. His fingers dug deep into my sides, into my hips and I leaned more as I reached my hand down. He whispered something in my ear, something about the cold of the water. The side of my neck gave to him when he kissed it. He pressed his face to my ear, handed again for my closed fist, but I didn't give it. Pressure released from my spine. There was a jerk, then there was nothing.

I'll tell this story to my son when I see him. He'll be on the roof, his waifish shadow tracing stars, a book nestled in the gelled asphalt next to his foot. From behind I'll watch him stare off past the roofs of all our buildings as I stared out over the water. His father's face will be the one I see when I tell it. Hands to shoulders I'll turn him away, point to the skyline of the city, their lights casting shades along the walkway, the streets leading to ours abandoned, the dark bridge with no whirling water underneath it only dust and debris. I'll tell him a story about the people who died, stories about the people who lost their footing and fell, people who were pushed. I'll fill in my half memories and create new ones to forget what I don't remember. He won't ask about Matt, but when I tell him I'll look away and lie and tell him a story of someone I've never met, someone just as bad. We'll stand on unstable ground and peer over the side and imagine murk and mud. I'll lift him on the rusted rail and he'll hold tight to my wrists for

fear of falling. We'll sit at the window and I'll tell him stories. I'll point as if I were there when all those people died, as if I were there and I remembered. I'll tell him that all these stories came at the end.