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Albuquerque

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ALBUQUERQUE

By

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This story is about living in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 2017 as a mixed-race woman with Hispanic, European, and Indigenous Mexican and Puebloan ancestry. Albuquerque seeks to understand how marginalized cultures become subsumed and ultimately lost by the dominate culture. As a child of mixed heritage, I am interested in the internalization of this cultural disappearance, and all the subtle yet profound choices my ancestors have made: my grandparents refused to teach Spanish to their children so they would fit in better with the whites, my Indian great grandfather fled Mexico, leaving behind his tribe and culture, never to return. My pueblo ancestry is long lost and never talked about; instead, stories of Spanish conquistadors and rich merchants are the favored family lore. Albuquerque is also a focus on place, and what it means to feel like you and the place you came from are inextricably linked, and when one suffers, so does the other, and when one is parched, baffled, and wounded, so is the other.

prologue

Spiritual bottom is as much a place as anywhere. In the early part of 2017 I had a psychotic breakdown. I was living in Albuquerque, New Mexico, at the time. I have never been good with boundaries between myself and the world, but that year my heart felt especially tender. That was the year I attended a wedding of a friend who married a young Mexican man worried about deportation. They were 26, deeply in love, and when they kissed, all of us attending the ceremony felt we were witnessing, participating in, some sacred, love-fueled resistance. That was the year I made my husband pull over to help a stumbling man whose blood was running down his body in dark, thick crimson rivulets from the fresh gaping wound on his forehead. Twice he asked for a ride home, and twice attempted to climb into the backseat alongside my children, their little features frozen in terror; and so, determining that he was physically capable of getting himself home, we left the bloody man curbside. He is one of many experiences polarized between love and violence for me that year and at the time I couldn't say which was the more beautiful of the two. One scarce, the other abundant; both exhilarating. They held my interest like a bloodhound to any strong smell.

I came to New Mexico through my father's paternal bloodline, the Garcias, 14 generations ago. In the mid-16th century, my ancestor sailed by ship, bearing the Spanish flag to the New World alongside explorer Francisco Vázquez de Coronado. They landed in Central Mexico and headed north along the Rio Grande looking for gold and whatever else they deemed valuable. They travelled on horseback, carrying swords and matchlock muskets, their bodies protected by heavy steel armor and thick, layered leather. They moved over spans of useless sediment where spindly cacti sprung from the ground like skeletal fingers pointing to god, and around

impenetrable scrub, rocks, and canyons. Eventually they reached the valleys of the northern Chihuahuan Desert's rich, soft earth where maize, squash, and beans were grown by people who had lived there for so long their creation stories were of this land, because they were forged by the land, and they were the land and the land was them. They greeted the newcomers. In return, Coronado and his men took their bodies, their lives, their resources. In their bodies the Spaniards only saw darkness and savagery and so the Spaniards used their power darkly, savagely.

I came through my father's maternal bloodline, the Romeros, who in the early-17th century, left their homes in Mexico City to help establish new Spanish territories to the north. They traveled with priests, exalters and adorers of a monotheistic god made in their own image whose great promise was to reward unflinching devotion with wealth, so long as his worshipers could think like wealth, to only love *more* and *never enough*. They travelled with farmers, who planted wheat and barley seeds carried over from Europe. Don Juan de Oñate led the expedition; he claimed the land for Spain, divvied out its management to the men that served under him, and made slaves of the peoples who had always lived there. Bodies to work or to fuck or to love. Bodies to manage. Bodies to murder. They built churches and showed the people how to worship their new god, in their new miserable kingdom. And when the people protested, their limbs were severed from their bodies so that they might better understand the rawer dimensions of such divine love.

The children of these early Spanish colonizers eventually grew rich. Their children grew richer. In the 19th century my ancestor, Don Miguel Romero, discovered gold deep in the Ortiz mountains outside of Santa Fe, and the scars he left on the mountainside from mining his treasure are visible to this day. Don Miguel's money made more money. He built roads and train

tracks, razed entire forests and processed the lumber in his sawmills. His sons established new cities which they governed themselves and they filled their plazas with mercantile shops and other businesses they owned. Life opened up and because my ancestors mistook their abundance for healing, they bought sacred land, built a resort and named it El Porvenir, *The Future,* and charged those who could afford it access to the land and its sacred mineral waters. When the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Mexican American War in 1848, and New Mexico became a territory of the United States, my great great-grandfather, Eugenio Romero, travelled to Washington, D.C., to ensure the rights of Hispanics were upheld under the new constitution; that his children would be valued by their new country.

I came through my father's grandfather, Guadalupe, who left his people outside of Chihuahua, Mexico, in the early twentieth century. He crossed the Rio Grande, into U.S. territory, fleeing some trauma from his past, although no one in my family can say what it was. His twilight years were spent sitting on his front porch in a perpetual state of heightened paranoia, gun cleaved to his chest, jaw set firm and severe. But there had been some good years, too. After he crossed the border he found a woman he wished to marry, and she agreed, despite her parents' disgust that the man their daughter loved was dark-skinned and Indian. The couple eloped. They asked the notorious Judge Roy Bean, a west Texas man with a predilection for hanging lawbreakers, to marry them in secret. He agreed, but in return the judge made the young couple promise to give him their first-born son. That baby was my grandfather. My great grandparents never did keep their promise.

I came through my mother. Born to homesteader Montanans who hailed from the English countryside, at the age of 27 she left her first husband because he wouldn't stop sleeping around.

She moved south in the mid ‘70s, following in the footsteps of her youngest sister who had found love in the New Mexico desert. That man’s surname was Garcia, the Smith of the Hispanic world. Coincidently, but unrelatedly, that summer my mother also found love in the desert with a man named Garcia. They were married by the year’s end.

I was born in Las Cruces, New Mexico, when the sun and Venus were in the constellation of Scorpio. I was the second daughter, the baby, a mix of colonizers and colonized. When I was six months old, we moved to Texas where my father found work as an engineer for an oil refinery in a small, economically depressed town with rank-smelling polluted air from the refinery’s off-gassing. We didn’t stay in Texas, but my father never returned to New Mexico either. He was the first of 13 generations to leave and never come back. I returned, but not until college. The first 19 years of my life I lived out the peripatetic existence of an oilman’s daughter. We never lived in the big, interesting cities my father’s work led us to–San Francisco, Nashville, Miami–but rather, my parents sought safety and predictability in the suburbs that orbited the outskirts of these cities, and my father commuted to his work. By age fifteen I had moved eight times.

The last move of my girlhood was to Franklin, Tennessee. Franklin was a small, agricultural town. Quaint, yes. Friendly too. Networks of half-hidden, aged walls could be spotted throughout the countryside giving testimony to an unreconciled history. The walls were made of stone: cut into squares, layered one upon the other, caked in moss, built by slaves. At fifteen, I was rootless, desperate to attach myself to this lush country of backwoods that seemed as beautiful as it was backwards, humming and dense, life spreading out far and wide, green and vivid. In Tennessee, water was everywhere. An abundance of water. In the summertime,

miniscule orbs of it hung, suspended in the hazy air, attaching itself to skin and clothing and whatever else passed through it, and to be there was to be hot and dripping and burdened by its opulence. Mistaking my enchantment for love, I offered myself to Tennessee and its moist, dark earth, thinking that the parts of me that were violent and ugly could easily hide in that endless country of soft and half-decayed hills.

At the time, I would have attached myself to any beautiful place. This is what you do when you've never had a home. When a place hasn't claimed you and everyone around you seems well-defined and clear-sighted, as if the world had answered all their questions. I asked these questions too, but if my answers ever arrived, I was long gone, having moved off to some new part of the country. Instead of becoming grounded, instead of acquiring any self-knowledge, instead of knowing my own location and velocity, I remained soft and mutable, reforming myself with each move, adapting myself to fit better into my new surroundings. With each move, the world and I just kept getting less knowable.

In 1996, I graduated from my quaint, southern high school and then spent a failed first year of college at the University of Tennessee in a haze of blackouts and hangovers, determined that waking up in strange places meant that I was finally living a full life, that I was free. In some ways it was true, I was free, which is perhaps why it occurred to me that it was time to move again. I moved west, the direction of infliction and mythic notions of destiny. I chose New Mexico; the landscape of past Christmases and childhood summer vacations, the one geographic constant in my life.

I drove into Albuquerque on I-40, leaving behind long stretches of parched, beige, desert prairie where mountains rose high and vulgar from nothing. I passed through large mounds of

dark, volcanic rock inscribed with petroglyphic effigies and never linear, single spiraling lines, their inner coilings simultaneously touched the future, touched the past, touched the severity of *right now*. I felt no inklings of some inner, atavistic reunion until months later, when I realized I never had to leave the desert. My body then lifted with the elation of familiarity and belonging and then it softened with the relief of finally encountering oneself in the land and in the people and in the food and in the stories of their home. For months, I was so goddamn high on Albuquerque.

I moved in with my aunt and uncle who lived in the North Valley, where stretches of drab streets were lined with homes made of mud and faded wood, and where overbuilt, muscular dogs trotted through treeless dirt yards, barking from behind chain link fences. Behind these homes were large private estates where old wealth hunkered down in thick-walled adobes that sat low on the horizon, like a king behind his pawns. My aunt and uncle's home was not fancy, but after a suburban childhood of popcorn ceilings and beige carpets, I loved their brick floors, smooth white plaster walls, and colorful bathrooms tiled in Mexican Talavera. Behind their home ran an acequia, beside that, a dirt footpath shaded by an endless row of tall cottonwoods. By October, when I arrived, the tree's only remaining leaves hung dull. Brittled from the ceaseless New Mexican sun, the crisped leaves clacked together in the wind like the rattling of some cheap plastic toy.

Before I ever saw how the sunset lit up the Sandia mountains in a psychedelic screen of electric watermelon; before I drizzled honey inside the hot, doughy pocket of a fresh sopapilla; before neon arches led me towards Nob Hill and the bartenders that would know me by name; I knew Albuquerque was mine. Here, my life would be lucky, and everything I wanted would

come to me. Albuquerque felt different from anywhere else I had ever lived. It was all that was base, carnal, and ancient; expressions of a wisdom uninterested in denying its own nature–equally sacred, equally profane, all loving. Social rules and hierarchies felt like the patronizing suggestions written on a comment card, only to be ripped up and swept away by the uncommon grace of a hot desert wind. I knew I was home.

That was the fall that construction crews began finding the bodies buried in the flat vastness of the West Mesa. A bulldozer had unearthed the first one–such a boring way to come upon staggering, unholy violence, but isn't that always how it happens? Thirteen women were exhumed, as the earth was prepared for the affordable housing development that would soon cover it. Initially twelve bodies were found, until they discovered a fetus, curled inside its mother's body like the tiniest Russian doll. I watched on the news as one by one, they were identified. The women were prostitutes and because of their work the default attitude that these were unlovable, throwaway women prevailed over their story. No one demanded justice, no one demanded the killer be caught. Selling one's body for sex was a dark pursuit; the risks, obvious. That same fall, a young woman, a high schooler, paid for advertisement space on a centrally located billboard overlooking I-25; on it she created a sign reminding Albuquerque that these women were someone's daughters. Someone had created them and loved them. I felt ashamed that I had ever felt otherwise. A door inside of me opened, and led me to a more interesting kind of love. Until then I had not: experienced, witnessed, believed, or observed that every person was equally deserving of such deep, undiluted adulation: the ugly, the old, the sexual, the psychic, the queer, the dark, the wise, the unfuckable, the sick, the unbelieved, everyone. Or at least I thought

I hadn't. Such truth is the offering that Albuquerque would give me, freely. I glimpsed it for only a moment; it would take me almost 20 years to accept it.

One year after my move to Albuquerque, I found love. I walked into a Blockbuster Video on a hot August morning after a cocaine and whiskey fueled all-nighter. My eyes fell upon a tall, blond-haired man standing at the back, and when I looked at him, I became enveloped in a rush of gratitude for every poor choice I had ever made, bringing me to this here and now. A shared lifetime between myself and this stranger moved through me in that moment. Despite my shyness, I spoke to him in a bad Australian accent, just so he would look at me. We've been together ever since.

For the next twenty years we lived in New Mexico, minus the one year we spent abroad in England, the country of my mother's ancestors, and with whom I felt little connection. I dreamed every night of a relentless sun, and dry, dust-filled desert air, forcing its way through my doors and windows, scratching my eyes. I vowed that once I got back home to New Mexico I would never leave again. In London we stared in through the glass fronts of the city's boutiques filled with a lavish beauty we couldn't afford, a solid mass of weeping grey always above our heads, me never feeling like I could get warm enough. I gave my change to a beggar who seemed to have walked out of the pages of a Dickens novel; their body: malnourished and sexless, their accent: cockney, their pallor: pale green. When they held out their open palms, I saw that their hands were covered in open, seeping sores.

Albuquerque 2017 was a collision of storms. Road construction tore up Central Avenue, Albuquerque's main vein, where most of our unattended homeless population spent their days. Social services, including mental health care, had been cut off by the governor to save money,

and so the destitute and vulnerable were released out into the streets to fend for themselves. Police officers, overworked, underpaid, and reeling from a well-earned reputation of unnecessary brutality, were unable to attract new recruits and were understaffed by 700 officers. That year Albuquerque's violent and property crimes– murders, rapes, assaults, and thefts– rose to the highest rate in the country, per capita. Meanwhile, Trump's racist rhetoric exalted America's love of wealth and power and whiteness. Fear spread throughout Albuquerque as our large, undocumented population lived in terror that they or their children's bodies could be apprehended by unsafe men and deported to a territory of other unsafe men. And it all felt as if some monumental rock had been moved, uncovering a gaping hole, out of which crawled suffering itself, and that suffering spread itself all over its miserable kingdom. Even now I'm unclear as to whether it was Albuquerque or me who had the breakdown that year.

Me, with no boundaries. After I had my babies, years earlier, I had taken my boundaries down, not wanting to miss anything, any speck of love there for the taking. My heart was open and every day was a new opportunity to fall punch drunk in love with my children, my family, my home, my city. Everything. To believe in love meant I had no choice. The alternative, to turn off and to shut down was unimaginable. And so, as Albuquerque receded further and further into some painful existence, I had no ability to not follow. 2017 was the year I sat on my couch, drink in hand, enveloped in my ministry of isolation to better feel the intensity of my life, painful as it was, because in my boundaryless, confused state, I mistook pain for pleasure. I found the intensity of pain so beautiful it was almost unbearable. That was the year I communed with the divine through messages encrypted in dead birds and filthy piles of trash lying in the streets. My mind like a radio dial, tuned to the world's hyper-spiritualized vivid sensuousness, always

searching for signs. I found meaning in repeating numbers on addresses, billboards, license plates, receipts, labels on plastic mini liquor bottles, the side of a taxicab. Certain words or phrases unaccountably popped into my head with no prompting; a woman's name just before she spoke it; an old song or an unusual phrase; all innocuous enough, and yet they would appear unprompted, more than once if I paid enough attention; no coincidence too impossible, irrational, unreasonable. All part of some private, private commune of purpose between an emissary and her master. I know now that I was in a psychosis, but more than anything, it felt pure and spiritual.

I knew I was experiencing some form of madness, that something dark and untoward lurked within the forest of my mind, terrorizing me in its way. So, while the rest of the world numbed out, believed in enemies, believed in hierarchies, believed in capitalism, how blessed I was to experience myself, so deeply. How fortunate I was to sit in my house, alone, wicked, mad, drunk. Immobilized by so much love that I couldn't even move.

Albuquerque

Always violence.

First an explosion, next a cooling, an expansion, a cohesion, a creation, a calm. But below this calm, just beneath a thin surface lies a hot, unsettled molten agitation of radioactive decay; the center furnace of the world churning inside itself in a thick, turbid stew. A hardening. A crust forms, the beginning cycle, an ouroboros of indiscriminate creation and destruction. Sinking down to feed on itself, and rising up in renewal.

A crack in the dense, dark oceanic rock forms; the beginnings of a tearing. Time fills this split. A separation occurs. Oceans divide us.

Mountain ranges rise and fall. Volcanoes form, erupt, and nearly annihilate all life. The wind comes and blows it all away until the landscape flattens, and if you saw it you would have believed none of it ever happened, none of it ever existed. The Age of Fishes arrives with the slow encroachment of a shallow western sea where life flourishes. Scaled predators, with grotesque bodies of an ornate, monstrous cartilage, swim through murky, warm waters, crushing through hard shelled bodies with heavy jaws. Teem with lungfish. The Rockies begin to lift up through sand, mud, and limestone. The sea begins to dry.

The ground becomes a wet, fertile delta. Volcanic ash abounds. Something crawled out of the ocean and stayed. Life on land is yellow-eyed. Thick armored skin, lung breathing, and large, sometimes lumbering bodies, who feed off lush forests, grasslands, and each other. Another sea. Its waves etch the flow of the tides into limestone cliffs. Hundreds of millions of shark teeth fall

out of mouths. This sea is short lived. The Rockies, still growing, begin to block moist air coming in from the ocean, and lush forests shrivel to dry grasslands and then to a parched, red desert floor.

Air moves through a reptilian horn and one low, sustained note rings loud and ominous like the clarion call to all these wide-mouthed beasts whose time is ending, although nothing ever truly ends.

Mass extinction. We survive. Those that do not are too specialized. But we are small, secretive things, *Purgatorius*, hiding amongst the ferns, our bodies hairy and milk-making, our babies birthed live. Our ears detect the faintest whisper–a whooshing of air above our heads, the snap of branch from behind–and so we flourish. Alongside us are: birds–feather clad, toothless, and hollow-boned former dinosaurs; crocodilians, turtles, sharks, nautiloids, clams, plankton, ferns, conifers. Fruit, and nestling seeds inside soft, giving bodies. Flowers, too, and their co-evolving insects.

We become diverse, our bodies grow large and recognizable as the ancestors of modern forms. We are: deer-looking creatures with triple horns, elephants with trunks as mouths, muscular camel-like bodies with bifurcated horns above the nose, bear dogs, three-toed horses, large hog-like omnivores, hoofed mammals with great, inward-curling horns, beavers, raccoons, short-legged rhinos. Volcanoes continue to erupt and then disappear. A rift sinks between two faults, deep in the ground. First a trickle, and then a flow of water. A river is born. The Rio Grande. One future day she will be an entire ocean.

The earth cools and water freezes into small mountain glaciers. The earth warms. It cools. It warms. Always slowly; life adjusts. Between the mountain and river live dire wolves, sagebrush voles, humans, shrews, mastodons, mammoths.

Bristlecones grow on granite cliff Sandia Mountain walls. Cottonwoods grow along the Rio Grande River.

january

> The earth began to bellow, trees to dance
> And howling dogs in glimmering light advance
> Ere Hekate came.
>
> Aeneid, Book VL [Dryden]

For me, the new year first showed up on a November morning, when the desert air was crisp and sweet, and the golden light glowed like the spectral glint of some auric crown. Artists had long come to New Mexico just for this light, and strained to capture it in their work in some meaningful, truthful way. That morning I stood in my living room, looking out of our large picture window, watching the outside busyness of the neighborhood parents and children making their way over to the elementary school just one block east of our house. My children, Lucy and Hurleigh, who were in fourth and first grade respectively, were getting themselves dressed and ready for the day. I drank my coffee with the smug leisure of a woman with nowhere to be, undisturbed by the shrill, piercing whistles of the nearby crossing guards who would escort these tender little creations of mine safely across the street. I had already gone for my morning run, I had already packed my kids' lunches, I had already kissed Nick goodbye. I was still wearing my running clothes, unconcerned by sweat stains and the way the cheap material festered with the acrid and sour smells of overuse. We had no expendable income to replace them, but also, I didn't care. I had another hour before I would head to the university where I studied Speech

Language Pathology, a subject I hated. As such I spent most of my class time radiating that hatred towards my professors, whose strange, technical knowledge of the mouth, like some small, facial amphitheater, seemed at best useful and dull. My hatred was a havoc-wreaking boomerang, always finding its way back to whatever darkness it came from. I only accomplished hating myself for trying to be a practical person.

Out my window, I spotted a friend of mine across the street at the eastern edge of the park. He stood with his daughter, a tiny, deep voiced girl Lucy had known since kindergarten. Their eyes were locked in parallel, unflinching stares; necks craned upwards, mouths gaping slack. Something in that tree was holding their attention. I yelled over my shoulder to Lucy and Hurleigh to finish getting ready and to meet me in the park.

Once across the street, what I saw was so much better than anything I could have expected. An owl was perched on a tree branch, its large yellow eyes staring out from underneath its enormous horn-like eyebrows. The owl alone was worth the trip across the street, but there was more. Next to the owl, not a foot away on that same branch was a Cooper's hawk. The hawk, red-eyed and speckled like some royal, territorial demon, rose up pridefully–a challenge–and then fanned out her long, scapular wings. Her bird-eater's wrath was justified. The owl was in *her* park, where she raised *her* babies, where she hunted, and where, perched on high and using her sharp, hooked beak, she meticulously plucked out the white, downy-soft, breast plumes of her kill, that once released, floated airily away, like some strange, isolated snow. The hawk shifted this way and that, straining her long, speckled neck outward, her compact wingspan a transverse. Like a cross.

The owl remained flat-faced and unimpressed. Lucy and Hurleigh appeared, and we all held our breath–powerless acts–but the only witchery we knew that might stretch time. The owl jutted its neck forward, once, then twice, and then. It flew.

Or.

The new year began a little early for me. In October, Nick and I took the kids camping. We decided to car camp in the Magdalenas, a small range of mountains only an hour south of Albuquerque, right off I-25, near Socorro. We had been passing these mountains at least once a year on our annual November trek to the Bosque del Apache wetland preserve, to watch thousands of migrating cranes gather and rest in boggy fields, before resuming their migration south. This was how I spent every birthday, asking Nick to take the day off work, and later, pulling the kids out of school.

The Magdelenas had always looked quiet and lonely, rising up dark and brown from the earth, its canyons, like thick velvet folds, even darker. They were named after Mary Magdalene, a true friend to Jesus, and the only companion of his to watch him die. Her face can supposedly be seen in the rock formations of the mountain's large, cauldron-like calderas forged by the ash and lava of erupted Cenozoic era volcanoes. I saw nothing but dirt, Chamisa, Apache Plume.

We chose a spot as far away from the smell of the campsite toilets as possible, near a border of diminutive, skin-scratching scrub oaks that seemed to be guarding a semi-impenetrable forest wilderness. We spent the day hiking up Water Canyon. The name was no ruse, there was indeed water, which was often not the case in New Mexico. It ran down the carved slips of a little, rocky creek bed, rendering a shiny, jade polished wetness over the smooth geology. Lucy

and Hurleigh, not caring that the water was cold, removed their shoes and walked through the creek until their feet went numb.

Later, by the fire, we made s'mores and stood under a gluttonous density of stars; the black sky, closer than ever, filled in the space surrounding us. And while I was in this midst of sky and trees, of half-curated wilderness where rationality and rapture intersect, I thought to say a little prayer to Dionysus, the god of intoxication and in-between states.

That night the wind blew violent and careless. I didn't sleep much; I was hatching a plan should we fly away inside our tent like Dorothy. When I did sleep, I dreamed I was inside a museum, surrounded by the gilded treasures and cherished books of some ancient culture. I looked down, and watched a serpent slip from my body, wet and dripping in its afterbirth. It spoke, although I couldn't tell you what it said. I just knew, even within the confines of dream logic, this was untoward, and possibly the most rational thing that might ever happen to me.

...

The light on the first day of 2017 was as drab as leftovers. I woke up early that morning and drank coffee, alone, in my living room, my whole body throbbing with the sticky sickliness of an over-sugared liver. Hangovers never kept me from my daily routines, and I certainly didn't sleep them off. The morning was my favorite time of day. Whether or not I hurt, I was up before the sun. That morning, sitting in the darkness, I read my monthly horoscope on my phone. *One of the best and scariest thoughts is that nobody on Planet Earth knows what they are doing.*

The kids had spent the night with my parents in their hotel room at the Marriott Uptown, right off I-40, sandwiched between the restaurants Buca di Beppo's and Ojos Locos. My mom thought she was doing Nick and me a favor, that we would dress up, and go out to celebrate New Year's Eve with other dressed up couples, as if we were that kind of people. We weren't. All we wanted was to be with the ones we loved the most. So instead, we drank three-olive martinis, listened to music, and cooked. We toasted to the New Year with Brut Noir and fell asleep by ten. I slept soundly that night, through gunshots and fireworks.

I decided to run even though it was a Sunday, and I usually didn't run on Sundays. It just seemed like the right way to start the new year. My route was one I had been jogging for months. I liked the monotony and predictability of its sameness; my body could switch into cruise control, leaving my mind free to do nothing. I didn't want to take on new information or think about my surroundings, I just wanted to feel my body moving.

I always began my runs with a loop around the park. The park's form was an amoeba-shaped blob, the prized aesthetic of the '60s, the decade when my neighborhood was built, during the time Nob Hill, Route 66, and the University of New Mexico began attracting middle-class families wanting to live in centrally located neighborhoods filled with green spaces and good schools. The body of the park's four-acre green spanse of mild hills spread out bulbous and irregular on the opposite end from where we lived, cinching together at one end like a neck, then releasing into an orbicular head-like form. Exactly one hundred Siberian Elms had been planted throughout, and these trees, whose branches, like a broken arm, bent sharp and irregular, thrived through heat and drought. In the winter the view of the park from our living room was of many drooping branches, hanging heavy and pendulous, and trunks too large to wrap my arms

around. During the windy season, the park would erupt in great sonic cracks, from the elms' large, brittle branches buckling under the force of the wind. The first summer we lived on the park, a microburst–which I was later told was a weather phenomenon said to be an environmental consequence of climate change–descended from nowhere, uprooting three of the park's fully grown elms. Nick and the kids and I had been in the park that very afternoon, when an eerie warmth began to blow around us, and the light, occluded by swiftly moving clouds, shifted. We left the park, and by the time we were safely inside, looking out our window, all three elms were down, as if felled by some supernatural force. One lay exactly where we had been standing.

After the storm, the neighbors gathered around the prone trees, and all the children removed their shoes to walk barefoot across the ridges of the trees' cankerous, deeply fissured trunks. No one had ever seen anything like it. This particular variety of elm had been selected for its hearty, tolerant nature. All of Albuquerque could burn, and these trees would survive, or so it was believed.

Before we had moved to the park, I was obsessed with living on it. The idea, for me, paired the convenience of being centrally located with access to the natural world, even if it was just a patch. Patch or not, once in the park, I felt immersed *enough* within the green and the trees. I felt removed *enough* from hard, concrete surfaces and the repetitive, inescapable motions of living inside a grid. To be surrounded by a pocket of trees–clustered together in towering groups of four or five, each cluster different, all welcoming; picnic here, nap here, slacklines and volleyball here–felt like a rational way to exist in the world.

And so, we moved into an ugly house, to be on the park. Before this, we had rented a two-story home a couple of blocks away. I didn't want to be blocks away; I wanted the park to affect my life daily. I wanted to yell, "Go to the park!" to the kids when they were too much underfoot. I wanted to sit on my front porch alone, without feeling alone, because I was surrounded by people. The homes on the park were unaffordable for us, but I knew if I waited something would come up. One morning, when Lucy was in kindergarten, I remember walking her to school, and watching as a man–stooped and ancient, wearing filthy pajamas–struggled to push his wheeled, city-issued garbage bin up the slight incline of his driveway while a woman–equally aged and frail–braced him supportively from behind. The lawn was long dead, and his house was covered in a neglectful layer of dirt and grime. *Please don't let it be this house* I thought, but of course, it was.

The old man, Ivan, died in his home the following winter. He was 102 years old. After his death, the woman, his companion but not his wife, left, and Ivan's children held an estate sale, cleaned out the house, and put it on the market. No one made an offer. The walls were the yellow of old, coffee-stained teeth, and the faded wallpaper in the bathrooms seethed in funk and its long, foul history. "You can literally feel sixty years' worth of shits taken in here," I said to Nick, while we inspected the master bathroom.

"That is disgusting," he said, as if he had forgotten, after fifteen years of being together, that I was disgusting.

By the time we saw the house–after two months of no offers–the sellers had removed the plush, grey, heavily stained carpet, revealing beautifully preserved narrow planks of

honey-colored oak flooring lying beneath. We put in a bid, ten thousand less than they were asking, and our offer was accepted.

We deep cleaned that house, but no amount of elbow grease seemed to make much of a difference. In the room that had been Ivan's study, I discovered a series of rust-colored splotches all over the floor. I found that if I scrubbed hard enough, they transferred, dark and red, onto my yellow sponge.

Nick and I repainted everything: walls, ceilings, kitchen cabinets. We overlaid the crusty linoleum on the kitchen floor with Marmoleum, bought new appliances, light fixtures, installed a farmhouse sink, and replaced the Formica countertops with Ikea butcher block. The outside stucco and trim were yellow, the front facing wooden façade was a dark brown, and so I repainted it dark blue. I had a five-year-old, a two-year-old, and a nine-month-old St. Bernard puppy at the time, the domestic was my frontier, and shit and piss were very much a part of my every day. I didn't need my house exterior to reflect this.

We xeriscaped the yard in gray rocks and I planted Jupiter's beard, yarrow, yucca, sage, Russian thistle, Blue Mountain sage, climbing ice, dusty Susans, succulents, lamb's ear, desert willow, lilac, creeping thyme, black-eyed Susans, vinca and hollyhocks; all drought tolerant and watered through the DIY drip system whose ugly network of black, plastic tubes protruded rudely through the rocks because we never cared enough to do the work to properly bury it.

The house improved, but we didn't have the money to give it the overhaul it required. So be it, we sighed, we live in an ugly house. But who cared if you were inside an ugly house when you could look out your window at beauty?

I began my run with a slow, steady, gait, to warm up my muscles, along the singletrack dirt path running parallel to the park's edge. No one was around. The regular morning folk, the pre-work dog walkers and retirees, many of whom I had come to know on a first name basis, were taking the day off, apparently. On my right, I passed the Millers, my neighbors to the west. Next, I ran by Marisa's and Parisa's house–grad student roommates who, despite being young and hot, often played with us in the family friendly soccer games the Millers organized on Sundays. I passed Joseph's, an older man who often spoke in lengthy diatribes about whatever depressing book he was currently reading chronicling some environmental travesty; Jesse's and Melissa's, a thirty-something couple with preschoolers; and then Earl's, whose Frank Lloyd Wright style-home was the most interesting on the block, although I had heard from Becky, another neighbor, that it was dilapidated on the inside and would have to be demolished when he died, which could happen at any time since he was a drunk. Becky learned all of this one day when she knocked on Earl's door to collect money for some neighborhood cause, but instead of collecting money, she wound up smoking a bowl with Earl and hearing all about his time in the shit. "In the shit?" I had asked her.

"Nam," she clarified.

I rounded the corner at the bottom and passed Kathy's and Dave's, politically active empty nesters on the verge of retiring, her from a career in neuropsychology and him, something to do with computer software. I passed Julie's, although it was no longer Julie's, who was a concentration camp survivor, and who had just died the summer before. She always wanted to pet my St. Bernard, Bez, and I lived in mortal fear that he would jump up on her–he was such an asshole that way–and cause her to break her hip. In the end, she did fall, break her hip, and died

soon after, but Bez wasn't the cause. By the time Julie died, Bez was living on a mountain ranch in northern New Mexico. At some point, around a year and half in age, some mysterious mechanism in his brain had clicked over to blood lust. On two separate occasions he attacked another dog, ripping off large chunks of flesh from their bodies before I somehow managed to pull off all 160 pounds of him. There had been no provocation, no history of violence. We got him as a puppy. "He's never done that before," I said apologetically, both times.

I passed Norma Jean's and her stark white, wood-framed house, whose lush green grass and dark shutters were as southern as her Mississippi drawl, and stood out from the rest of the neighborhood's adobe, territorial, and mid-century ranch homes.

Almost back where I started, I ran past a white, two-door truck, where, pressed against the window, a dark, oily whirl of hair surrounded a point of pink, tender scalp. I didn't mean to look; I wanted to give McCain some semblance of privacy, to not notice how uncomfortable it must be sleeping in the cab of a truck. No toothbrush or running water, the small cab slowly filling with the rank fumes of the self. McCain had been parking his truck there at night for over a month by then and, for a time, the neighbors speculated as to whether or not the cops should be called, our tacit protocol being one of vigilance bordering on paranoia due to the park's long history of bizarre encounters with unstable peoples in search of a public space to overdose, have psychotic breaks, prophesize end times, beg, masturbate, what have you.

I was outside one day talking to my next-door neighbor, Marty, when a delicate, dark-haired woman with papery skin, living not exactly on the park but near the park, approached us. Neither Marty nor I knew her name, although I recognized her as the woman who never made eye contact when I passed her in the park, while walking Bez's replacement,

Mooney. Instead, she kept her eyes down in some deep concentration while she slowly walked backwards along the little dirt trail, each step as careful and deliberate as the last. With distrustful eyes, Mooney would release a low, menacing growl as we walked around the strange, backwards lady.

Walking up Marty's driveway that day, Mooney and Marty's dog, Pax, stood on all fours and barked loud and threateningly until they were shushed. She was here to discuss her concerns about the white truck that had been at the park every night for over a week now, she told us. But Marty and I were unsympathetic.

Marty stood there alert, listening to the woman's concerns respectfully, wearing his jogging clothes from the long training run he went on earlier in the day, for a marathon he was about to run. Marty had just proudly confessed to me he hadn't changed or showered, nor did he plan to, even after he spilled coffee down the front of his already filthy t-shirt. Parked behind him was the baby blue Saturn sedan he still owned after almost twenty years, bought when he was a resident, before the twins were born, and before the large doctor paychecks started rolling in. He was gangly, a tall elbow of a man, with the blond hair and sinewy handsomeness of a musician. Marty was the only person who had ever referred to me as Suze. "Hey Suze," he would say, on the occasions we crossed paths either in the morning, after his night shift at the hospital, or later, over a shared meal, as our families became closer, realizing more and more the strangeness of the other, but in the best ways possible.

"I tell you what," Marty said to the woman, in his nerdy, mid-western nasality. "I'll go have a conversation with him and try to feel out if he's a weirdo or not." I felt the slow-walker's dissatisfaction at this resolution. She had mistakenly thought we would be on her side. She didn't

know that Marty and I had made McCain our hero. Marty thought he might be writing the great American novel. But that was my dream for myself, and because I had learned scarcity from the desert, with no water nearby to show how a high tide raises all boats, I kept my theory on McCain simple: he was a free spirit.

Marty did end up knocking on McCain's car window one night, talking to him with his well-practiced, calming bedside manner. It turned out that homeless, dirty McCain was a vet. Marty believed he wasn't dangerous in any way and so he wrote down his phone number and gave it to McCain, asking him to call if anyone tried to bother him. McCain took it gratefully, but only called sporadically, to ask for money.

After my warmup loop around the park, I headed south, past Bandelier Elementary school, across Carlisle, and turned onto Ridgecrest. Ridgecrest Avenue was the pride of the neighborhood. Down its center ran a grassy median that cut between large homes built with grandmotherly white wrought iron fences and dated façades of horizontal wood, coated in thick, yellowing varnish. Sometimes someone would die or move and there would be an estate sale in one of these homes, and the whole neighborhood would stop whatever they were doing to come and see what was inside, knowing these homes, which seemed normal sized on the outside, were endless, multi-roomed palaces on the inside, where carpeted hallways led you to rooms enshrined in ornaments and glittering tinsel; a year-long tribute to Christmas. Or, they led you to large storage areas filled with minuscule, expensively sequined leotards that brought to mind JonBenét Ramsey, and so I touched nothing.

As I headed up Ridgecrest, my body settled into the run. Fancy houses gave way to moderate, well-maintained homes painted in uncomplicated beiges, built with clean,

uninteresting angles. A few blocks later, these homes turned into apartment buildings. The closer I got to San Mateo, the more the air filled with the effluvium of deep fryers and large, festering dumpsters. Instead of merging into the San Mateo/Gibson intersection, Ridgecrest terminated in a cul-de-sac with its own little green park where, on those early mornings, I sometimes came across blanketed silhouettes of inert bodies. Cutting through the park was a sidewalk that led to a large arch tiled in turquoise squares sprawling upwards and morphing into a dark blue 1950s Chevy sedan. Public art, but also a totem to a car culture town, where cruising was a leisurely past time, before we knew the dangers of carbon emissions, before Superman's existential crisis, when nobody minded that Albuquerque was unwalkable and when it seemed there were no consequences for bottomless consumption.

I touched my palm to the arch's cool turquoise tiles, turned on my heel, and headed back the way I had come. Something dropped ahead of me, falling so close it almost touched my nose before it *thwap* hit the sidewalk. On the sidewalk lay a little raw pink form with sparse, black, slicked-wet feathers almost covering its tiny body. From her nest, two shining eyes, like black pearls, stared out at me until I moved on.

The birds, always the birds, laden in portentous codes. *So special.* The dead ones indicative of some future failure of mine.

I finished up my run with a cool down jog around the park until I reached exactly five miles, no more, no less. I turned around and headed home, crossing the street in front of my neighbors to the east. Their home was near squalid, in worse shape than ours. Old cheap paint peeled from every surface, thin window panes included, and the yard was all dirt, its untended plantings withered and indistinguishable from the many weeds.

Of course, I was grateful to these neighbors, the way their house was uglier than ours. In their front window was a homemade sign taped on the inside of the glass, printed on a white piece of 8.5 x 11 computer paper. *Global Warming Is Probably Real*. Beneath that, another sign. *There Probably Isn't A God*.

God or no god, heaven or hell; choose one, it's all the same.

–-

The morning of January 7th I woke up to new snow and a district-wide text message that school was cancelled. I went into Lucy's room and hovered for a moment over her still-sleeping head. Just a glance at my children could riddle my senses with an incalculable love–their still-forming legs, arms, torsos, toes, ears; casements of a life so tender they intoxicate my heart, so vulnerable, every square inch radiates with some potential future tragedy. I liked to say to my kids, "Look at those knees. They're works of art. How did I know how to make those so well?" It didn't matter the body part; I made them all, they were perfect.

By 10, the park was filled with kids and we parents clustered about, sipping our coffee and catching up. Cynthia interrupted us, and asked if her three-year-old son Levi could use my bathroom. "Of course," I said to her, and led them inside. At the age of 47, she had just given birth to twins. She and her husband, Randy, had been trying for years. I knew this because she told everyone who would listen. Cynthia would tell us about the special diet, the special acupuncture, and how she had gained 15 pounds on her doctor's recommendation, by eating carbs again and foregoing her daily 10-plus-mile jogs around the neighborhood. She drank

unpasteurized goat milk and replaced all the mattresses in her house with new, organic ones. She attributed her successful pregnancy to these things, but I speculated that several costly rounds of in vitro fertilization were involved. Sometimes in conversation, she would casually mention a yacht or "one of our other homes," and I always found my eyes staring at the harsh stripe of grey hair that grew from her scalp because she was too cheap to pay someone to color her roots, or at least that's what she said.

"How do you like your new sister and brother?" I asked Levi.

"Good," he answered shooting past me towards Hurleigh's room, where he began playing with my son's toys.

"Levi, it's time to go to the bathroom," Cynthia said, but he ignored her so she tried again. "Levi, let's go to the bathroom so we don't have an accident." Nothing. "Levi, don't you want to go back outside and play in the snow?"

"Yes."

"OK! Well, then let's use the bathroom."

[...]

"Levi!" Cynthia repeated, while not *quite* yelling. But Levi knew how to tune out his mother. He stood up unceremoniously, dropping the stuffed animal he held and walked into the family room. He crouched down on all fours, and began donkey-kicking Hurleigh's drum set. After that he stood up, dropped his pants, and pissed on my floor.

That night we watched *The Goonies*, a movie I treasured from my childhood. Watching it for the first time as an adult I was dumbstruck by the main character's mother, who was simultaneously loving and fierce, not just with her children, but with other people's children too.

"What is that?" she asks her son's friends in an opening scene, her tone angry and demanding. Everyone acts confused. Just before she entered the room, Chunk had knocked a miniature statue of Michelangelo's David off the coffee table. He picked it up, only to find its tiny plaster penis had broken off.

"What?" the boys ask, worried Mikey's mom knows the statue is broken. They squirm under her hostile stare as she waits for an answer.

"That!" she says curtly. "That is a mess!" The boys look down and realize she is pointing at the smattering of crushed potato chips scattered on the floor. "And I want it picked up," she commands, to all present, non-filial entities included.

Who is this mother? I wondered while watching this scene. She yells at kids that don't belong to her. She demands they take responsibility for their actions. She doesn't worry if she is liked. I don't see this woman around anymore. I wondered if I was the only mean mom left in the world. If, like some mythological creature, the others had been chased into the void by some muscular, threatening force. Was I the only woman who still called their children out for being petulant or annoying? Who ignored their name being called from another room? Who admonished bad behavior in front of others? I wasn't trying to be mean. I just don't know how to pretend motherhood isn't a position of power.

In the last stretch of January, I woke up on a cloudy morning to the prodding of soft fingers on my shoulder, but when I raised my head and looked around there was no one there but Nick, sleeping soundly next to me. It was a Saturday. I showered and dressed. I went to soccer games and cheered my children on from the sidelines. They were terrible at soccer, both of them. They

seemed to be playing in their minds, the game never translating to their bodies, and that was okay because they didn't care yet that they were bad.

At one o'clock, my friend Holly picked me up. I said goodbye to Nick and the kids, that I'd see them tomorrow, and I got into Holly's Volkswagen bug. As I approached her car, I was reminded that her license plate ended in 111, and I sighed with relief, because all is fated and I was exactly where I was supposed to be. We headed north on I-25, and then west to Bernalillo. We turned down wide, graded dirt roads, and then towards the river until we reached Steven's house.

We spent the daylight hours chopping wood and tying little pouches of tobacco on to long strings, like Christmas lights, while others cooked food and contributed to the many ceremonial preparations for later that evening. After everyone took their turn in the sweat lodge, we all entered the great room, and sat in a large circle around Steven, who lay prone and bound with his hands behind his back, so many offerings to the spirits laid about his body. The windows and doors were all covered in blankets so that when the lights were turned off, but for the unaccountable light flickering about the room, we would be suspended in full darkness, listening to Steven pray.

To my left lay the emaciated, frail form of a woman whose body was riddled with cancer. She was there as a last resort, to see if Steven's prayers could save her from death. I thought they could.

A wooden bowl of raw organ meat was passed around and brown juice burst between our teeth as we bit down into kidney. The lights were turned off, the door was closed, and for the rest of the night the outside world was shut out.

The next day, I went to the Women's March that was held downtown on the Albuquerque plaza. People held signs and shouted out and women stood on the stage and talked, although I couldn't hear what they were saying. I stood along the periphery with Nick and the kids, choosing to be apart from the crowd gathering below.

I wanted to see who was there. Who we were. Had we been here before, burning our bras, wanting to be taken seriously, no real structure or language in place that would support us? The word militant and killjoy used to describe us when we asked our bosses to stop taking our tip money and stuffing it down the front of their pants, daring us to come get it. Which of us were expected to disappear now that our flesh crinkled around our eyes and hung loosely around our bodies; our hair had thinned into a coarse grey; our bodies were unfertile and valueless; our minds lit, wise, compassionate, knowing. Did we remember to tell our daughters to keep an eye on their drinks?

Did we once call ourselves Riot Grrrrrrrls and listen to music fronted by women in tiny clothing who were as sexual as they were intellectually grinding? Do we now buy Girl's Rule! t-shirts at Target for our daughters? Did we drink too much in college, until we felt removed from our life, watching it unfold as though it were a movie. Watching from a distance as a man, a friend, takes us into his room, the word "no" just out of our reach, and so we clenched our jaws shut against the unwanted kissing as he laid us down on his bed.

Are we armed with language? *Coercion, #metoo, microaggressions*. Have we reclaimed the word *pussy*, which before, felt like the drip off a dirty man's mouth? Were we self-obsessed, convinced of our own greatness, by our helicopter parents, who anticipated our every need, swatted off every danger, rendering our self-esteems undamaged, opulent even?

We were all these women. A spectrum. Creators of life. Makers of death. We were so very, very, valuable.

Albuquerque

The right cobble spotted, rough and pitted like any other rock. Once broken open, a smooth glass interior capable of fracturing into large flakes. Struck by the wide base-end of an antler, splitting into a workable form. Edges become fine and sharp through calculated pressure. The sun shifts. A fluted center, the delicate, final, percussive reduction. Moistened sinew marries lithic to a stripped wood shaft, fletched with feathers as rigid as yucca spine.

The women dig out the earth. First a large circle, and then a smaller adjoining circle. In the center of the first, a hole. The birthplace, where long ago, the first peoples crawled out from the inside of the earth. Skin began to smooth and soften, bodies began to multiply; one into two, into four, into sixteen, while the sun set in the western sky.

late february

I waited.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me. Do you know where your passport is? I can’t find it. I’m trying to get all of the documentation together that we need for Mexico.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea. Um, let me think. It isn’t in the file box in the guest room closet?” I took a breath before answering this question. It seemed obvious to me, that if I was saying I couldn’t find his passport, the implication was that I had looked for it, probably where it was normally kept, because I’m smart like that.

“My passport and the kids' passports are there, but I can’t find yours. When was the last time you used it?”

“I believe I used my passport...for ID on my work trip to Sacramento last month, since New Mexico licenses aren’t compliant anymore.”

“Right. So, do you remember where you put it? You’re really fucking with my organizational system here.” Nick laughed.

“Hold on, let me close my office door.” Through the phone I heard a heavy woosh and then male metal parts click into a female metal receptacle. “I bet I stuck it in the top right drawer of my dresser. Why don’t you try there.”

“Top right drawer? Hold on, I’m going to look while I have you on the phone. OK, there’s a social security card...a weird little yellow foam thing that says...surf time? A huge knife, woah! Where’s this knife from?”

“The one in the leather sheath? Mike got that for me a couple of Christmases ago. Or did you mean the smaller one with the plastic black case?”

“The first one. It’s huge. Or both actually. Why haven’t I ever seen these knives before?”

“You have. You just don’t remember because you only pay attention if a weird bird is involved.”

“That’s the fucking truth,” I laughed. “OK,” I said, moving some clothing around. “I don’t see your passport in here.” I closed the drawer. “Where else would it be?”

“Try the drawer in the dining room.”

“OK.”

“...”

“I don’t see it. But hold on. What the fuck?” Amongst Mooney's vaccination records, the kids’ accumulating school pictures, a set of miniature screwdrivers, masking tape, and a pink barbie shoe, were more knives. “There’s two pocket knives in here! I *know* I’ve never seen these before.”

“What do they look like?”

“One is small with a black handle, I guess. It’s made by a company called Kershaw.”

“Oh yeah. That’s *your* knife, dummy. I bought you that a couple Christmases ago.”

“Really? I kind of remember that. OK, the other one is a little smaller than the Kershaw, but it’s heavy and silver and it has a bunch of grooves cut out of the sides, giving it a kinda H.R. Giger-alien effect.”

“Oh yeah. I think that’s the knife I found on a trail in the Sandias a couple of years ago. It’s silver you said?”

“Uh-huh.” I let out a large exhale. “Alright. So, more knives, but no passport here. Where else would you have left it?”

“Maybe in one of the drawers in the front table? I might have put it in there right after I got home.” I walked over to the entryway and opened the table’s small, wooden doors, and then it's even smaller, interior drawers.

“I don’t see it, Nick. But, damn! There’s another knife in here! What the fuck? How many secret knives do you have stashed around the house?”

“They’re not secret knives, Suzanne! I don’t *stash* them. I just, you know, have a lot of knives. I love knives. I’ve always had them around. Why is this new information for you?”

“Oh wait! I actually recognize this one. It’s the one Lucy found on our camping trip last fall in the Magdalenas.”

“Oh right. It has a handle that looks like a feather?”

“Yep.”

“Yeah, I’ve been meaning to sharpen it. The blade is really dull, which would be super dangerous for her to use. Dull blades are much harder to control and can do a lot of damage.” I continued rummaging through the table.

“No passports here. Where next?”

"Shit. It's not there either? I thought it would be there for sure. All right, the last place you can check is on the top shelf of my closet. But don't freak out. I keep at *least* three knives there. That I know of. So, you know, consider yourself warned."

"Alright then," I said.

"Hey," Nick said and his voice got low and tender and I braced myself, knowing attention was about to be drawn to how I was feeling today. I would much rather think about: knives, documents, the fact of my unlabored breathing, the fact of acute anguish now behind me, the looming Mexico trip with my mother, to an all-inclusive resort in Tulum, one of hundreds, whose beachfront jungle had been clear cut for middle class tourists to eat and drink consumptively, no end in sight, documenting everything on social media so that people would see how luxurious their vacations were, how monied they are. It was all an environmental nightmare–we might as well have been planning to vacation at a superfund site–although I would never say this, because it meant so much to Mom and the kids were so excited.

"How are you feeling today?" And there it was.

"I'm fine. I'm great. Just hanging out over here with a shit ton of knives."

"That have *always* been in the house!"

"That have always been here."

"That you've never noticed."

"That I've never noticed." I blindly felt around the top shelf of Nick's closet and ignored the several cold, metal items I presumed to be knives. Finally, my hand found soft leather.

"Found 'em."

"Oh good, where were they?"

“On the top of your shelf.”

“Sweet.”

“OK, I’ll let you go now. Thank you, love you!”

“Love you too.”

mid february

I walked the park in counterclockwise loops, first past Loretta's house, then Moon's house, then Mary Jane's, wondering if my retrograde journeying might cause me to travel backwards through time.

Spring had come early. Here it was mid-February and already the park's Siberian elms, still leafless, had already produced overflowing bundles of seed pods, little ovarian-like colonies which grew out thick-skinned and green, that eventually, would dry up into brown, translucent husks. Walking through the park, I could feel the seeds growing. I could feel *everything* growing: the grass; ready-to-burst tight-coiled buds curled up inside an otherwise barren wisteria vine; the opening of a Spanish broom's tiny, yellow petals. I felt each cell annihilating the self, ripping itself apart, splitting in half, forming two. Two forming four, each new cell attaching to another, and then another, then another, another; until a form, raw and exposed, became so realized it burst outward. I walked through the park with an insatiable hunger, like a grinding, endless desire for more. But at least I knew this: the hunger did not belong to me. It belonged to the spring.

early february

I woke to the sound of a menacing, simple, one-note song, ringing out low, travelling wide. I spent the morning reading, with the TV on in the background. The president stood in front of a patterned, ornamental wallpaper the color of dehydrated urine, giving a press conference. That morning passed slow and steady, like a ripping. Like a roiling heat beneath my feet, parting my lips, opening me up, and splitting me down the center. I am a river birthing an ocean.

I thought: I have the flu. How did this happen? No, this isn't a flu, but it's flu-like. No, its worse. It's a mind flu.

I continued to feel worse throughout the day. My mind flu making me nervous. My body flu making me ache. For dinner I made chicken, a salad, and roasted potatoes. Looking at the food, nausea surged through me from my gut to my mouth and I knew I would vomit. "I feel sick," I told Nick, clutching my stomach with a soured grimace. My intestines fluttered and then rumbled; the movement of something liquifying and rank. Worse was the sense of some unfathomable dread, hovering close, excreting a dull, peculiar panic. I had no ability to touch it, to point at it. To give it a name.

I stepped inside my bathroom and took off all my clothes. My jaw trembled. I must be cold, I thought, but I couldn't bear to have anything touch my body. I kneeled in front of my toilet and, as if that were enough of a cue to proceed, my body began to heave and lurch in preparation for an exodus. Before the dam broke, I stared down inside the toilet bowl that I had, just the day

before, cleaned until it glowed, and felt no pride and that's how I knew I was in trouble. That this mind-flu was going to worse than last time.

I remained in the bathroom for hours, taking turns shitting and vomiting, my body contracting and contorting with spasms, twisting me into strange forms like the sallow-skinned creatures of Hieronymus Bosch's hell, who hunched over in fits of pain, dripping with their excrement and blood, and some deep psychic wound. My breathing shifted into a labored, forceful heave. I could not get enough oxygen. I stared at the bathroom window and spoke to it in a whisper. Please. Stop. Please. Stop. Neither shitting nor retching had me begging, though. It was the dread. The ick. I could feel it everywhere, on everything. It had always been so, but now it was closer and louder, like the sound of sharp metal in a communion of blades, one sliding against the other, against the other, against the other.

Was this psychosis or psychic? What's the difference again? I can't remember. I am so big, monumental, overwhelming. Can I investigate my thinking even as it deteriorates? Can I marvel at the magnitude of the psychic weight crushing me, or will this belie my crazy credibility? Do I have to slither along walls, dull-eyed and inchoate, my hands running over its yellowed, peeling paper, to qualify for broken? *Her brain broke.* If I can form a thought, do I still have to participate in life? *I'm still thinking. I'm still thinking about my thinking. I'm still thinking about my thinking about my thinking.*

At midnight, when it seemed, finally, that everything had been emptied from me, I clutched at the door frame like a drunk, stood up, and with shaky steps walked out of the bathroom. Nick lay in the bed and looked at his phone under a stark light. How are you doing? I'm not doing so good. Do you feel better? I'm not feeling too good.

Maybe a panic attack. I thought that Nick might not be hearing me, the way these words formed so thick and feeble in-between sucks of air. I should get to a hospital.

Nick remained calm. He typed something into his phone and then looked at me again. “No one has ever died from a panic attack,” he said with a finality that seemed to reassure him. I’m sick, I said, or at least I thought I said it. I’m sick I said again, this time addressing the mercurial tendrils of facts and logic curling out from his ears. I wished in the moment to die, just to be right. Did I say hospital, I meant the mental one. The mental Marriott. I'm sick, the other kind. The treacherous kind. Tucked inside this fear; another fear: there is no love left in the world and I am doomed to always feel this way.

I lay down with my feet and hands together, then drifted off into a dreamless sleep, the fact of which felt kinder than anything else I could have hoped for at the moment. I woke in the dark, the sheets drenched, my body jerking in convulsed heaves, rhythmic and pulsing, as though some sinister form (who was doing this to me?), stooped and malevolent, stood over me (they picked me!), pelting my body with oblivion, with doubt, with an electric current of pocket-sized lightning. I mumbled fitfully.

I was singled out, I was picked! I would suffer the most, and then I make something out of all my of my suffering. I would sell it. Cash in. Get rich. *Rich, rich rich, rich, rich.*

One, two, three, four… a test. Just like Job. Me and Job, both of us blessed and blameless, and then something else. Both became inflamed with boils, poverty, and too much death, although neither of us ever shunned any chance of love. I knew then what lurked so close that night, what still lurks close. I had somehow fallen into a current of nihilism. It was so easy and only ever a micro-pivot away. Right here, on the other side of this thought.

Inside me an inner chamber opened, and somewhere deep within croaked out a shrill, dusty laugh. *Psychosis or psychotic? Psychosis or psychic?* This died.

I fell asleep to the emptiness of nothing.

Albuquerque

The name Alburquerque once contained two "r's," the first being dismissed once the Anglos arrived, finding two rolled r's too cumbersome for their undexterous tongues.

From: *Albus quercus*, Latin for "white oak." It is also possible that the name has Arabic origins. Albuquerque's namesake, the original two r'd Spanish town on the border of Portugal, in the province of Badajoz, was once ruled by the Moors.

Al burquq. "The plum."

Named in honor of: The Most Excellent Francisco Fernández de la Cueva, the tenth Duke of Alburquerque (1666-1724), Viceroy of New Spain, Grandee of Spain, a Knight of the Order of the Golden Fleece, and many other lesser titles. He served magnificently from 1702 to 1711, dressing himself and those employed in his viceregal palace in luxurious French garments and triple-cornered hats while the masses wore fetid rags.

The Viceroy's inheritance of titles was twofold; his link to the title, Duke, both maternal and paternal. His father, Melchor Fernández de la Cueva, the 9th Duke of Alburquerque and many lesser titles, married his own niece, Ana Rosolea Fernandez de la Cueva, the third Marchioness of Cadreita, Navarre, and daughter of Francisco Fernandez de la Cueva, the eighth Duke of Albuquerque and many lesser titles.

When his office term had expired, the tenth Duke of Alburquerque extended his term through a generous donation of two million pesos to the crown–an exorbitant amount–money he

earned through backchannel sales of various government positions. The tenth Duke's continued remissions became so large, so costly, that his city could no longer pay its police and other government workers, and so violence and thievery inhabited the streets.

Generally, the tenth Duke was remembered as an affable, refined man.

march

Warmth returned and daily I sat outside on my front patio. We had a wrought iron outdoor furniture set of table and chairs and I would chase the sun by dragging a heavy chair around, dodging the spindly shadows of the pollarded mulberry trees standing on opposite ends of our front yard. On Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays I only drank water and assumed everyone noticed my restraint. On Thursdays I began sipping IPA's from stemless Rydel wine glasses, slowly, ritualistically, reverentially, beginning at noon and continuing thereafter for the rest of the day, for the rest of the week, into the weekend. I kind of ate. I ran. I read, outside. To be near the park, and to hear the calls of the Cooper's hawks nesting in the elms. Watching them swoop from tree to tree gave me peace.

Standing between me and my view of the park was a row of ornamental Pampas grass I had planted several years before, hoping the grass's tall tussocks would create a permeable and defining organic boundary. My plan worked, but because we lived inside the oppressive margins of high desert gardening, the grasses, which can grow up to ten feet tall, never grew more than three feet in our yard. Three feet was just right. The height created enough of a visual boundary to obstruct the view of our patio so that I wasn't noticeable to people walking by or hanging out in the park. People walked by all the time and mostly I remained hidden from them; I could tell by the way their bodies never stiffened into the arhythmic self-consciousness we inhabit when we know we are being watched.

Almost a month had passed since the night of my "incident," and I was still very much not OK. Language describing that night and my mental health in general eluded me: mental

breakdown, nervous breakdown, psychotic break, psychosis; these diagnoses felt damning and like they belonged to other people. I could have gone to a doctor or a hospital, but I didn't, partly because I couldn't tell if my breakdown was spiritual or psychotic; I didn't know it could be both. I didn't want psychotropic drugs administered to me by a doctor who I imagined was winning in life, who prized their logical mind, who had no context or value for the bizarre, biblical tone of my reality nor would they understand the world, to me, felt like a story, written by god, for me to decipher. I didn't want this narrative dissected, analyzed, and charted by anyone who couldn't' see all the disappeared women I could. Their solution, if anything, would be to disappear yet another one, me, through meds, their DSM manuals, their inability to evaluate and treat my spiritual state. I appreciated doctors but I would never fully surrender to them. I delivered both of my children without any anesthetic because at the end of the day I wanted to fully remain in control more so than I wanted comfort. The bulk of my worry was that there was no help for me and submission to western medicine would require that I disappear myself more than I already had.

There was also the fact of the small part of me, tucked away safely somewhere deep inside, observing all of it, was telling me to wait it out.

The only history of mental instability within my family that I knew about involved my grandfather Ernest whose depression was debilitating enough to have him institutionalized and treated with shock therapy. When I found this out in my twenties, I couldn't believe this, it seemed so brutal, but also so interesting and dramatic for a family that was generally not. He was dark little man—Native and Spanish, although he mostly looked Native— he walked with a stiff, uneven gait, and in his later years when I knew him, he called me Little Sue, a nickname a I

hated then, although now I remember him fondly. He would offer me, with his disinterested smile, a piece of an orange. Disinterested because he wasn't concerned if I wanted the orange or not, the pleasure for him belonged in the offering. *Naranja* he would say, waiting for me to repeat the word back to him. Spanish was the native tongue for both he and my grandmother although they purposefully only spoke English to their children. As far I know he didn't speak any of the languages of his Native ancestry, Puebloan or otherwise. These ties had been long ago eradicated; such a common story for New Mexicans.

Ernest's own father Guadalupe, in his twilight years could be found sitting on his front porch, armed, in a fugue of paranoia. Who was Guadalupe guarding his house from? I am lacking crucial details but I don't need specifics to recognize trauma and paranoia. I also know trauma is inherited. It is one thing to hear the family lore of generational traumas; it is another to recognize yourself in them, a shock really, because you had stupidly believed the promises of modern life would save you. Not so. The genetic signatures of these traumas lie within. They tell their story one way or another.

As I moved around the patio that March, seeking the sun's warmth, I clung to the memory of my uncontrollable, convulsing body on that night, as though the fact of it offered some kind of proof that I hadn't just had a bout with a heinous stomach bug. This is what I imagined people would assume; the glaring subtext being that I was a histrionic, frail woman. But I had lain down, drifted off, and woken up to what felt like electric shocks coursing through my body. Not continuously, but rhythmically, as though by a someone or a something. I kept looking for my tormentor, expecting nothing less than the supernatural; a cloaked, towering figure standing at

the foot of my bed but there was only air. Nick slept peacefully at my side. I never imagined I was so interesting.

Beside my grandfather Ernest and my great grandfather Guadalupe, the other person I thought about was St. Teresa. In college, in my art history classes, we covered the proportionately obsessed Renaissance and its signature of intellectual blossoming that arose following the Dark Ages, a confined and energetically stilted (and often corporally if not psychically masochistic) period. I saw many of these artworks first-hand during my semester abroad in Florence, Italy my junior year. It was a lonely semester; I had made the grave mistake of attending a small American school which prevented me from having to surrender myself fully to a new place and culture. I would walk around the city alone—I didn't like my classmates—visiting, like a fangirl, the city's many darkly gorgeous churches and artworks I had seen before in slideshows from darkened classrooms, a Starbucks latte in my hand. Even in 2-D, Bernini's sculpture of The Ecstasy of St. Teresa had intrigued me; my male professors always emphasized how Bernini had captured the virginal nun in the throes of orgasmic rapture. We mistakenly assume paradise is only for the dead and yet there was Teresa, rendered in stone, head ecstatically thrown back, frozen in marbled orgasm delivered unto her via the long, pointed blade of a cherub. The many folds of her vaginastic cloak. Gilded rays of heaven beaming down on her god-pleasure. Teresa was eventually sainted for her ecstasy and the gifts of her uncontrollable, trembling body (to the annoyance of her fellow nuns who often had to clean up whatever messes these spontaneous raptures created: broken oil lamps, spilt milk, etc.). She didn't just tremble though. Occasionally, an incredible lightness of being would overtake her, and she would suddenly find herself floating in mid-air.

I couldn’t imagine what it is like to have one's strangeness valued in this way. This was in sixteenth century Europe, a time when large spans of land were beginning to be privatized, enclosed, made exclusive. The lower classes that once kept themselves alive through their dependance on the open land commons began moving to the burgeoning cities where they usually became beggars and vagabonds. Lit minds—particularly those that were old, unmarried, and female— especially crones and their expansive knowledge of the natual world, healing, life, and death, were beginning to be burned as witches. Teresa, however, who processed reality at the queer intersection of reason and ecstasy, was sainted.

Witch burnings eventually became their own deathly feedback loop. Psychic women repress their own minds now, or, die slow deaths, aren’t believed, become wardens of the state. But Teresa thrived in her supernatural experience—which was certainly super but also quite natural. She had a psychic commune with god that people *believed*. I too had a supernatural experience, a psychotic breakdown, a commune of pain; wasn't this also tremendously special? I was convinced it was but I really, I had no answers.

And so that March, I found myself needing to be alone. I had no ability to not feel other's feelings, including the ones they tried to hide. It seemed that in my state I had become psychically attenuated to fear, no matter the person, dialed in to the acute grimace crossing over a person’s face when they thought no one was looking, or the angst that revealed itself in quick flashes. A gulp of air between laughs among friends and I'd notice an eye dart sideways, the mouth turn down, something rigid lurking below the surface, how had I never noticed it before?

These thoughts jammed my head with all the post-apocalyptic, exceedingly dark, McCarthy-esque stories of real crime, natural disasters, and dystopian near-futures everyone

consumed in their obsession with America's decline. And so, I attempted to remove myself from the world in order to seize control of the stories I was exposed to. Or at least, this is what I told myself . But stories have agendas of their own. They come and go as they please. I had control over nothing. I because I would not look at death, death came to me.

One day, early in the afternoon, I was outside reading when I heard a faint "hey." I looked up and there was Paula, a woman I knew, standing on my patio. She seemed to have come out of nowhere. I said an over-enthusiastic hello to her, trying to cover up my under-enthusiasm of being interrupted. Paula was not my friend; she was a friend of a friend. We made small talk at parties; our daughters were the same age but hadn't shown any interest in one another socially. I liked Paula fine, but our conversations were always very surface, although I appreciated her bawdy laugh and her *Fuck Trump* T-shirt. That day, standing on my patio, I could sense her agitation.

"I just found out I have colon cancer," she told me. The weight of her words left her mouth and fell at our feet, *thwack*. For a moment I said nothing. My mind ran through the mental algorithm of Paula's life without Paula. She was a wife, mother, teacher, daughter, friend. "Paula, that's awful," I said. "I'm so sorry." I had no platitudes. Those were the only words that seemed true right then. It *was* so awful. It might work out, she might end up being all right, but in that moment it was awful. We stood together for a moment and then she apologized and said she had to get back to her walk. I considered refusing her apology, but I didn't. She was distraught and anxious, and there was no point. She had needed to tell someone about her cancer diagnosis, and there I was.

A few days later I received another visit, this time from Mitch, a neighborhood acquaintance. Mitch lived one block over from us. He was older, in his early 70s I would guess. He was a retired high school math teacher, and before that he had worked for the military in some capacity. I knew of Mitch before I met him. I had seen him and his friend, Lois, walking their dogs around the park every morning for years. They always wore matching thematic hats. For Mardi Gras they donned festive Harlequin jester hats with colorful plastic beads dangling haphazardly off the pointed ends. Santa hats came out just after Thanksgiving. Head-sized shamrocks for St. Patrick's Day. It was quirky and sweet, and when I eventually met Mitch, I was surprised by how liberally he used the word "fuck" in casual conversation. "These goathead stickers are motherfuckers," he would say, with a grandfatherly twinkle in his eye. Sometimes when our dog walks overlapped, he would ignore Lois and talk to me about his travels or about his grumpy, ninety-something-year-old mother and all the money she was pulling in as a slumlord in rural Oklahoma. These conversations were easy and comfortable. He did most of the talking and never asked me any personal questions.

Like Paula only a few days earlier, one day while sitting on my patio, I looked up and there was Mitch, parting the tall, dead Pampas fronds I had failed to trim the previous fall. "I see you up here, hiding behind the grass," he said, seating himself at my table while his dog Benny, trailed along, sniffing and pissing his way around my landscaping.

I don't know if Mitch intentionally came over to tell me the story of the time he killed someone, or if he was just inspired in the moment. He and his wife did a lot of travelling, they loved the outdoors, and they were always camping somewhere off the beaten path. Somehow, we began talking about a particular one stoplight-town we had both camped near, in northern New

Mexico. The story he told began with Mitch and his wife passing through the town ten years ago during a heavy rainstorm. He lost visibility from the rain. Just as he was about to pull over, he struck something with his van. Something big, he imagined it was an animal. He got out to see what it was and there in front of his dented bumper, lay an unconscious man, soaked by the rain and surrounded by a pool of blood. Mitch called an ambulance, but it was too late. The man was declared dead at the scene.

As I sat and listened to Mitch, I kept wondering why he was telling me something so personal, but I was also riveted by the story, and the way Mitch seemed unconcerned that his over-sharing was inappropriate.

The story continued. The sheriff arrived and asked Mitch some standard questions. “I told him about the beers I had during lunch,” Mitch told me. “I wasn’t drunk or anything, but I didn’t want to keep anything back. The sheriff said it was just an accident, you know? These things happen. And then he let me go. I didn’t have to breathe into a breathalyzer or anything like that. Eventually, the family of the dead man *did* try to sue me, but the judge dismissed the case immediately. The sheriff called me to ask a couple more questions though, and he told me the reason why the case had been dismissed was because the man I hit was a pedophile, and he had molested several kids in the town. Everyone hated him. He was a drunk, always stumbling around. No one was surprised he had gotten run over. Frankly, they were relieved. He was a nuisance, and his family had cut off contact with him long ago. That’s why it was obvious they were just trying to get money from me with that lawsuit.”

Mitch then stood up and cheerfully told me to have a great day. “You too,” I said, unsure of what had just happened. Unsure of why another person, an acquaintance, had sought me out to

tell me something deeply personal. Neither Mitch nor Paula had seemed to want anything specific from me. And when I thought about it, this felt true about a lot of the interactions I'd had with people throughout my life. I had always thought that people told me their personal stories because they didn't feel judged by me, and maybe that was partly true, but I also had to consider that people told me these things because I let them. My childhood was peripatetic. I had moved around the country eight times by age 15, and somewhere along the way I had stopped trying to represent myself, knowing it was futile; people saw what they wanted to see, and believed what they were capable of believing. It became easier to be a witness to, rather than a participant in, whatever subculture I found myself within. But at some point, my mind must have become saturated with all the stories I had absorbed over the years. They had gathered themselves inside me. They became my story and they wanted cohesion. They wanted processing. They made themselves known, and turned themselves into a physical presence in my chest, like some inner mutiny.

I have one last story from that spring which, to me, feels connected to the other two, although I can't say why. I began noticing a dark Sebring convertible parked across the street in the same place every morning. Its canvas top was up, and a large beach cruiser bike was mounted on a rack at the rear. A woman, the car's owner I presumed, always stood near her car, sometimes in the park and other times in the street, as though she was defending it. Her clothing was casual and stretchy, for biking and other activities, I imagined. She wore a sparse, tasteful amount of gold jewelry and her face was heavily painted with makeup. Her thick, brown hair was cut into a short bob, her body was slender and strong. I didn't notice her prominent Adam's apple until my second or third glance.

She was always speaking loudly into her little flip phone, complaining about something. I wasn't interested in eavesdropping; I just remember I couldn't concentrate on whatever I was reading with the busy vibration of her voice thrumming in my ears. Her tone suggested anger and deep resentment. I didn't try to figure out why.

I wondered if she was a guest of one of my neighbors, but that didn't make sense because why would she choose to have these deeply personal conversations outside? I only ever saw her car in the mornings, so she wasn't sleeping here. While walking my dogs I noticed that her car, upon closer inspection, had little dents here and there, and the paint was fading. More interesting: The entires back seat was filled with things—all hers, I presumed, all of her worldly possessions. She must have been living out of her car. I worried for her. Where was she sleeping at night? Albuquerque streets were no place for a trans woman. To that end, nowhere was.

After I noticed that she was living out of her car, I began to hear her. "Do you know what you are doing to me?" she would implore, to whomever was on the other end of her little phone. "You're ripping my heart out of my chest," she said, her despaired words now round and full in my ears. My chest began to tighten every time I heard.

I considered talking to her, and seeing what I could do to help, but I had no trust that I could do anything to help her, nor did I believe she wanted my help. Didn't everyone just want to be left alone? I did.

A warm Friday evening arrived, the first that spring. We ate our dinner outside on the patio. Friends and neighbors were around at the park and several stopped by to say hello. During dinner I had noticed the Sebring across the street, which was unusual since I had only ever seen it during the day, and when I listened for it, I could hear the sound of her voice as she talked on her

phone. The evening sunset faded into dark. We finished dinner, and the kids ran to the park to play hide and seek with their friends, while the grown-ups caught up over beers.

All was well, I was even enjoying myself, until we heard a scream. “Leave me alone!” It was her, the Sebring lady. Her voice sounded different, more stressed, but I recognized its thickness of feeling.

The other parents realized someone was yelling at our children, that their innocent game of hide and seek was impinging on someone’s perceived private space. We began calling for our kids and they ran to us, scared. She was still screaming. “Get away from me! Don’t you see what you’re doing to me? You’re killing me! You’re killing me! Stay the fuck away from me.”

All the kids ran to us, their eyes wide in fear, but also in anger over their interrupted game. This wasn’t the first dangerous person they had encountered in the park. I asked Lucy where her little brother was. “I don’t know,” she said. “I thought he was with us.”

I screamed out Hurleighs’s name. “Leave me alone,” came a response out of the dark. And then I saw my little man, underneath a large elm, trying to make his body as small as possible. I saw his eyes gaping wide, his lips pulled back tightly in a fearful grimace. I felt all his fear and then I felt my fear, and this why there is no darker pursuit than motherhood. I ran to him, and as I ran the woman serenaded me with her curses and pain.

“Hurleigh,” I said when I reached him. “Sweetheart. Come here, come with me.” He was terrorized and incapable of movement, I had to physically lift him up and carry him until he remembered himself, and then we held hands and ran back to the house. “Fuck you all!” she screamed, and my heart hurt for her, and my son clenched my hand tightly, and my heart hurt for him too.

april

Immediately after my breakdown I also didn't think about my history of drug and alcohol abuse, starting at age 14. I just assumed life was this way for all of Gen X and maybe it was. The first time I fell in love was when I was all of five years old; a sweet, tender age when I knew I was a ghost full of ghost wisdom which was never going to help me survive capitalism. I was small and golden-skinned, my swimmer's hair sun-kissed and slightly mulleted. I sat outside with my Dad under a Jolly Rancher blue California evening sky while he nursed his can of shitty Dad beer. He let me have a sip of it and as soon as the alcohol hit my tongue I knew. Knew what? That fuzzy haze filling my mouth, that tiny fume of discord. It vibrated with an intensity that matched something inside of me, the solution to an unworkable problem.

Of course, that was only a seed planted. There were sips but it would be some time before I could drink the way I wanted too. In the meanwhile, throughout my girlhood, rather than fantasizing about my career, or who I would marry, I dreamt about motherhood and the bars I would drink in. The barstools I would sit on, the money in my wallet that would pay for the drinks. The endless supply to get me high. The babies I would create just to have a place to dump all the excess love building up inside of me. I thought everyone was this way, that we all wanted unconditional oblivion and gratuitous transcendence. My behavior, which was mostly calm and very sweet, my mother called me her sunshine girl, was as non-dramatic as a horizontal line until it wasn't. I punctuated the tediousness of my early 90's suburban life with erratic acts of rebellion; anything to interrupt my boredom. I skipped school; broke into people's houses;

smoked Marlboro Reds while jogging; snuck out my window with my girlfriends on weekend nights to swim in random people's pools; shoplifted everything; purchased seventy-five dollars worth of Brown's Chicken sandwiches, my favorite meal, using stolen checks; ran from cops; accidentally drove my mom's Nissan Stanza through our living room wall when I was 13 while I was, unknown to my parents, "teaching" myself to drive. Technically, my barely older sister was the one in the driver's seat, but I got all the credit and the blame since she was only helping me get the car back into the garage because, as I discovered, driving was harder than it looked. That was all in middle school. I had no ability or interest in controlling myself. I was confused by reality; life felt absurd, everything was made up. I wasn't doing drugs yet, I wasn't ready, but still, I assumed I would die and would never live past sixteen. I wouldn't have said then that I wanted out, I would have said I wanted freedom. But my sister Katy was the one who ended up dying at sixteen in a car accident. I was fourteen and even though it wasn't me who died, freedom consumed me anyway.

Katy died just as I began my freshman year in high school. Afterwards, I didn't return to my classes for a couple of weeks: family was in town, I had no attention span, and there were all the funerals and what not to attend. I was spending most of my time in the passenger seat of Erin's—my sister's best friend—little, silver Mazda, and had been ever since we left the hospital together after we gathered around Katy's bedside, me touching her leg, still warm with life, until very gradually, it wasn't. Erin was in the room too and it wasn't long after that we decided to get me high. We drove to the home of a crispy-haired kid named Derek, and bought an eighth off him. On the way, while stopped at a red light, we pulled alongside a slumped over homeless man camped out in the median and before the light changed, Erin grabbed a sparkly purple pen from

her purse, wrote Jesus Loves U!!! in bubble font all over a ten-dollar bill, and handed it to the man. Once home, I watched her construct a pipe out of mundane household goods: tin foil, a toilet paper roll, a safety pin. She packed the stinky little marijuana buds into the tin foil bowl with an alacrity I found thrilling.

She told me since it was my first time smoking, I wasn't going to get high, but I didn't care because I was getting into soft drugs, and my emergence into this new life was enough to sustain me, to keep my mind off my dead sister. I already knew I would smoke weed again, soon, and often.

Four other kids died in the accident along with my sister. Jamie, the driver, who, along with Lori, her twin sister who was sitting in the back, did not. Nor did Sherri, who sat in the passenger seat next to Katy. Everyone else in the car did. It was a Sunday night, someone's birthday, and there was no school the next day because it was Rosh Hashanah. A total of eight kids crammed themselves into the twins' white, two-door Grand Prix and set out on a dark road on a dark night into the clandestine, swampy interior of the Florida Everglades where they would be observed by none but leathery, yellow-eyed reptiles swimming their slow circles in the surrounding murky waters. What was unknown at the time, but would later become a point of contention, was that the Grand Prix's tires were bald. Jamie, who was driving ten or so miles over the speed limit, wandered a bit onto the grassy embankment, and then overcorrected, jerking the car to the left which caused the Grand Prix to spin out of control until it began to slide backwards, down the steep slope leading to the canal running parallel to the road. Once the tail end of the car hit the water the entire car flipped backwards and began to sink, upside down, to the canal bottom. In this way, it would be appropriate to say that my sister died by drowning.

Katy had just started her junior year at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School which we referred to as Douglas, although after the shootings that happened on Valentine's Day of 2018, most people refer to the school as Parkland Highschool. I was only there during my freshman year but I was surprised, while watching the news coverage, that twenty-five years had passed and yet the trauma of the place was still so alive, it was still translating the heaviness of its grief to me through my screen. And yet, in the shooting's aftermath, I couldn't stop watching the interviews with the kids. They were clear-eyed, articulate and could access a value system the adults in the aftermath of Katy's death could not. Their dignity was breathtaking.

My aftermath was just me, getting fucked up, as much as possible. I began smoking weed all the time, mostly with Erin and some of my other sister's friends who liked having me around because the particulars of how we were fucked up and suffering were so similar. Sometimes I got high on the way to school, or hunkered down in the parking lot between periods. Sometimes during. I wasn't actually attending any of my classes. I inhaled from whatever smoking object was handed to me, with no questions or regard for what it contained. As far as I was concerned the larger my repertoire of drugs became, the better, as if each substance: PCP, cocaine, someone's Ritalin prescription, was evidence proving I was finally becoming an interesting person. I learned to always have gum, to camouflage my scent in cigarette smoke, and how to properly use Visine by placing the plastic dispenser's tip in the corner of my eye while blinking rapidly. And while I loved to be high, and I loved to be with others who were also high, my dark heart craved alcohol, which was so hard to obtain, use liberally, and then hide. And so weed served as my hideable, easier-to-purchase-and-transport proxy to alcohol. Within a few weeks I had begun to rely on smoking it daily.

My parents were so enmeshed in the depths of their grief and I found myself taking advantage of their distraction by coming and going as I pleased, often through my bedroom window, I had removed its screen so I could perch on the sill while I smoked my Marlboros. The initial chaos of Katy's accident had passed, visiting relatives had gone home, and the neighbors were no longer dropping off flowers and food. Here is when my family might have made an attempt to return to somewhat of a schedule, but instead, the sharp teeth of my sister's already fraught car accident began to bare themselves. The parents of the other dead kids had been talking to one another. They all agreed that even though Jamie Bardol had been sober, that her worst offense had been speeding, she was at fault. They used the word "murder." *She murdered our children*.

These accusations cropped up around the same time the media had begun moving away from their aggressive, sensationalizing reporting on the accident and their repetitive images of grainy black and white yearbook pictures of the dead; footage of the Grand Prix being machine-lifted from the canal; funeral pics of beautiful, red-lipped teens draped over one another like Greek goddesses in their anguish; a soft-bodied, grieving mother clutching her son's once beloved stuffed animal. Kids had begun returning to school and in general, the people of Coral Springs began to think about other things. But as soon as this new narrative began to surface, as soon as the parents began making demands for "justice to be served," the media circled back, microphones and cameras at the ready. My parents were the only ones who felt their child had simply, albeit tragically, died in an *accident*. Jamie was their daughter's friend after all. But she was an easy target, she came from nothing, she had no parents of her own, just a legal guardian, an older woman named Ann who had taken in the twins after her heroin addicted daughter Linda,

had agreed to help her then boyfriend, also an addict, with the girls. The twins' mother, caught up in her own substances, was already long gone and soon after Linda and Ann agreed to help with the girls, so was their father.

And so, my parents dutifully publicized their support: they attended press conferences with Jamie, were quoted making supportive statements in the newspapers, attended traffic court with her to directly address the media circus and protestors moronically treating the occasion as though the judge had the authority to jail Jamie. Exercising the extent of his judicial traffic court power, all the judge could do was take away Jamie's license for a year or so; an outcome that proved to be anticlimactic for many. They took their angst out on Jamie, my parents and me in the parking garage, yelling and chasing us as we made our way through the concrete maze of cars, the harsh light of some news outlet's camera in our faces. This trauma, of being chased by a mob, was the worst yet. I still distrust groups, knowing some invisible collective kill switch can be activated, snap, just like that.

While this new all-consuming drama raged, I continued circling oblivion. I only wanted songs in minor keys. Also: inchoate, thoughtless beauty and a ready supply of drug options. Trucker sized meals to eat while watching Beavis and Butthead with Lauren, my blazed eyes Dorito bag red.

I assumed at some point I would get into more serious drugs and rehab would be inevitable. When I saw the future, I saw myself alone in a car, driving at night, crying for something or someone. Perhaps this was a past life. In it I drove a white muscle car, a '69 Shelby Mustang GT500, too fast. From my rear-view mirror hung a feathered roach clip which I

sometimes wore in my thick, long, white-girl hair. Friends of mine have confirmed to me, once they too were tragic creatures, who died high and beautiful, while driving their fast cars.

may

During my last year in college, I could feel the presence of a book sitting in the dead center of my chest. Obviously, it was not an actual book, it was more like the feeling of one, that wanted to be made real. I had never considered being a writer; my major was photography and art history. Writing seemed like an artform for people confident in the unique ways their minds worked, I would have never consciously chosen this profession for myself. My mind—addict-prone, sensitive, with a sharpness that was simultaneously subservient and easily provoked by authority—remained hidden from me. But the notion that I was fated to write appealed to my vanity. I would learn to write, I decided. I would write this phantom book out of me.

I didn't know what the book would be about but I knew I didn't want it to be about Katy, that I would happily evade discussion of her death for the rest of my life. Years passed and I toiled away, writing my stories. They were the shittiest, shitty drafts. My voice seemed to be buried under lifetimes of colonization and repression.

One day, around the time Hurleigh was born, it occurred to me that someone would tell me what the book was about and this quieted any anxiousness I had on the matter. The book was still present in me, still firm and expectant in my chest. When Hurleigh was a little over one year old, my mother, who was telling me about her recent visit with Jamie and Lori, now adults who were successful but still fucked up by the accident and the aftermath, casually mentioned, "someone needs to write a book about Katy's accident." I groaned inwardly; I thought I was done with that story.

But I wrote it. 315 pages. Every day I sat at my computer typing, editing, thinking, feeling daily as though I had slit my wrists to bleed out onto the keyboard. I concentrated on a redemption arc and an Oprah aesthetic. I wrote other people's versions of what happened. I focused more on making my mother proud than on the truth. I tried to come off like a person who was reasonable, healed, without obsession, a believer of linear time. A white man. This list of things I did wrong is long and predictable, but these were the most egregious.

In the years I carried that book inside of me, I always knew that one day, when it was complete, I would know that I had done my job, that my spiritual assignment was complete, by the way the manuscript would glow golden and perfect. But when I had those 315 pages printed out all I could saw was the dull, unreflective white of mid-grade quality Kinkos paper.

There was one section, however, out of that whole book, that I did get right. The only place where I could see myself on the page. Everything else just proved to be a slow, painful exorcism, a ritual removal of the master narrative colonizing my mind.

It was a story about my best friend Lauren, the night I fell in love with her. I left out an orgasmic, masculine climax of violence. This story is about waking up, an awakening, a departure from violence, even if it’s only for a moment. Look for that, look for love; I tell this story over and over, is there anything else worth telling?

Lauren

After Katy died, and I went through a phase of hanging out with her friends, it didn’t take long for me to realize I wanted to hang out with girls my own age. Partly because everyone

around me was so much more interested in sex. I was as horny as the next teenager, but my standards were high and I believed in the attractive power of my mind way more than that of my body. In fact, I became uncomfortable if guys gave me attention over my looks. But a complement to my mind, which I never received, would have been the same thing as an I-Love-You and I would have no choice but to respond in kind.

Lauren was my favorite. She was blunt and funny so of course no one liked her because people don't deal well with those qualities in a female. That and she was obese, which again, is detestable in a woman, especially in the 90s. I fucking adored her. My whole body relaxed in her presence.

I fell in love with Lauren the night we went to the Our Town festival, Coral Springs' version of a county fair with games and rides and I don't know what else because that's all I was interested in at that age. Lauren and I didn't stay long at the festival itself. We were excited to get as high as possible and go on the rides, but time moves thickly and slowly after you've smoked a blunt and we dawdled the night away so that by the time we arrived the rides were shutting down and other than the Carnies and some couple making out on the Tilt-A-Whirl, everyone was gone. I dug a quarter out of my purse and beeped Erin from the glass phone booth by the bathrooms to see what she was up to. She called us back immediately. She was going to Tiffany's house to babysit, we could come if we wanted, Tiffany wouldn't care.

Tiffany. She was the oldest sister of Nicki Roller, whose lithe dancer's body was the last of the five to be pulled from Jamie's underwater, upside-down Grand Prix. Tiffany did not share my parents' absolution of Jamie. But I was young and mutable and because I felt more of a bond in our shared sorrows I didn't speculate as to whether Tiffany and I had bad blood between us.

Within ten minutes we were pulling into the parking lot of an apartment complex I had never noticed before. I wasn't even sure if I had been in that part of Coral Springs. The apartment building was a modern, two story, motel-looking structure. Expenses had been spared. Thoughtless-white was the color choice for walls, doors, staircase landings, everything. So many exterior lights were on, every flaw glowed.

Erin knocked on a door and Tiffany answered. I stared. Waist length bleached hair. She wore a tight black unitard and her tremendous ass sat like a dollop of sour cream beneath her tiny belted waist. Were it my own, I wouldn't have a clue how to handle such a body but Tiffany's were master's moves.

By the look on Tiffany's face I could tell Erin hadn't mentioned Lauren and I were coming, but all she said was a nonchalant, "Hey girls," and pushed the door open, although she didn't step aside. I squeezed by and as did I brushed against her soft body, inhaling the delicious air in her orbit which hung heavy with a chemically piqued, floral scent of her cheap perfume.

"Have a seat," she told us, pointing at the little table in the kitchen. The kitchen was small and clean and it smelled exactly like baked ziti. I did as I was told. Across from me, sitting in a dark corner, sat a woman. "This is Denise," Tiffany told us, and the woman nodded her head towards us but said nothing. Like Tiffany, she wore her long hair down, but instead of keeping her hair out of her face, Denise's layers curled thickly, like dark worms into her heavily made-up, pockmarked face. Her thick eye makeup looked similar to Tiffany's, and her clothing was some version of the unitard Tiffany wore. But unlike Tiffany, her presence was like that of a human sinkhole, consuming all the room's joy to the sound of a wet sucking.

Lauren, who was afraid of no one, sat across from me next to Denise but I wished she was next to me. Lauren, with her large, strong body. At fourteen, with a body that size, every day the world reminded you you're unfuckable. You gotta be fuckable in a beach town, the world said. You gotta look hot in a bikini. Otherwise, what's your worth?

I met Lauren in third grade. I had just moved to Florida from Tennessee. It was my fifth move, and my third elementary school, and the first time I saw her I thought *that's the fat kid* because there was always one fat kid at every school. I met her one day during lunch and I liked the way she talked to me. She wasn't shy, and she didn't seem concerned with whether I liked her or not. Even then she spoke with the deep, low voice of the unapologetic.

But we didn't hang out until seventh grade. She invited me for a sleep over and so my mom dropped me off at her house in a neighborhood where some rich-people, and many rich-aspiring people lived, and where the previous year Whitney Houston was rumored to have almost moved. Her house was modest compared to some of the mansions surrounding it, but as far as I was concerned, her parents had a seat at a table my parents didn't even seem to be aware of. I entered through the glass front doors into a living room filled with custom furniture no one sat in and a grand piano no one played. The house's smell had a sour note to it from the cigars Lauren's dad smoked at the end of a long day of running the Jewish deli he owned. Lauren's mom owned one too, only she smoked Virginia Slims, and then used the empty boxes to hide her stash of Xanax and weed Lauren and I would later steal from if we were in a pinch. Her parents worked long hours and were always exhausted.

What was true then was true later, after Lauren and I became BFF's: once home, we never left Lauren's bedroom. Her door was off the little hallway leading to the room where her parents

hung out, watching TV, smoking, being tired. But once you entered her bedroom, you might as well have been in some private apartment. No one came knocking. No one popped their head in to see what we were doing, to investigate the smell leaking under her door. So many cigarettes and bong hits, but not in seventh grade. No, that first night at Lauren's was spent sober, and filled with distress and longing for my own home because there was something deeply off-putting about Lauren's house that produced a gut-rot homesickness in my belly and so I hardly slept. I couldn't exactly name what it was that felt wrong. I recognized the feeling immediately though, my own home felt somewhat the same. Some spiritual malady of the house itself. That night, I slept on Lauren's plush, rich-people carpet, waking every once and again to the sound of canned laughter and flickering light of her bedroom TV.

After that sleepover I didn't think I would ever want to go back to Lauren's. But after my sister died, I needed her. I needed her low, pitiless voice to say to me, "that's fucked up that your sister's dead," and then to leave the subject alone. It wasn't that I didn't appreciate everyone else's agonized acknowledgments of my family's loss which were meant to be sincere, a practiced projection of *I'm uncomfortable but trying*. That was tolerable. It was the pity I couldn't stand. Pity felt like damnation, and didn't they know I was going to be just fine? So, I stayed with Lauren and my love for her exploded over me every time she opened her unsympathetic mouth.

I needed Lauren's room just as much as I needed her. Where parents didn't poke their heads in, so I could be high and drunk and away from Mom and Dad who would rather have me home so we could grieve together. I wanted no part of that. My grief: so backwards and intense, a

misshapen joy vibrating in my body like so much love. A song I couldn't figure out and so I needed people to stop talking over it.

Still sitting at the kitchen table, Tiffany picked up a palm-sized gun-like mechanism I recognized from the two times I got my ears pierced in the mall. It was an ear piercer. I'd never seen one in civilian hands. "I'm thinking about piercing this area up here," Tiffany told us pointing to the top of her ear. I looked at the upper register of her ear, where she was contemplating this new hole, and its network of delicate little purple veins worried me.

"Do you know how to use that?" Erin asked.

"How hard can it be?" Tiffany asked. "You just gotta make sure you don't hit a nerve or a vein or whatever. Like, you don't want your fucking face to start drooping and shit." Tiffany looked at Denise. "You remember what happened to Theresa?" Denise nodded. She must have remembered. "Half of her fuckin' face started drooping after she got the top part of her ear pierced, and of course, she totally flipped out. But once she took it out her face just kinda went back to normal." I looked around at Lauren and Erin who looked at Tiffany as though she were something on their TV. Denise remained unreadable.

"Whoa, dude," Lauren said, and then, "Where's the bathroom? I gotta pee."

"Right through that door," Tiffany answered, pointing over her shoulder. Without a thank you or any other acknowledgement, Lauren stood up and walked in the direction Tiffany had pointed. I mumbled something like, "Me too," bolted up, and ran inside the bathroom just before Lauren closed the door.

"Why are you being so weird?" Lauren asked me as she pulled down her denim cutoffs and sat on the toilet. "Ah," she said over the sound of water falling into water. "I had to pee so bad."

"Am I?"

Lauren just shrugged and pulled up her jean shorts. "Isn't this a great lipstick color on me?"

I followed Lauren into the living room, where everyone had moved. I had yet to see any baby. Presumably, it was asleep somewhere in the apartment, taking all of our secondhand smoke into its still-forming lungs with its tiny little breaths. I looked around for a clock. The VCR read 11:33. *Fuck*, I thought. My mom would be calling Lauren's private line at midnight to check and make sure I was where I was supposed to be.

"Erin, "I said quietly, so no one would hear me or look at me or think about me. "Erin, we have to get back to Lauren's. Can you drive us real quick?"

"I would but Tiffany and Denise are getting ready to go and I have to watch the baby," Erin said, shifting her facial expression to match my anxiety as a courtesy to my crisis.

"When will they come back?"

"I don't know," she said. "I'm spending the night here." I saw by Erin's face she got it. She had been Katy's best friend. If I wasn't at Lauren's by midnight I was going to be in trouble, and I was always in trouble. It wouldn't be the first time my mom, robed in a stained nightgown, drove her Taurus wagon all around Coral Springs until she found me. Erin knew all of this.

"Ask Tiffany to give you a ride home," Erin suggested. I looked over at Tiffany, walking amongst the dingy furniture and baby toys in her apartment, getting ready to go out. I watched her inhale deeply on the cigarette she held between her long, lady fingers, admiring the way her manicured nails, held upwards in front of her puckered red mouth, glistened by the light of the TV. She tilted her chin upwards and exhaled, a severe look of concentration on her face. I didn't know how to ask a woman like her for a ride home.

We drove mostly in silence. Denise grunted in response to this and that but was otherwise quiet. We had crossed back over the invisible boundary between areas of Coral Springs I was and wasn't familiar with, and now I could recognize the surroundings. "Hold on a sec," Tiffany said, and pulled the car into the parking lot of a gas station I knew, although next to the gas station was a building hovering dark and low against the horizon I couldn't recall. It appeared lifeless but for the ten or so cars in the front parking lot.

Tiffany seemed agitated. "Who's here?" Denise asked, the sound of her voice so noticeably grizzled that I realized those were the first words I heard her speak all night.

"Who do you think?" Tiffany said, slamming the gear shift into park. I imagined this had something to do with the father of her baby. The entire scenario was the epitome of trashiness to a suburban kid like me, and to counter the sting of my uncontrollable judgement, I sat upright and attentive, hoping my body language only conveyed support. "Shit, you girls can't come in," Tiffany said, more to herself than to us. "I gotta run in and deal with some bullshit for a minute. I'm going to take my keys with me. I need my knuckle dusters." She grabbed her keys from the ignition and I saw that silver knuckle dusters hung from her keychain.

I couldn't sit in the car with Denise's unnerving presence while Tiffany was gone. I was pretty sure I wasn't high anymore, but I was hungry and had been ever since I had smelled that baked ziti. I leaned over to Lauren and quietly told her I was going to go buy some food at the gas station next door and did she want to come with me?

"Nah. I don't feel like moving. Will you get me some Twizzlers though?"

"Sure," I answered, bewildered by her willingness to sit in the car without me.

Heading back to the car, my arms filled with Doritos, Twizzlers, and orange juice, I could see Denise, illuminated by the bright gas station lights, through the front windshield. She was facing forward, her eyes focused and no longer dull, her head nodding, slowly up, then slowly down, mouth open, jaw jettisoned forward as though she was saying "yeah." Behind her, I saw Lauren gesticulating, her mouth moving rapidly, her eyes bright and alive, her body heaving forward in laughter. Denise laughed along with Lauren and a sense of shame and stupidity hit me quick and hard. I paused to fully take in the situation, to try to understand whatever it was Lauren already knew. That anyone could be loved. That everyone was loveable. And despite all the love denied her, this intelligence flowed so fluidly out of Lauren. I wanted to be this way too, but I knew I wasn't capable. I was too attached to money, perfect skin and a clear voice. I adorned myself in judgments and superstitiously projected my fear of being an ugly, undesirable woman onto those already kicked-in, half-disappeared women who had learned they didn't get to heal and that being alive and free was impossible.

But still. Look at Lauren and how she laughs.

may

Shortly after I came home for the summer from my first year away in college, my parents received my grades in the mail, which reflected my spring college semester spent: surviving on

the single, daily Chic-Fil-A chicken salad I ate for lunch, and thereby, due to severe caloric deficit, I had to take lots of naps, up to three a day, from my fatigue; slowly draining my four hundred dollars of savings on the .25 cent beers I purchased from the bars near campus, using my poorly manipulated but good-enough fake ID; eating a sandwich-sized plastic baggie of mushrooms that was unexpectedly gifted to me and then, because I had no "now I'm high on mushrooms" plan, following around my flirtatious, self-centered, Barbie-bodied friend Jocylyn, who had agreed to take care of me in my psychedelically tender state because I could not take care of myself. But then, sorrowfully and semi horrifically, I realized the true objective of Jocylyn's evening was, with her luscious titties out, maneuver through the crowded bar, stopping to flirt with whomever, to air out the immensity of her sexuality. The immensity of my own sexuality was so Catholically repressed and immature, I felt unsafe around Jocylyn's charge of candy energy and the thickness of so much sex. l took myself back to my dorm room where I emptied my bowels and put myself to bed.

My parents informed me they would not be paying for me to return to UT Knoxville and they suggested I move back home, find a job, perhaps my old job at the Red Lobster, and take classes at the local community college. But after spending a year out on my own I knew I could never live at home again. "I can sleep in the gutter now if I want to," I would tell people, high on my newfound freedom, after I moved out. The gutter being some peculiar metric of autonomy for me, I would never return to a time when the option of reaching some low bottom wasn't attainable. And intellectually, despite my academic history of F's and incomplete's, I was far too snobbish to attend the local community college and so, sensing the churning of some unseen wheel of fortune was slowly coming to a halt, I made no decision. For weeks I waited for

inspiration. And then one day I thought about New Mexico. Tucked inside that thought was a revelation: something was over and something better was about to begin. I could make New Mexico my home. Tucked deeper inside: within a year I would fall in love. And I did. I can't explain to colonized brains how I knew the future, so I won't.

Future love came for me again in 2009, when Nick and I and Lucy moved back to Albuquerque after living in Santa Fe for a few years. Nick was starting law school in the fall, Lucy was two, and more and more I began hating meeting people, because they would ask me what I did, and I would say I was home with my daughter and then a disappointment at my lack of career, theirs or mine, I could never tell whose, would flop about perversely in the space between us. So, to avoid these moments, I decided to get my master's degree in engineering. I signed up for some prerequisites: pre-algebra first, and I did well; next, trig and chemistry. My plan made sense to only me; the word "loser" had newly entered into the lexicon of my self-esteem descriptors, and I was desperate to do something non-losery.

I started the classes and they were OK. In the meanwhile, at home, I felt an unmistakable presence of someone always with me. While Lucy was at preschool, while Nick was at law school, while everyone was home, always. I was never alone. Whoever it was, they were soft and yielding. Waiting patiently for something. Me. A he. He felt like he had shown up, to save me from something, probably myself, and I loved the idea that I might be saved. That potential pockets of imminent disaster lurked everywhere and that somewhere on the spiritual plane, strategies were being put into place to either keep me safe, or to usher me towards my fate. By mid-semester my thinking had grown fuzzy and I stopped being able to concentrate in my classes. I got an F on my trig test. I peed on a stick to confirm I was pregnant and then I went

downstairs to tell Nick we were going to have the sweetest son. That night I dreamt of Benny, my grandmother's father. In the dream he told me this story:

Benny's Story

In 1883 I was 17 and had already been away from home for two years. Home was 160 acres of Montana requisition land my father paid $25 dollars for in 1861. When he was eighteen, he came to Montana from Minnesota to try his hand at wheat farming and to never have to live through another Minnesota winter. He used to say that watery, winter air froze a man's bones, and if hell was made of fire like the Christians claimed, maybe he'dfinally get to warm up. My father died when I was fourteen after a kerosene lamp he was holding exploded. He made that joke about hell on his deathbed, his body all burnt up and covered with bandages. It took him a week to die but in the end he still had us laughing. I never met another man like my father.

My mother, who died having me, married him for it, or so her brother Miller, told us boys. He came from North Dakota to live with us after his sister died, to help with that year's wheat crop, and then he never left. As a trade, Miller trained up and sold horses and that year he brought seventeen colts with him and had them sold by the year's end and it was a good thing too, because that spring proved so wet we was planting that year's wheat crop in mud, and nothing good grows out of Montana mud. My brother Lorne was six years old at the time and he was my only brother although there are five graves underneath the cottonwoods by the creek: a stillborn baby girl, the other; another girl, who come too soon to live, and for it, didn't survive long, and now they're all buried together. And of course mother died right after having me, I was early too, and when I come, I barely made a handful. The doctor told my father I wouldn't live,

but I have always been a lucky man and I lived long enough to get myself into plenty of trouble for any man's lifetime. But still, growing up my father and brother and even my Uncle Miller treated me with a certain care and I suppose back then I thought myself a bit special because of it.

The fifth grave if you're keeping track belongs to Uncle Miller. He died when I was ten, crossing the Missouri River on his way back from picking up some colts in Miles City. Lorne had gone with him and saw Miller disappear into the water. Neither my uncle nor the horse he rode ever surfaced, which, as far as I am concerned, is the scariest of all facts and I ain't ashamed to say that since then I never felt right by a river.

I suppose I never knowed a mother's love but I can't claim I ever felt sorry for myself for it, although sometimes I wonder what I missed out on. But we ate well enough and laughed plenty even when times were hard, for Miller was a joker too, just like my father, and between the two, neither of them knew what a straight answer was. I recall watching my father set a bag around one of our cow's udders to wean the calf, only when I asked him about it, he told me it was to keep the milk warm, and that answer satisfied me, little man that that I was, and he made that joke for years until one day I was old enough to think it through correctly. I remember being told by my uncle that our fence needed some growing, and he handed me the watering tin, and I'd toddle off and water it like I was told, and of course I was a kid and didn't know what all their laughter was about. I was the recipient of a lot of these pranks, being the youngest and all.

But no one was ever mean spirited. That flat prairie land stretches out as far as you can see and ain't no one coming to entertain you, so a person better be quick to forgive and quicker

to laugh. That's what I learned from my father and my Uncle Miller and it's the truest advice I ever knew.

Otherwise, come winter, when it's nothing out there but that damn white spread over the earth as far as kingdom come, and the sky greys into curdled milk for so long you forget the word blue, and it all begins to resemble too much nothing and nowhere. That's when a person starts to understand the bible wasn't written for northern folk because this country has always been too dark and too cold to separate heaven from hell.

Joy is my middle name, as is Benjamin Joy Burger; all but the surname are from my mother's side of the family. Joy was a long standing family name my mother kept trying to pass onto her babies, but so many weren't for this world and eventually neither was she. Mother's family was Norwegian homesteaders who first settled in Iowa, and then in North Dakota, and it always seemed to me they left the dark and cold only to return to more dark and cold. I come from the dark myself, born in December, on a moonless night. I neither liked nor disliked the name Joy, but I suppose most men might get their feathers ruffled over having a lady's name, but the name Joy was the only thing my mother gave me. One day I decided I flat out liked it. By then half my life had already passed. I guess you could say before then I was still thinking about if it suited me or not. It's just my nature to think about things like that for a long time.

Our cabin was nothing more than the one room. In the wintertime we'd all sleep in the kitchen, Father would have us circle our beds around the wood stove to keep warm. It's been my observation that a storyteller will naturally emerge from any group spending time together, and Miller was ours. You'd ask him for a story on a long winter night, and he'd sigh like he didn't

want to, and then for a time his eyes would stare out and he'd look like he was lost in a fog. But Uncle Miller couldn't help but rise to the occasion.

When Miller died Lorne took it especially hard. My brother had always had a quiet way—he didn't inherit the family sociability like I did--he was always more comfortable around animals than people. Like Miller, my brother never married and I suppose this can happen if a man already feels wed to his land and his animals. Of course I was sad too when Miller died, but when you're that young you don't know any better than to just accept things the way they are. So too, had either my father or Miller survived I suppose I might have never left Cutbank, but maybe I would since every year the struggle to raise a fit crop of wheat from that tired soil was like raising Lazarus himself from the dead. A person can only escape death so much. Like my brother, I didn't have the patience for the farming life, which only seemed punishing. But life has a way of keeping interesting, without my trying to make it so. Changes will come. That's all a person can count on.

After our father died, the owner of Bar B Ranch, Stuart Blackman, offered us cash for our land and Lorne had him throw in jobs on his outfit, and we were paid next to nothing for both because we didn't know any better. As it turned out, my father had mortgaged the land, so instead of paying us for the title, Stuart paid the bank directly. Stuart Blackman was a squat brick of a man with little beady, badger eyes, you could feel you before you even knowed he was in the room. He was one of the first men I ever seen wearing a tall white Stetson hat and at the time I thought he looked odd. In this way, he was a man who existed apart from society, as if he come from some close future, and already saw what the rest of us couldn't. For instance, he knew the only

way a man would ever make any real money in Montana was from cattle or gold and since he was pretty sure Cutbank, Montana, could never be so interesting as to contain any gold, he put his money towards cattle and started buying up all the land he could get his hands on. I don't fault him for being better with a dollar than I ever was. Stuart did give Lorne and I work and room and board, and anyways, Bar B Ranch is where I learned everything I needed to know in order to do the only thing I ever wanted, which was to be a cowpuncher.

Bar B Ranch consisted of 2000 head of cattle and a remuda of about 80 horses and a dozen ranch hands, depending on the day and the season. What Lorne and I were told on the first day of work by the boss himself was that we needed to know two things: when to help and when to get out of the way and if we could figure that out we would do just fine. By then it was the end of February, and for the rest of that winter Lorne and I went around breaking up the hay for the cattle. When the weather began to shift into spring, the cattle were turned out to the range for the season, and I suppose us ranch hands were too. Some of the boys working at Bar B were there riding the grub line, others came in from Texas and at the end of the day after we'd turn our horses loose and cook up our sorn bread and bacon, I couldn't hear enough of their trail talk. I turned 15 that summer and was pretty much an orphan set loose amongst prairie wolves and bears, sleeping on a soft patch of green every night, looking up at the blinking sky. When you're that young you think that blinking and everything else in the world is talking to you although I can't say I believe any different now. Anyways, I just started thinking different after that summer. And at the end of it, I'll never forget it, the way the light changed, the way everything by midday shined in a heavier kind of gold. And my heart began to hurt like an icicle was inside all cold and sharp.

Well I knew then summer was over and I would have to leave paradise and I couldn't stand for it. All's I wanted was to breathe that spirit in for the rest of my life. I had learned to keep a dry saddleblanket and to cast an easy rope. I was ruined from any other kind of living.

Most of the Texan boys who come up on the trail had never been so far north as Montana but you would never know from complaining because no one complained, which was another one of those important details about being a ranch hand Lorne and I learned. Not that we were complainers, but there was a certain agreement on perspective the men all seemed to agree on without saying so. If a night passed where the weather was foul and we was all up tending to the cattle and no one slept, the next day instead of whining, all the boys would be talking about is some good time they'd had in town with their girl, or the time they hit it big playing monte or some such, to keep that good spirit going strong. It was an easy outlook to follow because it reminded me of my father and Uncle Miller.

My brother preferred the company of horses to humans and eventually he became a horse wrangler, although he never did leave Montana. I liked the horses fine but I didn't have the ambition to be a bronc buster and a man can't pursue that kind of sporting life without it. That and possessing a kind of knowing about horses that can't really be taught, and Lorne did. Whereas, if one of the boys was telling a joke or a story about the trail, I wanted to be right there in the middle of it all, I couldn't hear enough talk about trail life, good or bad. A cowpuncher could tell me the horror of losing a man during a stampede and afterwards, finding the bodies of horse and rider pounded flatter'n a hotcake, and all I heard was adventure.

After two summers of listening to all the boys telling their stories about the trail and the traveling I was itching to get out of Montana. I hired on with the Moss brothers in the summer of

‘82, which was a questionable move since they were a notorious bunch, and the oldest brother, Thomas, was known to have shot and killed his wrangler the summer before, only no one did anything about it because for one, he shot a Mexican and he knew nobody would say anything over a Mexican, but also, Thomas had given the widow cash. I saw him try something similar to one of the grubline men the summer I worked for him. You could say Thomas tried to agitate this fellow, a spectacular rider called Hooks who could ride anything. Anyway Hooks was a black man and like Lorne, he was a good worker and had that knowing about horses, but that didn’t matter to a man like Thomas Moss. Thomas was always calling Hooks names and blaming him for things he never did, and you could feel how Thomas was trying to get Hooks to draw out his six-shooter so he’d have an excuse to kill him. But Hooks kept cool. Before that summer I thought myself an independent spirit, but I never did challenge Thomas Moss or tell him to his face the kind of low man he was and it's a damn regret of mine now but you can’t argue with the facts of yourself just because of regret. I ended up leaving the Moss Brother’s Ranch in September. Last I heard Thomas was awaiting trial for another murder, which he would eventually be hung for, because he shot and killed some settlers living along the trail to Oregon who were charging these outfits for access to their water, them that had freely been coming through that country for years. Once a man could start at the Rio Grande and head north by way of the The Old Western Trails, even clear up to Alberta if he wanted too, without laying his eyes on a fence. But that changed all in one year when the Union Pacific Railroad was built and all the buffalo was removed and folks thought this made the west fit for a settler to live and they come and begun fencing up paradise to make a buck. Well, that was the end of the free, open land.

Course, that is what was already done to the Indians. But what all those land speculators and settlers were too short-sighted to see was how they done it to themselves.