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RIB

By

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Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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RIB

Chairperson: Debra Magpie Earling

*RIB* challenges the narrative of Adam, Eve, and the Garden of Eden through the women of “SKULL,” “BONE,” “SCAR,” “SPINE,” “BLOOD” “CUNT,” “HAND,” and “HAIR.”

## SKULL

Tuesday at PetSmart at the checkout counter under the AC vent something sniffs at the crannies and cracks of my brain so I keep hitting “Enter” instead of “OK” and “OK” instead of “Total.” My boss, MIKE, always MIKE like his nametag—capitalized and thin—doesn’t pay attention to me, just nods when I nod or waves when I wave, like a PetSmart puppet but bald. I used to hope MIKE got kinky in his hours between me yesterday and me today but not Tuesday. Tuesday, he looks like a naked mole rat and I hope he’ll get stuck jerking it forever because after the third complaint he sends me home.

“Are you alright,” he says.

It isn’t a question because MIKE is watching a customer and I answer with a nod but MIKE doesn’t see so he doesn’t know. The thing in my head slinks against the backs of my eyes so I circle my hands along their sockets and this MIKE sees. When I walk out the sliding glass doors birds and cats and dogs and rats scream and beat against themselves.

I call Danny but he doesn’t answer so I drive by the McAllister’s where he works. His Ford isn’t in the lot so I pass by his apartment real fast but it isn’t there either.

I barely make it home before Aunt calls. I say I'm sick, too sick to speak right now while the thing prowls around, sniffing inside my ear. I tell Aunt it's cramps, bad cramps, maybe a sinus infection and read acetaminophen facts off a Dayquil box because I can't sound too bad or too suspicious or she'll hop a plane. While she talks, I walk to the Texaco down the street to buy earplugs and a sleeping mask because I need to stuff out sound and listen to whatever wanders inside my mind's folds.

I sleep with my mouth open so she must've gotten in that way. I don't know how I know she's a "she" but there's a "we," now, too. A "we" and a "they" and "they" have multiplied, bred, replicated asexually. Or, maybe they are fucking. Maybe, I swallowed two. It doesn't matter. The bottom line is there are more now.

You'd believe me if I could peel back my face and show you them in there. Their scales are works of art like stamps or coins, tiny and ornate and delicate, green and brown and curling around like water shifting. Their tongues whip in and out of their snouts in forked flashes so obviously sniffly that if you watch you'll know that's how they smell.

By Saturday, their skulkings make my hair itch so much I shave it off in chunks. I had hair like carbs, thick as bread. I thought I'd miss it but now I can gnaw my nails deep into my skull to feel my babies writhe the way pregnant mothers feel at their children. Danny told Aunt about my hair which means he's noticed me driving and it makes me so happy I lick my teeth over and over to hold back my voice but it scares Aunt anyway what with the wet flicking, ticking sound it makes.

My Aunt loves me so much that I can get away with most things, but she wants me to move home all the sudden like it's the most natural thing in the world for me to leave Danny. He'll come around and the thought of abandoning him makes me rip at at

my nail beds so much that MIKE says I'm frightening customers. It's the 27th and I need to put rent on Aunt's credit card because stress is bad for the pregnancy so I'll tell her one truth at a time to keep her at bay. Today, I'll tell her about the people in Kentucky with blue skin and tomorrow we'll talk about these fruit flies who can't get drunk because they're missing the gene named "happyhour."

I buy a hand mirror at Sally's Beauty Supply on my lunch break with my Aunt's card for \$15.99 which should make her think that I'm trying makeup or head scarves or something "normal" that means I'm "alright." Plus, I've got plans for the mirror. The PetSmart and Sally's Beauty Supply are neighbors in a strip mall where weeds fight through the cracks every few weeks before a guy with saggy eyelids lops the flowers off above the root with a whacker. People here stare at my head even though I wear a baseball cap that says NY and I wouldn't let them if I could charge the crickets to my Aunt's card without questions. For as long as I keep this job, I can steal them. So I smile at the gawkers with their barking dogs and their crying kids with hands I smell the stick on. I smile and steal ten crickets a day, or twenty every other, always thirty before weekends and I think MIKE might suspect something strange but what kind of sicko would you have to be to question a woman with cancer? Not that I have cancer. The staff treats me real good now, so good now I could steal more crickets if I wanted.

I hide a hanging mirror with a gaudy frame against the back wall of my closet behind my clothes. I pull the door closed, push the hangers aside, sit with my back to the mirror, hold up my Sally's mirror, and watch the skin on the back of my head ripple and

writhe. I let my tongue *thut, thut, thut* as it pleases and follow the pointed heads as they glide over one another. Babies in my neck, now.

For ninety seconds a day I heat olive oil in a nonstick frying pan, pour live crickets into the oil, and cover the pan with a good strong lid so they can't jump up and down on my counters with their beady little feet. The legs and antennas took some getting used to, crickets go stiff when they're dead so my throat's as holy and sharp as a cheese grater but I don't mind—being a good mother takes sacrifices. The babies don't need feeding every day but I've gotten where I like sautéing crickets with squash and zucchini and seasoning it all with paprika so now I cook it all the time.

Danny didn't like me eating insects. I said it's old world, a delicacy and he said I've lost it and he left me. But, he's hooked on cocaine we call yuca since we used to buy it from a gringo on Yuca Street so what does he know?

Last week, I sat in the McAllister's parking lot in my car eating a baked potato I bought inside when Danny went in for his shift with a green cast on his hand, fitted from his elbow to his fingers. He probably yucaed out a window or yucaed off a roof. I thought it'd make me feel bad seeing him like that but instead it makes me realize that defenestration is my favorite word so I practice it in my mouth between bites of potato.

After work on Thursday, the air is sticky with the kind of humidity that never hits Dallas but sends slick pussing from the people walking by me when it does. Everywhere I walk I see the scatter of squirrels' skittish tails, sprinting away and it's not like I care but it does make working at PetSmart more difficult. The dogs refuse to stand in my line, the cats yowl in their cages when I pass and don't get me started on the glorified rats. I've

considered eating a gerbil or two—thought about it, as they say—but I don't like the idea of those clawed toes scampering down my throat.

Men don't stand in my line anymore either. I'm not much to hold in the eye and look at, I mean, I like my features fine but I've never been one of those girls bearded baristas fork over free Starbucks for. Still, with one buzz cut in a bathroom, I erased myself. I became invisible to the dads and the dudes buying dog food and all their endless chit chat, their lingering hands, even the hot rot of their eyes roving my concaves of skin. Men don't want from me anymore and it's better than Danny or yuca or both, all the time and energy it saves.

Now, it's the kids who watch me close but their parents just apologize for the staring and the crying. They pull at their crazed pets and shrieking offspring and tell me “sorry, so sorry” because adults tune out what they don't want to see so that everything fits into the pattern, the plan, the whatever you call how you get through your day.

I keep finding myself at the Texaco or pressed against a cool shop window with no memory as to why I walked there or where I wanted to go. I sit on the cement sidewalk and try to think, try to flip through my mind like a photo album, but the pictures come out all screwy and out of order like the babies ate my memories and then the thought is gone and I'm lying in the palm of the sun, why, I don't know. The only thing I know to be true is written on the back of my hand in Sharpie: “boomslang venom makes anything they bite bleed from all the holes of its body.” I should've written down my address.

As if on cue, my Aunt calls. People must smell emotions like animals do, smell it in their bones.

“What’re you up to today, honey?” she asks.

The sound of her voice makes my babies quiver their tails.

“The Rangers won,” she says. “Four to three, Michael Young hit the last homer.”

She’s fucking someone new or she wouldn’t follow baseball but she might not appreciate me saying so I say nothing.

My babies churn, whisking my blood to a froth so I hiss the whole way home to drown out the cry of dogs, spitting at me, brave behind their fences. Out of the corners of my eyes I swear I see men following me, leering down from concrete roofs, telephone poles, trees, materializing only ever in pieces, shifting from view every time I turn my head and I can’t decide if I’d rather run or beg and plead because I can’t go back to life as it was when men could sniff and hunt me down. Finally, I slam my door against the shadows, lock the deadbolt, ram in earplugs, pull back the hangers, close the closet door, and strip to my waist to look in the mirror.

I know what I’ll do.

I’ll tell Aunt I gave Danny the boot and everyone has a unique tongue print, like fingerprints and that my old Greek Mythology professor Dr. Kulpatrick asked me to grade papers for nine-hundred bucks a semester and that I’m doing just fine. I’ll take a shower before work tomorrow but not again for a while so I look good and gross and sick. I’ll sit in the bathroom four times a shift for ten minutes each and talk to MIKE about nausea. The babies caress the tenderness of my throat and stroke what they’ve left of my brain. I close my eyes and smile at my reflection as a thin body crosses my forehead in a smooth “s.” I practice telling my Aunt about Blood Falls, this glacier in

Antarctica that gushes fantastic stuff scientists call oxidized salty water that lay people like because its weeps blood like skin.

I'm ringing up a fake hot dog and all the caged critters are talking at once when one of the bigger babies cruises across my face. I don't notice until the hot dog woman shatters the animals' hum with a screech.

I glance up at her from under the baseball cap, shielding my eyes as much as I can. Her eyes sit huge and her face drains pale and she is definitely staring at me. MIKE scrambles over, puts his hand on her shoulder and asks what's wrong, calling her 'Ma'am' in that way no one likes. The babies don't understand and I need to whisper be cool, be quiet but I can't so they tumble around my head, diving down and springing back up to pound against the crown of my skull in coils.

As the woman stammers an apology, I keep my head bowed and pull my collar close around my throat and try my best to blush because cancer's my only hope. MIKE takes the bag with the toy and holds it out to the woman, who trades him \$4.00 like I'm not even there and leaves as quickly as her legs can go.

A silence sits in the PetSmart. The dogs don't bark, the rats don't dig, and the birds don't prune. My face ripples, a river coursing, as the kiddos slither under my skin and for once, MIKE doesn't speak or look away.

"I know," I say. I clutch tighter at my neck and fake a sob. "They promise it'll grow back."

I hang my head and watch MIKE from the corner of my eyes. He seems to buy it until a baby chokes this moment to twist around her sister, shooting my ear up then back down, all of my NY cap with it. MIKE's pupils dilate. As calm as I can, I hold out the

only card I can play, the receipt. MIKE squeals, snatches, and hurries out the door after the woman and her fake hot dog, happy for an excuse to blink away what he's seen with his own two eyes.

Aunt's happy to hear that Danny's gone. She tells me so then asks about work, have I made any new friends, do I miss her? She rattles over the speakerphone while I watch my kiddoes in the mirrors, a knife I use to butterfly chicken beside me on the carpet. If I angle the hand mirror just right, I can see twenty of myself in a line—easy—and pretend I'm infinite.

I scoot and twist to spin around and face the big mirror set against the wall. Someone slinks over my collarbone. Aunt's voice echoes over speakerphone like a pervert preacher in a church on Sunday. Would I like her to buy me a plane ticket home for the weekend, can I make it, do I even want to make it, and I say ok all thick because I'm holding my tongue outside of my mouth over an empty bowl, juggling the knife, trying to decide on dead center.

“Up to you, baby,” the phone says. “If you can't come here, I'll come there.”

I set down the bowl, the knife.

“It'd be fun,” the phone drones on. “And honestly—I'm worried about you.”

The crawlers churn and hiss so fast like to strike, like to bite, that the skin from my neck to my crown pulsates with them. My eyes bulge, my ears oscillate.

“Yes,” I say. “Absolutely,” I say, because there's nothing else to be done.

“Wonderful! I'll book it tonight.”

I can't answer because my children gnaw at all they can reach, swallowing me whole. I shut off the phone, curl my knees to my nose and scream up at the hangers. I try

to distract my mind, to grab onto something true. There are more fake flamingos in the world than flamingos, or are there more real flamingos than fake flamingos? Before I decide, I pass out from the pain.

When I wake the next morning, the babies skate under my skin all quiet like they didn't just try to eat me from the inside out and even my pupils look sanded away, barely there. My head feels swollen, full of open sores but I need more crickets so I stumble into my PetSmart shift with sunglasses on.

MIKE shoots me looks as if that'd be enough to make me pluck the sunglasses off my face and cock my tail between my legs. The animals are especially loud today, so loud that customers walk in and back out in a hurry without bags or receipts or anything. MIKE cleans the cages and pets at everything like it'll help but they keep trying to escape. After a bird nips his hand, MIKE barrels toward my counter clutching a Kleenex to his finger because enough is enough and tells me to take my sunglasses off.

I bring the aviators off my nose and look straight into him so he can see the slits cut into my eyes and feel like a real asshole but MIKE stops walking. His jaw drops and his eyes widen as if they're all attached to strings and his feet crack as lines of fracturing stone cut up and up his limbs, now half white and grey, then gone, rock, then his torso, his arms. MIKE bawls, wild, and rolls his head on his neck in circles until the creeping limestone covers his chin, locking his head at a horrific angle. The animals howl when MIKE can no longer scream and I can see the death carved into his eyes from here.

People stampede around me, charging towards the glass doors. The babies feed again, ripping off chunks of what little skin still lines my skull. Their shredding inhabits

my every thought, every move—I sink to the ground vomiting, clawing at my scalp with my fingernails.

One by one, snakes chew through my skin and leap from my skull like eels, like hair, like fingers—branches of bone. But, they don't leave me. Instead, they lick at my face and my shoulders with their forked tongues. I lie on the ground twitching and spitting blood, waiting for everyone trapped in my mind to bite through the bone.

When the last snake meets the air, they knead my arms and my shoulders and my back to lessen the pain. Green and brown and black with yellow eyes—babies long enough to twist past my waist. I pull myself from the floor, dripping vomit, and sit until I can stand. The rats, the cats, the reptiles—everything—are as still as MIKE but the PetsMart has never been louder. Gooseflesh rises on skin, fur bristles in the aspen shavings, feathers flex, grating against each other like knives. My snakes glide like grass in wind *thut, thut, thutting*, smelling the caged animals whose reek soaks the air. We're hungry.

I knock two knuckles against MIKE's petrified face. His only response is a beautiful thing—the dull, echoing thud of flesh against rock. I pick up a floor-model dog kennel and throw it into the bird cages. The parrots and the canaries and the finches shriek as they take to the air. My babies snack on the colors as they pass, ripping the nasty things into halves and quarters, swallowing without chewing as I stand in the center of it all. I lift my gaze and shift it from one bird to another, to another, to another. They turn to stone from tail to tip, their wings fighting the added weight of their tail feathers until their torsos become rock, their necks, their eyes, the tips of their open beaks. They sink slow, as though the air were water and shatter against the ground. We sample the

PetSmart spread until my babies are full and *thut, thut, thutting* about sirens two miles away—now—one. But, I can't leave without my hat.

So I go back my register under the AC vent where I kept my personal effects in a Ziploc bag, slip my phone in my pocket, and set the aviators on my nose. The snakes coil back into my head for a post-feast snooze. I pull on my baseball cap that says NY, nothing but a woman, deliciously invisible, before I hit the backdoor.

## BONE

I'd developed this quirk where I'd be walking along minding my own business and shards of metal would erupt from my bone marrow, cut through my skin, and click into place like the blade of a pocket knife. My biceps would rip open, my forearms. My fingers would split clean down the middle. It hurt like hell but through the pain I already felt bad for my former, fleshy self. Now, I was a winged thing walking on air, a sphinx in the sky, I'd flex my feathered fingers.

The feeling started to hit me at strange spots, like Kroger. Three metal feathers sliced from my armpits, flecking my t-shirt in blood. My arms rose of their own accord. When I bumped into Kyia, she yanked me towards the new Kroger Plus card that she dangled in her fingers.

“When did they change these?” she asked.

Kyia pulled out her keys to compare the ratty card to mine. Fluorescent lights bounced back at her, reflected in my new card's lamination.

“That is fresh,” she said.

Kyia turned to the cashier, oblivious to the adrenaline gathering at my fingertips. I dug my elbows into my sides. I found no trace of the warm blood that had felt so real.

“Can I trade mine for one of these?” Kyia asked.

The cashier raised an eyebrow and clicked her nails against the register. It was two o’clock in the morning. “Do you want to open a new account?”

“Oh, no. No, I guess.”

“Kyia! Scoot,” I said.

Outside, a security guy watched us pass. His cataracts and drooping face gave him the look of a bloodhound past his prime. Once we got the car loaded up, Kyia danced in her seat.

“You know what this means?” she asked, wagging the little plastic card in front of the steering wheel. “You’re A Memphian now. Grit n’ grind, produce in the pantry.”

We hung a right on Cleveland Street. The Vietnamese grocery and the Crosstown flea market were as silent as I’d ever seen them. The spot smelled like spices spilled in mud.

“I love that you can see the Sears Building from your place,” Kyia said.

The Sears building, renamed the Crosstown Concourse last month, loomed to our left. The building stood walled off by a tall fence that didn’t do much good. Most of the lower windows were knocked out or cracking around points of contact from rocks or bottles. The fractured windows rippled in our headlights, cobwebs of glass. We could just make out the highest turret, standing thirteen stories higher than anything else for blocks. A mural flashed by—Rosie the Riveter and an all caps scrawl: PROTECT HER.

Kyia broke the quiet. “Mom said it was built in the thirties. Used to be the biggest building in Memphis.”

“No shit. Did you ever try to sneak in?”

“No way,” Kyia said. “It’s full of crackheads. We did get into that abandoned Navy base by the Arkansas Bridge. With the burial mound across from it, you know? Completely regretted it. There were still beds and tables. Super creepy.”

“Burial ground? Here?”

“Oh, yea.” she said, pointing east. “The Trail of Tears is marked too—runs along North Parkway.”

I shook my head and took a right onto Patricia Street. We stopped in front of a wilting duplex of brown brick.

“And you brought me here why?” I asked.

“Memphis, baby,” Kyia shouted, beating her hands on the dashboard in a drumroll. “Memphis.”

I regretted the Kroger run four hours later, when I woke up late for work. I checked a few shirts until one surfaced that a little Febreeze could fix and stubbed my toe on a sketchbook in the bathroom.

Things weren’t less chaotic at the firm. My desk didn’t sit in an actual office in the cramped building, but more of a fat hallway. A fat hallway that half the office used to reach the copying machine, and the other half used to reach everybody else. Every time I made a call, someone walked through one of my doors and out the other. Somehow, I never really talked to anyone.

“Please call me back when you can,” I told a voicemail box. “Thank you.”

Around 10, I realized that I hadn’t left anyone a call back number. Around 11, the office manager walked through.

“You know,” she whispered. “Vegas is two hours behind, so wait until later.”

This, of course, meant I'd wasted two hours every day for nearly three months, and everyone knew, and everyone decided not to say anything.

"No worries," she said. She never broke her stride.

I took a deep breath and picked up my cell. Ears pricked for oncoming footsteps, I texted Kyia: *Beer and Office Space tonight?* The phone's clock read 11:13AM. I popped my neck and added three skull emoji's.

By the time five o'clock rolled around, I still hadn't heard back from Kyia. As I paced the grid of my kitchen's linoleum floor, my phone buzzed. *Kyia: Hey babes, I'm sorry I can't! Going to a movie with Dylan.*

I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth. Shit. I twisted a few dials on the stove and tore a frozen pizza out of its packaging. As the pizza thawed, I walked the length of my new home, from the kitchen, through the hall with the bathroom, into my bedroom, to the sitting room, the front door. I couldn't decide how to hold my arms. The hours at a desk made them ache along an invisible line that spanned from just under my armpits to my fingertips, eerie and commanding as a phantom limb.

I stood in the archway that led from the sitting room to the bedroom and stretched, my fingers intertwined high above my head, my weight on my toes. I still hadn't bought any furniture for the sitting room, but I didn't mind its emptiness. Sometimes, I would lie on the ground and let my life leak out my ears.

As it turns out, the pizza didn't need thawing. It said so right on the box in big, white bubble letters. So, my dinner came out burned on the edges and cold in the center but I ate the whole thing. By the time I got in bed, I felt spooked. Only a few hours alone had transformed the dust-bunnies into black widows and innocuous creaks into intruders.

I'd devolved into nothing but a speck in this world of white walls—a speck that could be flicked away like *that*. Something on the windowsill shifted in the passing headlights.

I couldn't avoid thinking about my wings then. It felt ridiculous—crazy, even. But every time I reached out to grab at my feathers' shafted edges, the moment dissolved and plunged me into a deeper solitude. To fight the dark I turned on the TV and slept in its glow.

Working from eight to five meant nine hours down the drain—ten counting the commute—five days a week. So, I started going to bed at 3:30 AM so that I could own half of my time. Sleeping so little made my office life run together like the scenes of a dream—I'd find myself at the desk, but couldn't picture getting there.

Dylan and Kyia were an item now, she texted about it but hadn't come over for a while. I made spaghetti most nights and laid in bed with a movie on and a sketchbook on my lap and tried to ignore whatever crept in the shadows outside. After chickening out a lot, I finally yanked back the curtains. Four slanted eyes looked back at me. Two sleek orange cats, poised to spring—Rat-Bastards.

Sunday morning, I lay on my back in bed for an hour trying to think up something to do. I could wander the Lorraine Motel or the Stacks Museum, trace the bank of the Mississippi River. I could drive around Memphis, the radio humming low, and take in the city—the ever-evolving murals, the wilting mansions, the pockets of history tucked behind rusting commemorative plaques. For hours and hours every weekday, I fantasized about this precise moment of freedom, and here I sat, bored. When one of the rat-cats clawed at the window, I took it as a sign and popped open a can of tuna to set on the sill.

The cats scattered in an orange streak, their coats electric. The pigment floated in my eyes, a heavy paintbrush drug across a white plane.

I pulled a box out from deep in the back of a closet. A mess of oils, acrylics and pastels, clanked at me, pissed off I'd ignored them for so long. I picked around for an empty sketchbook or anything, really but my journals were full and the art store closed long before this hour. I couldn't stop now, what with the palpable indent my body had bored into the bed.

I carried the box into the empty sitting room, picked out a teal tube, and squeezed the color onto a bit of ripped cardboard. When the paint met the wall, my hand moved of its own accord. A single leaf took shape, crisp and jagged. I dropped to my knees and attacked the arch's base with broad, long lines. As the outside world melted away, I married the streaks into vines then into stems that twisted up and up the wall's arch. Ferns appeared here, a cherry-blossom there, the silhouette of a tree. One of the rat-cats slinked into the room, taking in the echo of her paws and the paint spreading up my jeans in flecks.

I emptied an acrylic green into my hand, circled my brush through the paint in my palm, and eyed the cat eyeing me. I screwed up my face and twirled the brush, fat with paint, at the orange thing. She yawned.

"Fine," I said.

The sound reverberated in the empty room. Just me and these rat-cats I felt just lonely enough to feed. I shrugged at the animal and returned to the wall. My trance broken, the same strokes that had seemed so daring had withered into stretched pathetic strings. I stood to shake out my legs. The clock's red light read: 5:37 AM.

I flicked the light off and crawled into bed in my clothes, my hand caked in cracking green. For the hour I slept, the paint fumes invited dreams of the bird I'd lost made of metal.

The next morning hit like a hangover. Kyia's mom was the landlord of the place. By letting me stay here, she'd done me a favor and I'd gone and painted all over it—in goddamn seafoam greens. I hadn't even protected the floors. It'd take three coats of the expensive stuff, easy, to make the wall white again, and I hadn't put down a security deposit. Instead of calling Vegas, I left Kyia a desperate voicemail, stole newspaper from the conference room, and slept in my car during lunch.

In true Kyia fashion, she found the whole thing hilarious. She traced her fingers along the thickened wall, clomping her platform boots along the warping floors I'd covered in newspaper.

“It's like *Jumanji* in here.”

The rat-cats stood stock-still, hypnotized by the words reflecting off of the buffed leather on Kyia's feet.

“Is it a rainforest?”

I shrugged.

“We've got to get you out of here.”

Kyia's promise to find something for us to do dissolved my guilt as quickly as it'd come. That night I spent \$540.00 at the art store then took my hands to the walls, streaking teal into globs of brown with my fingers, scuffing drying paint with my palms. I gave the trees breasts, hips, beaks, eyes, and long hair, braided into vines. The bodies

came together at first. I tucked distinct little ladies, wholly alive, into the folds of things. Then, disjointed limbs, the curve of lips, the gnarled knuckles of aging hands, and elbows weaseled their way into the wood, alone.

Friday night felt humid in a way only Memphis can be, so heavy with the Mississippi that fog cleaves the skyscrapers and steals the Pyramid's point. Kyia and Dylan picked me up from work, already swigging wine from coffee mugs. Like most of Kyia's boys, Dylan seemed self-assured in a baffling way. The girl on Kyia's left had short, deep blue hair and introduced herself as Lori. Her belly billowed over her skirt but when we filled up at the Chevron that stands in the red light of the Kellogg's factory sign, she took photos in the bathroom mirror—the shutter click of her iPhone camera on loud, on purpose.

“I used to be anorexic,” she said, as I flushed the toilet. “Way too thin. I ran cross country in college.”

While I washed my hands, she flipped through filters.

“What's your Instagram name?” she asked.

Twenty miles later, Kellogg's still saturated the air like a bad yeast infection. The highway transformed into a creepy backroad—unlit, two lanes. Kyia and Lori traded stories over a joint. The open window drowned out their voices so that I could only just catch the gist of what they said. The smoke seemed to pause between the two women—one blonde, one blue—and morph into the scenes they conjured in this wine-stained sedan with no clear owner. When the smoke curled close enough to kiss off their open

mouths, the window sucked the air into the night. Dylan told us we were headed east, towards the Ghost River.

The bonfire that came into view seemed to pour from the Ghost itself. As we parked, silhouettes moved lazily against the wall of flame they'd built. Kyia jumped from the car with a whoop and bent into a mock bow, her hand held overhead for me. I took it with my fingertips and descended from the car, pinky up, looking like an idiot in my pant-suit. Lori produced a fifth of gin. We pulled it in turns from our new perch on a log by the fire.

The heat of the night and the smoke, thick as fog, pressed in, so otherworldly that with each passing moment, I more thoroughly forgot my lack of friends, lack of purpose, lack of balls. As Dylan greeted the faces that surrounded us, Lori, Kyia and I become tipsy and giddy in a way that didn't need anyone else.

When I could taste splinters in my lungs, I pulled off my pant-suit and dropped my orthopedic pumps into the mud. Kyia shrieked and stripped too, then ran into the warm water after me, our masks chucked in the sand. The mud, soft and endless, traced my legs and burrowed between my toes. Kyia teased Dylan with a backstroke. Lori followed; bringing a gaggle of shadows with her and when the party began to flirt openly, on-shore and off, I was alone again.

I sank into the mud until only my eyes peered over the skin of the river to listen to the way voices carry through water, to feel everyone's movements lap against my temples. Good and drunk, I spun on the spot to take in the limbs of the cypress trees knotting the sky. The night was still but the water reflected fire on their leaves so that the wood seemed to seethe. Cypress roots climbed three feet above the waterline, making

each tree strangely symmetrical—a Rorschach test. I held my fingers open under the water so that weight tumbled through them. The fire came back into view. Four people played chicken, their shadows casting fighting giants across the river.

Something about the tree’s roots wasn’t right. The water illuminated each inch for only a second before moving on, but it looked as if someone had cut a few roots on every tree into deformed angles. I swam to the nearest cypress. When the expanding ripples of my body cut into the tree, the wood stuck out a forked tongue. I screamed underwater in a gurgling fit of bubbles that cost Kyia her chicken game. I ran through the mud in slow-motion. I’d forgotten I could swim.

“Snakes,” I yelled. I didn’t have to say it again.

Bodies plunged toward the bank where we collapsed, breathing hard, hair streaming water down our backs in rivers all our own. We lay there butt-ass naked, propped up on our elbows, mesmerized and horrified by the swaying rhythm of the snakes guarding their nests.

Kyia and I moved back to our log, laughing and raw in the veil of smoke. She looked down at her soaked cunt, at the hair gathered into a perfect, dripping triangle, and broke into fresh peels. I thought of the boy in the dark who knew her there. Did Kyia like him, or did she like to feel desired?

“River-snatch,” Kyia howled. “Fuckin’ Ghost River river-snatch.”

At work, I’d done a lot of Googling to explain my feather fantasy. I’d found an ebook I called The Research Companion to Paranormal Cultures that claimed ghosts and other unexplainables were only projections that stemmed from “disturbed” minds. It called my wings and all things intangible “figments of the imagination projected onto

reality.” The culprit—“too much writing, reading, dreaming, thinking.” I’d felt indignant first, but as the weeks washed by, the eBook scratched at my resolve. I spend forty hours a week helping the rich get richer, trapped under student loans and fluorescent lights. Of course my mind would rather cook up gore and whip up grandeur than sit with reality. I began to believe people who couldn’t handle the real world fixated on this type of thing and I felt ashamed.

But, here, soaked in southern night, I didn’t feel so silly. In Memphis, dancers call themselves pharaohs, children flip in the neon lights of Beale street, Elvis took his shits on a 24-karat toilet, and there are catfish long as alligators trapped inside a pyramid of glass. I ached for my wings to appear and strained my muscles like a rock n’ roll God on a toilet. No such luck.

The next morning my bed smelled like ass and Kellogg's and the rat-cats did not appreciate it, but I could finally, really, breathe. Memphis seethed around me. A College of Art student stapled up flyers and I could make out men in hardhats, roaming the Sears building. Too delicious a scene to miss. I called in sick and turned off my phone. I didn’t quit or anything like that. A girl needs to live without agenda, without reason or rules every once in a while. Around noon I had to bring in a ladder to reach the top of the arch that led to my bedroom. In reds and purples I painted hydrangeas, magnolias, sunflowers, irises—together here because they could never exist side-by-side, not really. Yellow snakes burst from hibiscuses, replacing the pistils. Mid-brush stroke my side bucked with an explosion of blue pain. When I grabbed my skin, I cut my fingers on the warmth of a single, ruffled feather.

I sat still and panted. When I could see again, my hands were full of dark, brilliant blood. It seemed a pity to waste. With my body, I transformed the stamens of cherry blossoms into tits and tentacles and crooked toes. Each petal became an imperfect wing. I moved on to the ceiling. The rat-cats thundered below me, tumbling after the rainbow my silver feather threw across the floor, paint droppings sinking into their fur.

## SCAR

I was still the type of person who didn't think to put curtains over windows when it happened that I saw him through one. A bathroom window, no less. He stood tending his trees and I wore nothing but my underwear. That Tennessee bathroom, a 70's relic, swathed in blue. His eyes would be bluer.

I sat on the commode. When I stood, he was gone.

Soon, my neighbor Mark not only had a name, but a full-blown presence, a laugh, a gait, a book: *The Smell of Apples*. Over lamb dinners, classes, and the run-ins that come with the territory of any small Memphis neighborhood, we become friends, brothers, queers, queens. He would sabbatical back home in South Africa and I would take care of his house on Patricia Street. That was the plan anyway, except he never returned.

I fully understand the childish affinity for scars. In the wake of a tragedy, I want something three dimensional destroyed beyond recognition or reassemblage. Preferably, this thing is external but I'd bear its mark on my body before I'd let it disappear. I need to point at something that personifies disarticulation. If reducing pain to rubble is the only way to rebuild, what does that mean for the body or the being inside? "The only way to survive is to excavate everything." *Michael Ondaatje, September, 1992.*

*Leave it broken.*

According to academic definitions, Mark was a trauma long before he died. In a class on Masculinity, he made me define my gender. The class culminated in a fifteen page paper where students had to do just that. At the time, the process made me feel bold, strong, and confident that I was a capable, educated, driven, and inquisitive person and who knew communicate that identity. Confident that life would welcome me into its ranks.

Four years later, I sit on the floor of my apartment in Missoula, Montana with eight pages of that final paper, now, a forgotten effort, half preserved, in my hands. My (new) dog sleeps at a (different) lover's feet and I know I shouldn't break their spell of calm. I should fold these pages, these pieces of myself up hamburger style and slip them into the notebook they fell from. Instead, I read and read.

The flesh on the floor stirs as if from sleep, rustling papers, and fights to breathe in the viscous air. When did it begin to forget the work in those pages? When did it stoop to calling itself by one name? The lover reads on, oblivious to the dam that has broken between them and the flesh on the floor.

*Leave her broken.*

In class, we called him the Behroness. We'd giggle about Drag Day then find ourselves competing for the most accurate gender inversion. *Don't you dare write me a sex scene without ass zits!* He'd say. *Nice hooves*, he'd say. *If you find yourself wanting to end your story with a moral, go to the stove, turn it on, go back to your story, reconsider. Let the stove get good and hot. If you still want to write me your moral, lay your hands on the burners. You may use your hands to type it then and only then. I will need to see the burns.*

Mark gave me a copy of *The English Patient* in the wake of that class. I wish I could recall this moment. I know he was wearing his glasses made of bone, his hair in a low ponytail, I imagine his weekend outfit: a black V-neck and cargo shorts. I didn't know then that his clothes were always so crisp because of Apartheid. That he'd been a General that fought for the wrong side. That he'd thought turning spy could right a wrong, only to find acceptance of his queerness among the people he'd promised to betray.

Over the course of three Megabuses that rolled me from Dallas, Texas to Ann Arbor, Michigan, I sat on the bottom floor next to a man in alligator skin boots that matched his yellow-tinted sunglasses. He never took either pair off. I read the bulk of *The English Patient* through the night on a bus to Chicago with my elbows tucked in.

*When I finished the book around four in the morning, the man in the yellow sunglasses shook off feigned sleep and said, "That's one hell of a book. My daddy fought in World War II."*

Or, maybe: *I didn't finish the book until after the trip, back in Memphis. No one but Mark would talk to me about it. Everyone knew "Seinfeld" and "Seinfeld" made fun of the movie once, so why read the book?*

One statement is true, the other is a lie. You'd rather it be the former but truth lies in the latter. It is also true that Mark recommended I tell the first version, when it came down to it.

Truth carries no weight in memory. Details slip into new territories with every iteration—Ondaatje's hawk slipping through levels of time and memory—with eyes of Memphis blue.

That same year, I suffered a trauma far from home. This is a truth I wish I could change. The following day I did all the things a person can do to erase an event. I paid through the nose to have the front tooth replaced, I took pictures of my bruises, I stayed in the city, moving through its crowds cloaked in thick, flesh colored paste. I felt sure I could turn this around. If I stayed there a few more days, I could build a new narrative. I could find a ride home.

The English Patient's disfigurement requires constant care from his nurse in palpable ways. Although there is an unspoken knowledge that the English Patient will not improve, there is a plan in place to treat his wounds. This set regime of care is only made attractive with a healthy dose of impalpable pain. I did not know all this when I was young, when I asked my doctor that the bone I'd broken be left alone.

I planned to leave Memphis soon. Move on, move out, but my PTSD symptoms didn't much care. I'd fight the panic attacks that gathered in my shoulders, stealing my throat, with books, runs, lists, friends and end up a puddle, regardless. I missed Mark in allowed ways—a quiet, weighty sentence.

There is a path cut into the protected trees, a linear line of dirt and crawling growth that slashes through Memphis called Evergreen. I knew a secret entrance where I could pick my way down rotting steps stashed behind a cul-de-sac and send cottontails streaming from my feet in blurred lines. In the place the trail most closely passed by Mark's house, tree limbs met above the path. In spring, this feature was sublime but in winter when all the branches went bare, I ran this stretch as fast as I could. Something the trees could no longer save me from swirled in the blanket of dead, brown leaves.

Mark's death didn't change that fact but it did change Evergreen. He used to run there every morning before I woke up. I saw enough whispers of this act to know it to be true. Before I left Memphis, I decided that this stretch of path would become one of the things a future self would miss so I ran there over and over, back and forth. It's a social exercise, the need to be thin, but I was looking for him too, running alongside me from the horrors we both obsessed over, and tried so hard to avoid. The horrors we were blindsided by in the end.

Of course, I never saw him and the rabbits, too, disappeared.

My friend once traced the curve of Mark's closed eyes with a makeup brush, applying purple powder. He sat on his toilet in a kimono in half-completed drag and she saw then the age around his eyes, peeling and plumping into wrinkled lines like the tracks

birds leave in fallen snow. Time made palpable. She liked to tell me this story after he died and that telling, over and over, drove me to despise her.

She would tell me that story than leave his house, go on with the order of things, but I had to go into my bathroom and see him on the toilet, legs crossed, chatting about nothing, his eye make up half done. More than that, I resented how elaborate my friend's descriptions of Mark's aging skin became. She wanted to impose reason on what had happened to Mark. Rob him of his youth and turn him old, decrepit enough to die. To me, it seemed wildly cruel. Some sick new form of victim blame.

My friend and I never recovered our relationship and I never told her why I stopped calling her back. In the end, she left the bed frame I'd let her borrow on my lawn in pieces and that seemed fair, if dramatic. Somehow, in the sorting of things, my mind took her memory of Mark on the toilet and made it mine.

Mark's copy of *The English Patient* is full of notes laid out in perfect, scrawling script, with a thick felted pen. He marked through the lines he liked sideways with a diagonal dash that obstructed the language beneath it. It annoyed me until I found myself inches from the text, decoding with squinted eyes. What he wanted.

I want to tell you that his book smells like him but it does not. I want to tell you that his notes hold a pattern waiting to be found but that seems a good way to go crazy.

*Leave them broken.*

I came home from school on a balmy Memphis day to find policemen in the driveway. We were next door neighbors then, so I couldn't tell if they were in Mark's driveway or mine even then, much less now in memory, where both houses were my home at different times. A person or perhaps several had popped his wrought iron porch door from the frame. With his laptop, they'd taken six months of writing, his father's blue ring, a boombox, and other things I've forgotten. Mark only cared about the ring.

"I'm not precious about things," he kept saying to me, twisting the white flesh of his ring finger, new to the sun. "I'm not precious about things."

You're missing a piece of my story—a finger, really. I don't want to tell you that I went to the hospital. That a good Samaritan called the cops without putting on slippers, without running outside, that the cops called an ambulance, that the EMTs came back to see me when their shift ended as night gave way to day. I don't want to tell you this but if you were to look at me closely, you'd see anyway.

In a later life, I bought an external hard-drive to backup my computer over a video. Mark beside a cherry-blossom tree, singing "The Click Song," an Afrikaans song about the mating dance of a beetle species that bumps his ass on the ground rhythmically in order to attract a mate. I recorded the video for him to send to a friend, this time. He'd already sung it to me when I'd turned twenty-two.

In an even later life, I'm flipping through records with gloved hands. Missoula, Montana, crisp air, crisper cold. I saw a name I had once heard Mark say—Miriam Makeba. I flipped the record over and in this place worlds away, the South African's first

track: "The Click Song." A gift beyond reason. I held it to my chest and paid Rockin' Rudy's \$9.95 without ever passing it across a counter. I didn't yet own a record player.

In all my lives, after the birthday fanfare ends, I only want to go home and play this record. I haven't failed so far. Sometimes, I sing along, sometimes I sit and listen, but most often I dance in small circles and pretend that Mark is there, flashing his teeth, putting in hoop earrings, chopping garlic, checking the lamb. His song, unstuck in time.

*Leave my "cluster of known scars." Ondattje, September, 1992.*

When Mark's heart failed him, I rented his home while he took his sabbatical. When a homosexual man dies, of course people do not think to tell the woman living in his house. Of course, it doesn't occur to people that this twenty-three year old girl could love him. It's no one's fault.

When Mark's heart failed him, I didn't get to tell myself the white lies that accompany grief. Mark was angry with me when he died. Angry about his trees, which he believed I'd forsaken and I didn't do enough to correct his impression because that was the thing with Mark. He turned his temper towards the people he loved with reckless abandon. We all knew this.

When Mark's heart failed him, I do not flatter myself to think that he felt angry with me on his deathbed. But I also do not think that for a second, he thought of me and there's sweet relief in that. In that imagining, Mark is only the man I loved and admired, separate from me.

*Leave us broken.*

In Missoula, again, there is a tall, broad man with a white ponytail that I see everywhere in sections, rounding corners, crossing doorways. His features turn all these doors into thresholds I hope I've imagined.

After two years of watching him, of startling at his movements, I met the man who is not Mark. His features are unlike Mark's, up close. His eyes are too kind, too easy to read. In the moments I speak with him, I miss Mark's difficulty. I miss the way Mark chopped garlic when he brimmed over with anger toward me, as if this herb was the only thing stopping him from stabbing me. With Mark, everything became *unbelievable*, with ever-increasing 'e's and *banal* held a whole lot of 'a's. Social constructs were choices that didn't belong in our world. Over a beer, I thanked the man who is not Mark for helping me to grieve Mark's loss. It made him extremely uncomfortable and Mark would've like that, too.

I'm incapable of remembering the name of the man who is not Mark. I could ask. I could always ask.

*Leave me broken.*

I still slept in Mark's bed. I didn't have a choice, what with my housemates and our cramped corners. That's what I told myself but there were two futons. It seemed important then to go through the normal motions. To go to work, to come home, to face his house, to apply to graduate school, to brush my teeth. His shampoo hadn't run out yet and it made my hair smell like coconut. The only photo of Mark in the house is of him in

Tanzania as a child with his sister. They're sitting on a lion each and there's a spare carcass next to a little white dog named Fifi. Mark's the one sitting on the far right lion. He's so young here that he doesn't look like himself but it'd be gentler if his face had grounded the image in the past. Instead, this carnage is a relic of my Mark and his searching blue eyes. *Fifi*, he told me *Fifi*.

I rescued a dog out of Mississippi. I adhered to old patterns to prove that I was strong. For whom, I'm not sure. For the boss I'll never see again or the boy I'll never see again? I hope that I powered through my confusion for myself but can't find a firm enough foothold to believe it. Months later, in Mark's bed, I would call a friend sitting states away so that someone I didn't have to look in the eye could hear the muck making a home in my throat. Polite grief sticks to the skin.

*Leave me broken.*

A week after I knew that Mark was gone, I sat in the hallway studying his bookshelves, tucked there by a roommate trying to make more room. It felt like looking for him. I pulled books from his shelves and leafed through them, searching for a book to quiet the pounding headache gathered behind my eyes.

*The Berlin Stories*, by Christopher Isherwood, published in 1945, found its way to my lap. Inside the front cover, in Mark's thick felted pen, I found the words

*May 2015*

*Memphis*

*For Taylor-*

*On my bedside table, for you:*

Mark

I wanted to steal this book. I wanted to steal this book because some lucky bitch with my name was getting a little Mark beyond the grave. Gone love. I reread the date, the time, the place, and slowly realized that he'd left it for me. A warmth I'd been promised in Bible School spread from the book, to my fingers, to my hands, and up. When I'd moved in last May, had I set it there? He left it on the table by mistake? Had the universe worked through my past self to give her, this later me squatting on a dusty floor, a gift? Or more likely, the book looking up at me must be tangible evidence of Mark's forgiveness or of the afterlife or of energies of attraction unseen? The cover art, a single set of legs casting two sets of shadows, did not help my imagination. Mark probably forgot about it.

*Leave me broken.*

I should lie to you. I should tell you that I've read *The Berlin Stories*. I should say that I skipped work and meals and showers to read it cover to cover without pause. I'm curious where the story is going, don't get me wrong, but I live one thousand eight hundred fifteen miles away from Mark's house now, and that's only if the mountain passes are clear. Four years ago, he gave me his favorite book, published on the month and year of my birth. Three years ago, I showed his sister the secret attic closet full of things he loved to take back to South Africa. Three years ago, a shelf gave me *The Berlin*

*Stories.* “Blood of my blood,” Mark once said, in an email I keep marked with a star. Neither who I am or who I’ve been can let the book end.

*Leave me broken.*

The more I read about trauma, its lingo and answers and arguments, the more I fear that the only solution is perseverance. Icarus fell into the ocean with a thud and we remember him now, sure, but did anyone onshore set down what they were doing to watch? Did Pieter Brueghel’s painted plowers and the toiling sailors bother to empty their hands and shield their eyes from the sun?

A fib I tell myself: Mark didn’t know that he would die young. If I say it aloud enough, surely, I will forget that it is untrue. That his father had a heart attack, too. That Mark ran every morning, gave up alcohol, and ate healthfully, because he feared this, the thing that happened to him.

“I’m not afraid to die,” Mark once said. He tossed this truth over his shoulder as he descended the steep, narrow steps into his basement, bent nearly double, in the last months of his life. 2015, the in between time of spring and summer. A hot stick bloated the air. “This would just be a dreadful place to go.”

That basement was a damp and dark place, thick with the feeling of unseen spiders licking their chops. Over the low lip of the ceiling that careened towards the floor, a neat three feet of wallpaper were glued into place, forcing four cartoon ducks to swim in a uniform line.

“Duck,” I said.

“Duck?” he asked.

I pointed and he craned his neck back to look and laughed, his blue, hawk eyes made wide by this new detail in a familiar place. Often, I’ve wished that I’d responded to the conversation on mortality that he wanted to have, rather than scurried into a safer corner of thought—an observation so stupid he’d missed it on a hundred laundry runs. But then, those ducks were the perfect type of *banal* delight.

*Leave me broken.*

## SPINE

The fog started at the edge of sky and mountain—the felted ends of something sinister banged out on piano strings. We lost our heads as the storm descended. Whispers gave way to shouts. Our voices grew weak against the gloom. Two years faded into folds of stifling vapor. Three weeks without sun was all it took for him to leave the place we'd built together.

I fill our house with an unbroken chorus, my mantra of hate. I hope it will heal me but, more so, I hope that it hurts him. Hope that snarling tendrils of thought ripple out my mind, cut through the sheetrock, slice the clouds, halve the trees and cleave the mountain until they find him and grate his skin and burn his face. I tell our goats this, over their morning bushel.

The fog listens in, breathing on the backs of my knees and rubbing at the hem of my skirt to feel the fabric. The deer tracks that once encircled our property have all but seeped into the earth. They too, have retreated somewhere beyond here, into shadows. Jack and Gertie don't seem to mind. Brother and sister, jet black, they commentate as I walk from door to kiln, door to kiln cutting into the earth.

“We are not interested in validating your despair,” Jack says.

Gertie nods. “Pull it together,” she says.

He hated my cigarettes, my music, my fear of the dark. So, I leave the lights on at all hours and smoke until my feet grow grey in discarded ash. I move the furniture. I cram the things he once gave me—a twirling dancer in a jewelry box, his letters, musty with pressed leaves, my ring—into drawers. But, nails still protrude at angles where his things once hung.

I debate yanking away his memory with the claw of a hammer. But, when the fog lifts, rays of sun will shoot the nails' shadows across my sooty floors. I could lie on my back as mismatched angles cascade across my belly—broken sundials, time without direction—and stand up new. I set down the hammer and open a window to blur the edges between within and without. In the crushing black of mountain night, I can only make out two sets of eyes, green with glare, fires reflected in their corneas.

“Pouting?” Gertie asks.

Jack throws back his head. “Mourning,” he says.

“He isn’t coming back.” Gertie says. “Let’s go, too.”

Her weighty words slide over my face, inching towards my hairline, thick as water. A silhouette I cannot see flashes in her eyes, then her words are gone, behind me, moving.

“If we leave now, we won’t know that,” I say. “Give him a few more days.”

The goats turn their backs. Insects in ritual across the mountain bump their asses on weeds and rocks and trees in song that vibrates bone and calls-up half remembered creatures I knew at other windows, in other places, in the aftermath of other men.

The bugs' song does not stop his loss from rippling through my body and settling into boils on my hands. In the purple light of morning, I throw porcelain, slamming white clay into the wheel as if it owes me. Hours of sitting curls my spine until I can feel my body curve into itself, shrinking as quietly as my mother's did, fading over her household chores. My hands' deformities stare back at me from every creation, my pain made concave.

To learn to navigate the size of my palms, I clutch at pebbles and pieces of bark with the tips of my fingers, dropping things over and over. A child again, a girl I'd read in a book who fought polio by moving marbles with her toes, left to right, left to right. Every day, I find a small piece of the forest that I can cling to, carry it to the trail that I've cut into the earth, and press it into the dirt.

Even turning pages takes concentrated effort, so I find books about archeology and excavation, about peeling back the land to find what lies hidden underneath. I wish I could tug my need for him out from the place it's lodged in my abdomen and toss it to my feet, stomp on it for good measure. But, even in my books, it's not so easy.

Most of what archeologists find wouldn't want to be disturbed, wouldn't want to be yanked from home and paraded around. The burial mounds on the books' pages crumble as men—hoping for skulls, femurs, teeth, the stench of death that might make them a name—paw at the earth with gloved hands. The aftermath of one man pulling a golden face from its grave and naming him Agamemnon.

As time wore on, my busts dissolve into freaks, short and constipated and wretched. Their faces sag until chins, ears, and eyes rest on the earth, cheeks bulging against gravity. A patch of people, melting in the garden as my kiln grows cold. Still, I

can't seem to fill my time now that I'm alone. My mother spent her afternoons cleaning, cooking supper, and washing clothes. Without a man to care for my purpose slides away, rules wilt and collapse—black on my floors. No one teaches women how to make their own decisions and I cannot find a way to learn.

In the evenings, I eat on the porch to sit with the creeping clouds, to listen as they brush at pine needles while I circle my spoon through canned corns and cold soups. The rustling trees are the only sound in my woods now. I haven't seen anything—not a bird, a chipmunk, or even a lousy mouse in days. Often, when I listen to the quiet, I catch his scent in the air and it fools me into thinking that and he's finally come home and it's that hope that keeps me there, that helps me ignore the dreadful, unnatural silence growing louder in my woods by the day.

The mountain grows so dark that I can hardly tell the night from the day and I lose track of time. Whenever I try to sleep, banging echoes from the roof that sounds like the goats have climbed up there and taken up bowling. I used to run outside in my slippers and scream up at the roof, but every time they blink at me from their pen, half asleep. I'd go back into the house and the ruckus would start up all over again. I become so exhausted that I stop bathing and only remember to eat in crazed spurts. My identity slips from me. I can't decide what am I am when I'm not seen or told. Gertie catches me tucking pieces of the bathroom mirror into my path. Her gaze forces me to notice that my hands are bleeding.

“Do you think we're under a curse?” I ask.

I expect her to snort and call me silly, but instead she paces, shaking her snout. She looks from me to the ivy bush that has sprouted and thrives despite the dark, its grip tightening around my house by the day.

“I think we need to leave and you need to get a job,” Gertie says.

I decide to spend less time with Gertie.

Jack, on the other hand, follows every move I make in the woods, my incessant, chattering shadow. When we circle back home, I tuck what I’ve found into my footpath. Thrown clay is only malleable until it’s burned but there’s no limit to how much my trail can evolve. It’s a presence I can hold onto, a necklace of memory that strings together my actions and holds them there, right where I can see them.

I pull up the wheatgrass that slides over the path’s edge, sending two black beetles careening towards my feet. They begin to fight, their backs flashing purple, as if one must’ve toppled the other. When I crush them both with the heel of my boot, Jack looks past me, into the forest, and for an instant, a mob of shadows shivers at the tree line.

There are no cans, crackers or crumbs left in the house so, today, I have to find the car keys. I rise when the sun used to, follow my legs into the gloom and feed Jack and Gertie. They promise to watch for him and put on a show if he does grace us with his presence.

“Remind him what he’s missing,” I tell them.

“I am always exquisite,” says Jack.

“He isn’t coming back,” says Gertie.

Ten different men swim in my mind, ten names. For a moment, I forget who it is that I’ve been missing. But, there’s no time for thoughts like that, I have to stay focused. I

load the truck with wooden pallets full of planters, mugs, and vases that rattle the whole way down the mountain, a melody of possibilities—hot coffee lipping at brims, shelves, pens, flowers whose petals will fall to embrace them. A line of light like a horizon, like the earliest seconds of the rising sun, screams up the road. In the rearview mirror, my eyes are dripping, their color lost.

The whites of my eyes are almost imperceptible against my skin, which is paler than it's been in the longest winter. What color had they been? I rip the mirror from the windshield, toss it to the floor, and bring his sunglasses to perch on my nose. Soon enough, I'll pass the cherry orchards with their sharp, many-fingered leaves and I will have to remember to forget when he was here, when he told me that at the base of every row a rosebush grows—a sacrifice to mold—only to decay.

The truck hums past cabins, quiet in their maze of bird feeders, wrapped in that smell of heat—of Frisbees and sweat and sneakers stained green. Markers of a normalcy I'd forgotten. Gertie's right—I need to get a job.

I can make out the market from here. Tents sit on the land that juts into Flathead Lake for events like these and the casualties that clot the local newspapers' veins. The isthmus is a haven for the bodies that float up from the waters, deaths as consistent as its tides in their impossibility. Husbands and wives, fisherman born in these mountains, a six-year old boy said to have only walked the shoreline. The water waves at me, startlingly blue. In stories, my neighbors blame a giant eel—our Nessie. To some, she is a relic of the past—a fossil undead—the last bony sturgeon to gulp at freshwater. Others say she's a freak, a water snake with a gland issue. But I believe they cooked her up, a

myth born to serve as a sponge and absorb the unfathomable things people catch at the corners of their eyes in the woods.

As I descend the dirt road cloaked in cherries and crow song, vendors come into view, tourists. The tourists are fleshy in the sun, the pinks of their sunburns tinged blue, so saturated by the light refracting off the lake they appear to drown in it, or to have drowned already.

Cam is there with his soaps and his shoulders curled like a buzzard on a power line. The lavender lady is there, the huckleberry man. In a past life, I could do this. I could descend this mountain in lipstick and earrings and look these people in the eye, laugh even, when they told me I'd moved into an uninhabitable house that I should leave before things got weird. If I told them he left, would they say I told you so?

“Karen!”

I haven't heard my name spoken in so long that I jump at the sound, but it's only Cam, waving and calling from behind his stall. I pull in and park the truck, my discarded mirror scattering prisms across the roof.

“It's good to see you off the mountain, kid,” Cam says, already outside my door. “I was just organizing a search party to send after you two.”

“Everything's fine,” I say. “Great actually, just been busy.”

Cam claps his hands together and rubs them like a man on a high dive, about to plunge into the lake.

“Let's see 'em then, kid,” he says.

I pull my wares from the truck and together we carry them to an unoccupied patch of earth. Cam sets his box down with unnecessary showmanship. I want to scoop it back

up, turn on my heels, and flee. The tourists part around us without a word—a herd of shades.

“Salvi making you do all the heavy lifting these days?” Cam asks.

I muster a laugh but it sounds false, puny against the world. Salvi—my Salvi—how could I have forgotten your name? The dirt underneath me groans like a living thing, like this isthmus isn’t an isthmus at all but the back of the beast, lying in wait to dip into the cold depths of the Flathead and snack on the drowning.

“Is he coming down later on?” Cam asks.

Cam’s eyes bore into me but I can only think of Salvi. Of those amber irises, their dark rim, the way the syllables his mother chose for him dropped off my tongue—chocolate.

“Salvi,” I manage. “No, not today. He’s not feeling well.”

“That’s too bad,” Cam says. “Has he been sick long? I haven’t seen him at the Raven. The guys up there were saying they haven’t had a drink with him in a while, either.”

“Yes, yes, he has been,” I say.

The ground underneath me kicks but no one seems to notice. I feel sick to my stomach, like the truth in my gut wants to tumble from me and make itself known.

A couple in navy visors wanders over to nudge my porcelain this way than that.

“Excuse me,” I tell Cam. “Hello, folks, please feel free to pick them up and take a better look.”

“If you need any help getting these packed out, let me know,” Cam says. “Tell Salvi we miss him. Hope he’s better real soon.”

“How much?” a visor asks.

“Forty dollars for the vases, twenty for the mugs.”

“See you, kid,” Cam says, his hands in his pockets.

“See you,” I say, my voice bright and shining as a bell.

I manage to sell enough to carry the boxes back to the truck on my own. It’s an even greater relief than the mangos I buy, the rhubarb and eggs and broth, because I can’t tolerate any more of Cam’s questions.

As my truck and I climb toward home, I murmur a new mantra: *Salvi, Salvi, Salvi*. In the side mirrors, the tourists’ skins are stained the color of thawing meat. My eyes water until I cross back into the cloud cover that mottles my mountain so that she looks bruised, beaten.

Only an hour in the sun transformed the grey of my home into a stranger. The truck’s headlights cut through the fog well enough, but with my feet on the ground I can’t navigate the gloom. It presses into my pores, lifts my hair by the handful, strokes my hips, my legs, thick as water. Surely, the fog hadn’t hung so low before?

“Jack,” I call. “Gertie?”

But there’s no sign of them or the figures they keep in their eyes. As my eyes adjust, bodies curl in the gloom. Shadows roam the rooftop, men pace around me, their fingers, freakish tendrils of mist, feel at everything. I find my trail and follow her spine to the back door, slapping at the hands and bodies pressing up against me, stealing my footing, palming my breasts. I fall in the house and kick the door closed but the men don’t leave. They leer at me from every window and I finally see them for who they are: everyone who’d ever fucked me or loved me or hit me or touched me, whether I’d

wanted it or not. They smash their features against the glass, contorting themselves into horrible sameness—noses, teeth, palms pressed. I run from window to window wrenching the curtains closed, fighting to shut out him then him then him.

When the men can't see me anymore, the walls began to sway and the air to sting, and the house shakes with the familiar earthquake, the same crescendo that plays out every night and all I can think to do is stuff towels into the doorframes' cracks. I crawl to the living room, clutching a blanket to my chest and lay on my back in surrender. There's no escaping them. Either these men will find their way in or they will topple my house on top of me.

The next morning, I wake up on my back in the center of the floor and see that my ceiling has turned to fog. I try to push the night before from my mind. I want to wrestle my fears down with good, solid logic, but the walls have cracked as if cut open by some invisible hand and I can't remember what pattern of milk spots and scars and features had been his and I can't remember his name.

I feed the goats and trace the house's perimeter searching for answers. Signs that my men were really here and I haven't lost my mind. I find a single broken window pane, fractured into a hundred shards, the most fragile cobweb. My face splinters across it, the most beautiful I have ever looked, all pigment gone, all whispers of symmetry dispelled.

Jack's muzzle burrows into my hand, his warmth reminding me of the rain, the cold, the figures curling in the fog.

"The woods want us to leave," Jack says.

I sink to my knees and press my face into the place between his eye and his ear.

"Did you climb onto the roof last night?" I ask.

“No.”

That day the clouds plunge lower, until they steal the tops of trees, solid as a ceiling, causing Jack and Gertie to plead together: “*leave, leave, leave.*” For once, I listen. I walk my trail’s length with a shovel, ripping at weeds, trying to think through my options, decide where I’ll go. Cam’s seems as good a place as any.

The goats watch me at the windows as I pack. The thought that he’ll never find me if I leave this house eats at my resolve. I open a low drawer and his scent grips me. He needs to see me, to laugh, to remember that I am not all the things that came to be between us. To see that hunger has made me look the way that he always wanted—thin, small, edges sharp as cut glass. Jack butts his head into the window, shattering my hesitation. They’re right; I have to get out of here. So, I plunge my hands into the drawer and gather the little relics men leave behind—razors, boots dripping soles, a flannel, jeans, dip cans—for my trail.

Jack runs behind me as I walk, pushing wisps of smoke through his nose, “*leaving, leaving, leaving.*”

In a flicker of lightning, the shadow of an animal hunched on the roof flashes across the mist before me but when I turn, all I can see are claws of clouds and ivy, consuming my home whole. I dispose of everything and follow my path to the kiln. If I can fire everything now I can still leave before nightfall and I’ll have more to sell, more to barter for food and shelter.

Sharp lines of my old pots, ignored so long they barely clear the weeds growing between them, throw my new freaks’ deformities into painful focus. I load my slumped creations into the beast’s belly and close her, running my fingers down her walls until my

touch meets pipes, valves. I throw the valves and press the switch, pitching red light into the fog that creeps into my hair.

When blue flame hisses from the pilot, straight and strong as a blowtorch, I open the ring valve so that my streak of blue becomes a torrent of flame that curls underneath the machine. I breathe in the gas, the pine, and flex my toes into the earth until they sink, dirt made quicksand by rain and throw the main valve until it pops over and over and six blue tentacles of flame writhe in the kiln, caressing the faces therein, burning their features into permanence.

As I watch the busts burn, my men's smell fills the haze swaddling my face. The silence of the woods pushes heavy against my ears but they are here. His scent invites a river of memory, a current I follow powerlessly—they gathering firewood, them snarling on a checkered floor, the warmth of them in sleep.

They are faceless. They stand in my memory as an imperfection of knuckles and freckles, of lines and bumps and elbows, hair spinning under their jaw like my wheel meeting water.

I peel myself from the kiln and face the trail woven into the mud. I walk without thought of walking, walk to feel where they fit into the woods. The trees still whisper nothing but my footpath shifts, a conveyor belt plunging me onward, mirrors alive in the licking blue flames flashing red, orange. The brume's cool embrace cradles the back of my neck.

He stands, a perfect silhouette thrown in the light that escapes the cabin's windows, his pulse wrinkling the night air. All of my practiced profanities, my retorts and my venom, squat low on my tongue. He doesn't have to speak for me to know that I'll take him back. Like my mother and her mother and her mother's mother, I'll take him

back; I'll always take him back. Gertie stands stock-still, her only movement the shake of her head as Jack bounds alongside me, bleating and jumping.

“Stop,” Jack yells, his scream human, and then he's gone, swept away by the fog. The dried mud caked to my man's flannel slides at my touch, an avalanche, as I drink in his details. His face is consumed in fog. The mirrors laid on the earth reflect the kiln fire, painting his skin purple. How stupid I was, to have ever thought I could leave him.

He wraps his arms around me, and for the first time in so long, my sternum and spine slide into a single, unified line. Even as I cling to him, his skin shifts like smoke and I know I have to hold tighter this time so that he can't disappear.

We don't speak as we walk into our home, not about the ivy climbing the walls or the mist that skims the ceiling and tugs at our ears. As he carries me, floating to our room, he ticks off light after light after light to tease me, his face still in shadow. When he lays me down on our bed, he is colder than I remember, heavier. Meditation made flesh, his body enshrouds my own, swallowing me whole. The smell of him fills my nose and tumbles down my throat thick as thrown clay. I gasp against him, unable to breathe, unconcerned by air, suffocated by relief. With all of my strength I clutch at his back, mud made water sliding through my hands.

## BLOOD

A tick like the hypnotic hand of a metronome echoed across the flatlands, rippling past warped, wind-beaten trees, whistling through barbed wire fences. A bull watched Tani dig, his bulbous eyes open despite the rain, glinting with the iridescent slick of a shucked oyster shell. Tani threw her head back and let the hot rain seep into her mouth. The shovel clattered to her feet where it bounced against red clay.

“Fuck,” she shouted.

A light flicked on down the road, in the house where her Papaw had lived, and his father, and his father before him. Tani’d skinned her first bass in that linoleum kitchen, learned to shoot snapping turtles under Papaw’s peach tree, just a silhouette in the light of the window now, dead and dark.

“Fuck you,” she yelled to Sookie, the son of wife number three who’d scooped the land out from under Tani’s family without right of blood. In a matter of years, he’d allowed the nutria to chew through the pond until the water drained away, leaving the carp and the bass Papaw stocked to flop in the mud, drowning on air. They’d been friends once, Tani and Sookie, a fact Tani hated to admit.

The house’s outside light came on.

Tani sat on the rain dark earth. The porch door snapped shut behind Sookie, who carried a short rifle, Papaw's Winchester 30-30, no doubt about it. Tani pulled her knees into her chest and watched him shuffle into the yard. He looked like a rat wandering a maze as he peeked behind corners, pawing at the same land that had been Tani and her sister, Della Eloise's, domain. As Sookie roamed, Tani could all but see Della Eloise waiting by Papaw's tin barrels for the perfect moment to strike a match and drop a hissing Black Cat into its depths so that the firework billowed, loud and eager as a landmine.

Sookie retreated and the house darkened. All became still again, save for the rain. Tani looked back to Papaw's beloved bull, Bobbi, named for the stump of a tail a mountain lion left behind. The lines of his ribs gnawed through his fur. Tani took out her phone and called Della Eloise.

"Meet me at our old place," Tani said. "I know it's late. It can't wait. *That* can. Park at the Texaco and walk the rest of the way. No, Sookie won't wake up. No, not once. Thanks. Bring a shovel. Do I sound like I'm joking?"

Tani pocketed her phone and pushed onto all fours, then to her feet, her breath a creaking labor, she moved to the cover of the nearest tree. The cottonwood glittered in the pattering rain, thanks to the silver forks that hung from its branches, floating on fishing wire. Tani and Della Eloise's doing.

Tani leaned against the tree and allowed her focus to ramble from the present, to become unstuck in time. She tried to will the horror of the night before from her muscles, to believe that the fat drops of Texas rain winding down her back could wash away the bruises rippling under her clothes.

Della Eloise took her sweet time. When she did come into view, she walked slow. A lecture brewed on Della Eloise's tongue and it put a pull in Tani's gut, a fist of familial love. She'd missed her kid sister. Tani pulled her Rangers cap low over her face and tongued the shape of her new teeth. A hand at her neck had snapped her incisors into an arching, crescent moon and the dentist's fix sat fat against her tongue. Tani imagined a stranger crossing paths with the triangles of bone she'd left behind, prodding at them with a shoe. More than likely, her teeth had already been kicked into the sidewalk cracks, slipping from memory as easily as the rest of her.

Della Eloise stooped low to walk under the silverware oscillating in the tree. She kept her shovel slung over a shoulder.

"You had better be dying," Della Eloise said. "And we'd better be burying you."

Tani smiled under the brim of her baseball cap. "I've missed you too," she said.

"You can't call in the light of day from a Luby's or a Whataburger or some shit? Swing by the house? You know we can't be trespassing like this."

"I've got a good reason," Tani said.

Della Eloise looked at her hard. "You've always got a good reason," she shook her head. "Shoot then."

"A couple things," Tani said. "You remember when Papaw died and you wanted him cremated and I wanted him buried so you barbequed him without telling me?"

"You mean 'cremated' like he requested in his Will, 'cremated?'" Della Eloise asked.

"Sure."

"For fucksake Tani."

“I buried some of his ashes. Most of his ashes.”

Della Eloise looked up into their cottonwood as if searching for strength. “You did what?”

“Just the chunky bits,” Tani said. “I promised him I’d bury him on the ranch when he was up in the hospital. I told you that and I couldn’t—”

“Couldn’t leave well enough alone?” Della Eloise finished. “He wasn’t making any sense, Tani. He put what he wanted in his Will. That’s the process. That’s what people do.”

“Well, whatever, it’s done,” Tani said. “I put the big pieces in the Folgers can.”

“The Folgers can? For the rattlesnake tails?”

“Yea, they’re in there too,” Tani said.

Della Eloise rubbed at her temples. “You picked through our Grandfather’s ashes, pocketed ‘chunks,’ put him in an rusty can with a bunch of snake asses, and call me years later in the middle of the night, in the rain. Am I missing anything?”

“Tails,” Tani said. “They’re snake tails. And the can’s airtight, I Googled it.”

The wind picked up, bucking the forks on their strings. They clanged into one another, spitting music.

“What do you want from me?” Della Eloise asked. “You want me to get mad? Yell at you? Why are you even here?”

“Because I can’t leave Papaw here now that Sookie’s letting everything shrivel up,” Tani pointed to Bobbi’s hungry frame. “The tree’ll be next.”

“So?”

“I buried him under it,” Tani said.

“Christ.” Della Eloise looked from the shovel to Tani, her eyes narrowing. “You don’t need me for this. And Sookie’s been letting the land die. What’s going on? Why’s this a burr in your ass all the sudden?”

Tani licked at the rain brimming over her lip. Her face ached to its bones, her knees felt ready to buckle. She needed to convince Della Eloise to dig for her but her sister’s questions made Tani want to seep into the clay. Della Eloise would kill her if she knew.

Tani straightened to her full height and gestured to the night black rain. “On a night like this, who needs a reason?”

Della Eloise snorted and swung her shovel into the ground, its tip clanging against the red earth. Only a temporary victory, but it’d do. Tani aligned her back against the cottonwood’s trunk and shuffled to face Polaris. Tani took a large step, shooting pain into her knee, but kept her voice steady and counted her steps aloud.

“You couldn’t just bury him beside the tree?” Della Eloise asked.

At thirty paces, Tani stopped and pivoted on the spot to smile at her sister.

“I would’ve mounted his head on a branch and we could’ve dropped a quarter through his eye socket, classy like, but you had to go and burn ‘im.”

“Imagine my regret,” Della Eloise said, carrying her shovel to the spot Tani stood. The women slammed their shovels into the stubborn earth.

The pair set into a rhythm, scraping at the red clay in unison. Tani hoped it would keep Della Eloise from noticing how much each stroke cost her. Her limbs and joints were heavy, weak until the shovel met the ground and pain reverberated through her body. It felt as if a brand had been set to her flesh, a marking Tani couldn’t sand away.

Water pooled in the divot they'd made. Every so often, they paused to check the house and pat Bobbi, who lumbered around them in the dark.

"How deep did you put it?" Della Eloise asked, panting.

As Tani stopped and tipped her head back to think, a flash of lightning exposed the flat expanse that rushed from their feet to the horizon.

"Not much further," Tani said. "I was drunk at the time, better for digging."

Della Eloise's mouth puckered into pinching, her skin pulled taut.

"What's wrong with your face, Tani?" Della Eloise asked.

Tani touched her eyebrow and licked her lips. She'd forgotten to keep her head down.

"Nutria attack," she said. "Dig."

Della Eloise didn't move.

"Dig," Tani repeated.

"Go ahead," Della Eloise whispered, her face as unreadable as a mask.

Tani stared at her kid sister, the girl who'd come home with almost a dog a day, mean, feral things no else could break. Tani'd seen them scream as Della Eloise bit down into them, grinding her teeth through their fine fur, into their ears' pink cartilage. There were whispers of Della Eloise in there, half buried.

"I'd almost forgotten this side of you," Tani said. "Good to see ya, again."

"Dig if you're so tough," Della Eloise said. "Let's see it."

Tani put her weight into the balls of her feet and brought the shovel back, but Della Eloise slipped behind her before Tani could swing her weight to the ground. Della Eloise grabbed at the nape of Tani's neck, the same place she'd been held the night

before, when her mouth met the concrete. A phantom hand burned her skin. Della Eloise yanked at the bill of Tani's Rangers hat. Tani twisted away and let Della Eloise take the cap. As another tendril of lightening met the earth, Della Eloise grimaced.

"Your face—dammit—Tani, I didn't know. I didn't mean—" Della Eloise said.

"Get a good enough look?" Tani asked. She snatched back her soaked cap and sat it on her head with a sad thwack of spraying water.

Tani scooped up her shovel as casually as her muscles could manage and ground it into the growing hole.

"Stop," Della Eloise begged. "Stop making things so hard. Talk to me."

"You're the one making this hard," Tani said. "Let's get Papaw and I'll get outta your hair."

"So what, you're going to take off again?" Della Eloise shouted. "You call me in the middle of the night, in the pouring rain to dig up some shit you decided to do without telling me, with your fucked up face and I'm supposed to go with it? Feel sorry for you?"

"You'd feel like a real bitch for saying that if you knew what I've been through," Tani went back to digging.

"Then tell me!" Della Eloise said. "Always with the poor Tani, Tani versus the world bullshit. Let me guess, you were drunk? None of it was your fault?"

Water snaked under Tani's collar, fingering the bruises blossoming down her back.

"Living the way you do shit's bound to go wrong," Della Eloise said. "It was only a matter of time."

The suspended forks frothed the wind and the features of the landscape seemed to close in on Tani. Bobbi chewed cud at her fingertips, Papaw's house shone, alive with light.

"It's not a big deal, just some asshole. You can yell all you want once we get Papaw out," Tani said. She kicked Della Eloise's shovel with her boot.

Della Eloise shook her head. "Why're we here, Tani?"

Tani kept digging. She'd always wanted to be the big sister. Tough, larger than life. She wanted so badly to prove to Della Eloise that they could live their lives independent of men. And in a matter of hours, she'd failed them both so terribly. Tentacles of pain ripped up her spine. Maybe Tani felt that desperate to change the subject or maybe it the thudding of her heartbeat tenderizing her flesh that spurred her on, but crazed anger rang in Tani's ears.

"Say what you want," Tani spat. "But you're still the kiss ass cozying into Daddy's lap."

"Don't you ever say that to me," Della Eloise said. "You don't know anything about life after you left. I did what I had to."

"No one made you stay," Tani spat.

"So what? I should've abandoned my entire family, like you? Gone into debt? Come around a few times year looking like Quasimodo? I got out the smart way."

"You married the first football player you could fuck," Tani said.

Della Eloise nodded. "Yea, yea I did. And you're nobody, nowhere, with nothing, digging up a dead man. So don't you preach to me. I played the game. You should've been in Daddy's lap, too, and took it. But you never could just shut up."

Tani wanted to tear Della Eloise limb from limb and pitch her pieces into the basin where Papaw's pond used to be. Remind her of her worth to this world of men. Rain smarted in the stitches in Tani's eyebrow.

"I hated Daddy too," Della Eloise said, crying now. "I used to dream about him dying. He'd look at me in the rearview mirror then WHAM, car accident, quiet. And he'd finally leave us alone."

Black spots and old images peppered Tani's mind. Their father, his nostrils flaring, the veins in his arms pumping, purple rivers ready to boil over, his breath at her face, his finger borrowing, hooking under her clavicle. Della Eloise watching around corners, always safe, always saying nothing, doing nothing to stop him. It never occurred to Tani that Della Eloise had hated him too. The rain quieted, the storm was passing. Tani held Della Eloise as she shook, heaving tears. As Tani opened her mouth to speak, Sookie's voice materialized at her back.

"If you don't get off my land, I'll shoot your heads off," Sookie said. "Clean *off*, you hear?"

Tani straightened and turned, adrenaline coursing up her fingers, climbing her hands. In the purple light of dawn, Sookie aimed Papaw's rifle at her chest. Sookie was balding now, his hair a frizzing halo. His Carhartts trailed in the mud.

Tani walked toward him like a tightrope walker, careful to keep Della Eloise directly behind her.

"Good to see ya, Baby," Sookie said. "Looks like somebody clocked you good."

Tani kept walking toward the man and his gun. The whites of his eyes glowed against his nicotine stained skin. He spit a stream of tobacco-ridden slobber.

“Baby?” Della Eloise repeated.

Sookie’s mouth twitched into a grin. “Tani didn’t tell you?”

“Shut up,” Tani said. “Don’t move, Del.” She took step after step towards Sookie, determined to protect Della Eloise. Twenty paces to go, fifteen. Tani wanted to believe that Sookie didn’t have the cojones to shoot her but with each step Tani felt less sure of what she knew.

“I got every right to shoot you for trespassing, Baby,” Sookie said.

“I know that,” Tani said.

“Tani, stop it,” Della Eloise said.

Ten paces. Tani willed her spine straight, her back sharp. Her battered body pulled at the back of her mind, begged her to bow out, to curl up on the ground and sleep. Eight paces.

“Go ahead,” Tani said.

Five paces. Sookie’s cheek bulged over the butt of Papaw’s 30-30. He set finger to trigger. Two paces. Tani took the cool barrel in her palm and pressed its end to her sternum. Sookie yanked at the gun, tried to pull it from her grasp. She set her feet wide.

“Go ahead,” Tani repeated.

Della Eloise let loose a string of curses, small against the brewing sky.

“I got every right,” Sookie said. His finger tensed around the trigger.

Tani grasped the end of the gun with the heel of her free hand, wrenching it sideways. His fingers still tangled against the trigger, Tani clipped Sookie’s chin with the butt of the gun and it fired, scattering shattered sound. The world moved slow. Tani slammed the weapon into his gut. His fingers came loose. As Sookie bent double Tani

swung the Winchester into his temple like an axe. Sookie fell to the ground, spitting  
chew, spouting blood.

Tani spun, her ears ringing. Della Eloise mouthed words Tani couldn't hear and  
ran, kicking up mud. Bobbi lay toppled on his side, shit rolling from his ass. Sookie  
crawled, his feet churning, fighting for footing. Tani put Papaw's rifle to the crook of her  
shoulder and breathed in deep. Her knees whined. Her vertebrae felt loose, as if the  
thread that held the meat of her body suspended could snap any second and plummet out  
her ass. If she shot him, Della Eloise would never have to know what Tani had done. The  
morning light flickered before her eyes and Tani was small again, small enough that  
Papaw's hand rested heavy on her shoulder. He nudged the inside of her foot.

"A little wider," he said.

Tani spread her feet.

"Weight forward," he said.

Tani shifted her weight into her toes, into that good place where the gun becomes  
an extension of the body, a vessel for the feeling pushing out the bullet. If Sookie were  
gone, Tani could lie. Say some drunk was looking for a fight. She'd been in the wrong  
place at the wrong time.

"Get 'im in the sight," he said.

Sookie's head was the size of a pumpkin. If Sookie were found dead, would Tani  
and Della Eloise be next in line for the land?

"Let your breath go and squeeze gentle," Papaw said. "Don't jerk it now."

Tani swung the rifle away from Sookie and shot one of Papaw's tins feet in front  
of him. Sookie spilled to his feet, his hands clasped over the back of his head. Tani

watched him, disgusted. Regret already flooded her mouth, taking on a taste. Tani lowered the gun and turned to face Bobbi. She could barely carry her limbs. They had a new weight, as if her marrow had thickened and her bones had sunk low in the bag of Tani's skin. Della Eloise cradled Bobbi's head and stroked the bridges of his snout. Tani fell to her knees and set the gun on the ground. She rubbed her face into Bobbi's skeletal ribs and rooted her hands into his bristled fur.

A shot rattled the air so close to Tani that she could feel it in her teeth. When Tani looked up, Della Eloise stood over Bobbi's head with her face set. She shot again and Tani pushed down on Bobbi with her full weight to help him ease out his last breath. The old man stilled. Della Eloise threw the gun in the mud and stomped to their cottonwood to sit against its trunk, her head in her hands. Tani let her go without a word. She pressed against Bobbi's warmth a moment longer before shaking out of the hoodie clinging to her skin. Tani tugged Bobbi's eyelid closed, sealed it with a flat stone, and covered his ruined head, the purple of his tongue with her clothes. Cotton from the trees already burrowed in his fur like fresh snow, a new season. Tani patted Bobbi's shoulder and pulled herself to her feet.

Tani laid down beside Della Eloise under the wind chimes they'd strung up so many years before and watched the sun grow fat along the skin of the earth. She rested her head in her sister's lap and let Della Eloise trace the stitches weaving her brow with a shaking finger. Tani licked the artificial slick of her new teeth.

"It was Sookie," Tani said.

"What?"

Tani pointed to her face.

“Shit.”

“I didn’t want to tell you,” Tani said. “I don’t want you to think I can’t handle myself.”

“I don’t think that,” Della Eloise said. “But how the hell did that happen?”

“I was lonely, I guess,” Tani said. “Bored. We wandered a few bars, had a few beers. I wake up with his hand down my pants. He said I ‘owed’ him for all those years we’d flirted back in high school—before he got the land, you know—and I should’ve fucked him then, but I was going to now. I went for his nuts and his eyes but he’d pinned me down while I was asleep. I got outside though. He beat my ass right there on Papaw’s sidewalk.”

The women fell silent.

“He couldn’t rape me though,” Tani lied.

Della Eloise took the Rangers cap off of Tani’s head and ran her hands through Tani’s hair. A fistful of auburn came out in Della Eloise’s hand; she gasped and showed it to Tani.

“Oh yea. Can you get it?” Tani said. “It’s been falling out all day. I’m not sure if he ripped it out or if it’s stress.”

Della Eloise combed her fingers through her sister’s hair and let the loose strands go. They swirled and balled in the wind, tumbleweeds. She tried not to stare at the colors spotting Tani’s torso under her wet t-shirt.

“Were y’all drunk?” Della Eloise asked.

“Does it matter?”

“Where does Papaw come in?” Della Eloise asked.

Tani lay quiet a moment, then shook her head as if waking from a dream.

“That’s the funny thing,” Tani said. “I was sitting at the dentist’s and I waited all this time to see the lady doc. I barely had front teeth but I sat there all docile and polite because I couldn’t let a man near my mouth. I’d bite his hand off.”

“Fair,” Della Eloise said.

The women watched the still of Papaw’s house. Sookie sat huddled somewhere inside, licking his wounds. He couldn’t call the cops in a town this size; he’d never live down needing the long arm of the law to run off a couple girls.

“Every guy that ever knew me wanted something for it,” Tani said. “Everyone except Papaw. I hadn’t thought about it until I was laid out on a dentist’s chair, overturned as a roach. Anyway, I bought a milkshake, hopped in the car, and waited for the sun to go down. I’m not balding back there, am I?”

“Nope,” Della Eloise said. She dropped a ball of hair behind her back.

“And I couldn’t believe how much Sookie’d let Papaw’s place fall apart. I don’t know, I needed Papaw and maybe he needed me?”

Della Eloise’s hand finally came away from Tani’s hair empty. She smiled and popped her neck.

“Let’s go get him then,” Della Eloise said.

The two women stood and Tani put her baseball hat back on.

“I’ll shovel,” Della Eloise said. “You cut down the silver. We’re makin’ a new tree.”

Tani nodded and watched her sister pick her way to their hole and kick her shovel’s blade into the earth. It was a kindness to be ordered around. Tani pulled out a

pocket knife and cut down fork after fork. Pockets full to overflowing, Tani patted the cottonwood's trunk and crossed to the spot where Della Eloise dug. Della Eloise's shovel struck tin.

A rattling met Tani's ears, a half-forgotten sound. Every summer, Papaw would drive them hours into West Texas to hunt rattlesnakes on ranches with oil wells owned by men who weren't the sort to try and stop Papaw from doing much of anything. Near a well, Papaw would find a butte or mesa where the snakes lurked in the cool, park the Chevy, and carry a three gallon can with a length of rubber hose and a valve into the hills.

Once, they'd searched for the perfect place all day, until dusk. Papaw finally choose a scruffy mesa and climbed its plateau, the length of quarter inch copper tubing on his can's end flashed in the beginnings of blue night. A dangerous time of day to hunt, when the sand could play its best tricks on the eyes, could whip up mirages in the slightest wind, but still Papaw slipped the tubing into the caves, silent and slow, injected the gasoline. After a beat he scooped up the can and sprinted back to the girls yipping, his eyes wide and giddy. Della Eloise and Tani beat the truck bed with their hands and screamed with him, their knees grinding into the coarse fabric of tow sacks, straining to see the first signs of life at his heels.

The rattlesnakes came all at once, descending the colored stratas of rock, the thick rope of their bodies skating across the earth, skating right into the trap that was Papaw, standing before Tani and Della Eloise, a boulder in water ready to part that swarm of scales with nothing but a half inch pipe, a loop of wire strung at its tip. Papaw tossed his pipe from hand to hand, trying to gage which direction the biggest snakes would slice around him, as barks escaped his mouth, something born of joy and adrenaline,

something like a laugh. A diamondback longer than a man took shape in the gloom, his head held high above the sand. The snake was so big there was a smell to him, a rot of the rodents swallowed whole. The snake broke towards the headlights and Papaw twitched toward him, a knot of practiced muscle, and slipped the wire over the diamondback's head. Tani and Della Eloise tossed Papaw tow sack after tow sack as he fought the thrashing snake, tightening the wire and holding the pipe high overhead as the snake's hooked fangs searched for skin and its rattling tail drummed against the earth, the truck, the elements, the loudest rattle in the whole cacophony of the homeless hoard.

That night, the stars burned bright and low; they seemed close enough to scrape the Chevy's roof as Papaw wound them towards home. The cool night air hummed against the cracked windows and let in the sound of the rattlesnakes scratching and rattling and writhing, bagged in the truck bed. Tani slipped in and out of sleep in the crook of Papaw's armpit, his leathered arm tucked around her, her cheek snuggled against Della Eloise's head.

Della Eloise held the Folger's can over her head and shook it like a maraca, laughing or crying with the relief of it all. Tani burrowed her face into Della Eloise and leaned into the sound, the memory, Papaw running again, yipping, holding their world together. Choking on their laughter, the women walked to the main road.

"Thanks, Sookie," Tani hollered at the house. "You've been a doll."

As the women walked, they settled into a comfortable quiet. Tani wrapped her arm around Della Eloise's shoulders and pressed her chin to her kid sister's head. The wind swathed the exposed skin of Tani's back, cradled her, took on her weight. Tani

flexed her blistering fingers. Her body would slough off the evidence of this beating, and soon.

“Coffee?” Tani asked.

Della Eloise rattled the Folger’s can. “Coffee,” she said.

## CUNT

That summer, my body peeled itself from the inside out and the outside in like we could escape each other. I bled so much my waist emptied and my edges shrank. The vitiligo that had faded from my fingers in childhood brightened back into glowing. By August, I looked like I'd dipped my hands in bleach and the rest of me was unclean. A rash or bites or both clawed at the backs of my arms and my legs. In a fit of rage, I threw back the mattress, positive that bed bugs had burrowed into its corners. Something was sucking me dry and I wanted someone, even insects, to blame.

I had no say in the matter, so I hid in billowing dresses and gave up on tampons. I learned to smell the metallic shed of my body to gauge how much of me cracked open. My molting turned me into a night creature. The further my body receded the more voracious I became. Nothing satiated the dizzying, greedy, hunger I felt. Booze, food, dick, pussy, books, the heat that bit at my ankles—I wanted more of it, always, but I had to hide that too, once it got out of hand. Men can punch each other at night. They can set things that way. Get some pep in the prick, find some manhood. But no one wants to watch the little woman with the easy smile grow fangs. My girl-next door look forces people to take my actions as their own potential, my pretty, spitting face sticks under the skin like a splinter—according to Jones, anyway.

But it happens, it's happened, so I promised Jones I'd spare the masses and by way of sticking to it, I moved my bed right up against the windowsill and stacked them thick with books, chips, candles, postcards, shed pajama pants. It became my nest, a place so lawless I never wanted to leave. The solitude made me introspective—the only thing I knew to be in the midst of my own splitting. I'd shuffle into my office job from eight to five but after that the day was mine and I often spent it lying down, unscrewing the steady curling of my spine, reinstating my organs. I'd try to remember who I am and who I'd been, and it helped to have long conversations with Jones, who worked nights at a retailer no one in their right mind cared to visit at any time of day so she had nothing but time.

Jones and I had been best friends once, bosom friends, I like to say, just because she hates it. She thinks my body's purging all the men I've let go poking around inside and it's possible, sure, but Jones is a virgin so what does she know?

"I know you're a lot nicer when you're making love," Jones says.

"It's called sex, Jones," I say. "Don't be gross."

"They've brought in a bunch of nutcrackers for Christmas and they're staring at me and it's only October."

I watch the popcorn ceiling above me. A face forms in the plaster's pulpy shadows, or maybe it's the Nyquil I'm drinking, personifying itself without permission.

"That unsustainable," I say.

"Thank you. They've got crackers for breasts now, can you believe it? The ladies' mouths don't open. Only their chests."

"Like titty-sex?"

“What is that?”

“Southern Baptists’ third base,” I say.

Jones snorts.

“How many more mouths do you think we’ll lose?” I ask.

“Who’ll lose?” Jones asked.

“Us? You, me, women, nutcracker peoples. That doesn’t freak you out? Now only fifty percent of nutcrackers get a say and we’ve all decided we’re alright with that?”

“Are you drunk?”

“No, I’m sober,” I say. “Sober as a heart attack.”

Jones falls silent. I imagine her in that big, empty store, turning the nutcrackers around. A glittering red and green army, marching the wrong way. Their bad boots remind me of the converse sneakers Seamus had custom-made to say TALL GUY on the back. The fourteen year old white boy’s tattoo. He hung himself in a beach house while his mother cooked cinnamon rolls downstairs. Jones and I both dated him, at one time of another. Now, we only ever talk about him sideways.

“I don’t think any of us really get a say,” Jones says.

The face on the ceiling has disappeared. A toothy grin takes shape behind it, a dog. I close my eyes and press the moon that hangs from my necklace into the warmth of my sternum. Beneath my bones, there’s some comfort, some answer, something tangible I wish I could pull from my cunt like silk—a magician’s trick.

“Do you?” Jones asks.

“Do I, what, now?”

“Do you think we get a say?”

“I don’t,” I say. “Do you?”

There’s not many places to go after a conversation like that so I encourage Jones to avoid the nut-peoples’ Civil Rights issue because everyone else is, and hang up. The Nyquil pushes at my forehead above my eyes, pressing me deeper into the bed’s embrace. Maybe, I’m no better than that popcorn pulp making up faces on the ceiling as it goes. Or maybe I’m a churning person, reborn all time but I’m just now noticing, or maybe this is a big one, a transition of sorts. Something less cliché than a caterpillar crystallizing into a butterfly or something exactly the opposite.

“We need more fairy tales about devolving,” I say, but Jones is gone.

I flex my toes. They hardly move, like hooves or feet webbed together tight.

When I wake the next morning, I have a text from Jones: *Hell to the yes, dude.*

What she means by that, I don’t know. I open my messages. My own text bubble stares back at me: *Let’s get a say. Road trip to Flagstaff? Friday?*

I’d sent the text somewhere between the last sips of the sticky Nyquil bottle peering at me, rolled halfway under the bed. I remember the hope I’d felt, typing away, in waves of memory that flirt with shape, gathering under my white speckled fingers. I only have a few minutes to make myself office ready but instead of dressing I carry my plants to the tub to water them under the faucet and arrange them to drain while I’m gone. It centers me to see life in this sterile, porcelain place. The trouble is I’m always forgetting the little things I like to do. The evidence is in the brown, eating at my plants’ leaves. I sit on the toilet and try to decide how to play this. I haven’t actually seen Jones since Seamus’ funeral and that was what, three years ago? I could back out, but then again, why? What would I miss here?

“Piss it,” I tell the plants. “Let’s impose a crossroads.”

I felt a tumble in my pelvis; a sure dislodging of something once connected  
slinking out of grasp, not yet, but soon.

## HAND

During a particularly insulting session with a graduate psychology student of the seven-dollars-a-pop variety earlier that week, Erin was reminded that her pessimistic outlook was a toxic act that Erin was choosing to afflict upon *herself*. Her therapist really liked hammering home this *herself* bit. So as Erin took a lap around the pillow section of Pier 1 Imports, shuffling about in her apron, looking like so many of the porcelain penguins that surrounded her, she took wicked, reckless pleasure in deciding that this shift was, without question, a worst case scenario.

First of all, it was a Saturday night. Erin's friends, poets and painters supported by their parents, were already shit hammered. They sent Erin's phone buzzing every few minutes or so, jiggling her apron's kangaroo pouch up and down, stirring all the small, broken things she'd gathered inside of it—shards of coffee mugs and doorknobs, a once glittering Christmas ornament of Santa in a Cowboy hat, intricate cloth flowers. Her friends meant well but as per usual, their words and pictures made her feel murderous towards the innocent penguins. Erin could, of course, leave her phone in her locker in accordance with Pier 1 policy but its buzz created a game of cat and mouse that helped to

pass the time. The store's manager, Debbie, maneuvered a cruel vendetta against SAIL PHONES.

It was this combination of one on one time with Debbie and the wealth gap that all Pier 1 employees tried to hide from their social circles that made this particular shift the most despised. On a weekday, shifts could be explained away as hobbies, a discount on incredible stuff that everyone wants but no one really needs—salt shakers shaped like squirrels, firefly lights, margarita glasses with cerulean rims. But on the weekends, it was harder to give a reason for working through the readings, dinners, movies—all the small things affluent communities schedule. As if to add insult to injury, the city of Missoula, Montana shut down by 6 PM sharp. Between six o'clock and close at ten, not a soul would wander into the shop and serve up a little action. The monotony made it difficult to ignore the unthinkable questions that Erin could usually stifle with distractions and movement. Could she escape poverty on her own? Or was this life as it would always be? Meanwhile, every Saturday evening without fail, Debbie met the store's inevitable silence with theatrical surprise and ferocious malice.

Debbie spent a lot of this time on the phone with Kathy, another Pier 1 manager up in Kalispell, bitching. The phones sat on the cash wrap, a 360 degree counter bolted down at the store's center that served as Debbie's throne, lighthouse, and command center. Debbie's voice—a shocking thing that did not sound like it could possibly inhabit the frame that carried it—reached into all corners. Debbie was no taller than five foot one, but that voice of hers belonged to a large man. She was also known for her love of flashing the Mickey Mouse cartoon tattooed to her calf at unsuspecting employees when the mood struck her. The combined effect reminded Erin of a sword swallower or a flame

gulper that had phased out of his act and aged into the role of beloved circus storyteller. Her laugh, which can best be described as a *GAK*ing noise, never escaped her lungs more than once at a time.

“Kathy,” Debbie said into the phone. “I told her I was tired of the bullshit, I told her and I’d tell her again, you know I would. *GAK*. They say they won’t come in anymore like I don’t have an eye for faces. Girl, I know you! You’ve been back for my pillas before and you’ll be back again. It’s these kids I keep hiring. I got to work around their schedule. They get school, they got girlfriends, and it’s gotta be my problem. I can’t get ‘em to work. Well, I know it. How can we keep any of ‘em at what corporate pays?”

Debbie was getting on a roll now, so Erin grabbed a duster and disappeared to the candlestick section. Erin dusted in Debbie’s view for a while with her face screwed up as if the intricacy of the glass required close analysis. At the sound of the next *GAK*, Erin shifted out of view. Her phone told her that her friends were at the Sunrise Saloon ballroom dancing. They’d shot videos to prove that they were far more fun than Erin’s date would be—even this fourth date with a man she actually liked. No word from him yet, though. Not a good sign.

No one responded after one minute, then four. As Erin stood around pretending to dust, the outfit she’d packed and laid flat in her work locker felt garish, so over the top and bright that she could all but see it shining through the store’s back wall. She set down the duster and planted her hands in her pouch to run her fingertips over Santa’s hat for courage. When Erin had first started working at Pier 1, she thought their merchandise was beautiful. Working there was like having a backstage pass to a polished, shimmering world she wouldn’t have access to otherwise. But with every passing day, the store bent,

skewing before her eyes, growing more and more distorted. The once perfect symmetry of all these trinkets imported from factories far away was fake, peeling away at the seams. It was a capitalist wasteland and Erin felt foolish for having ever been convinced by its thin veneer.

The shards she carried with her in her pouch seemed like the only reality in the whole place. Erin wandered to the wall art section and allowed the store to melt away from her mind. As she roamed, she imaged all the polyester and the plaster and the plastic around her melting, oozing to the ground like burning candle wax where it pooled, climbing up and up and up until the Pier 1 was filled with water. Erin could all but feel ripples knead her skin as fish cruised by. Erin circled back to the candlesticks feeling like one of the swimming, crawling creatures on this spot when it was a Glacial Lake, only fifteen thousand years ago.

Erin's phone buzzed. She whipped it from her pocket, hating herself for hoping it was Michael rather than her friends. It wasn't him but it was a "him." The last "him" that Erin had come to know the quirks of, the last set of quirks that she'd decided she loved before he turned about to be lying about this or that. He'd tagged her in video on Facebook. They hadn't spoken since the day she'd ended it, months ago, and here he was, his name standing there, demanding her attention. Already Erin's brain had begun to cook up wild theories. This had to be a love profession, or a hate video, or maybe it was a public show of regret and deep, deep sorrow. It was a video of a seal.

The seal was lying around, sunning on his back, barking, or perhaps, laughing, in gulping breaths. The video's caption read, *Saturday Night*. He tagged her in the Comment section without further commentary.

“Erin,” Debbie growled.

Erin all but dropped her phone. She’d completely forgotten her surroundings but it was too late, Debbie was rounding the corner, bearing down on her with furious glee.

“I will take,” Debbie shot her palm into the air between them. “That.”

Erin dropped her phone into Debbie’s hand without a word. The two stared at each other.

“Do you think that’s funny?” Debbie hissed.

“Funny?” Erin asked.

“Making fun of me or something like I’m above bustin’ your ass.”

“Making fun? Debbie I’m sorry I—” Then it hit Erin, the laugh. The fat, guffawing seal rolling around *GAKing* like Debbie.

The pair looked at each other some more.

“I’m sorry Debbie, I’m a dumbass,” Erin said. “My ex tagged me in that and I’m waiting to hear about a date and I...”

Debbie turned on her heels and headed for the cash wrap. “Come on,” she said over her shoulder.

Erin followed Debbie like a woman might follow an executioner. She burrowed her hands into her pouch, but even her favorite treasure—a synthetic pinecone smaller than a penny—couldn’t save her now. Debbie rounded her command center and stood behind the register, Erin’s phone in her hand. Debbie opened the phone, set a hand on her hip, and watched the seal video. She looked up at Erin, pulled her mouth into a snarl, and watched it again.

“You said an ex-boyfriend sent you this?” Debbie asked.

Erin nodded.

“Seals?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Erin said.

Debbie set down the phone. Erin tried hard not to look down at its screen for new messages.

“You like this boy?” Debbie asked.

“No,” Erin said. “No, not at all. I’ve got a date tonight, actually. He hasn’t texted though. That’s another reason I was on my phone.”

Debbie tilted her head back on her neck and let out a spectacular *GAK*. “So you’re not sad about this one, you’re mad at the new one. I thought you were about to cry over a seal.”

Erin did not bother to correct Debbie on the exact tenor of her emotions. Debbie pulled the drawer under the counter open, slid Erin’s phone into it, and snapped it shut.

“You don’t need the new one,” Debbie said. “You need Roku.”

The little woman marched away and began adjusting mugs so that their handles faced the correct, jaunty angle due west.

“I’ve been divorced twenty-five years,” Debbie said. “Best decision I ever made. Now I’ve got Roku. I pay 125 dollars a month to see every show worth watching. I watch all them award shows to make sure I didn’t miss anything. You go ahead and name one. I’ve seen it.”

Erin shuffled closer, holding her duster before her like a shield.

“Go on,” Debbie said.

“*Parks and Rec?*” Erin asked.

“Yep.”

“*Bones?*”

“Boring.”

“*Twin Peaks?*”

“Love the old ones. Didn’t like that reboot.”

Erin was out of shows. “What’s your favorite?” she asked, her voice faltering. By now, the women had exchanged more words than they’d ever spoken to one another.

“*How to Get Away with Murder,*” Debbie said. *GAK.* “No, I like *Scandal.* Do you have Netflix?”

Erin nodded. “And Hulu.”

Debbie rolled her eyes. “Hell, you’re not taking advantage of this century. A hundred fifty years ago you’d already of married some guy you didn’t like and popped out a couple kids you liked less and there wasn’t cable television.”

Erin’s phone buzzed from within the drawer.

“You’re young, though,” Debbie said. “Might as well. That seal shit is a good sign, the way men work. They can smell when another one wants to scoop you up.”

The store’s phone rang and Debbie moved to answer it, all business again. It wasn’t an order, only Kathy, so Debbie launched into speculating about how she’s supposed to pay for all her son-in-law’s ingrown toenails without a single sale to be made.

Debbie’s ranting left Erin alone with her thoughts, which was not a place she felt entirely thrilled to be. The lack of reprimanding was a bonus and it wasn’t that Erin was against TV, she was just against the idea of living her life in front of one. Tonight’s date

suddenly felt like the precipice from which her life would either sky rocket toward bliss or plummet into avid Oscar's watching despair. Erin wanted to hurl a penguin to the floor, feign shock, and bolt for her phone. *Imagine fall leaves dropping through the surface of a tranquil pond*, her therapist would've said.

The door rang out and a petite woman with eyes the size of plates leapt into the store and headed straight into the Housewares aisle, away from Erin. According to store policy, Erin was to chase this woman down, offer her a hello, and ask if she was looking for anything special. Like any sane human being, Erin wanted to do no such thing. Erin peaked at Debbie, hoping this moment would go unnoticed. No such luck. Debbie's head was already on a swivel, her nostrils flared, sniffing for Erin.

"Hello ma'am," Debbie barked at the stranger. "Hello!"

Erin hurried over to the customer, accidentally scaring her in the process. The woman jumped and fixed her wide eyes onto Erin, gripping at the leather pouch that hung from her neck.

"Hi," Erin said. "I'm sorry—I—are you looking for anything special?"

The woman's face changed before Erin's eyes, transformed by the contagious grin that spread across it.

"Thanks, thanks no," she said. "I don't want to buy anything. I'm only passing time. Driving the truck through, you know." She pointed to the eighteen-wheeler parked across half of the Pier 1 parking lot.

Erin nodded. The woman dropped her hands from the pouch that she wore and started commenting on everything around them—the bunnies, the flowers, the Easter eggs. The way she spoke about them, Erin could almost forget the rain outside and the

gloom that had begun to gather over her evening. They walked through the indoor furniture, the outdoor furniture, the rugs, and had made their way to the lamps when Erin felt comfortable enough to ask about the pouch that by its sheer size, dwarfed the woman's torso.

"My crystals," she said, patting the pouch. "I had a Wiccan make it for me. Have you been down to Butte?"

Erin shook her head.

"Do not go." The woman said, her eyes fierce, stress in every syllable. "I mean it. Do you believe in planes beyond the physical? Don't answer that, they don't care if you do or you don't."

Erin could feel the hot stare of command central trained on her back.

"I do," Erin said. She motioned to the lamps in what she hoped looked like a gesture of all-encompassing spirituality to the customer and salesmanship to Debbie. "So, the crystals? They?"

"They protect me," the woman said. "I am to keep them on my person at all times and I mean at all times. Especially, when I'm sleeping."

Erin nodded and got them moving again. So long as the duo kept a steady pace around the store and appeared to admire the merchandise, they might be safe from Debbie, who, thankfully, was still tethered to the phone.

"I bought this big old house in Butte—historic house—I make good money truckin,'" the woman went on. "There aren't many women in truckin' so they know to keep a good thing when they got it. It's bad on your back but I've gotten to travel and I told them I would not work without my dog so I keep her right in the cab with me. It

started in the house though. Butte's a damned haunted place. Do you know about the Berkeley Pit? That toxic water that killed all those birds?"

Erin nodded.

"Well, those miners aren't at peace either. As clear as you can see that Pit, I've seen the dead ripple out of Butte. All us truckers know if you drive into that town at the wrong time of early mornin,' spirits pour towards you like they're trying to get out. I don't think they can, though. Anyways, in my house, I'd be fast asleep then wake up with hands on me. All over, mean, hitting and pulling and pinching."

The stranger's mimed spectral attack did not look much like an interior design oriented conversation but Erin was determined to hear this woman out for *herself*. It was the only distraction from her phone and her crumbling view of the future that Erin was likely to get all night.

"I tried scrubbing the place with sage, then sweetgrass. I moved the bed out of the 'dead man's' position, where your feet face the door," the woman said. "I even called up a Catholic priest about an exorcism but I think he only made the thing mad. I'd had it. I spent all this money on a house only to be goddamn relieved when I had to go back on the road. Then, it started happening there too. I'd been sleeping in Portland and wham, Calgary, wham, Spokane, wham, wham, wham."

As the woman clapped her hands against her body, emphasizing the "whams," Debbie appeared over her left shoulder.

"This doesn't sound like pillow talk to me," Debbie said.

The woman was so shocked by the rasping voice that materialized behind her that she jumped again, sending a pyramid of stacked decorative pillows cascading across the floor.

“I’m sorry,” the woman said. She did not look it.

“I don’t pay her to stand around talking,” Debbie said.

Erin took this uncomfortable moment as her cue to chase pillows. She moved away as fast as her apron would allow and took to piling pillows in her arms.

“She was a big help,” the customer said. “It was my fault I got to blabbin.’ I’m passing through and wanted—”

Debbie did not let the woman finish. Instead, she pointed a thumb at the truck that spanned the length of the store’s front windows. “I noticed,” she said.

During the thick silence that followed, Erin stacked pillows.

“You know what,” the stranger said, turning to Erin. “You can stop that honey, stop that now, I’m not going to buy all those after all. I do not need any more throw pillows in my home, or in my *truck*. Thank you so much for your help I will not tolerate—I will not be back, but thank you, honey.”

She talked as she walked the length of the store, until her hand rested on the front door. To Erin’s surprise, the woman changed her mind, turning on the heels of her boots, and walked back to Erin. Erin expected Debbie to head the woman off but, for once, Debbie stayed silent, her mouth disappearing into a pursed pinch not unlike an asshole.

The woman dug through her crystal pouch and extracted a soft pink, rose quartz stone. It was jagged and distorted in some places, but unlike everything that surrounded them, Erin could tell that it was of the earth. It was real, and its presence compared to the

decorative pillow in Erin's hand, stitched with fake fall leaves, made tears gather behind Erin's eyes.

"Here," the woman said.

Erin shook her head. She couldn't accept it.

"Take it," the woman urged. "You need protection too. It will protect you from all kinds of things."

The woman took Erin's hand and pressed it into her palm. The rock was warm and rough to the touch.

"Thank you," Erin managed. She wiped a tear away with the back of her hand.

The woman grinned wide. "Ask it for what you need," she whispered.

"Could I give you my number? I'm sorry to ask," Erin asked. "But will you call, the next time you're in town? We could get coffee or—would that be alright?"

The woman nodded and Erin scribbled her number on a pad of stationary with the Pier 1 logo bolded at its top.

"Until next time," the woman said, squeezing Erin's hand.

The woman wetted her lips then threw her head back and yelled to Debbie, "Goodnight, thank you for all your help."

As quickly as she'd come, the woman walked out the front door. Debbie locked the door behind her, glowering up at the cow dog that peered out of the truck's passenger window. Apparently too furious with Erin to address her, Debbie stomped to the back office, spouting a stream of profanities Erin would've been impressed by, were she more confident that they were not directed at her.

Erin added the crystal to her apron's kangaroo pouch and heaped the pillows higher and higher in an effort to hold her thoughts at bay. Erin wanted to sprint out the glass, break through it and leave nothing but a Looney Tune's silhouette of herself behind. She could hop in the truck and begin a new life. Find herself on the road, lean into this fascinating new friend. But Erin needed this job. It didn't pay the rent, much less renter's insurance, health insurance, utilities, phone bills, and there was no chance of promotion, of ever getting out of here. But without this job, every unemployed hour that ticked by would feel like a failure or complicity.

Erin felt like a caged animal. She tried to imagine pre Glacial Ponderosa Pines splitting open the floor, growing until they shattered through the ceiling but she couldn't escape the present. A stock photo of an exceptionally fit, young couple smiled up at Erin from a fifty dollar frame. It wasn't life as she'd once thought it would be.

Erin figured that she was likely to get fired anyway and fished her phone from its drawer. At least she could cut the suspense for *herself*. Among her friend's reactions to her pre-date jitters was Michael: *Sorry, I'm going to have to cancel tonight. Stephanie and Kelly want me to go to this BBQ thing with them. I'd rather hang out with you!*

Debbie swung through the back door, her coat on and her purse on her arm. Erin didn't bother stashing her phone.

"Get your stuff," Debbie said. "We're leaving. I'll tell corporate we hadn't made a sell in 5 hours. Called it a night. If they push it we'll tell them you got bit."

"Ok, yea," Erin said, too numb to question her.

Outside, Erin held Debbie's umbrella high overhead while Debbie locked the store's heavy double doors.

“You goin’ on your date?” Debbie asked.

“He backed out.”

Debbie grunted and shook her head. “Roku, I’m telling ya. Step into the century.”

They walked to their prospective cars and waved from their seats, their heads blurred dots across the rain. As the storm beat against Erin’s borrowed sedan, she turned off the radio, unzipped her backpack and took out the outfit she’d folded piece by piece. She put on lipstick in the rearview mirror and combed out her hair with her fingers. Once Debbie had driven out of sight, Erin checked the lot for lurkers and stripped down to her underwear. She sat a minute, watching the water snake down the windshield in pulsing arteries. She wanted to tumble out of the car and run circles around the lot like a child, bathe away her worries. It’d give Debbie something to do when she saw the security cameras’ footage in the morning.

Instead, Erin turned the trucker’s rose quartz crystal over in her hands. She considered setting it on her tongue, but it was bitter, metallic to the taste, so Erin whispered into it, like she might a small living thing.

“Help me get out,” she whispered. “Help me get out, help me get out on my own.”

The rock didn’t respond but Erin felt freed, like her spine at least stood a little straighter. She tucked the crystal into her brassiere, pulled on her red dress and her boots and texted Michael: *No worries! We’ll be at Sunrise if y’all want to stop by.* Michael wouldn’t come, Erin knew that, but she’d rather be snubbed twice than let him think that she was wallowing. With her shift cut short, Erin had only made forty-five bucks, thirty-eight after taxes. Meeting up with her friends meant spending five of that on Sunrise’s cover and twirling across the dance floor with some cowboy hat to save on three-fifty

PBR, but if she sat still in this lot, or in the apartment she couldn't afford, or really anywhere too long, the ground would swallow her whole.

## HAIR

All the men behind the caution tape had something to say about Florence.

“She was only lighting a cigarette,” a man said.

“She ran right into me, I couldn’t help it,” came the driver.

“Don’t worry about that,” Law Enforcement said, worming his finger underneath his collar, taunt as a rubber band. “Pretty, though. Such a shame.”

I wanted to ask if it would still be a shame if she were less attractive, less docile looking, what with her long blonde hair and her crisp pencil skirt but I didn’t ask. I didn’t ask anyone anything because I’d seen Florence. I’d seen the same thing as the drivers and business men, the dad whose daughter’s tears darkened his polyester shoulder. The question wasn’t what happened. The question was who would speak Florence into story.

People grated their feet against the sidewalk, watches were checked, phones materialized. Law Enforcement ran out of things to scribble and I was behind enemy lines, the only woman left in this throng of men who insisted upon dancing around the fact that Florence had set her hair on fire, on purpose, at the corner of Third and Abrams.

She stood on the sidewalk like a pebble in water, at first, unmoving. She accepted the shoulders that jostled hers, grounding her down no matter how she stood. I saw her

try walking sideways, like an arrow. Saw her watch her feet, try to skate with the grain. All the while, Florence looked defeated, like she might slump over and sleep right there on the cement. She set a foot in front of the other, but it was slow, too slow, and I'd started to help her, but I was running late. I couldn't stop. I passed Florence like the rest. I crossed the street and that sense we don't have a word for reached into my body, jerked at my intestines, and pulled me back around.

Florence stood on the opposite street corner, at once invisible to the crowd pushing past her, and licked over by the person beside her. Licked over by greedy eyes roving her body, licked over by every hand that brushed against her until by their sheer number each violation became a single pawing presence. I was still stuck behind a DON'T WALK sign when her head was thrown back and to me, Florence became only her mouth, flung open, gaping silent at the sky. A faceless peacoat had run a gloved hand through that delicious hair and balled his fist. He was, after all, entitled to its softness. He dragged Florence a step and was gone. Across the hum of passing cars between us, I heard him say, "You look good, sweetie."

"You look good sweetie," I said.

"Excuse me," asked Law Enforcement.

The mob of rubberneckers pivoted on the spot and I wanted to believe that they were listening but my features burned, red rose up my throat and onto my face. The men cataloged my collection of skin.

"That's what he said," I said. "The man in the peacoat that pulled her hair before she..."

“Did you see anything else?” Law Enforcement said, bored. The peacoats in the crowds bristled, their shiver a spreading virus.

“I saw everything,” I said. I fought the wild urge to spit.

“You’re going to need to be more specific if you’d like to make a statement, ma’am.”

“Florence went to the gyro shop doorway to get out of the way. Then she took her hair in her hands and held it there, looking at it. I wanted to ask her if she was alright so I tried to get to her but I couldn’t push through. That’s when she pulled out the cigarette, lit it, took a drag, struck another match and held it to her hair, above her ear, like it was nothing.”

The crowd clucked their disapproval. They shook their heads; they clapped their hands together against the cold. Law Enforcement raised an eyebrow, his pen poised above his report, his hand still. He clicked his pen closed.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said. He turned away.

The air hung heavy with the smelled of diesel and burnt hair and the men filled the silence with the same denials, the same language as before.

*Lighting a cigarette. Couldn’t help it. Pretty. Such a shame.*

I’d failed Florence. I hadn’t gotten to the part of the story that mattered, the moment I knew then I’d never scrub from my mind, so I slipped under the city and boarded the subway due east, the same way Florence’s screaming ambulance had gone off to.

I roamed the hospital for hours. Ignored the worried calls from work. At the vending machine, I found a blonde who looked an awful lot like Florence.

“Florence?” I said.

The woman jumped, startled. No, just her daughter, buying a Snickers Bar. I apologized for her loss.

“She didn’t die,” Florence’s daughter said.

Her resemblance was uncanny. She shook her head and with it that hair, thick enough to get lost inside.

“They think she’s crazy,” Florence’s daughter said.

I held her shoulders in both my hands.

“That word doesn’t mean anything,” I said. “That’s what people say when they’re too afraid to think a thing through.”

I pressed my business card into her lacquered hand.

Florence’s daughter called a month later. She wanted me to look over a psychiatric asylums’ contract for potential oddities and, perhaps, draw up an agreement granting the daughter durable power of attorney over the mother, since it was an optional, albeit encouraged, enclosure of the asylum’s long-term treatment contract.

I pretended to forget the durable power of attorney bit until Florence was institutionalized and I could get her signature myself, pro bono, of course. It was arranged that Florence and I were to meet in the institution’s eye—a garden planted at the center of its interwoven buildings.

Her head was entirely bald, her skin burned and blistered. One of her eyes was lopsided, stretched up and open by a skin graft—bad patchwork. But in both of her brown eyes, Florence looked undeniably awake.

I don't smoke but I lit a cigarette anyway and offered her a drag. She took it without thanks, sat back, and pushed the smoke from her lungs. Her attendant texted at the fringes of the synthetic garden, perhaps deep in thought, perhaps pretending to be.

"You're my lawyer?" Florence said.

I tapped the power of attorney paperwork. "For now," I said.

Florence grinned and took another drag. "Here for the freak show? Go ahead, gawk away. My doctor's a wizard. A thigh, a handful of staples, a little elbow grease, and voilà."

I took in her smile, the smoke curling around her melted features. Life made a dream, since Florence.

"No," I said. "I was there, that day. I wanted to help you."

Florence cocked an eyebrow.

"I'm here because I want you to know that I saw you. I saw the flicker of relief on your face right before your hair caught. The flames floated around your head like a cloud, or a crown. I'll never forget it."

Florence nodded. "That was the good bit, before the burning."

I looked down at the page between us. At the words oozing up from it: "schizophrenia," "incapacitated person." Florence picked up her pen, poised to sign her rights away on the dotted line.

"I don't believe it, you know," I said.

She sat back and studied me, clicking her pen open and closed. Her hand was still normal, graceful, even. Her nails were long and painted red. With those red fingers she

pushed my papers back at me, unsigned, snubbed her cigarette, and motioned to the attendant, who bustled over.

“Florence,” I begged. “You were beautiful. I need you to know it was the only beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

Florence stood and looked down at me with such confidence, such peaceful assurance that she seemed to stand as tall as the buildings surrounding her. Dwarfed by comparison, I knew already that I’d said it all wrong. I’d come all this way only to fail Florence, again. A grin cracked her face.

“And now, I’m not,” Florence said. “And now, I get to just be.”