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Dirt

Rebecca Landau
University of South Carolina

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DIRT

by

Rebecca Landau

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Accepted by:

David Bajo, Director of Thesis

Elise Blackwell, Reader

Julia Elliott, Reader

Brian Glavey, Reader

Lacy Ford, Senior Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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Abstract

Dirt weaves together different narratives concerned with the disruption of rules governing the physical body: a new set of creation myths. This collection gives voice to a spectrum of bodily experiences and processes of transformation, evoking questions of conformity, confrontation, and self-determination. By centering stories around differing body politics and the cultural narratives inscribed upon our bodies with and without our consent, *Dirt* invests both content and form in important questions of self-creation and voice. Yet by defamiliarizing the bodily experience and refusing to provide or articulate answers, *Dirt* exposes the unstable nature of this bodily, synesthetic experience and our perceptions of the world. Each piece obfuscates and confuses the self and perception in an attempt to deny traditional narrative's "revelation" about this self-creation, and the collection instead emphasizes the instability of the truth of what we know about ourselves. In turn, these stories seek the unlimited number of possibilities within this unsteady truth—and the room for magic in our own world.

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pretz

i have a daughter with white hair. she is a child who, always when she's hungry, pulls out her hair and stuffs the little wisps of white that came from her head into her fists. her fists make tiny balls. she blows her tufts of fur into the air and watches them rise and fall. sometimes she puffs out her cheeks again because she wants to keep the hair up. sometimes she grinds the tufts into the carpet, but always somehow before i shave, they end up caught in the stubble on my chin.

i try to teach her how to talk: how to ask for things in more constructive ways than through yanking and blowing.

she learns how to say words, and when we get the doggy and when i ask her to name the doggy, she does.

my daughter gives the dog the same name as herself. i wonder if she feels a special connection to him. i also think, maybe she likes saying her own name, or the way she knows she'll hear it all the time, in the good tones and bad.

when pretzel the dog has accidents inside, pretzel the girl becomes the good child, but she is always the good child. angelic hair floats in soft tufts around us. it reminds me of dandelion seeds, and i think maybe pretzel has confused her head for a head that is full of seeds. i think, probably, she makes wishes every time she tugs and blows her fur-hair up higher.

i point to objects, and instead of giving them names, she licks them. i point to the door, and she licks it. no, no, door, i say. she does not respond and does not say door, but she licks it again. i point to the fridge and the t.v. and the dog, and she licks them.

when she does talk, she rounds out each word in her mouth, and she sticks her tongue on the floor after. mouth round, tongue to floor. lips on gritty tile. i clean the floor for her. i make sure the floor is very clean. we stack big alphabet magnets on the fridge, one under the other: letters in red blue green yellow.

i stop pointing at things i don't want her to lick, but instead she touches everything in the house: tries to find her way in with her tiny fingers as well as her tiny tongue.

she has a tiny house for her dolls, and the tiny house is open at the back, but at the front, the dollhouse-makers painted a tiny door.

because this door is made of paint, it will not open and will not close. or it is always open and always closed. always open or always closed. and or, something like that.

pretzel grasps at the doorknob. her fingers splay against the painted wood. she does not look up at me: she can do it by herself. she is her own girl-child. she touches at the flat surface of this until i tell her it is time to not. i tell her this. i say, pretzo, what are you doing? but i ask instead of say. she looks up at me the same way that the dog looks up at me: from below.

i love this tiny house: i have always loved tiny things. when i was little, i pretended i could live with polly pocket, be her best friend if she had friends that were

boys, but i didn't really do that in the way i always say: when i was little, i pretended i was polly pocket. and now this tiny girl with white hair is here.

pretzel the girl loves things that are bigger than her: like pretzel the dog, me, couches and coffee tables. even her alphabet blocks, which are each bigger than her hand, which is a little hand.

i tell pretzel this: we have to find the thing to eat to make you bigger and learn more, like alice, and i feed her broccoli and chicken and things that make children grow.

when i come home from work, i find the alphabet letters on the floor. they are on the carpet, not the tile, and i wonder if her tiny mouth made a wet ring on this rug or if she dug up tufts of the shag.

i pick up the letters, and they seem bigger to me, this much closer to my face. they are bigger this much closer.

pretzo has arranged the letters so that they spell WOG and then ARDI and then a slew of other words i don't know, and i wonder what she means by WOG.

i bring the letters closer to me, like having them next to my face will help me learn.

i put my mouth on the hard plastic, and it tastes like hard plastic and magnet: like, if you were pretzel, what you'd expect. if she came in and found me like this, i am sure that she would tug at her hair and throw it at me and that it would waft to the floor, but she doesn't show up.

the first letter fits well in my mouth, but its legs peek into my cheeks, and when i swivel it around, the legs poke out of my mouth, so i do the only thing that i can, and it goes down whole.

i swallow.

once i start, i can't not, and the legs of all the letters in my belly, i am polly pocket and pretzel at once, but like this i can understand that their version of small is actually big. the letters become bile in my belly.

when i feed pretzel dinner later that night, i point to the broccoli, and i say broccoli, and she touches it and then she licks it, and when i tell her, finally, to do it, she eats it up, and we come to a new understanding of what we are meant to do with things so that we can learn them.

afterward, when i point to the dog and name him, we eat him too, and i join her in chomping at his fur.

after that, we do not say the word pretzel, because the word pretzel can only refer to one thing. after that, we don't say much of anything at all: except to name the things that we want to fill us up until we get big.

A Wolf in Wolf's Clothing

1. The hunter who doesn't recognize herself as hunter

She dug up her backyard, and she moved the trees into her storage unit for them to take root. She fit the conifers into the backseat, their necks hanging out the passenger window and limbs bowing toward the pavement.

Before each trip to the storage unit lot, she climbed onto the upholstery and rolled up her back window, catching the tree between the glass and the frame, making it stable. The glass shaved needles and bark off onto the driveway, and she left this trail of needles down the white line on the side of the road. A line she could follow every time she returned.

Dirt fell into the seat pockets and the gaps in the seatbelts. It matted over her seats. Mud dug into the floor and ingrained there. When she opened the door to drive, she smelled earth, and she climbed into it.

In the storage unit, filling with trees, she patted the dirt onto the floor. She patted the roots down into that flooring, and they scratched and grated against the plastic.

1.

She made her house bare. She moved what she called her collection from her workshop to the unit. She'd collected pieces of the people she'd dated, and she'd always stacked the pieces along the walls of the workshop which was not her workshop anymore.

In the transition to the new workspace, she dismantled the stacks. She loaded the beer bottles and socks and toothbrushes and shampoos and food wrappers and ticket stubs and Polaroids into the dirt in her car, and she found her white-green line on the road that took her back to her trees in the storage unit in the parking lot.

As the trees grew, when they grew, they tangled around her exes' beer bottles. The branches grew through them, and specks of cracked glass glittered sharply out from spaces below them, between the roots and the branches. The trees carried bottles upward to the white plastic roof. Their roots pinned down lagers and IPAs and curled around the bottlenecks in a weird embrace.

The conifers shed layers of needles, and the green and then brown blanketed the layers of glass. She buried her exes' socks under the needles and glass and buried their toothbrushes under those. She tamped down the dirt with her trowel and toes, and at the top of the tallest tree, she planted one of their cigarette butts like a star.

1.

She set this as her new workshop space. She stacked mirrors and cans of epoxy to the side and built a new mound of dirt to bury her feet in. She would bury her feet and mold her mirrors in this space with no light, and she would sculpt what she felt with her feet. What she smelled in her roots.

2. Chops

The sculptor never cursed, but she only had one word for sex. She cringed when dates called it making love. They should have known this cringing was a red flag, a sign warning them against her, but when she said fuck, her voice rasped, and they forgot that the rasp was supposed to warn.

2.

On her first date with T, he took her to a bar with red lights draped low over the tables. She held her hands over the candle in the middle of theirs. Together, they watched her fingers cut into the light. Separating the white light below from the red above, her palms cupped a halo onto the table.

Their eyes followed her fingers as her hands moved in and out, dividing and reflecting. She made both lights brighter, and her hands burned.

T sat on the same side of the table, and they both stared at the flame and the empty vinyl booth across. Her purse divided the space between them.

They stared at the table. They stared at their food when it came.

She didn't know how to talk to him when he was on the same side, when she couldn't see him, so they sat, muscles tense, the two quiet except for breath and silverware.

After, when they climbed into his truck, she took the middle seat, close to him, and buckled herself in there, and he didn't question it, but she could feel his uncertainty, surprise. She knew she had to be in the middle here, but she felt the space to her right broadening, empty and weird. She was too far away from the window to press her face to the glass. She couldn't see the white-green line on the road through that window, but she traced their way home.

She took him upstairs and kissed him, and she folded him up inside her wool blankets and traced the sweat along the ridges of his chest and stomach and hips.

She talked to him here. She was always scared to talk to her dates without being able to feel them next to her; she couldn't talk without touching him. She was scared of

the distance and how it might disrupt what she said and how she meant it, so she pressed her meanings into his skin with her own.

She touched his arm and asked about his family. She touched his neck and asked about his home.

She ran her fingers down his neck, and the hairs prickled.

She drew lines between freckles and moles.

2.

She woke early and curled up on her couch. Her sheets clung to his shoulder and draped down his side, and she wanted to touch the place the covers hid: where his chest sloped into his stomach. She dug her feet deeper into the cushions and stretched forward for her camera. In bed, he shifted at the sound of the Polaroid.

When he left, she took his string of floss from the trash can.

She climbed into her car and smelled earth. She drove to the U-Haul unit.

In the dirt in the unit, at the base of one of the smaller cypresses, she buried the Polaroid. She tied the floss around one of its branches, and she breathed in the damp and dark.

3. The hunter who catches scent the same way the wolf does

She made the feet first. She took the mirrors from their stacks in the U-Haul and carved fault lines in them with her X-Acto knife, and she cracked and shattered the mirror glass against the trees. Her cypresses muffled the sound. Fragments littered down into the soil and roots and brushed against her toes.

She ran her fingers along the sharp mirror edges, looking for the glint of light in the glass, but the dark smothered her reflection.

She took the broken pieces and molded them into feet. The fiberglass epoxy resin made her skin itch like steel wool and made her throat and ears grate with sound.

She inhaled roughly, and her lungs felt full in a way she loved but knew she shouldn't.

She worked her way up the legs, binding mirror into form, and she spent hours in the dark, her fingers pressing glass into itself.

Afterward, leaning against her car, she sat and picked sharp pieces from her feet. She winced as the blood trickled down to the pavement, and she left the broken bits next to the faint red stain she had made.

4. The hunter who traps but never kills

She searched the men out in bars and coffee shops, but she let them come to her. She met their eyes. She draped her shapeless lace and chiffon over the bar stools, and her dress rustled whenever she lifted her arm to drink. She stared at the slick wood on the bars and waited. Sometimes she brought books and read, and she mouthed the words as she said them in her head. She read slow. Her mouth moved slow.

They came to her, wishing they could keep her lips paused exactly as they'd seen them, over that one spot, but they wanted more than that to brush past her onto the next bar stool so they could rustle her chiffon, even just for a second.

They were the ones who came to her, but she was the one who always silently asked the question they couldn't say no to.

She ran her fingers through her hair. The hair on her head grew to about the same length as the hair on her shins and under her arms—half an inch, give or take. It never grew any longer or shorter. Her fingers brushed over her stubble. She mesmerized them.

She wanted to make lists of their names, the ones she'd collected, but that felt too predatory. She wanted to tell her friends about each of them. She dug her fingers into the chiffon, hungry but never able to devour, only able to amass them. The dates never quite sated her, never quite suited her taste. She wanted to gather them and trap them, drive them down the white-green line to her storage unit with their belongings. She wanted to hide them in her pockets or under her bed. They tried and hoped for second dates, but she knew better. She rooted herself in the parts of them that she was able to capture, and she dug her toes into her dirt. She embedded the parts in the soil on top of the plastic on top of the pavement. She never loved any of the dates enough to not want to know more of them; she loved all the rest too much.

She collected phone numbers on napkins and business cards.

When she came home the night after T and the night after searching, she found the roses that T had left on her doorstep. She lifted the flowers out of the vase, and she moved them into the dirt in her car, and she drove until she could plant the rootless stems. The thorns sticking in her fingers, she nested the roses into the hollow at the base of the smallest cypress.

5. Fish

That night, the sculptor went to the river and buried her hands in the water and waited. She crouched above the water, her sweater dragging in the stream and tugging behind her.

She waited until the right fish tickled her palms, and she closed her hands around him.

She took the fish out of the water.

She kissed his fin and the scales on his side, and she threw him back in.

The fish poked its head back out of the water.

"Don't worry," the fish said. "There are others of us." His fins held him in place.

"The world is your oyster."

The sculptor frowned and left the river.

Her eyes stung, and even outside, away from the unit, she coughed. She remembered the horror stories she'd heard about sculptors who weren't careful.

Glass in her lungs, though, she was sure, would glitter in a way that she knew.

6. Hunters make for angry prey

6. N— identifies her rapist solely by smell

The sculptor stared at the shellac on the bar.

The man beside her shifted and licked his lips, and she dug her nails like claws into the wood surface of the bar and avoided eye contact.

She named him M because she knew that the naming gave her power.

She had not asked the question or invited him.

He didn't say a word. He stared at her chiffon.

She could smell the scent so strong she could taste it. He wasn't wearing cologne, but he invaded her nostrils. He thickened her air.

He didn't move. Her muscles tensed.

"Go fuck yourself," she said and met his eyes.

He didn't flinch.

She recognized the question there, predator and prey the same. She frowned and shifted. She touched her nose to her shoulder and sniffed, scared she smelled like him, scared she was him.

His eyes never shifted. He climbed off the barstool. He walked toward the door.

She took his coaster; she drove down the white-green line.

She buried the ring-stained cardboard in the roots of the cigarette tree, and she inhaled deep. Her throat burned with wintergreen and damp and glass fibers.

The sculptor ran her fingers down the string of floss and nodded to her tiny, wilting flower garden in the hollow of the cypress.

7. Hunter and wolf howl alike

The trees grew through the roof. They bent and caved and pushed and broke through to the sunlight, and she patched the spaces around the holes with mirrors and mud. The tips of the trees breathed life into their bottom halves, and rain trickled down into the mud and branches. The air inside became clammy and wet.

She brought more flowers and gifts and touched each on her visit, greeting the tulips and coffee cups and chocolates like she was greeting friends.

She dug her feet into the dirt and sculpted. She could feel the mold growing on the epoxy; she smoothed her fingers over its velvety texture.

The epoxy smell mixed with the mold in a way that made her gag.

She worked her way up from the legs of the wolf to the body and the tail. She ran her hands over the form, and her fingers snagged on the angular bits that jutted out from the body.

When she was done with the bulk of it, she stood by her car and coughed and coughed and coughed. Her skin flaked off in pieces.

8. The hunter who becomes the wolf

She pulled Z closer to her and untangled her legs from the sheets.

She smoothed the freckle in the center of his collarbone. “I like that,” she said. “Symmetrical.”

He told her she could have it, and she knew she could make a whole person if she collected enough. She’d draw lines from his freckle to the others’.

She rubbed the spot and asked where he lived in the city.

“Staying in a Motel 6 across town. Embarrassing I guess, but I live out of motels usually. Not sure I’ll be here for long.”

She ran her fingers the length of his collarbone. She asked him if he was here for a work thing.

His mouth turned down. “Kind of more a for me thing. I want to be anywhere but where I am, always, so most of the time I can’t be the other places either. I hate traveling and being gone and half-awake and never quite there, but I have to try to get out anyhow.”

She connected the freckle on his bicep to one on his chest. She liked it she thought, even though her world didn’t coincide, and she looked down and brushed her flaking skin off her arm.

He looked out at her blank walls and blank spaces. The only furniture she’d left in her room other than her bed was her nightstand, with her Polaroid and book on top. “I like it here,” he said. “I wish I could stay here, instead of going back to those motel

paintings of mountain landscapes and the flowered bedspreads and coffee makers and mini fridges. None of it makes sense. I unpack my clothes into those little drawers, but it's an impermanent place. Why do I pretend in these make believe places? Why do I unpack that little photo of my parents? My parents say I'm scared of putting down roots somewhere permanent, that I'm running or some shit."

She paused, her finger on his chest. When he said roots, she had to think of it as fate, like he knew what she was doing with her planting and burying, but she hated the metaphor. Roots were only roots. They didn't exist for him, to serve his symbolic purpose. She dug her nails into his freckle. She spat a silent rejection.

8.

She dug her meanings into his skin with sweat and spit.

He kissed her. "Your mouth tastes like fish."

"That's what I am." She smiled and coughed.

She wanted to cough her meaning into his lungs. She wanted his throat to burn like hers.

He talked so much that he disrupted the way she understood things, and she ached for her balance back.

He stared at the white of her walls. "You know, I don't want people or to be tied to people, so I think I sub things or places for them. And I search out people who do that too. I want to find people who don't want roots but need them and hate that they need them. I need to know they're out there too. I roam and come back and hate the need to come back, and I want to see someone else roam and come back and hate it. I don't want to be alone in doing that."

She ignored him. She wanted to hear his voice reverberate down her spine.

She rolled over and coughed and came back to him with her fingers outstretched.

“That’s mine,” she said and ran her fingers over the divot she’d claimed in his collarbone.

He leaned over her and the edge of the bed and reached down to his pants. He took a pen from his pocket, and he stilled her chest against the mattress.

“Here,” he said and drew a small dot in the center of her chest.

8.

When they woke up, they found flowers on her doorstep, and she gave them to Z. “Here,” she said.

He glanced at the card attached. “No one ever says no to you, do they?”

She frowned. “I don’t know. I’m not sure what that means.”

He didn’t answer, just winked at her and clutched the bouquet upside down. He walked to his car.

She took the hair that had collected in her shower drain and drove with it in her fist from pavement to plastic to dirt, down the line.

When she got to her U-Haul unit, she didn’t pull up the gate.

Instead, she found the red stain from the glass in her feet, and she left the hair there.

9. Attend to the bones

The sculptor shut the storage unit door behind her and watched the line of light fade as the door descended. The door latched shut and lifted a plume of dust and dirt into the dark.

She formed the head last. She used the smallest fragments to mold each angle in the snout and ears.

She tucked Z's hair from her fist into the fresh epoxy and gave her form fur. The strands bristled out from the wolf's forehead and jaw. She smoothed them back. She smoothed her fingers over the velvet mold covering the rest of him.

She'd made her wolf entirely of mirrors. She could feel the angles of him, the surprising smoothness of the joints.

The darkness in the unit smelled moist and fetid.

She wanted to dig her nose into the dirt under her and climb into it with her toes. She set her face next to her feet, smoothed her palms against the cool soil. She dug her lighter out of her pocket and held it to the wolf's belly. She expected him to look disjointed and fragmented, like he'd creak when he moved, but he moved like fluid, like hot glass. His underbelly and his paws and his snout and tail reflected her outline, distorted by the flame, and she curled up next to him, nose and throat burning, and buried herself deeper into her roots and dirt.

Monster

We didn't know what it would look like when the sky fell. Some of us thought it would be loud, that fire would spread, that the sun would set us all ablaze. The pressure would make the earth crack and the oceans flood, and we'd drown and burn and crumble. Others thought that the clouds would wrap us up like blankets and that the sky would smother and fill us. It would taste sweet and sticky on our tongues.

Even back then, I knew that I would be the one to make it happen. Back then though, I didn't know that it would be a good thing. I didn't know that the clouds really were that soft and warm, that wrapping myself in them would make me feel that safe.

*

When Kay said, "The sky is falling, the sky is falling," people listened. She spoke quickly and quietly, and the words came out blurred and whispery. We almost didn't hear when she said them, but we already knew to pay attention whenever we saw her lips moving.

The heat was suffocating in town more so than anywhere else, but we walked into town so that she could sit on that bench and whisper in awe, so that she could announce it in her quiet way. She could feel how close the sky was even before I could.

No one stared, but they didn't avoid her eyes either. The townspeople walked by our bench and nodded. My translator leaned back and stared at the sun. I had grasped the language, and she had no job here yet; we all understood each other at first.

I asked Kay, "What do you think they're going to do now?"

Kay drew a semicircle in the dirt with her toes. “I think they’re gonna go home and hug their children.”

We stopped at the convenience store on the corner and bought Oranginas for the walk back.

We took the main road to Kay’s house, and the heat beat up at us from the black dirt. It burned our legs whenever it touched them, so we walked softly, picking up our feet all the way so as not to raise dust.

Kay and I talked about cotton candy clouds, and we sipped Orangina from plastic bottles. Our bottles crumpled inward as we sucked out all the juice and air.

The palm trees gave us some sort of shade. When I looked at them, the air felt wetter than it did when I looked down at my cracked hands. I imagined the trees burning and drowning and crumbling, and I felt a twinge of guilt.

The time that Kay said it, everyone believed her.

*

When I lived back home, across the ocean, I let boys walk me home at night because I was scared of the dark and the monsters that hid there. I was scared of the homeless people on benches and in bushes. I was scared of the beards and the dirt on their clothes. The boys that walked me home bought me drinks. They smiled and touched my hair, tucking it behind my ears. They wore clean clothes and smelled like spices. Their friends were so nice. Their girl friends smiled, and I thought, back then, that girls only vouched for boys that they trusted. The boys walked me home. They locked my door behind them. They locked me in with them.

When I walked home alone, I looked to the side so that I could see behind me

through my peripherals. I didn't want the men who walked behind me to know I was scared. It was rude to be scared.

Back home, across the ocean, the boys that lived across the street threw stones at my windows and walls. The rocks made dents in the wood siding, and they cracked the glass in the windowpanes. The boys knew how to throw just soft enough so that they didn't shatter anything. They knew how to aim. These boys watched their friends walk me home and lock my door, and they pelted my house. Later, I traced the cracks like fault lines with my fingers. The edges were sharp, but they were never sharp enough to make my fingers bleed.

*

When the translator went to town and yelled that the sky was falling, she was heralding the end that she felt, too. But when the translator said it, even though she said it exactly like Kay had, no one listened to her. The townspeople didn't care or didn't trust her or maybe just couldn't hear it again.

*

Kay kept her windows open at night.

When the man climbed in and tried to rape her, Kay laughed at him. She told me this with her smile spread so wide. She sat on her front step and pointed back toward her bedroom.

The translator's accent was thick. I asked her to repeat what Kay had said.

The translator saw my confusion and said, "Makala, they have no word for that in this language or in this place. She doesn't understand why your face tightened like that."

I shook my shoulders loose of themselves and settled back against the step,

stretching my legs out in front of me. My body had curled in on itself when she'd said it. My limbs had tightened to my frame.

Kay's mouth was thin. Her laughter had stopped when she'd seen my face. She extended the apple in her hand. "Here."

The translator looked at me. We'd thought my grasp of the language had grown. She didn't understand why I needed her help.

"I get scared for you." I pointed at the door and the insides and stared at Kay. "How you live here alone."

My teeth broke the apple's skin.

Kay looked down at me. "I know I'm safe."

I stared at my translator. She didn't speak.

"But that man didn't think so."

"That man knew I was safe. What would I be scared of?"

I took another bite of the apple and shoved it into the side of my cheek. "What if he'd succeeded?"

"At what?" She cocked her head at me. "It's just a penis, Makala. Not something with power."

The translator smiled, and I wondered, if what she said was right, what it was that actually had power in this place.

*

At night, on this side of the ocean, I lurked on street corners and hid in bushes. At night, Kay and I whispered and giggled and got leaves and twigs tangled in our hair. We watched people walk home and thought hard about sending them good energy. We

visualized it as a big burst of light. We watched girls who never looked behind them. We watched girls who never checked their peripherals. We watched boys who watched their reflections in the glass storefronts. We watched them nod at the bread and cheese displays. We watched couples who held hands but never looked at each other. We went back to Kay's house. Our pants thinned at the knees and turned a greener shade of blue.

At night, we threw stones at the stars. We waited until no one was around and then flung rocks toward the brightest thing we could see. We were always scared that the rocks might come down and hit someone or someone's house or their windows or their walls, but we never saw them come down. We dug until we found the right ones: the smooth ones. The dirt clung to the rocks like it clung to us, and I woke up with dirt caked in my fingernails and cracked creases in my palms. I started weighing my pockets with stones, and they bumped against my thighs whenever I walked. When I took off my pants, I smoothed my fingers over the purple and yellow skin. The bruises were always small. They never hurt much.

We left the twigs in our hair, and we let our skin turn colors. We buried our fingers deep in the dirt behind the bushes, and when we sat on the benches at night, the grated seats left imprints in our thighs like scales. I reveled in our smell.

I learned to trust that in this different world where there were no monsters like the ones at home, I was the monster. My knees grew greener; my hair grew shaggier.

I wanted them to be scared of me.

*

During the days, we gardened. The translator sat on the porch and closed her eyes against the warmth, against us and the town that wouldn't hear her, but Kay and I sank

into the ground in her yard. The day the purple flower popped up, Kay dug us deeper into the mud.

“My father used to hack them to pieces when they changed colors. He didn’t understand how it worked.

“The flowers, they hibernate. But sometimes they cross-pollinate. He got so upset that this flower, when it woke up, had different flower DNA, that it wasn’t white like the rest.

“He got so scared that I’d go to sleep and wake up different. I told him that that was stupid.

“But this orange one grows in the same place every year. It’s the same one that he got at with the hoe. The resilient little shit.”

Kay leaned on her shovel.

I tore off a petal and smoothed it against my palm. It made my palm feel hollow, sunk in.

I slid it onto my tongue and felt it grow limp. I dug my hole, and the flower crumbled to pieces against my teeth.

*

I started taking a pottery class by myself. I read a story about a girl who made an urn out of ashes, and I looked down at my stained hands. Wednesday nights, I left Kay in her kitchen and the translator in the corners of the house. They knew that I would be able to talk with my hands.

The hardware store had imported hard hats from across the ocean, thinking they would help. They still believed Kay. I picked one up for her, and when I took it home,

she used it as a water bowl for the cat.

At my pottery class, I buried rocks in my coil pot and wondered if they'd shatter in the heat.

Most days, I walked home alone, through the dark and the monsters.

But when I packed up my bag the week the sky fell, the man next to me stopped my hand.

“Do you need someone to walk you home?”

He wasn't close, but I could smell the stench of what importing hard hats from across the ocean had brought.

I didn't smile with my eyes or my mouth. “If you'd like to, you're welcome to.”

He held the door open for me.

“I don't like to see women walk home alone.”

We passed the bench that Kay and I crouched behind and on and that gave us texture.

“It doesn't seem safe.”

The wind blew, and I could smell cologne and need. My stomach tightened.

I breathed it in and unclenched my muscles slowly.

“That's very nice of you.”

He talked about across the ocean. He asked me if I'd go back. I said I wasn't sure and thought about how my hands felt in the clay.

He talked about Kay's prophecy and the heat and the bugs and the hard hats.

We came to the path in front of Kay's house, and I stopped him.

I looked past him. “Thank you for the walk. You can go now.”

I didn't look back. I locked the door behind me.

Upstairs, I stripped off my clothes and piled them in a corner. They smelled like spice. I grabbed my robe and sat in the armchair. I pushed my back straight against its back. I breathed through my muscles.

Kay inhaled slow and steady across the hall. Through our open doors, I watched the moon stream into her room. When she exhaled, the curtains framing the window light breathed with her air.

I let it steady me.

I treaded downstairs. He was already gone. I unlocked the door.

I slept well.

*

The translator kept wanting to be heard; she kept going to our bench and speaking there, but when the townspeople started throwing their own rocks at her, she left for the world across the ocean that neither of us had missed before this.

I didn't need the translator to talk to Kay anymore, but I knew that I'd have to follow her soon, in the way that all things eventually turn to home.

*

Kay taught me how to clean myself. When my mom was little and the bathroom pipes froze, she'd boil water in the kettle and pour buckets over my head. My feet would steam, but the cold would rush in everywhere else. In Kay's bathroom, the air was wet and warm and clung to me in beads. She sprinkled me with baking soda, and I cleaned myself backward, my feet in mud. The water changed colors from the muddy pipes and streaked my skin with rivets of brown. I buried my roots in the bathtub, let them fall out

through my fingernails and toenails into the dirt that caked the flaking floor of the tub.

Her towels were coarse.

We sat on her porch, and I sucked the sweet bathwater out of the ends of my hair.

I smelled like rust.

With my feet caked in mud, I could feel it coming.

*

The day I followed the translator home, to the place across the ocean where we locked our doors, I found the right rock to throw:

When the sky fell, the clouds and the sun and the blue surrounded us. The change happened gradually then all at once. We drowned and burned and crumbled. Everything slowly got bigger, and the sound of the suck made everyone look out their windows and step onto their porches. We'd been waiting for it, even across the ocean, so when the sun got big, we knew that this must be what the falling looked like. The blue enveloped us. It took the tall buildings first, but it worked its way down. It covered post office boxes and grocery stores and trees. We wondered what would happen when it made its way to the grass. We wondered if the blue could actually smother that bright of a green. The trees shriveled and the roads cracked and flaked like the floor of Kay's tub. The sun fell far from Kay's house, but I was sure she heard when it hit. We saw it from where I was, and we knew that it had really hit everywhere at once. The light extended out in a burst, and for awhile, we couldn't look anywhere without looking at the sun. The guilt left its pit in my stomach, but the pit was sweet like cotton candy, the way we should've known the end of the world would be.

Every day after the collapse, we grew blinder and warmer. But I liked the way my

skin felt.

I liked pressing my warm palm to my cheek.

The Wooden House

When the baby girl stopped being able to see, she started telling the boy, the smoker, about the cracks between the cracks in her palms and the bumps and ridges on each one of her eyelashes. She could see things so much closer and sharper, she said. She told the smoker about the cat that she'd seen in her driveway: the one with three tails and the clouds of fur that she could see from yards away. She knew the smoker doubted her eyesight and that he wasn't sure if she'd made up the cat, if she was just trying to impress him with the breadth of her vision. Because the baby girl was good at denial: they both knew that about her. And he'd told her that he wasn't sure three-tailed cats could exist. But whenever he was in the yard with her, he looked for the fur or the tails or any trace of something he could cling to in believing her. "Everything's so much more distinct lately," the baby girl said to him. He whispered cat sounds into the dark with her, listening outside the brick house for a response.

*

When the baby girl was still a girl, her momma decorated the shabby old house, the wooden one, with quotes about the home and family and love. The momma spaced out the quotes, and they splintered the walls into sections. Before bed every night, the momma touched the baby girl's nose and said, "Just like a button." She looked into her eyes and said, "They're the windows to the soul." The baby girl blinked and sniffed, and the momma's bedtime stories mimicked their walls in the way they splintered.

The baby girl stared back at the momma's eyes. "Baby blues," she said.

“Yeah, Laur,” the momma said.

The momma told her, “Don’t ever let anyone steal what’s special about you,” and the baby girl kept her eyes guarded.

After she started guarding her eyes, the teachers and friends and boys smiled at the shy baby girl as she stared down at her fingers.

“So coy. So shy,” they said to each other.

*

The baby girl only started losing her vision after she began dating the smoker. After the smoker kissed her for the first time, she let him look into her eyes. She knew he didn’t understand the significance of this; he only saw the blue. But once she looked up at his eyes, she noticed it for the first time: the way she couldn’t see. She got caught up somewhere in the space between her own and his. She could never see all of him at once, so she moved her hands to the places her eyes didn’t reach. She wanted all of him. She hated that she couldn’t look at both of his eyes at the same time, that she always had to shift between the two. She didn’t tell him about her vision then, when she first started losing it. She didn’t want him to feel bad. She didn’t want him to get what she was giving up for him. The way the smoke her momma had always warned her about seeped into her eyes when he was around.

Once she realized that she was losing her sight, she started touching and listening more. She made it a habit to touch his nose before they went to bed, and every time, he wrinkled it. He snapped, playful, trying to catch her finger between his teeth.

*

The baby girl grew up in a family that listened to the radio every night. They

hummed to the voices on the talk shows, and the baby girl learned to sing without music. She sang to the birds resting in the trees around their driveway. She dug her toes into the warm concrete. “Hey, birds,” she sang. Her momma told her that they couldn’t hear. “Most birds pretend to be deaf to us,” she said. “Mostly because they’re embarrassed that they don’t understand. They’ve only got their bird language. That’s why they respond the way they do.”

So the baby girl sang to talk radio every night before bed. She asked her momma how the man on the radio knew to stop talking once they’d turned it off, and the momma thought for a long while. “When you press the little button, the wires send an electric shock to him,” she said. “And that’s how he knows.” The baby girl thought about this for a long time, and after she learned, she waited for someone else to turn off the radio. She didn’t want to feel guilty. The radio in the wooden house stayed on for days at a time, voices echoing across the living room.

*

In the brick house on the nice side of town, the clouds in her sight blurred her window screens into grey mats, so the baby girl stopped sitting within the house. Her eyes focused too close or too far here: she couldn’t see past her long, long eyelashes or through the screens. She was too disturbed by this conflating and crossing of hair and wire, and so she sat outside, on the porch of the brick house, and wound her hands through the bench’s wrought iron grating. When she sat here alone and saw the three-tailed cat, she could only focus on the floating fur. She didn’t notice at first that the smoker was never with her when the cat came around.

The only big thing she could follow was the way the light moved over and

through the smoke and the wrought iron and the concrete floor, and after awhile, the light became the closest point that she could focus on. The light blurred the concrete into the wrought iron and the cat into the pavement and the smoke into the smoker. Her eyes flattened the place, and when she pressed her feet against the floor, she pressed them against everything in the plane she'd distilled.

Flowers bloomed around her house, and they bloomed into the sidewalk and the house and the wrought iron, too. After the white flower popped up where the purple had grown the year before, the baby girl cried at the loss of the old. "Most of the time when they disappear, they're asleep, not dying," she told the smoker.

He tipped his cigarette ash into the flowerbed and nodded.

"But this one is different." She stared and stared at the little white flower, and the smoker watched her stare. When the baby girl stomped on it because it wasn't purple, the smoker nodded like he knew the death was inevitable.

*

When the baby girl was little, she lived in a house made of wood where no one lit candles. The first time she burned herself on a frying pan, her momma unplugged the stove's gas line. "You'll scald your fingers or you'll singe the curtains or you'll make the house burn and fall," her momma said, and for days after, their kitchen smelled like gas. They cuddled under blankets in front of their blocked-off fireplace. They warmed their food in the microwave. Her momma gave their candles away as presents. "Here's some sandalwood," she said to her friends. "Have honeysuckle, too." She emptied her cupboards of all of the matches and lighters: the ones from weddings and hotels and convenience stores. She rid them of all of the possibilities and danger.

*

As the smoker sat on the porch with the baby girl, he started noticing that she'd grab for his hand where it wasn't. He attributed the misses to her eyes always on the driveway or the mailbox or elsewhere, at first. Until he noted the consistency in her misses. She grabbed the stool's edge when reaching for her glass. She pulled the rug when picking up her shoes. Her vision was failing her, he figured, in that she wasn't looking.

The day he finally talked to her about it, the baby girl shattered her drink on the porch floor. Glass shards flew and stuck in her feet, and he picked out each one with tweezers in their bathroom, as she balanced her foot on his knee.

He dug the tweezers into the pad of her foot. "Laura," he said, "You can't see."

She let him look into her eyes.

He looked up from the bathroom floor, but he couldn't tell if she was looking back.

The baby girl frowned. She hadn't thought much about it. She didn't think much about it. But she trusted the smoker; she believed him.

"Huh," she said, "I guess it probably runs in my family," but she couldn't think of a single family member who couldn't see. She ran through all of them in her head, but she couldn't come up with anyone.

The smoker begged her to fix it, but the baby girl resisted. They fought for weeks, in quiet ways. The smoker left purple flower clippings on the kitchen table: reminders of what she'd lost. He turned the radio on in every room that had one, and he left her with the sound.

*

In her childhood, the baby girl sat with her momma on the porch of the wooden house, and they listened to the power lines buzz. The birds landed on the electric wires, and the baby girl asked, “Why don’t they get hurt?”

“There’s a reason telephone poles are shaped like gallows,” her momma said. “But when the birds hurt, they’re okay with it. You can grow to like the stuff that hurts you.”

Her momma patted her hand. “I think the parts that they like are the parts where they hear our voice crackles, ‘cause they travel along that line. They like to hear the singing, even if they don’t really get it.”

The baby girl nodded and held her fingers in front of her face against the silhouette of the telephone pole. She crossed them into the T, blocking out the real one with her little, pink fingers.

*

The smoker badgered the baby girl for weeks, but she was scared of the doctor she had in her head. She imagined how he’d say, “That’s awfully weird, sweet pea.” She knew he wouldn’t call her by name. They never did: those ones who wanted to make her feel safe when they were far from it.

She was scared of doctors the same way that she was scared of photographs. She was scared of what they would capture when they looked into her eyes. She was scared that they would know about all of the times that she’d turned on her stove when she was little, after her momma had forbidden it. She was scared that they would find out all of her lies.

She'd only ever been to fake doctors, friends of hers or her parents who'd read through the library's science sections. They were the ones who she knew she could trust, because they were the ones her momma had trusted.

She told the smoker this.

The smoker crossed his arms.

They sat on the porch and stared at the light, and when the smoker reached into his cigarette box, he found a shard of glass from the day that she'd spilled her drink. He found it embedded in the end of one of his cigarettes, pushing against the camel-colored, paper flesh.

He showed the baby girl the cigarette. "This is why," he said. "This is why you have to fix it." He put the cigarette back in the box.

The baby girl frowned at the thin blur. She didn't want to tell him she couldn't see the glass shard—couldn't understand his "this is why" because she couldn't see his hands. She watched the light blur over the box and his hands and the floor. She trusted him.

"I guess maybe we have to," she said. "But only if it's a certain way."

*

The baby girl found the dead bird in her driveway under the cloud of fur. He blurred into the pavement, and she caught glimpses of sparkly flecks of gravel in with the matted feathers. She wished that the birds were like the flowers: that they could hibernate within themselves when they died. She wished that the bird could rebloom. She knelt next to him, and the gravel grated into her knees with a sharpness that was familiar. "I'm sorry, bird," she said, smoothing her hand along the pavement until she reached his head.

She patted his feathers firmly against his body, and her eyes pressed him into the driveway.

*

When the baby girl finally asked the smoker to fix her eyes and they went through with it, they did the fixing in the bedroom of the big, wooden house.

The smoker dug the glass shard back out of the cigarette box and steadied his hand against the side of her face. He straddled her on the bed: they'd arranged it like this. She stared up at him, and he murmured her name like an incantation. He pressed the glass into her eye, and red stained the white comforter and sheets and streaked her face. She looked up at him, and she couldn't see her eyelashes anymore, but she could see the cries and sounds that she made like they were encasing the two of them. Sounds on top of him on top of her.

The red dried, and her eyes dried, and the baby girl stayed in bed.

He took her to the porch a week after, and she looked at the spot where the white flower had sprouted again. She told him, "It's all the colors now. I can see the purple in him, too."

The baby girl saw greens and reds and blues in the brick house. She saw white in the black pavement. She stayed on the porch until night fell, but the night didn't change what she could see.

The smoker sat with her. He saw the three-tailed cat only after the glass and the bed and the sound swelling around him, but he saw it then.

*

A month after the fixing, the baby girl hammered nails into the outsides of her

windowsills so that the birds couldn't land on the brick house anymore. She sat on her porch and waited to see them on the wires, and when they landed, she watched. "I want to see them sing," she said.

The smoker didn't hear. He was too caught up watching tufts of fur float by on the sidewalk. They clumped together into tumbleweeds.

Despite what she'd done, the birds still landed on the windowsills of the brick house, and when she was inside, the baby girl watched them, through the window screens, as they clung to the nails.

Snake Star

Tom left in December. His razor disappeared. His toolbox disappeared. He took his pictures down and left a constellation of holes in the wall. Ava drew imaginary lines between the holes where the nails had been, and she buried herself deeper into the indent in her mattress. When Tom left, Ava started sleeping with one arm outstretched. She curled her leg over the space where his legs would have been. She molded herself to the parts of him she wouldn't have touched.

When Tom had slept in her bed, she'd stiffened and straightened. She'd drawn imaginary lines and told herself not to step over the cracks. "You'll break it," she'd told herself. She was breaking backs like sidewalks, like she was 14 again.

When he left, she reached out and clutched over and into him. She reached into his ribs and his lungs and his stomach, and she squeezed. She slept burrowed around and into and over the space he'd taken up. She sprawled into the space that wasn't hers.

He was gone, "like, really gone," she said to Grace, and Grace frowned from across the couch. Grace never really responded, only listened, the way she had for all of the six months they'd lived together. If they were closer, Ava knew, she maybe wouldn't have started talking to herself in echoes.

Ava said it out loud in her empty bedroom, in her empty kitchen, in her empty bathroom. "Melodramatic," she said to her mirror and hated the way she was still talking to him. She frowned and watched lines crease her face. She traced them down her chin to the edges of her jaw. The words hung around her, dense, and she imagined she could

almost see them. She kept talking; she had to keep talking; she kept herself warm with it. The words condensed into layers.

She turned back to her mirror. The quiet scared her, but she couldn't say it to anyone else. She needed this thing that couldn't talk back.

*

She baby talked to Tom because she was scared to touch him on his side of the bed. "Baby, honey, sweet thing." She crooned. When he touched her first, she'd touch back, but he became this thing that she didn't want to spook. She didn't want to be what made him leave. So when he left, she clenched her fists and sprawled over her lines, mad that it hadn't worked.

She wished she'd touched him more. "Stupid," she frowned at her mirror.

She replaced all the things he'd taken with him. She collected screws and nails and stored them in fishing tackle boxes, organizing each screw by length and size into each section. She bought a hammer and screwdriver and saw. She made a shrine of Lowes receipts and drill bits in the back of her closet.

He took with him the polyurethane smell and the cut wood smell and the loud of the hammer and drill. She'd sat next to him as he soaked her desk in polyurethane and as he cursed the bubbles under his brush. They'd breathed it in until they were dizzy. She'd turned pages in her book, and he'd slathered his hands in vegetable oil and crept up on her, dripping stain down her cheeks.

She made a list of fears she wanted to get over because she wanted to get stronger but also because she wanted to find ways to touch him when he wasn't there. "Doing somersaults," she wrote. "Heights," she wrote. "Cracks in sidewalks—perfecting, Dark—

night, Talking loud—people, Quiet—me.”

She hid the one that mattered the most somewhere around the middle of the list. “Clay,” she wrote, “—touch.”

She didn’t blink at the mold in the bathroom or the compost for the garden. She was never scared to touch the dead mice she fed to the snake. She didn’t have trouble with touching the grotesque or the dead, but it was touching things that meant something that scared her. The living things were what made her nervous.

*

She crooned to her snake. She eased herself into —touch. “Hey, sweet thing,” she whispered, and she let him come to her. “Hey, Clay.” She baby talked so that the words touched him before she did. The vibrations extended between them.

She’d read that somewhere once, that sound was touch made invisible. Baby talk calmed the babies because the words patted back their hair and smoothed their skin and rolled over them in waves. The physical world stayed physical, even when she couldn’t see it. “Caressed,” she said and ran her tongue up to the roof of her mouth. She wanted to roll her mouth around the word and touch him with the sound. She counted Clay’s scales.

She talked to the rest like she’d talked to Tom, and she convinced herself that if she sang softly enough or spoke sweetly enough, she wouldn’t really have to —touch.

She’d always thought that was how snake charming worked. She sang to him. “Love me tender, love me sweet.” She traced the marbling on his sides with her voice, “never let me go.”

She broke through the quiet that Tom left. She filled the beats in her day when he would have crossed her lines and touched her. She sang and mumbled through.

“Hey, pretty,” she said to Grace. She started crooning to everything that she was scared to touch. She imagined herself petting all their faces and surfaces and smoothing her hands over their hair and their slick little tails. When Ava was alone, she crooned to herself, knitting words together.

Grace responded with raised eyebrows and smiles, but when Ava started sleeping until noon and murmuring to everything, Ava knew the change in herself, and she eased open the crack in her door so that Grace could keep her safe. Ava knew that if Grace could see her, even when she was asleep, she would protect her. And she knew Grace could do nothing else.

Ava kept her eyes shut tight when Grace checked on her every day at one, and Grace kept to her schedule, as she quietly worried. Ava lay prone, her arm outstretched and fingers curled around and crushing the space where Tom’s arm would have been.

Ava missed the days when the doors shut tight, but she knew Grace had to keep her watch. Grace was her silent protector. She kept the loud and the bad out, kept the living room hushed so that when Ava mumbled, she’d be able to hear it.

*

Ava had to thaw the mice before she fed Clay. Twice a week, she cradled the stiff mouse body. The thick fur collected in cold clumps. The freezer-burn dampened her palm and left flecks of ice that melted fast. She wanted to lick them off each of her fingers. The mouse eyes squinted, glued closed, black slits against the white fur. She grabbed the tail, frozen in a slight curve, and submerged the little body in her Ziploc bag. The fur fanned out in ripples. The mouse bobbed along the surface of the bag water. Each body hugged the line between the trapped air and the warm, milky-looking water.

The smell didn't ever get too bad, but it was always there. It hung in their kitchen. It lingered in the curtains over the sink.

Ava tried to pick mice that had ice patterns on their sides. She tried to match them to Clay's marbling. She read the frozen markings like tarot cards, read each as a sign of fate. Tarot cards, tea leaves, cracks in her hand, mice in her palm.

She never told Grace because she knew Grace would have laughed. Grace was the skeptical one. Grace kept her sane and organized and from knocking on too much wood or jumping over too many cracks. Ava settled each plastic bag on the windowsill and let it warm in the sun, and the mouse smell warmed itself into the curtains.

*

When Tom moved out of Ava's room, he took his photographs off their nails and the nails out of the wall. The old barns and fields and dogs disappeared with him.

He saved the hanging hooks attached to the nails, and he shoved them in his toolbox, and he packed the toolbox in his truck.

He'd been the one to cross the line she drew in the bed. He folded her in his arms and pointed at his photos. He told her about Venus.

His lab Venus had been the brightest white. He pointed to the picture. He'd named the dog and his sister Venus A and B when they were pups. When B had died, Tom's dad had made the little casket with Tom. The casket was the first thing he'd taught Tom to make, and Tom had cut open his hand trying to get the wood right. He'd picked out the color to match her coat: birch. All of his furniture now was dark. He'd stained everything he owned mahogany, because he couldn't handle the color of birch.

Ava ran her fingers over his callouses. She frowned. "Isn't it kind of weird to

name dogs by letters though? Feels so distant. Clinical.”

“Felt right though. I don’t know anything about planets.” He twisted his leg tighter around hers, smoothed his foot up and down her calf. “But they were both so bright. It made sense.”

She let him cross over the bed’s mid-line.

“Dumb,” she would have said in her mirror.

But Tom had known how to shave down the rough edges of her desk so that the wood wouldn’t splinter her fingers. He’d known how to gloss it down and keep her fingers safe.

When he left and left that constellation of holes, she frowned because she didn’t know anything about planets either.

*

Ava stopped using tongs to feed Clay. She held her breath the first time she lowered the mouse down to him, and she felt the tug of the body as he coiled and struck. She knelt and watched him. The little body disappeared so fast. She sat back against the foot of her bed. “Ok, sweet thing. I get it.”

They’d told her at the store, “Do not handle for two days after feeding.”

She waited and waited, and when she leaned in to pat him after the two days, she crooned. It took her two weeks before she could scoop him out, and in those weeks, she stared and she sang.

When she finally reached in and beckoned him to her, Clay slithered up her arm to curl around her neck. He rested on her shoulders there, and the touch barely felt different than the talking.

She walked him over to where Tom's pictures had hung.

"Look, sweet thing," she said. She touched his nose to the wall, and Clay smoothed his face along the map of holes. He nosed into each, and she imagined him burrowing in and out and away.

"You can dig, baby. I trust you."

She moved her fingers from one to the next, and Clay followed her as she went. She wanted to dig a pattern for him to slither through. She wanted to give him some sort of present, but they were only left with a map of what was missing: the dogs with letter names.

*

The morning after Ava locked her door the first time, she watched her doorknob turn at ten in the morning. The doorframe shook slightly, but it didn't yield. Ava heard Grace's footsteps pad away to the kitchen, and she smelled bacon grease cutting through the mouse must like panic. She didn't open the door at eleven or noon or one.

Grace knocked. She called Ava's cell, and Ava heard her footsteps pace outside as her phone vibrated next to her.

The footsteps stilled; she didn't leave the living room.

Ava came out at dinnertime. Grace sat on the couch outside of her bedroom and held a book. Ava watched her stare at the pages; Grace didn't flinch or move. Ava went upstairs and took Clay's mouse out of the freezer and bagged it.

Grace came up to the kitchen table. She clutched her book and tightened her grip as she spoke, like the effort was physical. "Are you okay?"

"Of course, pretty." Ava smiled at the concern but furrowed her eyebrows.

“What’s up?”

“You locked your door.”

Ava nodded. “I let Clay out. I didn’t want him to scare you.”

Grace shivered. “Ah,” she said.

Ava lowered the bag to rest on the countertop, and the little body bobbed in the water. The light through the curtains glinted off the plastic.

*

Clay swallowed the space Tom took up. He fit under Ava’s arm; he wrapped himself around her legs. He consumed the space like it was one of his mice, and Ava imagined that the empty spot had gone to the same place inside him.

She gained weight. Her waist thickened. Her arms thickened. She fit her hands against her thighs, wrapping them halfway around. She measured herself against where she used to fit in the bed. She was enveloping herself, swallowing old Ava like the old her was her own tail. She took up his space and her space. She expanded on the bed.

*

When they’d fucked in the shower, he’d pulled her hair softly.

Afterward, he’d sang to her. “Love me tender, love me sweet, never let me go.” She’d felt the words like they were warm spit on her back from the showerhead. They’d distilled between the droplets; they’d gathered close to her skin.

He’d kissed her fingertips; he’d ran his lips over the whorls to remind her he’d kept them smooth. He claimed ownership of that.

When Tom left and her room quieted, she asked Grace to cut her hair. She wanted to feel someone touch her. She wanted someone to play with her hair. She closed her eyes

as Grace washed it. Grace massaged her scalp; she buried her fingers in the strands as Ava hummed faintly. Grace's hands so close could protect her from anything. The shampoo prickled her ears and ran down the back of her neck. The scissors, after, rang metallic in her ears.

*

When Clay stopped eating that week, he didn't stop taking up as much room, stretched out long next to her or coiled around her, but his stomach slackened. When Ava first noticed, she wrapped her hands around him, trying to measure. "Pretty, skinny snake," Ava crooned. "Please eat for me, sweet baby."

Ava threw the dead mice in the trash after they'd sat for too long. The smell built up in the kitchen in waves, and after a week, it stifled the room. When Grace started gagging and groaning, Ava started throwing the mice in the backyard. She could never look straight at the tiny pile of bodies.

After two weeks, she made the vet appointment.

*

She heard the vet in fragments.

"Have there been any changes? Has his sleeping pattern changed? Is his diet consistent?"

"Seen it before.

"Starving himself.

"They do this when they're trying to prepare for big prey. They want to make sure they have the room.

"Measure themselves against you.

“You are a good bit more appetizing than the mice.

“Prey—

“Don’t let him in your bed.

“—advise against.”

She heard it like music: reverberating through her eardrums.

*

She looked back at her list: “—touch.”

She rubbed the edges of her mirror, like she was asking it to talk back. She pursed her lips at the glass.

She didn’t want it to talk back. She’d never wanted any of them to talk back.

She thought that maybe she could swallow Clay whole. Maybe he could live inside her stomach, distending her belly. She leaned down and touched her open mouth to him. She pressed her lips to his scales. Maybe, if it happened, they could loop together, swallow each other.

That night, she didn’t crate Clay, and he stretched out long against her, then wrapped tight around her legs. He slithered up and tangled into her hair.

“How long would it take anyhow, sweet thing,” she mumbled as they curled together.

“He wouldn’t do it,” she said to her mirror.

*

She could have made a Snake Star, but she didn’t. When she faced that wall, she lifted her hammer and struck wherever she could, wincing as she caught and mashed her thumbs on top of the nails. She hammered randomly and let the noise reverberate through

the air as she dug holes into the wall: layering over layers and making the air warm, making that cloak that she always saw whenever she sang to Clay or Grace.

She locked the door so that Grace wouldn't come in to save her from the loud.

She cared less about where the nails landed or how her fingernails cracked. She just wanted to hear the hammer. She didn't make the Snake Star, could barely remember what it looked like, but when she hammered close to the floor, she wrapped a constellation tail down and along her baseboard. She made a spot where Clay could slither up and trace the path she'd made.

Rio

Most of the time, the people that lived in the towns on either side of the river called it the Rio. But when the old folks spoke, in hushed voices in grocery stores and BINGO halls, they used the name they'd learned from their own parents and grandparents: The Place Between Times. They murmured the name like they were afraid of it, the place or the name or the girl who lived there.

The girl who lived in the house bent over the dock avoided the grey-heads when she saw them. She thought this name that they gave the place was hokey, and she knew they whispered about her whenever she came into one of the towns: about why she would want to live in that leaning house. But the old folks were set in their ways of speaking. And secretly, in ways that the girl would never admit, she liked the name and the way it made her shack more than a run-down house. She smirked when tourists stopped on the bridge to take pictures next to the sign marking the time zone split. She was the one who got to live the legend, and she was proud of that in a way that made her ashamed of it.

The time zone line split her house: her bookcases, her coffee table, her TV, her doorframes and windowpanes. When her cell phone switched times as she crossed her kitchen, she knew that The Place Between Times made the change magical. They all thought this place was two places at once, and on her insides, she knew that it was right, that she did exist in two places at once. She bought into the myth wholeheartedly, although she'd never admit it out loud. She only left The Place fleetingly, for work or

groceries or to visit friends, and every night, she returned to the house where she'd grown up.

She never invited the townspeople or the tourists into her home. She didn't want their eyes, didn't want to have to admit to them what she felt in her core. She didn't want to share the way she lived within the legend.

And the townspeople were happy in their own homes, the ones that didn't lean. Homes with dishwashers and TiVos and shiny new electronics, whirring in corners and on their mantelpieces. Her new boyfriend's house was like that, and when she went into town to visit him, she avoided eye contact with the machinery. She didn't know how to look at it like it was normal. She was used to her clunky old TV, with its rabbit ears and sticky knobs. Used to her sink full of dirty dishes. Her wash basin in the river and the way she could let her dirty clothes pile up high in her bedroom.

When her boyfriend visited her, he set his phone's clock to manual because he hated never knowing which time was right. He hated the way his phone switched and blurred as he crossed the threshold of her living room. He hated her old TV and her dirty dishes. But the boyfriend, at least at first, didn't ask the questions that would expose or change her world.



Secretly, in her quiet, ashamed way, she gave her own house a name, another hokey name that she kept to herself and the river: The House on the Edge. A name separate from the townspeople's names. She knew she wasn't between the times like they thought. She was on the brink of something, something closer to falling. She wasn't attached to the towns or their townie cultures or their fast or slow time. She was attached

to her own time, her own in-between space. And in this named place, she stayed nameless.

The townspeople tried to pin her down like they'd pinned down the place. "Both Princess and Pauper at once," they laughed. She knew they thought her smirks and her quiet ways and her dirt-stained hands meant that she was stuck-up. They only saw the way she boarded up her doors, not the ways she cracked under the town's pressure, the way she needed to escape from their eyes. She didn't avoid them because she thought she was better than them; she did it because she was scared of the things they said about her and the way they knew she had to believe in the place. The girl lived within her myth, but she wasn't The Princess they imagined.

At first, the boyfriend only called her by the name she wanted to be called. When he first called her Princess, she cried, and he didn't understand why, and she couldn't get why he didn't understand.

He told her she was perfect in the way that only Princesses were, and he slowly eased her into this new way of understanding the name.



Back in the first month, before he hated the myth for the way it took her from him, the boyfriend loved the legend and the place and The Princess. The girl and the boyfriend swam together in the river. When they kissed underneath the surface, water rushed into their mouths, and fish, drawn to the warmth of their bodies, swam between and around them, brushing against their limbs. The boyfriend and the girl held each other, and she couldn't separate him from the fish, couldn't tell which touches were his and which weren't.

He pointed down at the shiny, gold scales and tried to name them.

She smiled and squinted. “No, no goldfish in the Colorad.”

After the fish, the boyfriend stopped swimming in the river. “I don’t like the way they touch us. The way they touch you,” he said, and the two stayed closer to the house.

When the boyfriend wasn’t there to inhabit the in-between space with her, he hated The Place Between the Times and The House on the Edge of Time, and eventually, he started hating both even when he was there with her. He hated the way this place had a power over them.



At first, when the boyfriend was gone, the girl ate her meals on the porch facing the river, and even though she could see the other shore, she never looked at the banks. When she sat next to the river, she couldn’t take her old rotary phone outside, and so she was cut off from the rest of the world. This place, on the edges, was her solace: a place without the grey-heads and the middle-aged families and the kids who threw pennies at her fish. A place even without the boyfriend.

On the nights she ate on the porch, the river glimmered, and the fish leapt. She whispered when the fish broached the surface.

“Fish,” she said to them, and the fish sparkled in the little light that remained. She believed in the fish like she believed in The Place; they were a life beyond the town: a life beyond the eyes.

The water in her glass reflected the sky like the river did. Like the fish did, their shiny scales sometimes that cloudy blue.

But on the night that she stayed on the banks and forgot about her phone and the other life for too long, her boyfriend left angry voicemails.

“Why don’t you love me?” he asked, and she heard the way he was really asking, “Why won’t you pay attention to me?” echo in the way his voice cracked over the line. She hated the plaintive child inside him, but the plaintive child drew her to him. And he was both parent and child to her, whining while cleaning under her fingernails. He left his own smaller messes, but in his adult way, he couldn’t stand her dirt or the way she brought the wild inside.

But she knew that he needed her in a desperate way. She could hear it in his voice cracklings. When he’d bought her new detergent and soap, she’d traded one ritual for the other. She’d started taking her clothes to the Laundromat in town, instead of washing them in the river. She’d started showering more and stopped letting the clothes pile on the western side of her bedroom, stopped running her fingers over her long, soft leg hair.

The girl had always been a skeptic about love, but secretly, in ways she would never admit out loud, she was terrified of hurting the boyfriend. She needed him in this new, desperate way, in the way that he needed her.

She’d never left The House on the Edge of Time for long, but her instincts, on the day of the voicemails, told her that the river and fish would still be there when she came back. She could leave them for however long; they would always be her constant. The boyfriend was more fickle.

When the boyfriend left the angry voicemails, she left her banks and went into town and crawled into his bed. She kissed his chest down to his hips and murmured on

her way down. “There, there,” she said and stayed the night, for the first time, in the town on the Mountain side of the river.

Although she went home the next day at lunch and settled back into her routine, she started staring up at the shore when she ate. Her new cell phone never left her side, and when she finally sat still on the eastern edge long enough for the time to stabilize, she set her clock to manual. She started noticing when she was late to the boyfriend’s house or to work or to appointments.

The girl spent the night more and more often at his house, and the boyfriend stopped leaving angry voicemails. “I get it,” he said. “I get what you’re doing for me.” He murmured as he kissed her chest down to her hips.

She still came home and talked to her fish, but after her first night out, she added to her new routine, leaving her river to show up to one town or the other on time. Her rituals manifested less in the whispers and more in the way she instinctually clutched her phone to her chest.



They’d been together three months the day after Christmas, and the boyfriend was the one to count, the one to want to celebrate it. For Christmas and their three-month anniversary, he gave her a TiVo.

“It’s a time machine,” he said, and she smiled because, even though she was a skeptic, she knew that the gift meant that he could read her, that he could see the way she’d become obsessed with shifting into his piece of time. She knew that he loved the idea of her changing for him. And the way he loved this new Her-that-Wasn’t-Her worried her, but she still desperately wanted that love.

The girl folded the black box under her arm. She didn't tell him that the old TV that her parents had left her in The Place Between Times picked up stations from both time zones. She didn't tell him that, at home, she could watch her shows at 7 and then at 7 again. Because with the box, she could watch them outside of her myth, apart from the in-between space that was hers. He'd given her this new way to do what she'd always done, and to break away from the legend.

The present she gave him was from a new her, a Not-Princess her and a Not-Not-Princess her: a new her that wanted to change her world to fold him into it. She'd wrapped her box in the western side of her kitchen and then rewrapped it in the eastern. Tape ran the length of every seam, and the boyfriend dug his fingers under all the folds. As he unwrapped it, he found the holes that she'd poked through the box top. He found the pot on the inside; he found the tipped-out layer of soil that spread around it. The label read "Columnea gloriosa – goldfish plant," and the flowers bloomed to the airholes: buds with skin red-orange, mouths puckered, bellies full.

"Now you have fish to match my fish," she said and watched his expression clear as he understood that she was giving him a part of the legend, making him a part of the legend. She nudged the box closer to him. "You can have a piece of me always on your side of town."

He stroked a velvety bud. "Thanks, sweet. I get it. I get what you're doing for me."

He looked down at the spray of dirt inside the box, spilling over and staining the wrapping paper. The dirt stains matched the ones on her palms and under her fingertips,

the ones he always asked her to scrub. “Help me clear the mess,” he said, and they dug the dirt out from every corner, making the box clean again.

But in the plant, the girl gave him something that the place couldn’t have: a fish that never swam in that river.

“I like this,” he said, as they confined the dirt to the pot’s insides, wiping it from all the outer edges.

At first, she didn’t have any problems adjusting to her TiVo or her Mountain life.



On the night of their three-month anniversary, the boyfriend took the girl to dinner on Main Street in the Mountain town.

At 7 p.m., she ate swordfish.

When the check came, the boyfriend’s mom called, and when the waiter came back for it, the girlfriend apologized. “Sorry,” she told him, “he’s on the phone with Florida.”

She asked the boyfriend how his mom was, and he nodded. “She’s okay,” he said. “I told her where we were, and she said she was going to the seafood restaurant on Main, too. I miss that place.”

The girl’s eyes followed the curve of his eyebrows. “Yeah. I feel like there’s a part of you there still,” she said.

On that night of their three-month anniversary, the boyfriend took the girl for ice cream on Main Street in the Pacific town. They crossed the river, and although the girlfriend didn’t notice anything change, her hair and fingernails shrank an infinitesimal amount. She grew as if growing backward and inward.

At 7 p.m., she ate vanilla ice cream topped with sprinkles, nuts, and Swedish fish.

When they sat down, his phone rang, and the girl focused on licking the vanilla drops before they reached the napkin.

He took the call, and she chewed on the gummy animals until he came back to her.

“How’s your mom doing?”

The boyfriend cocked his head. “You already asked me that, Princess. And that was my brother.”

“You know,” the girl paused, “I know I asked. But I don’t remember it.”

He smirked. “Have we become so boring that we’ve started repeating the same conversations?”

Vanilla landed sticky between her fingers. “I thought that wasn’t supposed to happen until six months at least.”

“You know that thing where you say the same thing so many times that you start doubting that it’s a word?”

“Fish, fish, fish, fish, fish, fish, fish,” she said.

“Yeah. Like that,” he said.

When they went across the Rio, they caught on to these ways they repeated themselves.

It was then that the girl remembered the townie myth that she used to know, from when she was younger. When she was a teenager, when she’d crossed the river to catch the Pacific bars that were open for that extra hour, they’d pretended that nothing

mattered. They'd already lived the hour. They'd convince themselves that the bad stuff wouldn't count or that it would only half count.

But this felt different than it had felt when the girl was a teenager. When they'd crossed the river back then, they'd intentionally done the same things that they'd done on the other side. They'd taken the same shots, kissed the same boys. And they'd convinced themselves they had no choice in it; they were forced into these decisions by the time zone line. She knew even then that they'd only needed something to blame their awful ways on. But this felt less than conscious, and she wondered how it had never happened before—when she'd always lived there. She wondered what was different.

When they got back to his house, she whispered to the goldfish plant. "I get it. I get what's happening," she said. Her hair and fingernails were both a fraction longer. They were the length they'd been when she first crossed the river. "Fish, fish, fish," she murmured, losing the meaning as she mumbled.



She knew this: the boyfriend had been the one to shatter the magic of the place, with his TiVo and his clocks, and in invading The Place Between Times, he'd broken the way the girl had found to live within her myth.

She started eating two lunches, started calling him twice when she only had one thing to say. She only realized the repetitions when he told her, and when the boyfriend called her out, she froze in her bedroom, instinctually toeing closer to an invisible midline. She used white chalk to draw a dividing line down the middle of her house. Once she mapped out her rooms, she was able to stick to the Mountain side of things, the time that the boyfriend inhabited, and she convinced herself that the eastern side of her

living room and bedroom and kitchen was the better side. She liked seeing the sunrise in the window above her bed. She liked knowing that she belonged to a community that was seeing the same thing. She liked knowing that the light landed in the same way on the boyfriend's pillows in the morning. She loved it, but she also felt somehow off-kilter.

For the boyfriend had thrown off her balance, her ability to exist on the edge, and even though she liked her newfound community, she knew she had to rename the house, so that it could reflect the way the home had splintered, with her inside, into two unlivable halves. But she wasn't sure if she had enough control over this place anymore to give it that name.



After a week of the girl's new ritual of staring at the shore instead of down at the fish, the girl shed her clothes and jumped into the river. When the water hit her, its slick skin enveloped her. The surface mirrored rainbows of oil and clouds.

The fish encircled her limbs, and as she surfaced, she noticed the gap between river and shore, the shrinking water level.

"Fish," she said, and she didn't need to repeat the name for it to make sense.

The fish followed her to the shore, where she left them. As she glanced at her phone on the dock, she felt the river subside. Looking up and then back, she could've sworn she saw it shrink another inch, and she smiled the same frustrated smile that she saved for the boyfriend, as she understood the river: it was her new plaintive child.



On New Year's, the boyfriend watched the live stream of Times Square at 10 because he missed home. He missed East coast time. The ball glimmered in his living

room as it dropped, and the boyfriend counted down to East coast midnight. He kissed the girl to the New Year that hadn't come yet for them.

When the cable station ran the Dick Clark special two hours later, they were still on the couch. They were still counting down. They were still kissing.

They were conscious of their repetitions, the way they let the other time invade their space and the way they let each other invade their own space.



For New Year's, the boyfriend resolved to try again to love The Place Between Times. That first day, when she came home from work, she found what he'd left her: the ways that he'd tried to love her legend.

In the New Year, he'd cleaned her house. He'd swept the dirt from the corners and cut flowers from his goldfish plant to display. He'd set the vase in the center of her kitchen table. He'd surprised her with these gifts that were more him than her now.

She came home. He'd cut the goldfish from their stems, strangled them in water. He'd scrubbed the chalk line from the floor, and she wordlessly tried to tread both sides of it. She couldn't draw it back—not after everything that he'd done for her. It would be ungrateful.

By the end of the week, the goldfish flowers had wilted, and their full bellies had shrunken and fallen onto the glass tabletop.

She stared and stared from the center of the room at the flowers he'd killed, and she froze there, unable to shift to the east or the west: only able to intuitively toe the line in order to not feel the loss.

When the girl's phone rang, the spell broke. The boyfriend's call dissolved the silence, and the girl broke away from the midline to pick up her phone, but she could only let it ring. She couldn't pick it up.

She brought the flowers to the banks and buried them in the mud, and the ringtone still in her head, she sang a song in which all the words were "fish."

She hummed the tune like a funeral hymn as she dug.



When she left for good, the girl considered taking his gifts with her as mementoes of him. In the river, she imagined, she'd clutch the electronics to her as the water flowed slicker than skin: a skin that slid off her but that she could never shed. But shorting their circuits and flooding their insides seemed like a violence that she couldn't inflict on them. They wouldn't function like she did in the water.

She placed the TiVo on her pillow. She wanted to swaddle it in her blankets, but she was scared that he wouldn't notice the difference. She laughed. That wouldn't be his type of joke. The bony frame depressed the pillow, and she curled up next to it in bed, an arm's length away. She could smell him on his sheets.

The townspeople held onto their myths about the Rio as timeless, but she knew they were wrong about it like they were wrong about her. In the river, she wouldn't be their Princess or their Not-Princess or their Not-Not-Princess.

On the day she swam away for good, the girl could see the shore in her peripheral vision, and she kept it within view when she surfaced. When she dove under, the fish encircled her hair in a crown. On the day she swam away for good, she swam straight

ahead, following the trail of gold scales. The fish glinted in the sun, reflecting the sky,
and they swallowed her as she reflected upward the same way.

Odo

That Sunday I used the newspaper from town to mop my face, and I mopped my face with the front page less because I was mad about the headlines and more because I didn't care, because it was like the paper was asking me to not care, the way it was so quiet and talk-around-the-subject-like, when it knew that we all just wanted to know about the solar storm. It was like no one wanted to say it out loud or let on that we were all talking about it, and since no one ever said anything in public, we could pretend that the talking-about-it was this thing that didn't happen. It was like if we could keep the island from hearing us say the words, we would be safe, but we were all still saying it when we could be heard in a whisper: "the sun's gonna burst, dummies."

I'd gotten my chicken sandwich from the strip mall in town, and the grease it left on my face took all the words from the newsprint and put them on my cheek and so I had to scrub at it, and Odo found me dealing with that in our kitchen, my face in the sink, my fingers rubbing at black smudges I knew were there even though I couldn't see them.

That Sunday paper posted this old mess of a headline about the flowers and plants dying on the North shore, all these details about bright colors and weird blooms up the mountain, but that wasn't why any of us had picked up the paper. I didn't not care about plants; I had my garden with its handful of green leaves. But it seemed like that's not what newspapers were for, not now. Like, if the end of the world was coming, even if we weren't sure, I'd want some journalist to talk about it, even if just in the editorial section,

definitely before the orange groves on the mountain or flowers by the elementary school. Just to do it, you know. To keep things timely.

Odo came up to me in the sink, and when I tried to tell her this from down below, she frowned at me so hard. “Ya dumb, Boro,” she said, “you think that doesn’t matter? You think the plants are dying for no reason?” Her frown deepened, and she flexed her fingers.

This was what Odo did when I tried to see more of the world. She called me out and called me names and said I was a dumb boy, a dumb Boro, a durfer, a zaboob, that I’d gone headfirst into too many waves.

*

When we’d first met, Odo had said, “I think you’re dumb in a good way,” and I’d thought that was a backhanded, fuckhead way of saying she liked me, but after that first week, after I’d gotten to know Odo, I got that she meant that “good” part. She was into the dumb parts of me in a real way, like she was into the dumb parts in everybody. She was drawn to us: dumb boys who clouded ourselves in incense and weed. Odo surrounded herself with surfers and street bums mostly because we were easier to talk to but also because she thought there was value in the way we didn’t praise ourselves or take our words serious-like. We didn’t try to convince her like everyone else that the dollar was God or that God was real or that Nike was our one and only, with their cool-ass sneakers and shiny ads. We talked to her about the world as we saw it, the wonder of birds and dried beans.

I wondered if I should have been insulted by the other people she hung out with and that were always around. Because in some way, she thought I was like Dog or Lexi,

that there was something that tied us together beyond the fact that we all stank of patchouli.

Sometimes I loved her people, and sometimes I hated them, but all of the time I was with them because all of the time I was with Odo, because I loved Odo like she was my mom or my sister or my wife, even though those were different things, because Odo was my Odo.

Even when I was scared of the way I was like her people, I was still drawn to them, and when I read that paper and shook the wet out of my hair and dried my face on the towel, I asked her like I'd asked her when we first found out about the solar storm: I asked if we could ask Blind Randy about it.

She snapped at me, "He's not a prophet; that's offensive, B," but all I could think of were his yellow eyes and the way they must see what mine couldn't.

*

That day, Odo told me to get in her car, and I said yes like I did, because sometimes when she drove we'd make it up to Foodland and she'd buy me a brownie or a snickerdoodle or a crumb cake. I thought maybe she'd take us to see Blind Randy near the surf shop outside of Foodland, even though she'd said no. Odo had said he wasn't a prophet, but maybe she'd finally let me nearer to him: let me know what she knew about him. She was hiding Blind Randy, I was convinced, and what she really knew about him from me, because he had to be a prophet, I could see it in his eyes. We saw him whenever she took me to get brownies, and he'd wave, like he knew we were there, even though he couldn't see. He'd be outside on that bench by the shop, and I never saw him anywhere else, and I knew that the bench was his right place: where he was meant to be.

We passed Blind Randy's shop, and I should have known where she was taking me then, when we took the fork to make our way up the hill past Foodland, but I also guess that was part of why Odo liked me, because she knew she could always surprise me.

Past Foodland, it was like we left the land of people, except for the crushed soda cans and occasional crosses on the side of the road. It was like we couldn't see the shacks or farms or mansions or big box stores with their cheap TVs, because the ocean got in the way, and it's not like the ocean actually got in the way, but it's like we couldn't shift our eyes away from it, not even for the road.

The orange groves, when we got to them, were bad, and I guess I got then how quiet and a mess the headlines actually were. I regretted using that newspaper as a napkin because of how much I hadn't cared about those headlines, but maybe the guys at the chicken sandwich shop should have handed the paper to me all greasy and smudged in the first place, so that I'd have paid more attention. A paper with grease already on it probably a sign that something was really wrong.

It took us a long time to get out of the car and a longer time to go up to the gate at the edge of that parking lot and press our noses to the holes in that gate.

The oranges looked glowy and fire-like against the leaves behind them. I had expected death to look like rot, and I'd expected maggots and brown-black goo, but these suckers were almost too alive: so very orange.

Odo said, "They look fluorescent," and we didn't want to admit it, either of us, but they were beautiful. We retreated to her car and laid on the hood of it and looked out at the fields through the wire grating, and after a couple of minutes, the orangeness of the

oranges hurt our eyes. When we looked away, we got floaters in our vision because we'd been staring for so long.

On the hood of her car, Odo took up so much more space than me, and I grabbed her hand, and she smacked my wrist real light, so light it was almost like she hadn't touched it.

"Boro," she said, like she was scolding me, because she was scolding me. She said it kind of sad-like, like she felt guilty about hating my hand.

I never wanted to touch Odo because I wanted her. I just wanted to touch her because I felt the need to touch things. It was the reason our garden was full of lamb's ears and licorice plant and Irish moss, because I only wanted plants with velvet skin. It was the reason we had a thousand nameless cats and the reason I wanted more animals, even if Odo didn't. For the cats, I would call a different name every night, and one or two would appear because they all had names and none had names, and they all loved me because I smelled like fish and because I fed them fish. They licked my biceps, and I buried my face and hands in their ratty fur. Odo hated when I did this, because sometimes I brought fleas inside and onto our couch, but I think secretly she hated my ability to touch things so casual-like. Odo was not a hugger, but she was more than not a hugger, she was a not-a-toucher. She was scared of bugs not because they were bugs but because they could touch her and they didn't know to not. She sprayed spiders and roaches with hairspray and left them for me, clinging to our carpet, because smushing them with tissues meant she was far too close: her skin to their skin.

In the parking lot, we sat for awhile longer, my hand not on her hand but resting on my stomach and her hand resting on her own, and when the sun set behind the grove,

the colors shone like they had for the past week: like the world was ending. We couldn't see the sun for the trees, but we could see this blue-green weird behind the leaves, rays reaching fingers of colors past the horizon.

*

Odo had once told me this about the touching: she felt guilty. When I got that puppy dog face, she felt bad for saying I couldn't touch her, and that was fucked up, she'd said. That was how that male bullshit got in your head. "There's nothing wrong with me for not wanting that," she'd said.

I never really knew what to say when she said stuff like that, I'd just say it wasn't like that. "I don't wanna marry you or sleep with you, O. I just wanna hold your hand."

But she'd say I was missing the point and that she'd only wanted to be open with me, and my instinct would be to reach out and pat her or hold her hand, but then, that was the problem.

*

When we headed back to the farmhouse, we didn't say anything to anyone else about the oranges. We didn't talk to each other about keeping our traps shut: it was like this unspoken pact. I think Odo probably didn't want to tell anyone because she knew they were all using the newspapers as napkins too: they didn't get it. But I didn't want to tell anyone because if no one else knew, the oranges were ours: a thing we shared just us.

When we got back to the house, Dog was skating across the porch trying to catch a lizard, and we opened the door for him. "You've gotta stop, man," Odo said. Dog cut his eyes at her. Dog had a lizard problem the way I had a cat problem, except he didn't keep them because he wanted to touch them, he kept them because he wanted to watch

them eat each other, and when he went long enough without feeding his tank-o-lizards, they did.

“I’m just trying to create the lizard king,” he’d said, the first time we’d asked him about it. Odo wouldn’t let him talk about it if she was in the room after that. She had limitations even with how much she loved our faults.

As soon as Dog settled into the kitchen, Lexi and Jimb were there. Odo said we kept her from feeling like a grown-up, the way we popped in and out of each other’s beach shacks, but mostly we all appeared in my and Odo’s farmhouse because that’s where Odo was. Each of us had this intuitive sense of when we were all at our big house, and we appeared as if effortless, as if out of nowhere, as if we were always in our kitchen because we belonged there.

Lexi and Jimb sat down at the table, because we all crowded into our tiny kitchen no matter how many people were there. I thought maybe it was because of how much we all loved food, but it was weird because we never really ate things in there, and mostly I guessed it was just a space where we felt right.

Odo wandered in and out of the room and rolled her eyes at our conversation and came back in because she loved it, even when she hated it.

*

On our island, the people had always called the thing that happened at sunset the green flash, but lately, it’d gotten bigger and weirder—something that didn’t just last for a second and then disappear. This new thing was not the tourist trap version of the sunset, what everyone came to the bay to see and then forget about, because it was fleeting, because it only happened for a second. Our new sunset was something that *Scientific*

American couldn't figure out and that the newspapers had already stopped talking about in favor of plants and oranges and headlines no one read anymore. I knew it was because they were scared to talk about it. We'd all settled into this quiet, existential despair, like, did we live our lives well enough, touch enough people, love enough.

My hypothesis about the sunset was this: we loved the things that destroyed us, and we were drawn to them like they were to us. So in the way we craved tans and sunburns because burning alive made us feel warm, we drew the sun to us physically, like gravity or magnetism. I liked thinking that maybe we'd get close enough to touch the sun—that we'd die the way the oranges did, in this awful, fiery beauty that no one could look away from. That was one of the theories I'd read, that we would all end up burning like that, but the scientists didn't think about it the way that I did. It was the same type of thing: the way that I was drawn to those coconut cookie cakes at Foodland or to velvet plants and cats. Or to Odo. Always to Odo. Gravitating around and pulled toward her.

*

We couldn't ever escape it, not with the way we still wanted to look at the sun so badly when we knew we couldn't. When the eclipse had happened last year, Odo had giggled and asked me, "One minute won't hurt, right?" and I'd bit my lip in surprise, because Odo was giggling.

Something about Odo asking that had kind of made me mad, like I should never had to have been the voice of reason. I'd told her it burned her eyes every second she looked at it, even like normal on a normal day. "People get sunblind, O." That was when I'd taught her about when you push on people's eyes, what it means when you see the lights under your eyelids, the way that glow was like the glow from fireflies or creatures

from the bottom of the sea. “We all have a little bit of that in us,” I’d told her, and I’d said it like it was magic, because it was magic: phosphenes. That eclipse and the way it changed things afterward was the thing that had made us Odo and Boro. We hadn’t told anybody else, but I knew Dog and Lexi and Jimb could all tell that we were different together than we had been, that there was something tying us together in this big old farmhouse with the red roof other than the actual house with the red roof.

*

In our kitchen the day of the oranges, we pretended like we could answer all the questions. Lexi and Jimb gave their hypotheses about the sunset in tandem: the ones they’d talked about the day before and the day before that, and they gave their reasons in tandem like they gave everything in tandem. It sounded like everyone was talking at once, but really it was just Lexi and Jimb and the way they did talk at once. If I looked down, I couldn’t tell who was speaking because Lexi’s voice was decidedly not-girl-like, and so I always had to look at them when they talked, but most of the time, still, I couldn’t tell who said what.

“It’s like the Northern Lights. The same way they can’t figure that out. It’s the same thing.”

“Smog.”

“Reflections off the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.”

“Reflections off the sea turtles.” Lexi and Jimb giggled, because that was their favorite, and because neither of them could tell which one had said it.

Dog said the worst one, the one we were all scared of. “Or maybe it’s burning out, ya know.”

I thought it, but didn't say it: that I knew Blind Randy would know better than all of us.

*

After everyone left our kitchen and it grew dark, I sat outside with the cats and a tin of sardines. "Maggie," I whispered into the dark, and the white one with the grey spot on her chin idled up next to me—chin on my leg, arm, hips, rubbing into me until I dropped the fish into her mouth.

My garden was wimpy, but it was soft, and I wondered at why it wasn't dying yet. Maybe there was something in the cat fur or the tin from the sardine cans that leached into the soil and saved my plants and their fur, or maybe the plants were already so soft that they couldn't die, too much like velvet.

The cat against my leg, I knew it was the thing keeping us from having the animals I'd wanted, the real farm, a real way of making this place workable, and yet its fur against my palm, I loved it, even if it would have eaten my tiny ducklings or been eaten by my giant sheepdog. There was something about farming and dirt and animals that Odo hated though, and she'd clung to the idea of cats as loners in her fight against a real farm. "The farm animals would drive them out or the cats would drive out the farm animals," she'd said, "they wouldn't be able to live together, not that many of them."

She never even seemed to like the cats, but they knew better than to touch her, and I thought that was the thing: that the rest of the animals would be dumber, like me, and they would have touched her or tried to touch her. The dirt would have reached into the cracks in my skin and the veins in our wood floors and it would have been

everywhere and she wouldn't have been able to avoid touching it, and that's why she blamed it all on the cats, they were her saving grace.

*

When I came inside and rubbed the cat off my hand onto the dishtowel, I counted to three and then went inside to the couch, this ritual I couldn't detach myself from.

In the living room, where we'd been doing this, Odo touched my eyelids the way she'd been doing. We'd been functioning inside the ritual since the eclipse. Nighttime was the time, and Odo touched me and only on my eyes. We didn't talk about what it meant that she touched me because I was scared to say anything or breathe for fear that I would break the weird spell the eclipse had cast over us, and Odo didn't say anything because I guessed she thought the same thing, and I hoped, like I guess I had to, that she didn't want to snap out of it either. This wasn't a male thing, I didn't think, it was just a thing where she recognized that we were phosphenes, and that was cool.

We never stargazed like we sungazed because we could see the stars without going outside, and why go outside without the sun there to warm us when we didn't have to.

*

The next day, Dog and Lexi and Jimb appeared in our kitchen while I was out getting breakfast, and when I came home to them sitting at the table, I wondered if they'd ever left. I wondered if they were always here when I was gone: if I could come home any day and expect to find them exactly where I'd left them, on my doorstep like so many cats.

I didn't really say anything to them because I didn't really have to, I just inhaled them, sitting in my kitchen and stinking of patchouli, which was a good stink all in all.

I'm not sure if they ever left, but Odo took me to the beach across the street from the elementary school where all the tourists collected. She knew we'd done the orange grove thing for her yesterday, because she'd wanted to see the oranges, and she knew I'd wanted to see the sunset, and so today she drove to a place for me. I closed my eyes in front of all that sand and water and tourist sweat and imagined what it must be like to be Blind Randy watching the sunset, which I guess was a dumb thing to wonder.

The colors were fluorescent like the oranges, and it made me wonder about the oranges themselves and what would happen to them when they died in this new way. If they'd burst from the surplus of color, if they'd fall off their trees and seep into the ground, if they'd just grow bigger and bigger until they got so big there'd be no more room for any of them or any of us, until we were all orange.

There was this little tow-headed girl on the beach next to me, sitting on a bench, clutching her tiny purse to her side, and I smiled at her, and Odo saw me smile and frowned. "You are the thing she is afraid of," Odo said, and she tugged at my tangled hair. "Look at you, Bo-bo."

I leaned over to the little girl and I didn't get too close, but I whispered to her, "It's not scary, but I think the sun's getting closer. I think if we built a highway, we could drive over and touch it, you know? Like, that's not a bad thing, it's just like a vacation."

The little girl with her sparkly purse gazed up at me. Her eyes didn't get any wider or smaller, and I felt distinctly like she was going to spit on me, but she didn't. She just stared and blinked, and I wondered, instead, what it was like to watch the sunset

through her eyes, and I thought maybe this was a less dumb thing to wonder than about Blind Randy.

*

The day after the last real sunset, the cats didn't come when I called them, no matter what name I yelled, and when I smelled the piss in the air, what they'd left behind, I knew something was wrong.

I walked out into the yard to see if I could find any stragglers lounging in the weeds, and as I walked, my once-velvety plants reached out with spines like cactus spines and grabbed at, tore at, opened my pants and skin. They thrived in new, viny configurations, and I wondered how I hadn't seen this from the porch, if they'd been like this all along.

I tried to find Odo to go on a walk with me, but she wasn't in our kitchen or our living room or upstairs, so I went without her. I wanted to see if the other plants had sprouted thorns or spines or changed the way ours had.

But none of the other plants, along the sidewalk or up the hills, looked like ours, not even the ones in town. The rest looked like the oranges had except not orange, their greens somehow too green, their leaves somehow too alert, alive.

I walked until I got to the spot where we'd been the day before, and when I stopped in front of the elementary school and saw Blind Randy and Odo standing motionless there, I knew that the end was coming. I knew he was the prophet Odo had denied, and I blamed him for the sun.

Blind Randy was not near Foodland, not on his bench or anywhere he was supposed to be. He was here, with Odo, and he was the reason why the end was coming. The end was coming because he was in the wrong place.

I looked out at the big open ocean and then back at the sidewalk and back at the school and back at him.

“Hey, Blind Randy,” I said, and he didn’t respond, and when he didn’t respond, I hesitated for a second, but then I stopped hesitating and did what I had to do to the man who had caused the end of the world, what anyone would’ve felt the responsibility to do to him.

Caught between the school building and the ocean, I hit him until he fell, until he was unconscious. Maybe if he’d responded it would have been different, and maybe I wouldn’t have hit him, and maybe he and Odo would have talked about the secret things I knew they talked about when I wasn’t around, but the way it happened, I hit him until he stained the pavement.

“Boro,” Odo said in a quiet way, and when I looked at her, I wished I’d pushed on his eyes and made him see, but then, too, when I looked at her, I knew he could already see, and I knew this was her scolding me like when I touched her hand, but she didn’t really do anything about it this time, either, didn’t swat my hands away or pick him up. She just left him there; we just left him.

I wondered if the red in the pavement and the dirt would get redder the way the plants did, like it was growing more alive as it neared its end.

We walked home to the farmhouse, and Odo being there next to me made me feel on edge, like I couldn’t breathe, and even though the plants were spiked and the cats were

gone, Dog was still on our porch chasing lizards, and Lexi and Jimb still appeared in our kitchen when we turned on the light. They were still in their right places, even if they'd been sitting in the dark. It was like no one had told them that today was the day that everything would change, like someone had forgotten to mention it. I wondered if that was our responsibility.

“The world is ending, friends,” I said, and they all grinned at me, because they still wanted to rehash and re-hypothesize why this was happening and what was happening. They wanted to live in the glory of it.

Odo wanted to talk about what I'd done to Blind Randy, but when she told them, they all somehow already knew, and I guess it wasn't even our responsibility to tell them about the world. Odo said, “Boro beat a man today,” and they all blinked at her like the child at the beach had done to me, and then they went back to their routine spaces. They were preoccupied with what we knew was coming, not with Blind Randy. If we'd made them talk about it, Lexi and Jimb would've said, who was Blind Randy, really, other than a prophet, and Odo would have shot them a look, and Dog would have said something worse, probably, but we didn't make them talk about it because they'd already moved on.

That afternoon Odo made them leave, and she touched me but not my eyes, and it was not in a way that comforted me, not in a way that took away the way she'd started to make me feel on edge, but I finally got what I was supposed to understand.

When she curled into me and her breath was on my neck, I understood the sun like I understood Odo. This heavy-panting woman who chilled and heated my skin at the same time. Hot then cold then bumps along my skin, except the sun haunted me in a way that Odo couldn't because it was so much bigger than her, even though Odo was big. Odo

was big not just in her middle but all around, and I could feel that. Except when she lay against me like this, she wasn't actually touching me. She lay behind me, leaving inches of space between us, and she almost-touched me, and it threw that electric-like thing in me even more on edge. She was big, her head, her arms, her hands, her feet, and I understood what people meant when they said big-boned, because when I could almost feel her flesh, when I could feel the inches between my flesh and her flesh, it was like I could feel the bones inside of her, pressed up against me and my back, and they were big.

When Odo-against-me ended, it was like the disappearance of the cats: the sign of the end of things.

We got in Odo's car like we did, and when I climbed in, she said, "we're going to drive into the sunset, like actually into it, like into the colors and the blur until we get to the sun. We're gonna go to the place where there is no highway, where we're just in open space." She was warning me so I wouldn't be surprised like I always was, like I was with the orange groves, because when we drove into it, she said, it would be hot and fiery and blurred out, and she needed me to be prepared, the way I'd prepared myself when I read all those *Scientific Americans*.

I wondered for a second if I was supposed to be the voice of reason here, but when I thought about the sun and how much closer it seemed to us now, I decided against it, I decided that she was right the way she usually was about the people she met, even when I didn't believe her at first. And when she lied to me, like she did about Blind Randy, she always had her reasons. It would just take me a minute to see.

We were gonna get close enough to touch it, she said, and O was okay with that, and I wondered if Blind Randy had told her to do this, if maybe the end wouldn't be bad

like I was scared it would be, maybe it would be glowy and fire-like in a way that was beautiful, and so I said yes to her like I always did, and we drove off into the sunset and waited for the sun to reach out with its spines and rays and grab at our hair and our clothes and our skin.

Crazy Because of the Sea

Marika lived a thousand lives, and although her first life was the shortest, we were always most interested in the first. It was this first life that we could compare to all the other lives.

We compared because we never got to fight with her about the way she saw the world. We were part of the lives she never lived—all the boys who never drank on sidewalks or porches or in nightclubs with her. We never bumped into her accidentally on trains or got to meet in any of the thousand cliché ways she knew by heart, when she only dreamed of living a thousand lives and didn't understand that she was already living them.

When, in her second life, she married the Jewish boy she met on the subway instead of the first boy from the Quik Stop, we knew that this boy would give her the home she actually wanted, with the white couch and the tropical plants in front of every window. We could see in the way that he hesitated from holding her hand that he didn't want to trap her on couches or in kitchens or in beds. He was different from the Quik Stop boy, who she had loved but shouldn't have, who had trapped her in these ways. When we saw this second life play out, we saw the way that the Jewish boy trembled when he stroked her knee, and we nodded to each other. He didn't trap her like that. We were right, the way we sometimes were. We'd seen this one coming. We knew this boy because we were him in some way.

Or we wanted to be him at least.

The Jewish boy was the one who first gave her the dancing figurine, on their one-year anniversary, before the knees and the babies and the house with the couch and plants. When he took her to the ballet in DC, on their second date, she'd laughed, "In my last life, I wanted to be a ballerina," and he'd bought her the figurine then, eleven months before they made it to a year. He kept it in his closet until he had a real reason to give her a present, and the ballerina waited in the dark. "For your next life," he said when he took the figurine out from her dusty corner.

The ballerina smelled like damp and dark, and whenever Marika thought of the smell of closets, she thought of the way the Jewish boy had loved her even from the start.

When she was little, her parents had signed her up for dance lessons. "Because it's what every little girl wants," they'd said, and until the Jewish boy, Marika had left all of it in her childhood.

But the way Marika said "in my last life" to mean a simple turn of phrase wasn't characteristic of her, because, in this moment, she said it the way that people normally did. And Marika didn't say things the way the rest of us did.

People like us said "a thousand" the same way we said "I love you to the moon" or "I love you to the ends of the earth." But when Marika said "a thousand," she'd say, "I wish I could live a thousand lives," and she'd mean every word, because she could never take things less than literally.

She refused to understand hyperboles. She didn't want to live in a world where people only loved each other half-heartedly, where they said things they didn't mean. And so even though she could never know she didn't need to wish for more lives, when she dreamt of them, she came up with too many to settle on in one afternoon or in a

handful of afternoons. She came up with enough to fill all of her spare moments. She dreamed of breakfasts in diners and first dates at drive-ins. But what she wanted more than to be at the diner was to know the man sitting at that counter. Sitting next to him, she'd be able to see who he was in the type of bagel he ordered, the sea salt granules sticking to and falling from his fingers, and she would love the bad parts of him the same as the good. She wanted to see the bad and good in every interaction. See everyone. In the other lives she dreamt of, she'd be able to sidle up to strangers on the street and rest her head on their shoulders. Nuzzle herself into the crook of their arms. She wanted to know all of them so well that they wouldn't question her body against theirs.

In most of her lives, she wanted to fall in love.

*

In Marika's actual third life, she fell for the boy with the van, the rust-colored clunker she'd spotted in the Whole Foods parking lot even before she saw him. She bonded with him in the checkout line over a shared love of Galas, and he took her back to the parking lot. In this third life, she died in that van, in the way that girls sometimes die in vans.

In the next, in her fourth, she fell in love there.

Mostly, when she dreamed about these other lives, she wanted to fall in love, but sometimes, also, she wanted to die more glamorous deaths than the ones she'd be given, the way we all did when we were little. She wanted thousand car pile-ups and deep-sea disasters. She wanted crowds at her funeral, wanted her loved ones to weep: to show how much they loved her. And her instincts were right to want disaster—because it was what suited her best, in the reality of all of her lives.

*

In her first life, her earliest memory was of clear water and of falling away from and into it. Of not being sure if the two were the same or separate. For months after Marika almost drowned in the neighborhood pool, she dreamed of becoming a mermaid. Her scales would glint in the sun's reflections from the surface, and she'd stay under the same way she did when she was drowning. She would fall heavy and slow and inhale so that her insides felt sharp and wet, but as a mermaid, this feeling would be the feeling that felt good. The water in her lungs would course through her ears like it was coursing through her veins: all within her, where it was supposed to be.

*

In Marika's ninth life, she died earlier than in all the other lives. Except for her first, the one we couldn't ever shake off. This ninth life was the one where she finally tried to escape from the Quik Stop boy. She could see how the pattern would play out if she stayed—the way it had actually played out in her first life. She saw how short her life would be with this boy, and so she ran from it. But she couldn't escape him in a real way in this life. In this ninth iteration, she bought a flight to anywhere else, hoping for one of her dream lives. She searched out remote parts of Polynesia, and she spent months diving without tanks or equipment, eyes wide open, looking for pearls. The natives warned her that she would get dizzy and sick, that people died from this. "Taravana," they muttered as she strapped on her flippers, and she did not know what this meant. They explained. "The bends—you get sick," they said. She didn't know that taravana meant something different, and we wanted to whisper it to her: their secrets that we knew. We'd tell her the

real meaning, “crazy because of the sea,” but we weren’t sure if she’d understand the words, coming from our mouths.

When Marika found the pearls, she did not pluck them, but she still had to keep visiting them. She couldn’t stop. The day that she died in this life, she barely surfaced between free dives. “They look just like porcelain,” she said when she surfaced. The natives did not understand.

They only understood her paralysis—how it foreshadowed that death was to come in the hours after.

They took off her flippers before she died, because they understood that the end would be soon. In this ninth life, she died with her toes pointed toward the sea.

*

In this ninth life, once she died, the Quik Stop boy, across all the oceans, donated her things to Second Chances. He knew what flying across the ocean had meant, how it had been a running away from him, and if he could have left all the things in the house on the curb, he would have. But “charity” meant he could throw her away without anyone complaining. He could donate her belongings to other grubby hands. No one to cherish these things for having been hers.

The dancing figurine that Marika had picked up from this same type of consignment store returned to its home among plastic shelves, and the Quik Stop boy felt safe in the fact that she was forgotten. But Marika at least was the girl who had wondered about whose hands had touched the ballerina before hers, and we knew there had to be others like her.

But even if no one else remembered, we at least would.

*

At some points, while she was living the thousand lives and dreaming about living the thousand lives and not realizing that both were actually taking place, she confused herself, and we found her murmuring to the Quik Stop boy or the Jewish boy, in one life or another, “did I dream that?”

We watched the Jewish boy when she asked this, and we smiled, hearts beaming with pride. In most lives that she lived with him, the Jewish boy walked to the kitchen and grabbed the ballerina from the top shelf of their curio cabinet. The doll was real; she’d never dreamt it. He mumbled something sweet and cheesy. Marika was the only dream, he said.

And the Quik Stop boy only answered if he wasn’t caught up in picking scabs from his legs. In most lives, he mumbled the same thing: “musta been another dream, yeah” or something of the like.

*

In Marika’s ninth life, after Polynesia and the pearls, the pianist from the church took the afternoon shifts at Second Chances, and day after day, she stared at the ballerina figurine on its plastic shelf. She priced it high, higher than anything else in the store, and stuck a blue tag on it on which she’d Sharpied the number 40. The cashier boys never looked at the tags, and when Rob at the register let the ballerina go for a couple of dollars, the pianist went home and sat and petted her cat until the fur flew so thick that she didn’t have to see what was and wasn’t in front of her.

*

In the way Marika meant things in all of her lives, when she said “I love you to my very core,” the Quik Stop boy could have tracked the words inside her skin to her blood vessels to the heart of her and felt it. And he knew the way she loved him, even if he was a shithead. We knew he knew this because we were him, in some way. Or we wanted to be him, at least, even if we hated ourselves for that.

But the Quik Stop boy saw the truth of Marika in the way that she tracked flight prices to Hawaii and Fiji but in reality spent her thousand nights setting alarms for 6 a.m. so that she could kiss him awake. The Quik Stop boy didn't think of a thousand in the literal way. He didn't understand that a thousand nights meant 2.74 years, or that 2.74 years wasn't right, was far too short. But in the way that he made her life short, maybe a thousand nights was closer to being right.

He saw the way she loved him through the way she woke him up. The way she packed his lunch. She would've peeled his apples, too, if she hadn't known that they would turn brown, sitting in that paper bag all day.

She called the Quik Stop boy her tin man and crooned, “If you only had a heart” in a saccharine voice, and it would've taken him a thousand nights, by our definition, to understand that the things she said so sweetly weren't always sweet. She wasn't always joking. Sometimes, she was bitter. Sometimes, in the core of her that loved him, she was unhappy.

But in the way of fairytales, she loved him forever, and in the way of Marika, forever never ended. According to the Quik Stop boy, in the way of the world that lied and exaggerated, she loved him a thousand nights, but the Quik Stop boy said “a thousand” like the rest of us did because the Quik Stop boy only ever sold her short,

whether he meant to or not. Did he mean to? We usually thought so. He didn't see, like we did, the way she wanted to peel those apples for him. He glimpsed the thousand lives that she wanted to live, but he didn't get the way that he kept her from them, in that first life. He didn't think about what checking her car mileage and reading her texts actually did to her. He just did these things.

In the way of the world that was real, Marika lived out this first lifetime of nights, but she didn't lose the part of her that meant what she said when she declared herself. And so she loved the Quik Stop boy through all of her lives. She loved all of the boys through all of her lives. Even the ones, like us, who she never met.

In all of Marika's lives, she ate at kitchen tables and in hostels, in parks and in vans. She ate at diners for lunch and dinner, but not once did she eat at a diner for breakfast. We found this odd—like it was fate's way of denying her something. We'd all had our fair share of Rise-N-Shine breakfasts, and maybe that's why we'd never gotten to meet her. She would miss the man with the salt bagel forever, and, as one of us, he—we—would miss her back. But we would watch all the same.

*

In the reality of her first life, when the Quik Stop boy heated up chicken noodle soup from the can, she inhaled the broth too hot and fast, and she spat clear liquid over their cigarette-stained kitchen table. When she got the hiccups, the Quik Stop boy said, "That's your body forgetting that you're not a fish anymore."

When she laughed, he frowned. "It was a reflex to clean the gills, back a million lives ago. When you were a tadpole, not you."

Marika furrowed her brow, and we wished we could whisper the truth in her ear. We wanted to keep her from believing his lies. Because this life was Marika's start. If she had remnants of gills here, they were hers and only hers.

In this deep-sea disaster, Marika breathed in the liquid.

*

In her 50th life, a man on the street gave Marika a briefcase that clanked when she walked. She didn't ask him why he gave it to her because she didn't care what was inside. She just wanted to touch that cool leather. She lived in alleyways, clutching the briefcase to her, because the smell of the damp and the dark comforted her more than the smells of anything else.

*

In the world after Marika's ninth life, after her death, the fireman took the figurine home for his son. He wanted to convince his son to stop dressing in black, and he thought the delicate porcelain, sitting on his nightstand, might soften his days or his nights, might make him reconsider the types of things that he valued. But the fireman didn't really know what to do with his son, and the figurine landed in the back of the nightstand's one drawer, where the two forgot about it. We watched the fireman and his son in the same way that we watched Marika: the way that we couldn't not. We could see how cold that porcelain felt, but seeing wasn't any type of way to feel something, so we watched the boy as he held the cold figurine in his hand, and we wished that he could appreciate it and the way it carried a piece of her. We wished he'd known the closet that it had been in and the hands that had held it in all the other lives.

In the world after Marika's ninth life, the fireman's son threw the nightstand on the curb after he stained the paint job with a can of soda. But in the drawers, the boy found the figurine, and wanting to give the ballerina back to his father in some way that wouldn't offend him, he buried her in one of his dad's old briefcases.

*

At a certain point, we lost track of counting Marika's lives.

Marika's nth life paralleled her first until age 13, when she hit puberty and stared at herself in the mirror. Where she would have felt nothing in that first life, she felt something in this one: something close to pride. In this life, she fell in love with herself, and she saw this love of her body reflected in the eyes of the men surrounding her. In this life, the men made her a model, and she came back to her mirror, night after night, and gazed at her reflection. She placed her palm on her mirror skin, and, hand to her waist, she closed her eyes.

*

In another of Marika's lives, her Jewish boy from life two gripped her kneecap hard, and he threw her against walls in ways reminiscent of her first life, even though he was never in that one. He smashed her dancing figurine, the one she'd bought at the consignment shop and hid in their daughter's toy chest, and the shards fell and buried themselves in the rubber toys.

*

In another of Marika's lives, her Jewish boy came to her as an actual angel, with wings, and she cried when she saw him, not because she was in awe or because she didn't believe he was real, but because he was dead before she got the chance to love him.

*

The fireman found the figurine in the briefcase, as he eventually always had to, long after his son left the house to live above the Rise-N-Shine. In the world of our daydreams, Marika would reclaim her dancer on the fireman's walk to the diner. Instead of climbing the stairs and leaving the briefcase at his son's apartment door, the fireman would stop halfway and hand the bag to a pretty woman—one who looked like a model. One who looked like she would love the ballerina the same way he had. In all the worlds where Marika died, like in this one, we dreamt she was alive, but in this world, when we were forced to face what actually happened, we pretended that it hadn't. We didn't want to know why the fireman gave his son back the figurine. We didn't want to know what happened after he left the son's apartment. Which shore the father went to and how deep he went into the sea. And so we kept them both alive in our heads. In our version of Marika's ninth life, the story ended with the doll and that rich leather in the hands of the one girl we would always cling to.

*

We hated her tragedies, but we knew them by heart. We watched the way the Quik Stop boy never gave her car crashes, and we knew he was wrong in this. He gave her the bad dreams she never wanted, but he couldn't even give her the worst of what she did.

*

In another of Marika's lives, in the deep-sea disaster, she visited the Bermuda Triangle and found her way out. The fates, as they so often did, could only deny her desire for tragedy.

*

But still, we have to get back to thinking about that first life, because this life is the one we're always waiting to find out about. Will she open the suitcase? What will she find there? Is it what she's been expecting? Will it appear in the life that it's supposed to? We have to ask this, even though we're scared of the answer: will Marika care as much as we do?

We knew the things Marika cared about. In all of Marika's thousand lives, she wanted to be a Woman of Mystery. She wanted to be someone who no one understood. And in our dreams, when we thought about bumping into her on trains or in diners, we knew that, try as hard as we could, we would never be able to know her. We would undress her, expecting to see her underneath, and when we did, we'd think that we could. "Aha!" we'd say, and we'd explain her to her. We'd say, "That's so like you," but we would always be wrong. She'd become tired of it. "Stop trying to define me," she'd cry to all of us boys. "I beg you." We'd call her different names, trying to make her ours—Marie, Maria, Ika, Baby Doll, Love, Girl—but we'd know that none of those names were hers. Know we could never know her like that.

*

Somewhere along the way, we found a way to keep track again. Maybe after we realized where we'd gone wrong. When we came to terms with the way we'd only ever be able to guess at these lives.

In her 997th life, Marika was a mermaid, and she breathed in water like we breathed in air, and like all good sirens, she caused deep-sea disasters and shipwrecks. When the sailors saw her, all they could hear were her hiccups as she dipped her head

under. “What’s the best way to get rid of those?” they asked each other. “You hold your breath, right?”

When the men held their breath with her in sympathy, their deep-sea disaster became one of existential despair, and they clung to each other. They grasped each other’s arms and shoulders and necks, and we knew their thoughts because we were the men, in some way. We wanted to be them, at least. In that long breath, they held the thought that one day, they’d be old. Their grandchildren would never hear the men’s stories about the girls who they loved, because the stories would never have the chance to happen. The sailors would only ever carry the girls on their arms in ink.

*

In Marika’s 998th life, Marika as an infant opened the briefcase and found the dancing figurine, but she didn’t recognize the ballerina—not the way that we did. We wanted her to touch it with reverence, and she did, because even as an infant, she was always Marika, but she didn’t touch it with a reverence that meant she understood.

We wished we could whisper this to all the Marikas that had lost the doll:

“There is hope.”

We wished we could whisper this to baby Marika, in this life:

“This is significant.”

But baby Marika cried at the cold in her hands, and we wouldn’t ever get close enough to show her why the cold was the feeling that felt right.

*

In her 999th life, Marika was the dancer. Her skin was fragile and pale, and if we could have held her in our hands, we'd have brought her to our faces. Can you smell porcelain? We would inhale her as best we could.

In this 999th life, Marika was eternally frozen. Her arms reached out to the ends of every room and past their ends. Her toes in pli  blurred together and into her plastic base. The base ran jagged at the bottom, where she'd broken off from what must have been a jewelry box. She never spun, this way. Never moved. She fit in cabinets and purses and closets and palms. She was adored. No one tried to understand her, even though she wanted someone to—because she always wanted that, even when she didn't. In this life, she was elegant.

*

We're older now, without her; we've grown wiser in the time we've spent waiting. We've fallen into the in-between spaces in our own worlds, in this space and time without Marika. We orient ourselves around her and the absence of her, because we can feel the thousand lives that we're all missing: the thousand Marikas that we all should have met.

In her thousandth life, we know this now, Marika was alone. She was a girl floating in space, swinging between stars. She filled the spaces between our words and our changes in tone—inhabited the pink noise that spread amongst our voices. She became music like tides—not tying them together in sound but in the way the heights always changed. She never settled anywhere, instead always bouncing in-between. She wouldn't want us to name this place, because it was always and will always be hers. But

this is the place she really wanted to be: the place where the thousand lives meet and she could live all of them at once.

Waco

When Sarah cut her fingernails on Saturday, sitting on her porch, toes dangling over the edge, she forgot that Tuesday. The cutting made her lose parts of her days. Parts of her week. There was milk in her fridge from the Tuesday shopping run. There were apples and pears and fresh curry powder on her counters. It was the curry powder that was the trigger. The spice smell caught in her throat, burned, and she grasped the absence of Tuesday. She didn't know if she'd gone to Costco or Bi-Lo, couldn't remember seeing the purple or red tulips at the front of the store, couldn't remember the glaring fluorescent lights or tile floors or the cashier's muddy, cakey makeup.

When she cut her hair, she didn't always know what she'd lost. The last few inches held months before, so she could never pinpoint who or what or when. There weren't always triggers. When she cut her hair, she would spread paper towels over the bathroom sink to keep the remnants from staying with her. Some of the hair always escaped to the floor, but it was never enough that she had to sweep. For weeks after, though, she'd find tiny hairs between her toes, buried in her socks.

In August, after Matt, her weight shifted to her stomach, stuck to her middle and then her thighs. When she gained the pounds, she knew he was slowly becoming a part of her. His words clung to her skin; his lips on hers added depth and dimples. Her fingernails grew. Her hair grew. She didn't cut either for two months, too long, because she didn't want to lose the added bits. She'd started gaining weight the day they met.

*

When Sarah's dad broke his leg, he filed for divorce. Sarah had been six. Her mom would cry and cry, and her dad would scream that it wasn't his fault. Her mom told Sarah that the break had broken his brain, that he'd lost the good memories with the shards of bone. Sarah thought her mom was just mad, but when their neighbor had her toes amputated because of diabetes, the neighbor stopped recognizing Sarah. When Sarah lost her baby teeth, she forgot what it was like to fall asleep in the cradle. Her mom spent the year after Sarah's dad left shaving her head, her legs, her arms. She tried the Atkins diet, Jenny Craig, Nutrisystem, Weigh Watchers. She lost pounds and pounds, trying to lose the memories of Sarah's dad. Sarah always thought, back then, how cool being a snake must be. She could just shed all of her skin with one shake, one flick of a tail, and she'd lose the memory of an entire person, an entire year. When her mom shaved her legs back then, Sarah shaved hers too, even though she barely had hair. She always nicked herself, and with both the blood and hair, she'd lose a little more of her dad. Sarah's mom didn't encourage her to shave her hairless legs, but she didn't teach her better either: didn't show her how to go against the grain or bend her kneecaps. She didn't stop the nicks or cuts or blood from oozing out in little bits.

*

Sarah couldn't look anywhere except for the kitchen table, at the tattoo gun lying on top of the yellow checkered placemat, the contrast stark between them but the two somehow both at home in Kat's world. Kat's hands in Sarah's table-locked vision left and reappeared with the supplies: alcohol swabs, thread, ink. Sarah couldn't see past them, and it was like, knowing what was to come, she'd already lost what surrounded them.

In that dim kitchen, Sarah's thighs stuck to her vinyl chair, squeaking with sweat whenever she shifted. She hadn't realized that Kat would shave her arm beforehand, and she wondered what she might lose with the little hairs that dotted her bicep, if what she might gain from the tattoo would be worth it. When Kat turned away to prepare the alcohol swabs, Sarah smoothed her fingers down from her shoulder to her elbow. She hadn't shaved any part of her body since she was seven, and she missed the silky smooth, buttery feeling. Kat turned back, pressing a cold, wet swab against Sarah's arm. The cold cricked her neck, and the alcohol ran down in rivets, collecting in her elbow. She stared down, running her toes over the prickly blonde tufts of arm hair on the tile.

Kat knelt on the stool, steadying her arm on the kitchen table and tracing. Sarah stilled herself.

Her mom had told her, "it feels like a cat scratch on a sunburn, but it doesn't go away. It's this scratch that keeps going, traveling. It hurts worse on different parts. You'll see."

The tattoo gun looked more like a pen than a needle, and the first minutes made her head feel both light and heavy, like it was weightless to move but would tip too easily if she swayed too far to the side. The pressure traveled, sharp but dull, insistent and stinging, somehow disconnected from Kat and the humming pen in her hand.

Sarah read the wedding invitation on the fridge, the cable bill, the shopping list and note from Kat's boss. She stared at the postcard from Kat's cousin, repeating Greetings from Waco over and over, memorizing the buildings and rivers in the letters. The cereal box on the table had 8 grams of sugar, 3 grams of protein, 1.5 grams of fat, 80 milligrams of potassium. The serving size was $\frac{3}{4}$ of a cup. There were no catchy slogans,

just facts about heart health and whole grains. The expiration date was still a week away, and staring at it for so long, trying to hold onto some part of the day, it imprinted into her.

Kat dabbed at Sarah's arm with gauze, spotting the mesh with red. Sarah stared at Waco. She hoped the blood on the gauze would be small. The memory of making lunch yesterday. Maybe cleaning the bathroom or mopping the floors.

She watched an ant crawl along the table edge, and the knocking of branches against the kitchen window interrupted the hum of the needle. The kitchen walls were close, cream-colored. The single bulb overhead and the weak light from the window made the color dingy, but the lamp Kat had pulled over to the table enveloped them in a circle of bright. Out of the corner of her eye, Sarah could see Kat's hair gleam.

Kat held up the hand mirror, covering the chip in the bottom corner with her thumb.

June 3rd traveled down from Sarah's shoulder. The ink ran in vertical lines. March 4th. Alice. Matt. June 3rd was the first of them, the deep black soaking into her pores. It looked gothic, each edge of it pointed, almost medieval. March was indigo, Alice red, Matt a color too close to her skin tone. Matt was like scar tissue, raised and faint. These last didn't have serifs or curls. They blocked together, backward in the glass.

Blood oozed out of the c and 3, but she knew at least that they would help her remember whatever she lost from the ooze.

*

The week after the tattoo, Sarah and Matt went to Black's Beach, and when they sunbathed, the beach spread wide around them. The shore was mostly vacant. Blurry figures dotted the shore.

Under that sun, hotter than at home, Sarah flapped the edge of her towel over, trying to wrap the towel around herself while still keeping it under her, a layer between her skin and the sand. The towel was heavy and thick, one of the soft ones from their linen closet, but it was slightly damp, sweat buried in the thick fuzz.

She uncovered herself, winced at the sun. She licked her lips, tasting sticky grit and sunscreen.

Matt grinned at her. "Let's go swim." He scrambled to his feet and reached down for her, his chest hair plastered to him in swirling patterns.

When he reached for her, she felt her hair grow a centimeter. His face blurred in the sunlight, soft and shiny.

She pulled her towel over her chest and squinted up at him, wrinkling her nose. "You go."

He wrinkled his nose back at her, dropped his sunglasses in the sand.

Sarah's little cousins always ran toward the ocean with complete abandon, arms flailing, hair wild. Matt reminded her of them. He ran like a toddler: big steps toward the blue, his distended stomach jiggling.

She watched him watch the horizon. He sat at the edge, the water creeping up behind him, slow with the tide. He sat until the water stilled around him, and he stood up, covered in sand mud, clumps stuck to his thighs and calves. He picked at the crotch of his shorts, patted off his legs, walked steadily back to her.

She closed her eyes and breathed out, resisting the urge to chastise him for picking at his crotch. She could almost feel her hair growing in tiny bits, capturing the day.

Matt collapsed beside her, sending up a spray of sand.

“You doing ok?” His eyebrows furrowed, and he nodded at the red, puffy names and dates on her arm.

She glanced down at the tattoo. “Yeah, I’m fine. I guess there’s sand in it though.” She frowned, pushed herself up with shaky arms.

He touched her forearm. He smiled.

Sarah napped, and when she opened her eyes to his hand on her arm again, she opened her eyes to Matt cradling a plush dolphin. He’d bought it to make her feel better, the way he always brought her gifts when he was in the right place at the right time: flowers from his walk home, impulse buys of root beer from the grocery store, and that one time a hamster from the Petco down the road. The one he’d cried about it when she’d made him return it.

She smiled at him and petted the dolphin’s velvety fur, embedding sand into it.

After, she treaded slow toward the ocean, head down, scared she’d step on something sharp and forget.

She got in steadily, inch by inch, the cold smothering her with each mechanical step forward. She focused on each section of skin as it touched the water, trying to visualize its adjustment, trying to calm her nerves.

Her arm stung with the salty splash.

She got in up to her bellybutton, the tide lapping in and out, the cold making waves along her stomach, and even though she knew she shouldn’t, she ducked her head under—her body tensed and shocked from the sudden cool.

*

After the beach, Sara's arm had swollen and changed. It had started smelling like it was part of an animal instead of a part of her, and Sara had avoided seeing her mom since they'd been back. Scared she would make her get it checked.

Home from the beach, Sara woke to the smell of three day-old roast beef.

Sara rolled over, curled into Matt. She wrapped her arm around his stomach. His belly was thick, not flabby. Her hand couldn't compress it. Her arm lay flat on top. She imagined his organs inside growing, stretching the skin. When Sara was little, she would sit on her dad's lap and poke his belly, wanting it to press in. He'd had this kind too, the fat like muscle. Her mom had told her that his stomach was like that because he needed his body like armor, to protect them. Sara had wondered if the armor had dissipated when he'd left.

Her arm throbbed when she moved it, and it oozed, draped over Matt's chest, leaking fluids that congealed into place. She stared at Matt's curls, at the spot in his beard where the hair grew in a spiral. She wanted to trace it with her fingers.

He was motionless in his sleep.

A wave of the rotten meat smell settled, warm, over them. It nestled into their mouths and nostrils, thickening the air.

Sara blew on his eyelids until they fluttered, until his grip on her waist tightened and he rolled onto his side toward her. He groaned, gravelly and quiet.

"Want me to make eggs?"

He frowned, his eyes closed. "M not hungry. Not with the smell, baby."

She looked down at her arm, drawing her shoulder up to her cheek. "Yeah."

"You need to call your mom about it."

She pushed her head against his shoulder, nestling into the sweaty curve of his chest. “I know. I just keep forgetting.”

Light seeped in from the curtain edges, filling the floor with lines and triangles of white.

Matt’s eyes squinted open. “I wish there were more hours in a day. Like, 12 for sleeping and 12 for everything else.”

She looked at his spiral of hair and half-laughed. “I’m making eggs.”

She left him for the hall, glancing back as he pulled the sheets to his chin.

In the kitchen, Sara turned on the stove, sliding the butter from side to side in the pan, watching it streak and sizzle. She poured milk into the bowl and beat the eggs to a pale, creamy yellow. The whisk scraped against the glass side, and she could feel the vibration in her teeth.

She put away the milk, glancing at the microwavable bacon, at the thick slices of country ham. The rotten meat smell coated her tongue and throat.

She slid the eggs into the pan and grabbed the curry powder off the spice rack. She held it above the eggs, counting to three as the spice streamed through the holes and settled in a cloud above her pan. She let the eggs solidify, tilting the pan to let the last of the slime warm and harden.

She sifted through the plates until she found the seashell one, and she slid the eggs onto it.

The hall was sticky and gritty on her bare feet.

She wiped the dirt off on the bedroom carpet, rubbing her feet against her calves in the doorway.

Sara left the light off, burying her feet in the shag on the way to the bed. Matt was on his back again, and she balanced the plate on his stomach.

He jerked slightly in surprise and reached down, opening his eyes.

She smiled.

She sat next to his stomach. The eggs tasted like spice; the curry powder moistened their eyes and noses, drying their throats. Each bite, through their dry mouths, tasted faintly like the smell of rotten meat.

They licked their fingers to soak up the last pinches of curry powder on the plate.

Matt squinted at her and grinned. “I like my women like I like my eggs.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“You know. Fluffy.”

She snorted and grabbed the plate, treading back down the hall.

She could feel her fingernails growing as she filled the sink with water.

*

When Sara finally visited her mom, she didn't go because Matt had convinced her. She went because she knew she had to face her arm and the way that it had started to rot away from her. When she visited, they gardened. They spent their afternoon in the sun the same way Sara was driven to do at the beach.

Alice picked a basil leaf and brought it to her nose, inhaling. “Do you remember which ones you can eat?”

“Of course.” Sara dug her fingers into the dirt, pressing down and then drawing back, smoothing the top layer of soil. She liked the way it felt under her palms, cool and damp.

The rich, earthy smell of the garden mixed with decaying flesh. The breezes relieved them of it briefly.

Alice would dig, transplant a pansy from its container to the hole, and glance at Sara as she dug. The names on Sara's arm shifted in and out of view as her sleeve slid on her shoulder.

"I remember mint." She picked a sprig of green. "And chives." She folded the leaf, cracking it and smiling. "And coriander. I've started on my own patch of parsley at home."

Alice smiled. "You were so little when I taught you those; I'm surprised you actually remember." She stroked the pansy petals, rubbing them between her forefinger and her thumb. The velvet left a soft, wet residue on her fingertips.

Alice hesitated, wiping her fingers on her jeans, leaving dark, wet streaks. "How are things at home? Are you doing okay?" She watched as the ends, "ce" and "tt," moved into her line of vision.

"Yeah. I'm good. Matt's good." Sara loosened the square roots of the pansy she grabbed from the container, scraping away the dirt that stuck to the container's insides.

"Well, you look good, hon. You look like you gained some weight, I think." The meat smell thickening the air, Alice lifted the basil to her nose again, pressing it to her nostrils and inhaling it up into them, shutting her senses out to everything else.

Sara wanted to shove more basil into Alice's hands or under her nose, keep her complacent, from asking anything. But she also wanted shove her arm into that space. Call out to her mom in ways she never could when she was little, when she only followed.

Sara crushed the mint leaf in her pocket.

*

When Sara had first started gaining more weight than normal, she'd gained fear, too: fear that she'd lose what made her gain the weight. Fear that he'd lose parts of himself and forget. She'd forbidden Matt from the obvious dangerous stuff: four wheeling, football with the guys, fights, driving. He hadn't argued much. He understood that she wanted to protect him.

On the weekends, Sara and Matt would order takeout from El Mexicano and watch Westerns in bed. Matt didn't like *Blazing Saddles* or *The Magnificent Seven* or *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, but he'd watch *Wild Wild West* over and over again, mouthing each line before Will or Kevin did.

Sara liked staying in better than going to Olive Garden or Ruby Tuesday, liked his big arms around her in their bed or on their couch. They'd spill queso on their floral bedspread. She'd find orange rice ingrained in the shaggy purple carpet. She'd vacuum the carpet the next week, but their feet would have mashed the grains into it, making them become a solid part of the shag. The purple slowly faded to a dingy grey, and the carpet thickened underfoot, crunching more with each night in.

A month in, she'd bought him kneepads and leg guards. She'd told him they'd help with his back problems. She'd smiled and called him her knight in foam armor.

He wore the pads around the house and whenever he went out. Sara's waist thickened.

*

Sara was the one who had decided to visit the doctor, but it was really Alice that had decided it: the way her silence taught Sara. The way the silence made Sara shave her legs when she was little. The way it changed her now.

The air conditioning was turned high in the waiting room, but Sara's arm had already been cold when she'd walked in. It had numbed in the past week. She'd thought that was a good sign, but Matt and Alice and March 4th had turned dark. The hair hadn't grown back; the skin had just turned blue then black then flaky. Sara flipped through the pictures in *Better Homes and Gardens*, past the fresh and healthy pasta recipe, past the article on reorganizing office space and the 100 ideas for tag-sale finds. She wanted to make wreaths and cakes, but she envisioned pointy twigs and hot ovens. She wasn't sure if burns would erase him. She knew cuts could.

The nurse called her in, weighed her, smiled, and Matt stayed in the waiting room.

The tissue paper on the bed crinkled every time she shifted. She leaned against the wall with her wrong arm and sucked in sharp. The skin crackled with the pressure.

The doctor's teeth were almost white; he opened his mouth wide with every word.

“Gangrene.”

Kat's cable bill had been \$42.36. Mike and Anna's wedding would be on December 2nd.

“Since it's the result of a tattoo, it was most likely caused by a bacterial infection, so it may spread throughout the body. That would most likely lead to sepsis.” The doctor walked over to the blinds, twirling the rod to open them.

Sara recited the grams of sugar in Cinnamon Life.

“There is no recovering the skin. We need to remove it to prevent the spread. Sara, you know sepsis can be fatal. If we don’t treat it, you could only have a year or two left. Or less – sepsis can act quickly if it sets in.”

Inside the W there was a lake, a building that looked like an armada, a bridge.

Bars of light patterned Sara’s legs.

The top building in the A looked like a hotel. The bottom buildings had seemed to be skyscrapers, towering over the desert landscape.

“We can create an artificial limb if you’re concerned about looks.”

There was a riverboat in the C.

Sara watched the doctor’s teeth. She grabbed her purse, clutching the soft, pebbly leather close to her.

She couldn’t remember what was in the O, but she could guess. Everything in Texas looked the same.

*

In the car, still in the doctor’s office parking lot, they sat. They oriented themselves.

His leg pads lifted him higher in the seat.

She buckled her seatbelt. “They said they couldn’t treat it.”

“What does that mean?”

She turned the key in the ignition, and the jeep hummed. “I don’t know. I mean, it might spread, but it’s probably not a big deal. I’m just like a giant chameleon. I’m gonna change colors.”

“Oh.” Matt turned on the radio, punched the third preset station. “I dunno, baby. You’re not a chameleon though.” He frowned. “I guess we can wait. See what your mom says about it.”

Sara let four cars pass her. She kept the windows closed, the child lock on.

When they got home, she told him she’d read a study about how socks were bad for your posture, your back, and she opened his top drawer and took out all of his socks. On the drive back, though, she’d really just imagined him slipping on the tile in their kitchen. She couldn’t have him forget in the time she had left.

She took the garbage bag of socks to the curb, double knotting it.

Matt grabbed the house keys and kissed her cheek. “Gonna stop by the Exxon for a soda.”

Sara hesitated, watching his thick frame, bulked up with leg pads, waddle down her driveway.

She grabbed her spade and trowel.

The sun was too bright on the back porch. She hesitated at the door, blinking, readjusting. The yard was wild except for her patch by the stairs. She’d lined her garden with bricks she’d found strewn in the grass. She liked how the bricks made it look orderly, safe.

She nestled into the tall grass, burying her nose in the parsley. The parsley was the closest thing to the smell of cut grass they’d had for a long time. She leaned forward, grasping a sprig between her teeth and cutting it between them, pulling back. She chewed slowly, crunching the crisp, dry greens.

She watered them; she felt her hair grow and her arm flake.

She sat on the back porch, eyes closed against the sun, arms splayed out on the chair sides. She felt her body grow warm.

Sweat collected at the nape of her neck and at the backs of her knees.

She spied Matt coming up to the front of the house, and she hoisted herself up. She leaned against the back door to close it. The kitchen was dimmer than she'd expected.

Matt yelled "baby" from the front door as she washed her hands. She scrubbed the dirt from under her nails, the green from her palms. He talked loudly, walking through the house and peeking his head into each room. "I have a surprise. Baby. Close your eyes."

Sara turned toward the kitchen doorway, eyes open. Matt stood on the threshold, Styrofoam box in his arms.

He grinned the way he always did when he brought her gifts. He set the box down, kneeling next to it.

"I felt bad about not trusting you. But they didn't have any chameleons at Petco."

Matt opened the front flap, and the snake eased its head out, almost hesitant. Its scales were smooth, wet-looking. It was sleek; she imagined that's what snakes looked like when they'd just molted. She dried her hands on the kitchen towel. The snake slid out, slithered toward her on the gritty tile floor, and the dirt stuck to it as it came.

Barracuda

Kate surfaced, hair clinging to her shoulders and arcing around her neck in swirls and loops that would itch her skin as they dried.

She watched the teens in the deep end, her sister Jill among them. They yelled and sent up sprays of water. Jill didn't look her way, and Kate didn't approach them.

Drops fell and merged. She imagined each one in the bigger pool pressing close into her legs, her arms, her hair. The water pushed each strand away from her skin. The droplets shoved against each other and shoved her against herself. They smothered her skin, suffocated her pores. She felt herself shrinking and wrinkling with the closeness.

Her mother had said, "Don't worry, baby. The pressure will keep it inside of you."

Kate held onto the side. Her legs grated against the concrete wall as she pulled herself up.

Her skin stretched tight as she dried. The water traveled down her arms and legs. She wrapped her towel around herself twice and folded it under her armpits, clenching them tight against the wet. The chlorine smell drifted out from under the towel, a layer of scent above the sweat.

Her mom had said this, too: "If you stay out long enough without a tampon, you'll spot through your suit."

She trailed her feet across the concrete, drawing wet pictures with her toes, frowning at the hot, gritty grey that burned and scratched against the soles of her feet.

She stood, caught in her tracings. She shifted her legs backward and forward slightly, keeping her thighs close together. Her body felt swollen.

She looked at the clock above the changing room door, trying to gauge how long it had been.

*

When Kate's mom told her she couldn't bleed underwater, Kate knew she was lying, but she didn't question her to her face, and she didn't talk to Jill about it, either. In the bathtub, she'd bite her lip to test it and shove her head under, letting her mouth fill with water. She'd flip onto her stomach, and her hipbones would jut into the bottom of the tub. She never saw blood leak out from her mouth, but she could taste metal against her teeth when she spat out the bathwater. She'd drag her tongue over the ridges on the inside of her lip for days after.

She treated it like a dare, but she wasn't brave enough to risk it, to believe her mom. She didn't believe that the pressure would work.

*

The chiropractor's office was too bright. Kate and Trudy stood next to the bed, and Kate surrounded herself in the mirrored walls. Her hips naturally shifted down to one side, and she watched as mirror Trudy touched her right hip.

Kate lowered her tailbone.

“Wrong. Act like you're sitting.”

“Good.” Trudy touched Kate's knees. “See how your knees bend automatically.” She touched her shoulders. “Look past your chest. No, no, you're skinny enough that you don't have to bend over. Bend your shoulders. Look past it. Better.”

Kate's feet were stained with streaks of dirt. They were cold against the pale tile.

"Hands on your ribs. Lengthen your spine."

Kate straightened.

"Good. That's how you should be standing. Now stand how you normally stand."

When Trudy stood in front of her, her perfume flooded Kate. She smelled like her mom.

"Hold your hands out."

Trudy pushed on her upturned hands, and Kate crumpled. Her body bent forward.

"Add 30 years and some gravity." Trudy shoved Kate's shoulders down. "And you have a hunchback."

Kate watched the way Trudy stood; the curve of her spine looked like Jill's. She stood the way Jill stood.

"Practice standing right. Ten times a day. You're young enough that it'll stick."

Kate broadened her shoulders, stretched through her crown.

Trudy pulled Kate to face the mirror.

She was elongated in the fluorescent lights. Mascara stains smudged under her eyes. Her cowlick stuck up in the back. She wondered if standing should be something she instinctively knew how to do.

She straightened her spine and inched her fingers into her pockets. She looked at her feet. She looked for the way she should be balancing.

*

Kate woke in the morning to the sound of screaming. Her body was coated in sweat. Her every muscle tensed. She ran to the kitchen.

Jill was perched on the seat in front of the bay window, facing out, her fingers resting on the sill. Her body tense, too. She turned and frowned.

The yowling was louder in the kitchen.

Jill hesitated, and the two stared at each other. Jill nodded. "Come here."

Kate's fingers curled into fists, and she buried them under her shirt, shoved them into her stomach. She crept onto the window seat beside Jill.

A tailless grey cat covered their orange tabby. He hid her almost entirely, grey fur muting the orange. The tabby's eyes squinted, and her chin sank low to the ground. The orange cat kept her mouth closed, but the air filled with a strangled sound.

Jill stared straight ahead.

"That's why we get wet when we fuck." She glanced sidelong at Kate as she said "fuck."

The cats looked like they were barely moving, but the sound surrounded the girls.

"My psych teacher said they've done all these studies, and girls get wet when we watch anything have sex, even if we don't realize it. Because we're scared it'll happen to us. So if we're lubricated, it won't hurt as bad."

The grey cat released the scruff of the tabby's neck and repositioned his hold. His mouth gripped her. He clung to it. The girls stared out the window.

"I don't want you to think there's something wrong with you when it happens to you."

The sound grew.

Kate looked in her mom's bedroom but didn't find her. She ran her tongue along the inside of her lip and went back to bed.

When Kate mowed the lawn a week later, she found cottony tufts of grey fur buried in the grass.

*

On the weekends, they went to the lake. The car ride took thirty minutes, and they spent it licking sticky fingers and kicking smeared chocolate wrappers under the seats.

They spread towels on the wet dock, and the towels clung to the old wood, absorbing the puddles. They left their mom sitting cross-legged in the wet and scratching at the wood with her fingernails. Jill took Kate to their rocky spot, and they spread flat on the lowest rock, bellies scraping against the slick grit.

They pulled themselves to the edge. The circle of rocks formed a shallow pool, and their heads hung over the crevice.

Jill eased her hand into the water. The fish in the pool darted away, but Jill stilled her breath and kept her hand steady. She flattened tighter against the rock. The fish she grabbed flipped backward, squirming slick against her palm. She smoothed her thumb over its head.

She held it out to Kate, but she looked down. Jill looked away. She let it drop back into the pool.

Kate's hands were clumsy. The fish tickled her palm as they darted against and past her. She dragged her nails slowly across the bottom and scraped up a cloud of dirt. The fish glimmered through it.

The girls turned belly up, faces to the sky. Kate's hair splayed over the edge, and Jill pushed it into a pile on the rock, shoved it closer to her sister's neck. "You know how fish do it, right?"

Jill let her arms drape over the edge and trailed her fingers over the surface of the water. “Fish don’t keep anything inside. They just leave their eggs on the ocean floor. It’s weird to think about – like, I guess the eggs are strong enough to survive without a mom. But they’re not hard. You can’t crack ‘em. They squish; they’ve just got these membranes around ‘em. I guess it’s enough.”

Kate rolled onto her back. She stuck her fingers in her mouth. She tasted the dirt from the water.

The water dried cold on their hands, and they twisted onto their sides. The sun warmed certain spots on their middles and legs, but they shivered from their toes up.

They picked their way back over the rocks.

*

Trudy had told Kate that women wore heels because it made their backs arch. She’d said that women who wore heels every day got tight hamstrings since the tension would eventually shorten their tendons. When they stretched their legs out in normal shoes, their feet flat, they’d be pulling on something shorter than what they’d had before.

Bend at the waist; pull from the knees. The tension would always pull at the back of the thigh. It would lengthen the legs, the body.

Her mom knelt in front of her on the carpet, her back exposed. Kate dug her feet into the back of the couch and pushed herself forward. She bent low and grabbed the zipper. It caught at each wrinkle in the fabric, but she backtracked and rezipped. She clasped the hook and eye together at the top.

“Thanks.” Her mom pushed up and smoothed her hands over the front of her dress, brushing the carpet lint and cat fur off her knees.

Kate stared at her.

Her mom disappeared but came back clutching heels.

She steadied herself on the wall and slipped her foot into the first heel. She stood stilted. Her hip tilted up. Her weight shifted, unsteady, to one side.

Her right calf thickened, and the curve followed up her back.

“Pull from the knees; it’ll make you stronger.”

She slipped the other shoe on. She sculpted the curve in her back.

“Bed by 10:30. Honor system.”

The keys jingled in her palm. She closed the door behind her quietly.

Jill had told Kate something different about heels. She’d said that women wore them because it changed their hips, their legs. It made their backs arch the way it did during sex.

*

Kate’s mom hovered over the kitchen counter. The frying pan spit.

Kate took a sip of her orange juice. She could hear the crack of eggshells against the counter. She pushed her chair back, and the wood creaked. Its joints shifted under the pressure.

The kitchen smelled warm. She took her place next to her mom at the stove, and they watched the eggs.

Her mom sprinkled salt over the tops as they fried, and it speckled the smooth surface. Flecks of hot oil sprayed from the pan.

They watched as the clear layer on top hardened and turned white. Bubbles formed, slowly rising as the edges crisped.

Her mom turned to gather plates and forks. Kate watched as the clear layer of membrane slowly disappeared and thickened into the white. She couldn't see the change from moment to moment, but she knew the eggs were thicker and whiter, somehow different.

The spatula scraped under the burnt brown. Her mom wiggled it back and forth, trying to clear the edges from the pan.

Kate took the first plate.

She separated the membrane with her fork. She skimmed off the top, but when she pushed the clear layer to the side of the plate, it left a trail of ooze across the white. She pierced the yolk and watched the yellow run. She guided it with her fork, spreading a thin film of yolk over the white.

Her mom propped her bare feet up on the chair opposite. She watched as Kate swallowed.

Kate let the liquid stay in her mouth. It didn't run to the sides, just congealed on her tongue. It coated her throat when she swallowed. She wanted it to linger.

Kate scraped the last strings with her fork.

Her mom leaned back solidly in the chair. Their forks clanked against their plates.

*

She took out her tampon before going into the pool. She swam a lap and perched on the side, elbows back on the tiled edge. The water lapped at her stomach. Her elbows slid on the slick tile, and her hair branched across her back, catching on the gravelly white siding. She swam in wide circles in the middle of the pool.

Fish could stay under for years. She tested herself in Mississippi, gripping the bottom, trying to grab where there were no handholds. She pushed the water above her up and out. She flapped her arms like a bird.

“There are words I hope you never learn.”

She gripped the cold metal of the ladder and pulled herself up fast. The water sucked loudly and poured off her.

She sank onto a chaise lounge and adjusted the height, sinking her torso closer to the ground. Her towel absorbed water from her hair and limbs. The drops evaporated off her skin. Her bathing suit changed colors, lightening as it dried.

The stain spread. Fingers of red traveled along the edges of the pale pink nylon. Her mother came from her umbrella on the other side of the pool and stood at the end of the chaise lounge. She dragged the neighboring chair closer. The legs grated loud against the cement. She planted her bare feet flat in front of the chair and sat, watching the women to each side, daring them to approach.

Kate smoothed her hands over her stomach and brushed sweat off the tightening skin. She looked down and breathed out. The sun trapped a layer of heat inside of her.

Pitetsbkrrh

The pilots didn't get what was happening at first. They thought the static was just static. They knew something must be crossing their signal, but they didn't care enough to figure out what it was. The sound blanketed the commands from the flight control center, and they learned to not hear it.

The air traffic controllers were the ones to figure out what it was. It's so simple, they laughed. They made signs and hung them on the walls in the terminal and on the planes. Turn off your cell phones, they said. When the radio controllers or the pilots or the passengers left their phones on, each text or call came through with a crackle. The text messages and voices bounced against the aluminum and titanium and blurred into static. The signs were a simple solution, they thought. They had fixed the problem, they thought.

The Pilot couldn't not hear the sound though. It took him a month to learn what each noise meant, to learn that each sputter and pop stood for a word. The static that crackled like Morse code became something he could read. He learned the pauses and blurs and moments in-between.

When they started asking passengers to turn off their phones, the few messages that came through became easier to decipher.

When his passengers boarded, they adjusted their air conditioning nozzles. They buckled their seatbelts, and they started worrying. When they couldn't see or reach or talk to their loved ones, they knew that the permanence they'd always believed in would end.

The laws would bend. Being out of sight meant being gone. What they couldn't see anymore couldn't possibly exist. They tried to picture their wives' and daughters' faces and couldn't, and their heartbeats sped. They bent over their phones. Please, they said.

The Pilot learned through their panic. The short then long then short in the crackle meant I love you: desperation. Please don't forget me for the hours I'm gone. If this is my last flight, I need you to know. I just wish you were here. My flight's delayed. Baby, baby, please don't forget to feed the cat.

The Pilot couldn't distinguish between the crackles for cat and dog, but he loved the inane messages that followed the desperate ones. He became privy to the secrets and not-secrets. He was mother, daughter, husband, boss, and he knew that the messages were really, on some level, all intended for him.

The Pilot wasn't sure, but his gut told him that when he received a message, it stopped there. The texts caught in the airwaves and his ears and never got through. They never arrived, stifled and stopped by him. He was the only one to ever hear these messages, he was sure, and he took a quiet pride in this. He got to swallow them before they disappeared. He was their witness.

*

When The Pilot and his wife fought, they did it at 4 in the morning. They did it on his layover in-between Hawaii and Hong Kong. They yelled and screamed and cried until he had to leave. He left. He flew to Paris and Duluth and Charlotte. He flew to Atlanta. And when he flew home again, they fought, on schedule. When his wife threw her phone against the wall and shattered the screen, she bought a new one. She threw the next one as well, and the cracks splintered like a spider web, radiating out from the center. When

he was gone, she ran her fingers along the grooves. The Pilot came to dread the flight into Boston and the drive to his little yellow house. He started stopping for donuts on his way home. He started stopping for yellow lights and letting other cars into his lane. He started going the speed limit. But when he pulled into his driveway, he suddenly couldn't wait for the terror to come. He opened the door before he'd turned off the car. He didn't wait for the song on the radio to end. He grabbed his toothbrush from his bag and rushed up the steps. Hi, honey, he said, and they fought until dawn.

They fought until they ran out of things to fight about or until he left or until they both flopped onto the bed, exhausted. They fought about his constant absence. They fought about money and sex. They fought about their loneliness and their overbearing need for each other. They fought because they missed each other, and they fought because they started to hate each other for it.

*

Before The Pilot became a pilot, he was a journalist. Their sleep was different then, calmer. In the mornings, The Pilot woke up to see his wife dress and put on her makeup. The morning he decided to become a pilot, he crawled to the edge of the bed and perched there. He sat behind her as she put on her makeup. She looked so different, reflected. He wondered that she could never know the inverted face the rest of the world actually saw.

Those days, he watched her read. She had to mouth the words as she read them, and books usually took her weeks. He liked watching her mouth as it took in things.

After he became a pilot, she told him to stop watching her read. The lamplight fell around her on her navy couch; his shadow cut in to hers.

She told him to stop watching her dress. She didn't feel pretty in the mornings.
She started putting her makeup on in the bathroom.

She didn't want him to catch her off guard, she said, and she snapped at him.

The Pilot became The Pilot. And after he changed, the fights started.

*

The Copilot listened to the static in his headphones, and The Pilot frowned. He wondered why The Copilot looked like he was straining his eyes while he tried to listen. He was doing it wrong, he thought.

I don't understand, The Copilot said. They all sound the same.

The Pilot regretted sharing his theory. He leaned forward and made notes in his notepad.

The Copilot watched him. You're hearing what you wanna hear I think maybe.

The Pilot frowned. I don't think so, he said. He adjusted his headphones.

The Copilot scratched his head. Remember when we used to fly out of Pittsburgh and see that skyscraper that flashed Morse code? They spelled Pittsburgh wrong with those lights. Every day, for probably about two years, they think.

Huh, The Pilot said.

Sometimes the systems are faulty, The Copilot told him.

Huh, The Pilot said.

The Pilot started to realize things. He had never turned off his phone before. He'd never received I love you texts from his wife, but he knew now that they must be caught in the airwaves. And after he realized, the messages he heard changed. When he heard the long then short then long, he knew the message was for him. He heard it at least once

each flight, and when it came, he smiled and leaned back in his chair. He rubbed his potbelly. She loves me, he thought.

He was surrounded by the sequence. He took in the love messages for his passengers and from his passengers, but most importantly, he swallowed the crackles from his wife.

The Copilot worried. The Pilot let the radio controllers become part of the background noise. He focused only on the static. Long then long then a pause, and The Pilot descended ever so slightly, every time. Each sound triggered a reaction. Three short crackles meant landing gear and a note in his notepad. The Copilot slowly and quietly took over.

The static had lulled The Pilot into a daze, and sometimes he fell asleep at the wheel, smiling and knowing. He knew that the I love yous he decoded must be from her, and when he came home, he went five over the speed limit. He came in the door and pecked her on the cheek and smiled. I sped home for you, he said. They began a new ritual of flowers and smiles and hugging.

They made love, and The Pilot called it making love. After, he stroked her face. He smoothed her wrinkles back and smiled.

The Pilot fell asleep every night listening to the calm of her breath.

*

After the Pilot and the Copilot and the people heard about the big crash, all the messages changed. The Pilot didn't expect it. The I love yous slowed. Passengers sent no panicked goodbyes. He decoded only a barrage of bad jokes and small talk, one-word texts. The messages came faster, more desperately, but the senders lacked something.

They seemed to mean it less.

Maybe the world's becoming a sadder place, he said to The Copilot, and The Pilot listened more intently to the static.

The Copilot steered the plane to the left and frowned.

The Pilot started scribbling more in his notepad. He became more and more addicted to deciphering and searching for the messages. He waited.

He craved the I love yous that never came. But he swallowed the rest anyhow.

The Pilot told The Copilot, Even Beethoven's fifth symphony starts short then short then short then long.

Ah, The Copilot said.

*

He didn't stop bringing his wife flowers or hugging her, but he learned he couldn't sleep without the sound of the static or the engines. He couldn't leave it behind. He recorded his flights and let them play on the speakers at home. The sound unsettled his wife, but she loved the flowers and smiles and who he had become. She learned to sleep with the sound. She learned to look forward to the nights and the crackles and the mattress sloping down under The Pilot's weight. The static gathered between their tan walls and weighed heavy on their sheets.

When The Pilot left for Dubai or Pittsburgh, his wife had trouble sleeping in the silence he left behind. She cocooned herself in her blankets and tried to breathe steady and not listen to the quiet.

The Pilot stopped leaving his cell phone on during flights. For the sake of science, he said to himself. He had to know that others out there loved each other, not just that his

wife was full of compassion. He had to stop decoding her texts, too, stop being so selfish. He had to want sounds she didn't know how to make. He had to want only their texts.

*

The Pilot's wife started sending him messages like she'd never sent before. She loved him to Dubai and back, she'd say, and she'd grin and wait for his response. She looked at his flight schedule and waited for the text when he landed in Portland, but nothing came. She waited for the text when he landed in Hong Kong. She waited for his Singapore text, for his Athens text. Maybe he didn't think Dubai and back was as witty or cute as she did. Maybe she should've said another city, a farther city. She tried to picture Dubai, but all she could imagine were skyscrapers and shopping malls. The ocean must be very blue there, she thought, and warm.

When he came home, she looked through his phone. She scrolled through the countless messages. He'd opened them all, maybe in Singapore or in Seattle or in Houston. She frowned. She scrolled through his call history. He'd called her and his sister and his mother. He'd texted his old roommate from college. He hadn't called old girlfriends or weird numbers. There were no suspicious pictures. He just had sound clips: hundreds of them.

When they went to bed, The Pilot turned the static up loud. His breathing slowed. When his wife got up to pee, she met his open eyes. She peed. She wondered how long it took him to fall asleep in the dark like that, listening. He looked like he was searching, but she didn't know what his unfocused eyes could be looking for or wanting in the dark.

The Pilot waited. He listened.

*

The Pilot couldn't stop wondering why the I love yous had stopped. When The Copilot went home to his family, he termed it a slow devolution. He flew his hand downward like a crashing plane. I feel bad for the guy, he said. You know that story about the guy that flew too close to the sun? his family asked him. No, that's a different story, said The Copilot.

The Copilot stopped responding to The Pilot when he spoke. The Pilot stopped talking. But The Pilot's mouth moved in his sleep. His throat vibrated, and a quiet crackling left his lips. The Copilot never noticed. The sound blended with the static coming in through his headphones. He stared out at the sky.

The Pilot came home, and he went the speed limit out of habit, out of distraction. He hugged his wife stiffly, and with each visit back, he went through the motions of returning. The first night he slept in the yellow house, he went to bed an hour early. The next night, he crawled under the covers an hour earlier than that. He started going to bed earlier and earlier and sleeping less and less.

The static buzzed in the background.

*

The Pilot's wife slept easier when he was home, but she woke up with his unfocused eyes on her. She woke up scared.

She stopped looking at his phone. She stopped worrying about the normal things. Her friends all nagged her. They told her over drinks that he was having an affair. He must be, they said. But she stared at her margarita. She crushed the salt with her teeth. She knew that he wasn't.

She had this theory, she told them, that the key was sleep. When he slept on the

right side of the bed, he loved her. When he slept on her side, he was different. He had different dreams depending on which side of his body he slept on, too, she knew. So she knew he must be waking up different.

She started putting her makeup on in the bedroom again.

The Pilot slept in.

He still told her he loved her, and his voice crackled every time he talked. It must be emotion, she thought, as she listened to his voice break and strain. She blamed it on work. The long hours made him weak and vulnerable. They made him so that he couldn't contain it or express himself.

He couldn't sleep because he was never on Eastern Time. His body was always in another place, his head always three hours behind. He was never rested. She didn't tell her girlfriends about her time zone theory, but she knew she was right: the sleep was what changed things.

*

The Pilot's wife started hearing the static even when he wasn't home. The silence that had scared her so much at night had disappeared entirely. She could sleep anywhere—on the bus, on the train, on benches, on couches, standing up. The static had no source.

She mentioned it to her girlfriends, and they asked if it bothered her. That would drive us crazy, they said.

No, she said, it's okay.

The sound soothed her.

In between flights, The Pilot stopped coming home. His wife called The Copilot.

He's staying in the cockpit tonight, The Copilot said. I'm not really sure why.

His wife frowned and clutched the phone, letting the static lull her to sleep.

Even when The Pilot did come home, he didn't touch her face or pull her wrinkles back. He smiled when she walked into rooms, but he smiled the same way when the TV turned on or the lights flickered.

Slowly, the static stopped.

His wife stopped falling asleep standing up. She ran her fingers along the cracks in her phone, and the motion calmed her.

His wife's head filled with silence.

Silence replaced the crackles.

Silence invaded the cracks.

And she packed her books and clothes, touched his arm, and left.

*

When she left, he didn't notice. I love you, he said, staring at the TV.

I love you, he said, rolling onto his left side and pushing the covers down.

I love you, he said, clutching the controls.

I love you, he crackled.

*

When The Pilot's wife left, her girlfriends told everyone they could.

They gloated. We were right, they said, and they made up their guest beds and smiled. When she cried on their shoulders, they stroked her head.

We always know best, they said. You have to think of what's best for you, too, they said.

The Copilot worried.

He noticed that none of the other pilots made eye contact with The Pilot when he passed. They were scared to meet his eyes. They didn't want to know what it looked like.

On their flight to Atlanta, The Copilot closed the cockpit door. He put his hand on The Pilot's shoulder. I heard, he said.

The Pilot looked up at him and frowned.

I heard about your wife.

Oh, The Pilot said.

I'm so sorry, The Copilot told him.

I'll be ok, The Pilot responded. He scratched his stomach. I have everything I need.

The Pilot opened the door and flipped up one of the flight attendants' overhead compartments. He grabbed a red fleece blanket and a pillow from the stack. He had a blanket that his wife had knitted in his bag, but he never touched it. He always pulled out the red.

He settled beside The Copilot. He wrapped the blanket around his legs.

The ground crew prepared the plane and loaded the luggage, and The Pilot sipped his coffee.

He looked down. He turned his phone off.

He flipped the switch to speak to the passengers.

Feel free to leave your phones on for the duration of this flight, he told the full plane. His voice echoed over the intercom. He pictured them, twenty feet behind him. He imagined their furrowed brows and the immediate shrugs that would follow.

The Copilot didn't say anything. He switched on the wing lights.

The Pilot could see her, twenty rows back, face against the window. She pressed her cheek against the cool glass and let it rattle her teeth. The window rattled in its frame. She felt the noise of the engine, heard it thrum past and into the earbud mashed in her ear.

The man beside the girl frowned. Didn't your mom ever tell you the story of the girl who fell through the airplane window?

And she'd push closer to the glass.

The crackle came through to The Pilot differently. The music from the dozen pairs of headphones mixed discordant and harsh.

He leaned back. The flight took off, and he listened to the long then long then long in the static.

Steve

Before Rae left, they fucked on top of the books, their hard spines jutting into her ribs, the library cellophane slick against her back. Her hands clung to Dylan's hips, nails gripping into his skin, and the dust jackets crackled underneath: *Six Days of War*, *The Politics of Dispossession*, *The End of the Peace Process*.

When she'd checked out the books from the library, she hadn't expected to be able to hear them. Hadn't expected them to leave marks on her that she could feel, either. She pressed into them, and their outlines left sharp, straight-lined imprints, deep ridges in the smooth skin of her back. The plastic wrinkled like Saran Wrap, creasing loose waves along her spine.

Rae curved her leg around his hips, pulling him closer. Her mouth was dry, throat dry. She shoved the blankets to the side, the heat trapped between them.

Afterward, when her job sent her across the ocean in that double-decker plane, she couldn't find a position in her seat that made her back feel smooth, and it was like the lines were permanently etched into her body.

On the airplane, like everywhere else, she thought about Dylan. She wished he'd given her something to take with her: a necklace, one of his shirts, a lucky pebble. Something she could have touched and thought of him.

*

Rae started listening to the news in August, before Dylan and before she left or knew she'd be leaving. It was August that she moved in next to Jaq, August that Jaq got her the job at the counseling center.

Over the summer, Rae had listened to the Top 40 station in the mornings, Beyoncé and Maroon 5, but when she'd started waking up earlier, Top 40 stopped working. In the house on Blossom, in the job with benefits, she started having trouble waking up in the mornings. The counseling job was the counseling job, and her sleep became heavy. She overslept, even with her old alarm clock.

And so she tried to trick herself.

At the mall, she stocked up at the end of summer sales. She bought her new radio alarm clock and her coffee maker with the timer. She stopped at Fresh Market on Sundays for her box of crullers, her pound of coffee.

She tried to make the Blossom Street house like the house where she'd grown up: like the last time she'd been happy waking up that early.

The radio filled her bedroom on Blossom like it had filtered through from her parents' room when she was little. Steve Inskeep, baritone, gravelly. She heard less of what he said and more of the how: his voice so low that the radio vibrated softly against her nightstand. She only picked up on tragedy in his intonation.

She wanted to understand the tragedy, but she couldn't get out of her own head in the mornings. She could only focus on one task at a time, the voices just a murmur in the background of her eyeliner, her toothbrush, her socks.

She padded down the stairs. She leaned hard against the wall, body still heavy with sleep.

Downstairs, she counted in her head: jumping jacks, wall sits, push-ups. Steps, squats, planks.

The radio followed her, the tone switched: Renée Montagne, her silky voice reminiscent of a black and white movie star. Like she came from a different time.

Rae's forearms buried deep in the matted carpet. She brushed off the lint and dirt, but her skin kept the shape of the shag.

She came to recognize the sounds that signaled each news section: each report.

High knees, lunges, crunches, then business, Cokie Roberts, then the shower set to cold, then hot, then cold.

Rae ate her crullers, wiped her sticky hands on the kitchen towel. A film of frosting residue stuck to the pads of her fingers and dug itself deep under her nails.

When she was little, her dad would turn up the volume on the radio, and she'd steal sips of his coffee. Five spoonfuls of sugar, milk to the top. She'd sit by the vent until the heat went off, her little back square against the bottom shelf of the bookcase behind her. She'd sneak back into the kitchen and lean down, chin against his saucer, lips on the edge of his cup.

When she'd decided she needed to wake up better, she'd tried to recreate this place. She'd made her list: crullers, Steve, Nescafe. She'd bought new sheets.

Her tongue coated with crumbly, doughy sweet, she sat at her kitchen table and stared at Jaq's car through the window, her elbows pressed firmly against the hardwood. Light leaked in through the small windows, dappling the olive walls but never quite permeating the room's dimness. She wondered why Jaq never dated anyone, why she never saw any men at her house: not even brothers or a father. She wondered what it was

in Jaq that didn't want relationships. How she was so simultaneously big and loud and forthright while so evasive about what was in her head. About her own life.

Rae had spent Sunday brunches with her since Rae had moved in, and she still felt like she could name nothing about her. She just knew that she lived alone. Was always alone.

It wasn't that Rae didn't value her independence, but she felt the alone so strong when she went grocery shopping or to the movies or out to dinner—always asking friends who brought their boyfriends.

She let the coffee grow warm then lukewarm then cold on its burner. She made it to smell, not to drink.

She kept her routine until November, waking up to the smell, the light, the low murmur of Steve Inskip's voice. In November, the news changed: it broke her routine, and it made her leave.

*

The counseling center gave Rae three weeks off to prepare before she left for Tel Aviv. They said to her, "These girls need you," and "they're young; you'll be able to understand them. Don't worry."

Jaq said, "These girls will trust you like you've never been trusted before."

This was when Rae checked out the stack of books from the library, after browsing the shelves at Barnes and Noble and counting her cash. The library hardcovers were older and thicker and coated in plastic, and they piled in her backseat, shifting from the left door to the right and back as she turned on Main, Second, Spring.

They made heavy sounds when she placed them anywhere: the dining table, the kitchen counter, her nightstand. She shoved makeshift bookmarks behind the covers: a napkin, a coaster, a florist's business card.

She dug out her old counseling books because the books were easier than the women at the center, even—especially—Jaq. They talked to her the way her teachers had talked to her in school, because these women were her teachers, and she hated it.

Sunday night, she read herself to sleep, but she only made it to page six before her eyes drifted. The books stacked beside her in bed, one for each night of the week, but the nights were short. Sleep was long. That week, the bookmarks held their ground, clung to the first chapters.

She curled into her pillow and breathed in the smell of clean.

She unplugged her radio alarm, and she managed to forget how much she loved the sound of Steve's voice.

*

In her third week off work, before she left for Tel Aviv, she met Dylan for the first time. She'd been drinking tea at a coffee shop, and he'd made fun of her for drinking tea in this place, when she was surrounded by the smell. He couldn't understand how she could go there and not want it or why she would go there if she didn't want it.

She wondered if she was attracted to him because he looked like the men on the back covers of her library books, like he belonged in the place she was going.

He took her to the movie theatre by her house to see *The Notebook* because, she was sure, that's what he thought she wanted. That's what every girl wanted.

To some extent, she bought it: pictured Ryan Gosling with his hands in her hair, building her a house, calling to her in the middle of the road. But she didn't want that, was better than that, she'd have said to Jaq.

Dylan bought them popcorn and pizza slices and a large Coke to split. They came home afterward.

He didn't ask about her job or her trip, even though he knew about both. He just pushed her against her door, his hands in her hair.

When they fucked on the books, she felt bad for the sweat on the cellophane, and she knew he must have felt the same. He stacked the books on her nightstand.

Her yellowed sheets stuck to her, thick and damp. Her walls seemed to reflect each other.

She fit herself to him, back tight against his stomach. She moved his arm to fold around her damp waist and shoved the blankets to the side, onto him.

She grabbed the top book from the stack. The dust jacket was slick between her fingers.

His voice in her ear, he said, "I knew this would happen."

She squinted, "What do you mean by that?"

Sweat.

He grinned. He started to ask something, cut himself off, said, "I mean, it's not a fair question."

Fingers on her stomach, he asked her if he was the best she'd ever had in a way that said he already knew the answer. Covers pulled up, fingers peeking out over the top.

Sweat.

He clutched her tighter.

Rae knew Jaq would have hit him, left the impression of the book on his face like she was a cartoon character, but Rae didn't feel, never felt, that instinct, even though she would never admit that to Jaq. She felt the instinct to grin with Dylan, his confidence contagious. Pictured him in the middle of the road. Pictured him picking out cereal with her in the grocery store—keeping the creepy cashier from chatting with her about her weekend plans. He would grin that confident smile that made her blush and hate him and love it. He would keep her less alone.

In the morning, she woke to the murmur of Dylan's voice, as he hummed, as he tried to find his shoes, and she wished the news on the radio had been different—that she had more than a few days left for that sound to fill her room.

*

Jaq smoothed her hands through her hair, the strands mousy even in the room's bright light. The kitchen was big, and the air was thick with the smell of burnt pastry.

“How's your prince?” Jaq grinned, picking a crumb from the cutting board and rolling it between her fingertips.

Rae snorted.

“You stroke those abs?” Jaq leaned against the counter, waist cocked to the side. Her figure large and solid against Rae's in motion, as Rae moved from the counter to the sink to the refrigerator.

Rae frowned and turned, grabbed the leftover cake and a roll of Press 'N' Seal. “I mean, I'm leaving. We only went on one date.” Rae rinsed the suds off. “And I doubt he

wants anything from me. I think I'm making more out of him in my head than there actually is."

Jaq crushed the crumb against the countertop. "Just one? Well," she paused, "You still can't assume that, Rae."

Rae covered the cake with the cling film, smoothing her hands over the form, sticking the plastic to itself. She looked up, eyebrows raised.

Jaq grinned. "Whatever. You can borrow my rain boots if you want though. For the trip. It's the rainy season there, yeah?"

Rae smiled, "I don't think we're the same size. But thanks Jaq."

Jaq shrugged. "Are you gonna see your family before you leave?"

"Are you saying you're not like family?" Rae winked. "I dunno, who would you see before you left?"

"Family, before any Dylan at least," and Rae forgot that she was trying to get something out of Jaq, in the face of the guilt. She looked at her pound of coffee. Her dad, so kind and quiet that he'd never say anything about not seeing her, even if he was offended. Even if he did miss her on the weeks she forgot to call.

"I guess I'd go see my family because I'd be scared," Jaq said, and Rae examined her, loud and big, against the counter. She'd never imagined Jaq could be scared, and she wondered if that meant she should be. She hadn't thought to be scared. She'd only thought about Dylan and the sound of his voice that morning. She frowned, but in her days left, she only saw Jaq.

*

The day before she left, Rae did her exercises, but she set a 6:30 alarm on her phone instead of her radio. She didn't wake up to Steve Inskeep. She wasn't sure why she couldn't listen to the news anymore, now that she'd actually be listening, but she couldn't.

She made her coffee. She watched Jaq's car.

*

When Rae arrived at Ben Gurion, she found the folders that the counseling center had left for her at the concierge desk. They'd created a file on each girl she'd meet that week. Rae stuffed them in the top of her bag.

From the airport, she took the train, and the seats here were blue with orange lines, abstract angles and squiggles running through the upholstery. They were scratchy and stiff from dried snot and sweat: children here were like children everywhere. Rae chose a seat across from a woman and young girl and stretched out, her bag heavy at her feet. Two men across the aisle stared blankly out the dark train windows.

The folders resurfaced, and she layed them in her lap: the first red cover glaring at her. The first girl's name was Tova; the file was labeled on the front.

The train was underground for the first half hour. The windows were black, and Rae stared at her eyes in the reflection, tugged at her shirt, watched the woman across the aisle pick through her child's hair. Rae's back was too stiff to be comfortable, to get her mind in the right place to read. She could only think about the creases lining her spine.

When the tunnel started to emerge from under, it grew arches in its side, and the sudden shocks of bright light lit the cabin. The sea flashed past. Rae caught glimpses of blue, a split second of sand.

The child edged closer to the window.

They came out of the tunnel, and Rae flinched, the bright too sudden. The sea was a dull, pale blue, the beaches pebbly. Bauhaus houses, white walls flashed past. Tiny balconies dotted the buildings with red roofs. An ant crawled along on the outside of the window, watching each house loom and pass.

The one house they passed with the window box and the chair on the balcony caught her eye. If he was with her, she'd stop them and lead them to that house. She'd kiss Dylan there; she'd lead him up to that balcony and that chair and wrap her legs around him. She didn't know if he'd like this place, didn't know what he thought about Israel. If he'd stayed for breakfast that one morning, she would have asked him.

Dylan's skin had been stained in dark and pale freckled marks along his shoulder, in splotchy patterns that had drawn her hands to them. The birthmark had made him seem vulnerable, and she hadn't known what to do with that. When she'd touched his shoulder, she'd pressed down and tried to blur the edges of the mark with her finger, like enough pressure would erase the color.

Rae picked at the edge of the book lying heavy against her knees.

The child across from her, face stuck to the window, gasped and shrieked at the landscape, the sea and the gulls. The woman murmured back at her, and Rae let the intonations lull her into her house on Blossom Street.

The child tugged at the woman's lap, pointed at the sea, and Rachel closed her eyes against it, letting the rhythm of their voices wash over her. She didn't need to understand what they said.

Rae leaned her head back against the window, the glass cold and damp against the nape of her neck. She stayed like this.

When Rae opened her eyes, she stretched; she looked around, and since the men across the aisle were talking to each other now, she could see their profiles, and she was suddenly more awake.

She squinted, eyes focused.

The man in the seat had to be Dylan; he had to have followed her here.

From his profile, she could tell that he had his nose, his eyes, his hair. She'd woken up to that face. He was the face of home, imprinted in her back. She tried to talk herself down: she couldn't tell that from a profile.

He wouldn't have come here.

Rae traced the curve of his hair, black and slick, down his cheeks to his chin. She wanted him to smile that smile at her, wanted his hands in her hair.

She traced the curve of his lips. His gun sprawled across the seat beside him, not touching him, connected only to the blue and orange upholstery. He didn't look toward it or toward her.

She focused on the seat's stripes, her breath short.

Rae followed the curve of his jaw, the scruff on his neck, the shadows where his jaw met his ears.

She half-rose from her seat. She reached out to grasp his shirt, and when he looked at her, she realized that his jaw mimicked that of the man across from him and the man even farther down the train. She clenched her eyes shut.

She couldn't understand what he said, and her eyes went to the gun in his lap, though he never touched it. He wasn't threatening, his voice not loud. She imagined he was asking her what she wanted, this foreign girl with blonde hair, what she expected of him. His intonation said he was asking this, asking something, but she couldn't answer him. She shook her head and shrank back into her seat. "Sorry, sorry," she mumbled.

The woman across from her raised her eyebrows. The child never noticed: eyes glued to the sea.

Red flashed past, the tile roofs blurring to make one long house.

The man diagonal from him shared the same greasy locks. The man on the other side shared the flare of nostrils. She turned her book over, cover facedown in her lap, hiding the jaw she'd find on every man she looked at with Dylan in her head. She frowned.

On her balcony, Dylan's arms would be steady, braced around her. She would look up at his face and see his expression intent, eyes dark, like always. His face had been so intent that night; she thought maybe she'd smiled too much. She'd never wondered if she should smile or not during sex.

She pulled her bag toward her and away from the men, the books dragging heavily across the floor, and she tried to read, but she could only stare blankly. Her logic had lapsed so entirely for a boy she'd only had one night with, but really, she didn't believe her logic had lapsed that entirely. She knew it hadn't been him: she'd known before she'd touched his arm, but she couldn't help but reach out. Couldn't help but see him and hope.

*

The counseling center had given Rae the folders and had advised her to talk to some Israelis before she met the girls. In the kibbutz where she was staying, Rae read through the files over and over until she had their stories, their pictures, memorized, and so when she wandered Rabin Square in search of Israelis, she recited what she knew in her head. She had finished all of her library books; she had read all the newspapers. She knew these people, even if she couldn't.

The giant triangular monument and shallow pool looked somehow industrial; Tel Aviv seemed less exotic at its core than what she'd seen on the train, even if she'd slept through most of the views. There were no cactus farms or aqueducts here, though: just white, straight lines, blocky buildings.

Rae passed the monument and recited her stories: The first girl, Tova, lived with an aunt. Her parents had died the year before in an attack at the markets in the Old City. She was set to graduate, but her grades were low. There were newspaper clippings about the attack. At the back of the folder, a picture of the family was stapled against the red backing. They were posed in front of stone steps, and a large door blurred behind them. Their shoulders pressed against each other's, shrugging upward. Their arms draped around each other's waists, hands gripping into the flesh, and they each leaned forward, their smiles wide, poised.

Rae passed the shallow pool again and tried to think of some way to approach these strangers who had been through the worst of it. To think of something to say.

She lingered outside the coffee shop on the edges of the Square, inhaling the smell, but she didn't go in. She returned to the center of the Square, to the water, to the

woman who looked like the girl from the first folder: long, dark hair, shiny against olive skin.

She was not scared of the women here like she was scared of the women at home, like she was scared of Jaq, but she knew Dylan could be with a girl like that, with dark hair and olive skin.

The woman who looked like Tova wore a hijab and bright colors, and Rae chose her because she was drawn to her: because of her dress, because of her eyes, because of the way she changed the picture. The way she gave it dimension. The way Rae could imagine these wrinkles around the younger girl's eyes in thirty years.

“Boker Tov. English?” Rae introduced herself as a journalist, and the woman nodded.

“Yes, a little.”

Rae asked the woman where she was from, about her family, and slowly led into the more serious question: how she felt about the attacks. The woman answered slowly, deliberately.

Rae nodded; she knew these were the questions she was supposed to be asking.

She nodded to the hijab and bit her lip against the only question she'd ever had for this woman. “Why do you wear that?” She hesitated. “Is it to attract the right type of man?”

The woman's expression changed. Her eyebrows furrowed. “It's safer this way,” she said.

When the woman asked her why she didn't have a notebook, Rae tensed. She could tell her the truth—that she just wanted to know these things. She could tell her

about her memory—the way she kept things, held onto things, without needing to write them down.

She motioned with her hands, as if pushing the question away. She told the woman about the differences between pre-research and actual reporting.

The wrinkles around the woman’s eyes creased deeper, and she nodded, and Rae knew the woman had understood her. Understood past what she’d said. “Okay,” the woman nodded again, and she left.

Rae didn’t approach anyone else. She sat at the rim of the pool and watched strangers pass. She wondered if she should be scared of the women here like she was at home. She couldn’t make sense of the differences.

*

When Rae finally met the girls in the makeshift counseling office, she’d tried to make the place like her Blossom Street home, her laptop opened to a Top 40 stream. When Tova appeared at the makeshift counseling office, Rae shuffled papers, staring, glazed, at each folder before shoving it behind the last. Rae counted to five, looked up.

Tova’s hair was shorter in person.

Rae smiled, extended her hand.

Rae made tea, moving hesitantly. They settled on the couches.

“I don’t want you to think I’m here to tell you what to talk about. You came to us. They gave me your file. I won’t push you, so I want you to talk about whatever it is you need to or whatever it is you feel comfortable talking about.”

Tova’s eyes drifted to hers. She smiled slightly. “That’s fine. I feel comfortable talking to you. You remind me of a girl from school.”

Maroon 5 filtered through Rae's laptop speakers.

Rae breathed steadily, nodded. "That's really good. What's your situation like at school?"

Tova spoke slowly, moved slowly. The steam rose from her tea, drifted between them.

"I've been having problems with my grades, I guess. I get distracted."

Rae nodded. "Why's that?"

Tova breathed out heavy. Her face was calm. "People come here, they want me to talk about my parents. That's not what's in my head. It used to be. It used to be all the time, but not now. You can't go like that. That's not what's there when I'm trying to read for class or when I'm sitting around doing nothing.

"The last girl who came, she wanted me to talk about politics, about the revolt. There are plenty of people who will talk about that. But not me."

Rae watched the girl's fingers.

Tova's hands smoothed her dress over her thighs. "What do you think about when you're not thinking about anything?"

Rae smiled sideways, eyebrows together. "I don't really know."

Tova smiled, waited.

Rae opened her mouth, hesitated. She brought her tea to her nose, breathed in. "Well, we all just want the fairytale, right? To be loved?"

If Tova had responded, Rae didn't know. She couldn't hear her over the sound of the Top 40 station.

*

When Rae went grocery shopping that first week, she went alone, the way she hated. The way she was scared of. She bought food to tide her over between meals: small things she could make in her small kitchenette. She bought Bamba snacks. She bought a tiny travel alarm clock, so that she'd have Steve's voice back, even if she'd ignore it.

When she walked past the movie theater on her way to the kibbutz, it was still open, line still out the doors for some rom com, even if the doors were guarded by soldiers.

When she thought about what Tova would have said if she'd listened, she wondered what it would mean, with her parents dead, if she was still just concerned with her neighbors or boys. If that would have been fucked up or if it would have spelled something redemptive.

If she were counseling Jaq in that makeshift office, Jaq would have sang along to the Maroon 5 song. Rae knew there was something similar in the way that Tova and Jaq looked at her.

The plastic bags rustled as she carried them to the kibbutz, and Rae wished she could stare at Tova's car and house and life the same way: to try and uncover the thing that would make Rae get it.

That would imprint her into her back in the same way.

Eat

On the day that the birds fell, Maggie said, IT'S RAINING BIRDS – and Maggie said it like people say IT'S RAINING CATS 'N' DOGS or IT'S RAINING MEN or IT'S RAINING LOCUSTS, but I couldn't tell which type of way she meant it because she said it like Maggie said everything, in that toneless whispery kind of Maggie way.

When it rained birds, it rained birds louder than either of us could talk and made it so we couldn't hear each other all that day or that night. The thunder was loud, a type of loud that was louder than any type we'd heard before. The first hour, we found a new way of being scared—one that made us aware of the backs of our necks and how unsafe they felt, all uncovered and exposed and open. The thunder didn't get quieter, but it felt like it got quieter because it lasted so long and rang so loud. By the end of the first bad day, it echoed between our ears in a way that had become familiar. We fell asleep listening to it, and when we woke the next morning to sudden quiet, we got dizzy without our big, loud sound. That morning was the first morning, one when we still didn't know how to hear the new type of quiet.

The breeze ran through tree leaves, and we stood on the porch, but the breeze was the only sound, and we couldn't hear anything else. I slammed one of our shutters against the house to make sure that it was all still there, that we could still make noise and hear it, but I made the paint rain down in flecks, and I knew our neighbors, feeling the paint fall from their farms acres away, would whisper like they did, DILAPIDATED.

The news reports said that it wasn't the lightning that had killed the birds but the sound, because the sound had to have been so much bigger up there. Maggie asked what the tube had to say about it, and I told her, IT'S PART OF THE EARTH GETTING WARMER.

The birds fell in through the holes in the roof and rotted, and we knew we had to deal with them because the smell followed us everywhere: the car, the grocery store, the street, the gym, Tim's house, Mom's house, La Fiesta. We couldn't patch the holes in the aftermath though, because of the birds, so the rains that came after the big storm leaked down onto our tables and beds and buckets and filled our house with more of the musty smell. WE HAVE TO TAKE CARE OF IT, Maggie said.

It followed us to Tim's house, and poor Tim's dog thought we were becoming birds, and he tried to chew on our toes and our calves, tried to lick the smell off us. WHY WOULD HE WANT ROTTING BIRD? I asked, but when I asked, Tim only cut his eyes at me. IT SMELLS FRESHER ON YOU, he said. IT SMELLS LIKE YOU'RE JUST WOUNDED MAYBE. When Tim cut his eyes at me, I could tell because it was him and me that he really wanted to raise his eyebrows, but I knew that he couldn't. We'd talked about it on one of our wine nights when we were talking about his secret insecurities and I was talking about things I talked about when I was sober because none of it made a difference to me. He could make his eyebrows waggle with his hands, but that was the only way they could move, unless I pushed him back against the couch and made them waggle with my own hands. It was like they'd been stuck to his face with superglue—restricted to that one spot. I could tell when he was surprised or angry or sad even when he didn't cut his eyes, but I told him that only I could tell, everyone else just thought he

was super calm. CHILL-ASS TIM, I said they said. They could probably read him just as well, but I knew that Tim needed to know the way only I could really pay attention to how his face changed.

When Maggie and I went to Tim's and he cut his eyes the way he did, he offered to bring Ralph the lab over to take care of the bird problem. TAKE CARE OF, he said, but he wouldn't say what he meant by that, which seemed kind of cowardly. Because, Maggie and I agreed on this, if he was ever going to make crass jokes about dogs eating rotten birds, he'd have to be able to face the joke. But Tim always let Ralph chew on us without saying anything, and I think both Maggie and I knew that Tim wasn't the type who could face things head on. So Maggie let go of the joke because of that, but when we got home to that smell invading our heads the same way the sound had, we wished we'd really brought Ralph with us, even if it was just for him to howl up at those roof holes. The sound could have filled some of that space and pushed the bad air back up to sit with the birds. We would have cried, anyhow, seeing their bodies or seeing Ralph chew them like he chewed on us. We would have cried the way we cried when we'd first stepped outside that morning. But Ralph would have really been helpful in the way he was always helpful, curled against our ribs and baying away the bad, the way our falling-apart house made us feel before the dead birds, back when the dust and dirty boards felt warm.

I started singing to push the bad air up and out, howling like Ralph, but the only songs I knew by heart were hymns from when I was little or top forty songs that came on in the car, and when I didn't know all the words, sometimes I mumbled the ones I didn't know, and Maggie thought that was embarrassing. And after the hymns and the pop

songs echoed for too long between my ears, I started wanting the smell and the bigger sounds back inside me even though they were scary, weird things to miss.

We figured out what we had to do when we were at Tim's again, because sometimes it felt like we never left Tim's because our moldy floor started making us cough, especially when we sat on it like we did sometimes, and the floor in Tim's house in town was this pretty, polished, dark brown wood that looked like no one had ever lived on it. When we got there, Tim called his advice TIM'S LESSONS ON HYGIENE. He said, YEAH, I JUST PUT EVERYTHING IN THE FREEZER. SOMETIMES I PUT MY CANTEEN IN THERE SO I DON'T HAVE TO WASH IT, and when he said that, I figured it was for cold water all icy, but he told me that he put it in there empty, like a Frosty mug, sure, but because it cut out all the germs. They couldn't grow where it was too cold just like I couldn't stand in the cold for too long, because after a couple minutes, my skinny arms started shriveling. IT KILLS ALL THE LITTLE STUFF, LIKE YOU AND GERMS, he said. Maggie laughed and said that it really killed parts of us 'cause we smelled like dead birds and were generally just germy assholes. WE HAVE TO TEST IT OUT, she said, GO STAND IN THE COLD AFTER WE GET RID OF ALL THIS. I told her, I THINK WE'LL ALWAYS BE GERMY.

We figured out what we had to do when we were at Tim's, but we didn't actually figure it out until we got home again and stared up at our rotting wood ceiling. OH, we said, and Maggie climbed into the rafters and cried at the dead birds and carried them down in her arms. We should have planned better and brought a bag or gloves, but neither of us wanted to go up there twice. She scrubbed her arms raw and red once we put

the birds in the freezer, but there was also no way the smell could've been worse than it already was.

When we scooped them onto our freezer shelves, one of the birds twitched, and I told Maggie that I bet we could save him, and she said that I'd imagined the twitch, that there was no way. Her arms were already sunk deep in dishwater, and her elbows were soapy. HE STAYS IN THERE, she said, and I closed the freezer door, but I couldn't give up. MAYBE THIS WILL WORK DESPITE. I MEAN, YOU'VE SEEN *SLEEPER*, MAGGIE, and the drips started collecting in puddles around her. She said, YEAH, BUT WOODY ALLEN'S AN ASSHOLE NOW, and I knew she wouldn't let me open the freezer door again, even though I wanted to press my face against that bird-face and breathe more air into those bird lungs so that he'd twitch again and whistle and come back to us.

After we got the birds down, we patched the holes because the storms got worse, but we only fixed the places that were really broken and that we could see through. The birds had made dents in our siding and our roof that we couldn't patch or fix without re-siding the house. They'd rained like they were hail but like a hail of dead birds, and we found feathers stuck in the wood that hail never left. When we took to the car at least, we could hammer out the indentations and buff out the places where the birds had hit hard, but we never really used the car anyhow because it was too old and leaked coolant onto our clothes, but it was still easier than patching the holes, so we spent Saturdays working on it. But with the house, we could only peel back layers of wood. The dents were all the size of baseballs and never bird-shaped: just round and shallow, like the birds had wanted to get off and close to the ground as fast as they could. When we took walks to town and

passed all the other farms, our neighbors waved from their ladders as they re-sided their houses: trying to erase all the traces that the birds had been there. Our house looked worse than it had, and I was sure the whispers were getting bad, I could feel them prickle the back of my neck when I walked into the coffee shop in town, WHY WOULD ANYONE WANT TO LIVE THERE? We could stick our hands through the slats in some of the boards, but we'd always been able to do that, but maybe it was more obvious now.

Even though the storms were worse, they stopped leaving marks like they had. The news stopped reporting them because the birds were already gone, so there wasn't much news there, and they stopped because we'd all gotten used to it, too: the new kind of scared was normal now. With the rain all the time, we felt damp even at night, and we were sure that didn't help the smell, but we were also sure that we weren't the only ones who smelled anymore. Though we did miss the way dry air had made our skin feel tight and our nostrils all stretched.

If the lightning hadn't made Maggie's and my room so bright at night, we would've started sleeping with the light on.

If there had been any birds left those nights, they would have all dropped the same way as the ones before them, but rain filled the dents in the roof and carved into the knots on the wood siding, weighing down the places where the birds would have been.

The worst night of it, Maggie said, I GET WHY DOGS ARE AFRAID OF THUNDER, and I watched her eyes as they stuck to the ceiling.

I didn't sleep close to her that night, but I could feel the fear and loneliness in her pulling me toward her.

The fear, though, was the thing that made me roll over and away. The fear made me want to stand on the roof and attract the lightning to us. I could be the metal pole lightning magnet. HERE, WE'RE HERE, I'd say, and my height would call the sky to us. Maggie would keep staring up, her face lit by the lightning that didn't stop.

I wanted Maggie to stare up scared like I wanted the caterpillars to curl up under my fingers when I touched them. I wanted to see what they looked like when they wanted to hide but couldn't.

I wanted the lightning to come the way that I wanted to live in this house and the way I wanted to make Tim's calm face move. LOVE ME, I'd shout from the roof. Maggie would say it was all bad for me, like believing in dead birds, but whenever I passed the freezer, I murmured a prayer.

When I went over to Tim's, I think it was that thing in me that wanted to see the hiding that made me be there. Tim's house and all its newness and clean corners and smooth lines meant everything was exposed, and it made me feel clean. But the clean felt like cheating on our big, old house.

When I went to Tim's without Maggie, Tim said, I'VE BEEN READING A LOT OF LACAN LATELY, and he pulled me into his room to show me the box that he'd bought. He'd read about a bee experiment in the Lacan book, and he'd ordered a three-pound box of bees. The box announced an expected shrinkage (DEATH LOSS, said the box) of 1-2%, although the label was just starting to peel from the edges. Tim said, I WANT TO SEE WHAT HE SAW, and I stayed with him while he took out the bees, and I held the wooden box close against my chest and then farther out, once I thought about it. The package was still and quiet, and I was surprised, but I don't know what I'd

expected. I just knew that a box of bees should have felt more alive than that. I should have heard their thuds against the side, I should have seen them carving dents into the wood. I DIDN'T KNOW YOU COULD SHIP BEES, I said, ARE THEY SEDATED?

NO, he said, THEY'RE JUST QUIET BEES, and he laid out a dish of honey. He cooed to the single bee that he let fly free, because he only let one out, and it hovered for a bit before it found the honey. When the bee landed and started drinking, he pulled out his pocket knife and, before I could question it, cut the bee's abdomen and said, LOOK, and I looked, and the honey poured out the end that he'd cut. The bee kept drinking, and Tim said that it was just like the book, and I'd never read Lacan, but I nodded.

I wondered what he was going to do with the rest of the bees, but then I looked at Tim's calm face and that happy bee and asked the question Maggie would have asked because Maggie always knew the right question to ask. WHY DOES HE KEEP DRINKING? And Tim said, HE CAN'T NOT. I knew Maggie wouldn't have left it there, I knew that, but I didn't know where to go from there or how to ask it so I went home. When I told Maggie about it, she said, LOVE OR DESPERATION, and I wasn't sure about the way she said OR.

The day after the worst of the storms, I unplugged the fridge and told Maggie the power was out. She wouldn't have wanted me to revive the baby bird. LET HIM REST, she'd said. But I knew she'd have to open the fridge and the freezer to carry the cold stuff outside, to keep it cold.

She opened the fridge first, and it took her four trips to carry all the food outside and down to the creek, and I sat on our floor and waited and it seemed like she couldn't see me through how busy she was, but she got to the freezer, and with the freezer open

just for a minute, the ice cracked and the sound happened so fast and we both flinched, and then the bird was there.

BIRD, we yelled at it, but it couldn't hear us, and I remembered everything that the news had said about their deafness that I'd never told Maggie.

THERE'S A BIRD LEFT! I called to Maggie, and I narrated it because I didn't know how to make sense of it, and Maggie didn't ask it like a question, WHAT DO WE DO? but she answered it like a question, I GUESS DUCK, because this was the only way she could ever answer with the bird diving down at her. If we'd had more time to think about it, I would have laughed because lame jokes like that were more my thing, not like Tim's, but we had no time, and we just crouched lower to the ground, scared of the tops of our heads and the backs of our necks and wishing we had things to cover them with to stop the bird from touching us or his feathers touching us or anything he dropped touching us. I wished we hadn't patched the holes because I could see him staring up at the ceiling like there was thunder there and like he was looking for the holes, like he could remember them even after being asleep in the freezer for so long.

I called Tim, and Tim came, and he brought Ralph, but he wasn't an asshole about it, just brought Ralph because the dog got lonely on his own. He didn't let Ralph jump or go for the bird or even see it right away. He roped him to our kitchen table, and Ralph sniffed bird in the air and sat very still until he found it, his eyes watching it flit in and out of our kitchen as it looked for real air, wanting air the same way Ralph wanted to not be roped. We didn't ask Tim to kill the bird, and we didn't expect it when he did. I don't think we understood what was happening when it started to happen or when it happened or really until he left. WHAT? Maggie whispered. Tim stood on the chair and grabbed

and grabbed until he actually grabbed it, and when he had it, he wrapped his fingers around its neck—not tight but I guess tight enough. Tim wasn't fast, but the bird couldn't fly at real bird speed because, we guessed, it had been in the freezer for so long. When Tim grabbed it, he said the feathers were cold, colder than he'd ever felt, and we wondered how many birds he'd grabbed like that, how many he'd felt. He was so good at it. We wondered if he had something to do with all the dead birds, but that didn't make sense, not really.

Tim left and he left the bird on the table and we sat at the table because there was nowhere else to sit, and it felt like the bird was a dinner guest in the worst type of way.

Maggie said, PEOPLE LIKE TIM ARE THE REASON THAT HURRICANES ARE NAMED AFTER PEOPLE, and when she said it, I was sure someone else had said it before. IS THAT A CLICHÉ? I asked her, and she said, YES, and it made me skeptical but then it made me believe her, because somehow it worked.

What do we do with this? Maggie asked, gesturing at the bird, and when I said, WE COULD MAKE A BIRD PIE, both of us laughed because fuck, we knew how bizarre that would be. But the dead bird stared up at us with that dead eye, so damn shiny, and I guess we rethought it. PIGEON PIE IS A THING, THOUGH, I GUESS, Maggie said. THEY USED TO MAKE THAT IN THE OLD DAYS. AND WE'RE NOT MAKING A PIE OUT OF OUR CHILDREN OR ANYTHING, LIKE WHAT'S HER NAME.

PROCNE, I said because we'd both borrowed that book from Tim, BUT WE NEED TO KNOW WHAT TYPE OF BIRD IT IS BEFORE WE DO THAT.

When we made the pie, I pulled out my birdsongs CD, and Maggie thought I did it to soothe us, but I really pulled it out to soothe the bird, even though it was obvious he couldn't hear it or even feel the vibrations because he couldn't have heard it even when he was alive, not after the big storms blew out his ears. But I wanted to honor him, and the song became a funeral march, and we stuck our fingers in the pie crust. It had been a long time since we'd heard that sound, and with the birds back, we didn't have to sing or bay to push out bad air and so Maggie didn't get annoyed at how badly I sang or knew words. The bird without his down looked naked, and I wanted to touch the gaping hole where he would have heard us, but it made my neck crick in that scary way, and even though it was a hole, I knew it was going in the pie, that someone would eat that absence of space where his ear had been.

When I visited Tim with the pie, I dressed up like a bird, painted my forehead black. I glued feathers to my shoulders and imagined the glue like the stuff that held his eyebrows in place. YOU LOOK VERY MOONRISE KINGDOM, LIKE THAT WHAT KIND OF BIRD ARE YOU GIRL, Maggie said, and I said, WHAT KIND OF BIRD ARE YOU, and I left. I knocked on the door and Tim answered and I pretended to swoop and swup, and I fell on him like the bird would've done to us if we'd given it more time. WILL YOU STRANGLE ME TOO? I asked, and I told him, WE DON'T KNOW WHAT TYPE OF BIRD IT WAS, BUT WE MADE PIGEON PIE. Maggie and I had hoped that when I handed it to him, he would see the dead bird pie and feel it and cry like we'd cried that first day when we stepped outside and saw them littering the sidewalk, but he took it. WOW, he said, his face calm and blank and Tim's, and under his straight eyebrows, I could read his eyes, and his eyes said, I WISH I COULD CUT THE BIRD'S

ABDOMEN OPEN LIKE THAT BEE'S, but instead he sliced the pie and Ralph ate his piece and we sat in his living room, watching the news reports and trying to figure out the weather. Tim pulled his canteen out of the freezer and offered it to me like it was some sort of consolation prize. IT'S CLEAN, he said, and I wished Maggie had come with me to sing song words that I didn't know again and push the air, maybe loud enough to make holes in his pristine, intact roof.

Tim opened the freezer and brought me the water, and part of me expected something else, but there were only canteens in there, and I sat there in my feathers, which ruffled each time I breathed.

When I walked back home, the feathers itched at my shoulders, and I scratched at them and the glue, but the sticky stuff left my shoulders raw and flaky. The feathers didn't come off, but my fingers lost their bulk, and when I came back to Maggie, I was left only with the quills and a straggly, sad layer of down clinging to them.

DID HE ASK YOU WHERE YOU GOT THE FEATHERS? Maggie asked, and I said, NO, and we sat on the porch and my feathers wilted more with the breeze.

I'LL PUT THEM BACK IN THE FREEZER, I said, but I sat with her and stared out at our fields and felt my skin start to shrivel in the cold. We sat and listened, but we couldn't hear much anymore, and we weren't sure if that was because all the noisemakers were gone or because we'd lost that way of hearing.

I pointed out straight ahead, THAT MIGHT BE A GOOD PLACE FOR AN APIARY, and Maggie didn't question it, just nodded. OK, she said, and we sat and strained our ears for the buzz of bugs that we could catch. I went inside and got a mason jar and punched holes in the top, and Maggie said, THOSE ARE BIG ENOUGH FOR

THEM TO GET OUT, but we sat on our porch and listened and waited, and our skin shriveled us into smaller packages.

Healthy Choice

The company said this: All employees must use remaining vacation days before December 31 or let them expire. If the people we worked with had seen what we made of the letter from the company, they would have compulsively washed their hands and their arms and anything that could have ever touched us. They would have not invited us back. Probably that's what we wanted: to mark ourselves as not-them.

Before the vacation, we came home to the house at the top of the hill, trapped ourselves indoors, and drank coffee. We didn't want to go grocery shopping right after work. We knew then that we would be middle aged. We knew how easy it would be to buy canned corn and Healthy Choice dinners and fall asleep on the yellow couch with our mouths open. The Healthy Choice crowd, in their houses on their own hills, drained cups of wine and fell asleep forgetting. But for us, day was like night was like day. Always half-asleep, we ran in that constant state of not-forgetting. We drank coffee the same way they drank cab, because we didn't want to wake up to the offices where everything died, where even the plants wilted. We could have secretly fertilized them, the golden pothos and wandering Jews, waiting until everyone left the office, but we didn't have enough of a claim on the plants to water them when our bosses forgot. And it made us wonder about the ability to own a plant, a living thing like a pet or a wife, a thing you couldn't own, not out loud or obviously, not anywhere but sweaty between sheets, claws around waists, panting "you're mine."

Every night that year, we drank coffee and watched and rewatched and rewatched *90210*, and some days, after working together or sleeping together or cooking, we worried that we were too tangled together, that we were one of those couples that people hated: two people that think they're one, one person that thinks they're two. But we cycled through. We didn't want to sleep and arrive at a morning full of crumpled leaves that had fallen in the night. The leaf pile that spelled guilt and meant, "You should be guilty." In the mornings, we thought about crushing the leaves into the shag, making them a part of the office space. In their funeral at least they could become a more permanent reminder, staining the carpet brown and in the dark spot saying this: DO NOT FORGET ABOUT US.

*

The windows in our living room faced east, and when we sat on the yellow couch in the morning, the light slanted through the blinds, carving our faces from our necks and our necks from our bodies and the couch from under us. We existed in panels, and we ran together—slivers of one body, deconstructed. We sat on the couch in the disjointed light, reading about Bangalore's trash trail and trash tourism, and Mitch nestled closer to me, murmuring how awful and ah god and buying into that eco-consciousness rhetoric, feeding the hive mind. We looked at all the pictures, and the trash piled far above the visitors' heads, and we could smell nothing there. We smelled each other, the faint scent of soap on skin, our hair, but nothing to measure by or understand what we were seeing. The tourists looked like refugees, like 40-year wanderers. The desert around them scrubbed dry and dusty, and the trash blended into mountains of faded, dull color. My mouth dried looking at the dust; my nose crusted.

The tour map listed Lots of Smell as a destination, and we weren't sure how to read the tone in contrast to these people and this wall of garbage.

Kellogg's boxes and books and plastic wrappers and disintegrating mush. I zoomed in on the books, tried to read their titles, tried to see if they were worn or dog-eared, if their owners had scribbled notes or doodles along the sides or spilled water or smeared grease on them. But the books were already covered in food and dirt, and I couldn't see the traces of the people that owned them.

I tried to zoom in on the mush, to pick apart what I could when I couldn't touch it.

We sat like this until the sun rose and the dark stitched us back into a piece.

I told Mitch this: We need to find a chair to go by the mantle. When he said okay, I told him our vacation would be one like Bangalore, but it would be different. We weren't the same type as those tourists.

He wasn't as hesitant as he would be later. He said, I like the sound of trash tourism. It feels good in my mouth.

He wasn't as surprised as he should have been, but when I announced my need for the chair, I guess he noticed my eyes and how they rested nowhere near the mantle. My gaze always on our patio's wilting garden, the one I overwatered and overplucked like an overprotective mother.

I wanted a chair for the mantle, but more than that, I wanted to embrace the impulse deep within me to slow down for the trash piled on the curb like I would for an accident or a flattened housecat. I wanted to mourn this abandonment the same way I would a piece of roadkill. And I needed to do more than slow. I needed to see the death. I

needed to understand why an owner would abandon something to the street, perhaps granting it a worse fate.

I guess Mitch agreed because, for a chair like that, he knew somewhere like IKEA was too far of a drive. And he knew that at the big brown dumpsters, we'd never have to meet the Healthy Choice crowd, the ones who went to Publix at 5:30, who clogged the checkout lines in work clothes because of their conversations with the cashiers. We'd cover ourselves in soft flannels and big boots and wade through the corpses of once-living things.

The journalists went on tours as voyeurs. They went to criticize. They went to do what tourists do.

But we would be 40-year wanderers, and we'd sift through our meccas with bare hands, touching it all with reverence. We'd carry these places with us on our feet; we'd carry the smell with us in our hair. We'd pass the dumps and the flame flickering in the night, gas and burning trash in our lungs. Our lungs making their own silent offering.

*

We disappeared into our own spaces that first day, and even though I couldn't see him, I knew he was in the upstairs closet room, the one we called the office but that didn't have a desk in it—just boxes and blankets. I knew he'd wedged himself between two of the boxes, that he'd folded the blanket underneath him and then folded himself on top of it and cradled his laptop on him. His back against the wall, he'd be there. And I retreated to my space: the bed. I knew we were both only doing the same thing, and by the way we separated in this new way, I guessed that we needed our own decompression spaces: places where we could sleepwalk and not have the other notice. We spent our first

day like this, but when the sun set, we met downstairs. The nighttime felt like the right time to do it, so we waited until the offices closed and our coworkers were on their own hills.

We made a pact, one that we couldn't open bags. We had to let the objects come to us; we were playing tarot with dumpster contents. We wanted to not slice our fingers open on soup cans or broken glass, to not find the fishy, slimy things buried deep in white kitchen bags, but more than that, we wanted to let fate have its way.

*

When my great aunt had a heart transplant, she woke up crying for white chicken chili. She woke up wanting to make soup after soup. She wanted to live in her kitchen and to make her life there: to watch NASCAR on the tiny TV hooked up over the microwave. Before the surgery and before her new heart, she'd gone to car shows with her husband. She'd drank Coors Light. She hadn't been too far off from the NASCAR crowd, and it wasn't scary to see her fall for Danica in the months after. But the chili was a big change, and the cans of beans piled up in her cupboards where the cocoa powders and flour used to be. Her husband was convinced that it was just the stress of the surgery that had changed her. But when she talked to anyone other than him, she told us: she knew she had something else in her. A heart that remembered its owner like our dumpster finds must have remembered theirs. When we went with her to the local races, she breathed in burnt rubber and steadied herself on our limbs. With her hands on my arm, she refocused on the tarmac and told me that she remembered the smell. She whispered this: The heart stores memories through combinatorial coding in nerve cells. I wished I'd taught her this; I knew the way she'd done the research without any of us, calling

research facilities and public libraries. I'd found her notes, buried under tissues in her nightstand drawer. At night, she said, she dreamt of hot flashes of light in her face, and she knew, without seeing the charts, what had happened to the man who gave her the heart.

She told us that she was never sure of the story, but she wanted to think only good things of the muscle beating inside her. She wasn't sure who'd hit the man, but it had been with a baseball bat. The dreams she had of the light were memories of the way the wood splintered as it entered his cheeks, his lips, his forehead. She never got much further than that; she didn't want to make up the story. She wanted us to believe her more than she did to know. But she was sure it was an accident, sure that some nephew had misunderstood a game or misunderstood how fragile humans can be. Maybe the man had surprised a stranger into anger. She usually settled here. He'd surprised someone.

The change didn't happen slowly for her. She craved the chili as soon as she came out of surgery, and we joked about the doctors mixing her up with someone from the maternity ward. Her life had revolved around food before everything happened, but she'd never served beans. She claimed them indelicate. She never touched jalapenos or hot sauce; she poured cream into everything the way we poured Sriracha. Relatives that didn't know her said she adopted this other life because she was unhappy with hers. But when she'd volunteered to make the dessert and smacked our hands away from sneaking fingers into her bowls, that had been her way of being happy, we thought. Her new way made our eyes burn, and our arms ached for the awful pinch that meant she'd caught us. But we still lingered as she cooked. We found her in the kitchen, cans scattered.

*

The first night, we drove to city center, to East Ridge Lofts, the apartments that paralleled the canal. We parked in the back corner of the lot, and we sat in silence until our hands grew cold. Mitch was nervous, and I wanted to blame it on coffee, but I got what it was—this wasn't his shrine the way it was mine. But I doubted myself in this. I coached him through: Trash became public property once it became trash. We would not be the first to do this. We would not be the first to dumpster dive. It would be normal. I said these things to him, that he would be okay, but I did not say to him that The Lofts was private.

The dumpsters were close enough to the apartments that we could have knocked on 4C's window from where we stood outside the big, bulky containers.

Our pact kept us from the mess. But the bags that ripped open when we dug leaked ripe juice onto our pants, and Mitch pointed, looking at me. I soothed him. I patted his hair, and he flinched at my garbage hands. They're not dirty yet, I shushed him. Mitch was never hesitant until actually faced with the thing he feared. He did this with haircuts and strange foods, and my fingers always coaxed him to safety.

The first day, we found ripped-open shampoo samples, old towels, two egg cartons, a basket of new looking clothes, an unopened box of condoms, a bundle of clean dollar bills, a bag of McDonald's ghosts, a heavier bag of McDonald's, a series of letters written like telegrams. A raccoon that looked up when we appeared but never ran. The raccoon watched as we sorted through the letters, and Mitch asked if, from the way he was looking at us, we were the ones who were supposed to run.

We found a drawing, with a giant woman and a tiny house, and I wanted to scrawl smoke curling out of its chimney. I wanted to draw flowers on it. I wanted to draw the

mother that had thrown it away: she would be a giant grey and black star encompassing all of it, darkening all of the edges.

That first day, we found the first of the couches. I unzipped the cushion and stuffed the telegrams inside, and we didn't have to talk to decide. I dragged the sofa to a level spot in the lot and nestled next to the arm, and Mitch nodded: She's the one. We shoved her into the bed of the truck.

The first telegram I buried in the couch said this:

September 15, 2014

BRITTANY,

B REQUESTS ROAST BEEF FOR TUESDAY STOP

SENDS HER LOVE STOP

ALL MY OWN,

HENLEY

Next to the couch, we found the almost chair, covered in leaves and shoved behind the pile of yard trimmings. Mitch said it looked like an Eames, but it was closer to the type we lived in during elementary school. We sat in this chair from science to recess to English. But the thing was charming, even if it was too yellow of a stain. Rust crept onto the metal bolts holding the top slab of wood to its base. I said to Mitch that I worried we'd never find the right stain. Nothing matched the red cherry on our mantle. We'd have to paint it to keep everything from clashing. He said, we could always stain a chair to match, but we'd sworn long ago we were done with staining. The smell was the one that obliterated any other scent, the one that we'd always used to cover the smell of trash, and

this felt wrong here. Like trying to pretend that the furniture was something other than left behind. The pieces had to be dirty; we had to keep them dirty.

When we'd stained furniture ourselves, the smell had clung to our bodies and wedged under our fingernails, and polyurethane coated my wrists in the places where my gloves didn't cover and the vegetable oil didn't rub it off. Vegetable oil smudging shiny down my arm like grease or dirt.

As we left, my flashlight lit the raccoon's eyes like spider eyes. Pinpricks in the dark. He was drawn to the light or to us or to the couch, but we could tell he never looked away.

When I sat on the couch at the end of the first day, I breathed in deep. Nail polish stained a raspberry heart on the sofa arm. The couch smelled like girl and must. I breathed in, closed my eyes. I steadied myself on its limb.

The girl that spilled the nail polish here couldn't ever leave this couch. I could see her when it happened, the instinctive panic that set in. No matter how hard she rubbed, she would only ever be rubbing it in, clothing the couch in a piece of her. But I knew instinctively that after, she wouldn't have cared. I knew that in some accidental way she'd wanted to mark this thing: to possess it. Make it part her. She painted its toenails like I painted my cat's when I was little. I rubbed my fingers against the grain of the fabric, and dirt rubbed deeper into the grain of the couch, marking a dark gradation of circled silt like water splotches.

*

After the floods when I was little, we took these vacations. We dug in dumpsters because the water had come up to the doorframes and we'd lost everything we owned.

The month of the floods, we stayed at my great aunt's because she was on higher ground, but the water had still reached the pot of tomato soup from dinner, cooling on the counter, and the kitchen had filled with thick red. We slept on the second floor, and we slept to the sound of water sloshing in the heat vents by the baseboards. She came downstairs that morning to a floor stained bloodshot, and my aunt could only cry. I slept naked back then, and when I woke to my great aunt, the sound of her replacing the water, I walked down the street the way I was. I was old enough to have had nightmares about showing up to school naked, but my insides were only weight, and the weight kept me from caring. The day was like the dream was like the day. The neighbors roped me in and brought me back, and my great aunt, feet stained red, asked me why I'd left.

After the flood, all the trash was waterlogged. We didn't take futons or upholstered furniture, but all our wooden furniture rotted underneath us as we sat in it. At the dumpster by the playground, I found the flowered couch with the metal frame. We didn't have to talk to decide. My great aunt nodded. We tried with the flowered couch, that one time, when I was little, and she had torn the flowers from its limbs, strewn them all over our lawn. I wanted to plant the pieces because I didn't know then how plants actually worked. She'd re-covered the couch in a deep mauve the texture of velvet but scratchier, and when I sat on it, I always faced its back, digging my heels into the cracks.

We ran from dumpster to dumpster, and we kept finding the raccoon that never ran. At every dumpster, we found him, no matter the distance. A star pattern marked his back right paw, and we were certain, every time, that it was him. I started taking trips by myself in the afternoon, daring him to show, looking for him more than for the chair for the mantle, and he kept pace, eyes always looking back.

After the first night, we rented a cargo van.

At the dumpster by the church, we found old photos: the back of a woman's head, a dilapidated building, two girls smiling with arms wrapped around each other. On the back of the photo of the girls, someone had drawn a dog and a cat, and I wanted to draw myself floating above them, an alien next to the moon and stars.

At the dumpster by the church, a man came out to us, lugging a Christmas tree. He saw us, and eyebrows raised, he said hello. I frowned at him and his polo, and I could feel Mitch behind me move backward toward the van.

I asked the polo shirt if he felt bad about the tree.

The polo shirt asked, Should I?

I said these things to the polo shirt: He'd chopped it from its roots. He'd made it his own, adorned it with tinsel and popcorn and ornaments from the parish. He'd abandoned it. He was abandoning it. He'd laid claim to this thing only to strip it of its needles, to lay it bare. I asked him this: Have you ever had canned corn?

The man didn't know what to do with me, and Mitch had folded into a squat. The man said we could take what we could use, that we had an hour left, but he wanted us gone. After the hour was up, he'd call the cops.

I nodded. I moved to shake his hand, but he dropped the tree beside me. He turned.

I told Mitch this when he left: I think I got to him. I asked Mitch this: Did you see the look in his eyes?

We lugged the wilting tree into the U-Haul. We would plant it, a giant cutting, next to the wilting garden next to our patio. We'd lean it beside the house so that it could

see the sunshine for another week at least. We'd plant ornaments on him and a silver star at his top.

The church was the first place that we didn't see the raccoon, and neither of us mentioned it. We listened to the clank of the cargo van as the thin steel bottom flexed over the bumps.

*

I wondered what our own trash would look like to whoever found it. In our bin at home, I found our condom that I'd buried underneath tissues. I found soiled underwear inside another plastic bag. I found dental floss, a razor, a shredded to do list. We hadn't tied our bag shut yet, next to our sink; I didn't break any pacts. I left the mess intact. But looking at it from the outside, I wanted to bury our condom somewhere in an unopened box where no one could see or claim it.

We threw out all of our furniture. We threw it out so that we could drag in the decrepit cabinets from the street-side dumpsters. If we threw out what we'd had, though, we realized it would only end up in one of those dumpsters. We piled it in our backyard like a new temple, and the fence hid it from our neighbors. The old furniture shaded our wilting garden, but it was already mostly dead.

We didn't let the vacation interrupt our routine. We still drank coffee, more out of habit than a desire to escape sleep, and it made our nights frantic.

We visited twelve dumpsters, and at the end of the week, we traveled to the one we'd saved for the end: the really good dumpster. The dumpster of legend. The dumpster that trash tourists would have talked about.

The active adult communities only let in homeowners who were 55 or older, which meant that their populations were aging out. Which meant that relatives, every month, left the contents of entire houses on the curbs. They got tired of finding grandchildren to send the furniture and knick-knacks to. Estate sales only wanted estates worth a certain amount. And so Leisure Knoll's dumpsters filled.

When we found the chair, we gasped. It was Danish this time, more of a Wegner design, with the top bar curved smoothly in an arc.

She's perfect, we said, and when we said it, we realized it couldn't be ours.

I said this: No one loved this chair. I smoothed it with my hands and felt the dearth of scratches. I said this: This chair lived in an office where no one ever unwrapped it. No one ever sat in it. No one killed a plant in this chair or read a letter in it.

I said this: I wouldn't want to sit in her and feel her newness and be the person that she would make me.

Mitch said this: You're right. Mitch said this: The color is slightly off.

We left the chair. And leaving the chair meant we would still be always searching, the same way we were always remembering and always not-forgetting and never really awake.

But that day, after the chair and the way we broke our own hearts by leaving it, we found the raccoon. Mitch cried when he saw it, and he said this: This is why I can't do this anymore.

I said this: I don't believe in coincidences. And we both knew it was the raccoon we were meant to have.

The raccoon flattened motionless at the bottom of the pile, and when we stared down, the raccoon stared up the same way he had the first night.

On the way back to our house at the top of the hill, he slid alone from wall to wall in the back of the U-Haul truck.

*

In the midst of our old furniture in the backyard, we cut up the raccoon. We slid the skin off his shoulders. Mitch said, This smells like regret, and I said, That's why we're wearing masks.

We created a wooden frame out of sticks and wrapped it in twine and plastic bags, and we took his skin with rubber fingers and sprinkled borax and salt on the inside. We coated his outside with polyurethane. We didn't know what to do about the bubbles, not on fur. The professionals didn't really use polyurethane, we knew that, but it felt right. It was what we had. The smell took away his smell, but it let us keep him. We stitched the pelt to the form. We stood him next to the mantle.

We thought about burying the remains of his entrails, but we knew the rest of the animals would come: looking for him the way we did.

*

The day I found the flowered dress with flowered fabric like the fabric from the couch my great aunt tore apart when I was little, I layed the dress out in our backyard. I draped it over the garden plot, next to the starred tree. I was old enough to know how plants worked, but not old enough to know how to make them grow. But the flowers here were plants that would grow. No one would have ever let me wear that dress to work.

That night, we watched *90210*, and as it ended, it washed our skin in flickering images. Mitch dug his nails into my arms. He said, I own you. He said, I want to leave myself in your body. His fingers fumbled against me. Our sweat dripped a stain between us, and the dirt from the couch clung to me and then to him. Bare skin against the couch grain, he said this: I'm worried about the germs. I threaded my hands through his hair and moved his head to my chest, and, superimposed palm trees reflected on our flesh, I coaxed him through.

After, on my chest, Mitch fell asleep, and the TV fell asleep, and the room filled with black.

I untangled myself from his legs and the couch's grip and dug in my bag for the flashlight. I knelt under the mantle so that my face was level with the raccoon's.

His eyes reflected the beam back at me, and I stared. I wondered what more I'd expected to see in them other than the light.

I put my finger to the dirt still damp on my skin, and gathering a clump, I smeared it on the raccoon's paw, crossing a star between his claws. If we ever left him, he'd carry this with him at least, a more permanent reminder, staining his fur brown and in the dark spot saying this: WE WERE HERE.