CutBank
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When January lifted its head
like a slow applause
and the hinges of everything alive
opened like fruit,
I felt like you and I could fit
in the mouth of a spoon,
like we were coconut extract
or a bump of cocaine,
like we were pollen
and benzodiazepines
and the sound of wind
making love to a clothesline,
I thought maybe we were made
of the same photons as light,
I thought about how I had never
made a dent in anything
using just my skull,
and then January unpeeled inside me
like a nicotine patch,
and then I let myself get stuck
in the elevator inside my head,
I let my body
become a bedtime story
with knights and horses
and a fire-breathing dragon
and then I made you pretend
to be the fire-breathing dragon
and, like everything else,
that felt good until it didn’t, like downing more cocktails than the number of letters in my name.
Yes, I bought the poet a drink but I wasn’t trying to fuck him, yes, I swallowed a beehive and it tasted like my fist.
Eugene died and we gave him to the fire, I pricked the fingers of many strangers, took a head count of their blood.
My tongue wore a lab coat and yours turned into menthol, I let the cool run through me like plasma through a vein.
I guess I was thinking mostly about how people turn back into objects and how we don’t know what to do with those objects, so in the end we pay someone to put them somewhere else.
MY HUSBAND, HIS STUNNING DERMAFLORESCENCE

I could call him daughter for all the ways he needs protection, but in fact he is my husband, hypersensitive in all ways tactile, olfactory, and gustatory, in other words, allergic. Visually, aurally, psychically allergic. Chimerical allergies - half medical, half poetic - I want to sketch, write sonnets to, harmonize.

He is allergic to ampersands (we cannot go to Best and Co. or Chip and Dent’s), to magic, hydrogen and distaste. My husband, allergic to yeast, nothing in him will multiply. I collect him from his recitations of Goethe at the home of convalescence, and he spasms in foxtrots.

“It seems I am also allergic to reading German in front of old women who no longer open their photo albums,” he sighs.

“Next time you can read him in translation,” I tell him. “Don’t push yourself too hard.”

But he’s no debilitante. If he’s running through the streets studying architecture and it starts to rain (his most beautiful allergy, though it renders him utterly undrenchable, so that my torrents will never reach him, and he’ll require tragic shelter for all his days), he doesn’t cower inside the strip mall, but skips beneath awnings, invests in renegade dime store umbrellas that blow inside out, snapped ribs in the wind. To him, it’s an adventure. He traverses the underground market, then plays umbrella tag up the street, hugging the backs of strangers, switching parasols when the owner turns a head. He perseveres the full length of the street, cajoles a taxi driver to secure a ride all the way up our narrow street and into the drive.

And if he fails, if some awning caves under the weight of inches and looses an arroyo down his neck and back, if he starts blooming in that dermatological fashion uniquely his? Then he opens more than sky that day, is enveloped by a mass of curious followers (I could be one, I think,
though who can say, if he weren’t my husband, I might avert my eyes), shop owners lean out and offer him aloe and asphodels, strangers peel back his shirt, as if all he needs is more exposure, others relinquish their infants into his arms so he might whisper something holy in their ears. He glows. He’s electric. Symphonies swell in his red skin.

He’s blessed, he’s touched. Doctors ruminate daily on how to salve and solve him. He has their private numbers and familial acquaintance. They send him baskets of organic fruit on holidays.

Second-string, to be sure, but still worthy of mention, are the banal culinary mishaps, when a sprig of lemongrass yields some equally dainty pain as ballast. Flapjacks are certain death for him, and so much as one sliver of Belgian chocolate, worse. Raspberries cause a camouflage to burn beneath his skin.

Restaurants have been the scene of many a rash and convulsion, and we often seek the security of bland food, hygiene via dearth. We request tables far from windows or plants which appear too outgoing. We carry utensils, condiments, and moist towelettes. Of course, there’s only so much you can prepare for.

In an Italian eatery with roving violinists, we discovered (not as I originally feared, some latent aversion to catgut resulting in disruptive sternutation), but a misfortune to which he hazarded the approximate appellation “a foiled fermentation,” wine earnestly resweetening itself in front of lovers too bitter to drink it. The spectacle caused his eyes to water, a forcible flood across the table. Other diners who couldn’t help but notice eyed the couple with disdain (to which my husband was, thankfully, immune) for their insensitivity and sentimental dissonance, dining in such a place in a state of anger, an anger which had virtually fisted the cloth napkins stuffed into their collars. And they were having lobster! They
had become the very monstrosity they consumed, their words steamed red and thrashing, despite all wishers willing them to still. My husband, as generous as he is afflicted, kept slipping tens to the violinists to serenade the couple with song. Instead, they seemed pestered, could not muster even shame enough for a half-hearted tabletop clutch. Seeing my husband so teary, depleted, I said, “Let’s not eat out again.”

I suppose this would be the time when other couples would seek solace in each other, couch themselves in home, stir the *olla podrida* of all ingress, the harried swap of cultures, but for my husband I, too, am an allergen, the allergy *de resistance*, a cherried trigger for his breaking out.

“It’s no cruel fate,” I say with a jot of optimism to any who care to ask, “His personal was quite transparent.”

*Man, S. Highly Allergic. Sex (not an option). Vibrant Conversations and Other Spiritual Couplings in Abundance.*

We find ways around it, surprise with sexy messages stuck underneath pillows, above the dishwasher, to boxes of fertilizer. He writes: Today spent thinking of you, my heart grew all adervish. I write: *My love, you make me want to let you insert it.*

And then we do it in isolation, he preferring the terrarium where he can watch our praying mantises mount and glide against each other. He falls against the glass and rubs his face as if weeping, says, “I wish I could release myself without involving insects.”

Still, he removes the screen and lifts a branch of them, cradles his hand beneath their carapaces and carries them to where I lie in the walking closet (which he dubs my swaying cage) and sets them to me, their legs
feathery against. I am stunned at the duration of their contentment, the wisp of friction, before they spring away.

On nights like these, I dream our life is a zombie movie. His body is shot full of holes and light pours from his eyes. His contagion, liquid with wanderlust, seeps into the places we touch, capturing us, like something we could years later be found whole in. It hardens around us and I do not attempt to flee. To pus, I prefer suppuration or purulence, the sound of baptism, like amber turning slowly in light. I have never been afraid of zombies. I don’t need pitchforks, priests, or mirrors to understand the awkward way they move. Sometimes it’s drumslade and trumpeting comfort to be called the undead.

If you love a man with allergies, you acquire a sense for where he’ll stash the dandered and discarded parts of him, the sloughed exfoliations: in the medicine cabinet behind vitamins and menthol balm, nestled in kitchen cabinets between orange extract and herbal tea. I assemble them alphabetically, then chronologically. I record them in my book devised for such reverence, noting location and date of discovery.

Sometimes I watch him emerge in a heaven of steam after he’s been showering, even if it’s not the right season for watching steam. Even if it’s summer and too hot for it, I wait for him to share what must be his private recrudescence. I lift the novel he’s been reading, and flakes of skin descend like stealth precipitation he’s been holding back for a more prudent time to fall.

“I need to get in,” I call to him, and he is quiet, thinking of some excuse to keep me from turning the knob. He emerges with a towel around his waist, another around his shoulders like a cape. He looks stunned and mummified, like who am I to be sitting on the bed looking at him just so?
He retreats into the walking closet (his secret walking in him, a strolling storm cellar). I want to knock on that door, too, cut out a window, slide his meals in the crack underneath.

I want his disease to be what collects us — a shiver of us, a sneeze of us, a doom of us.

“Is there something wrong?” he asks, and I respond, “Whatever do you mean?” because there is no time for all the answers to this question now that I am measuring water for tea; too hot unnerves the tannins, too cool and it’s tasteless swill. At 96.3 degrees, he leaves the room and I hang his teacup on a peg. I drink little. I am trying to be caffeine naïve.

From the other room, I hear a sneeze. Maybe the mail’s come, bringing with it some foreign dust to liberate whatever’s been trapped inside him. It’s beautiful then, a sneeze in that light, and I want to tell him, that’s the most beautiful sneeze I’ve ever heard, and he might say, easy for you to say, and he might say, there was a time I couldn’t even imagine you.

I hear the sneeze and the trees moving behind it and a truck exhausting background noise, the syncopation of birds. I move to tell him everything, but he has disappeared, maybe gone townward. And there he could find any number of things - bees, greetings, great unravelings. I wonder if he’s suitably prepared. We have been a long time living in this house. I could say, I know this town like the slats of my walls, but I don’t really know this town.

There are days he says, “Will you please, please just put that book down? Will you stop writing it all down?” And I think to put it in a drawer, in front of him, as if to say, I’m not. I’m not. I look at him until he lifts the
book from the bed and walks to the bathroom. He says, “Do you really want to know what I do in here?” Everything I’ve written, the things that make him fragment and flake apart, he makes shreds of it. I watch years float in the toilet bowl. He discards the cover and tries to flush the rest of it, though I don’t believe it’s really possible, thrusting both hands in. There’s too much of it. Water runs over and pages float at my feet. May — October — the dates bleed and fish, but the entries might be salvaged still. He’s out the door, but I collect the pages and spread them flat on the shelves of the walking closet, but I am not hiding them in the closet. I am looking in the closet for some other hiding thing.

There is a memory I have, when I was young and went to demonstrate against a fascist group in Ohio, and suddenly they were right in front of me, not plain-clothed racists, but in full regalia, and I was startled by how little there was to feel. That I could have answered a true or false question, I would have known which box to check, but as I was chanting, go home, I was thinking about a boy named Ely, how I hadn’t eaten since noon.

Or other times when someone told me that someone or other had died, when I was just about to ask for an eraser or a quarter, and I gave them my Terribly Pained Face, and then they extended a hand to me and asked, “Are you all right?” and I said, “I don’t want to talk about it, no I don’t want to talk,” as if what I have is not any ordinary dead mother, but a stuffed, chain gang, biker mother in a lazy-boy in the parlor or on the basement floor.

If I were to tell the truth of this story, it is not a blessing really, is it? He must feel shame when someone clutches his hand and sends him flushing in a depth-defying way. I am lucky to be free in the world of such reactions. It has been years since a word, or a touch, or a sideways glance
has caused anything in me to rupture.

But I still imagine there will come a day when we will touch and he will not sneeze into my hair and there will be no looking away. Nothing will happen and we will be overjoyed. He will say, I must have built up a tolerance to you, and I’ll howl and hold out my arms. Then we’ll clear the cabinets of all the analgesics, the shots and inoculations, throw it all out there in the middle of the floor and dance around all the antidotes we’d kept on hand for when we slipped up and connected.
Ways how to feel that can be forgotten.

How tedious truth is, and shame (There’s an animal in you when the name sloughs off, she sinks in when the bags of soil are split; you belong there.

Bark to stem. Among viburnum. The noisy joy of cadence is that it has direction,

keeps going (there is no loss-in-loss

No tape, no follicle, no longer standing as we have done, apologising into the night, into ink. How to feel as you do and manage the energy to evidence this.

There are basic exhaustions. I can be grateful.
If I would ask for spicy flowers I would.

We were given the meaning of worship (no use for a cellist among the viburnum (while mother was cutting them

What what, here, is important? This

panic. Provokes like acrylic; where worship, tar, we give it outline (to make everything relevant (wet-in-wet

Can I not be a flag in the surf (painted blue tit

Unblunt, not brooding, a practice of these properties to get going: circling nib, allowing only scent in:

Stay, we should say:

(not the thick wall of earlier, please)
Stay, reverie. Drink and get vigour.

I, reverie.
Substance, just go. Reverie stay, and (pant it: spiegel im

spiegel) (don’t make me ask the pavement) Reverie, never steepen and

pique me, irreverence.
Brandon Rushton

Sudden Onset of Sclerophobia
fear of wickedness

Pardon the inexcusable exercises taking place
in front of the elementary: how fast can we stash
a mannequin in an unmarked van. This is no lesson
in clean get away. Call it what you will. A schoolteacher
suggests her students are just like evidence: only good
for sinking in the river. Like all lovers of distance
the neighbor keeps a pair of binoculars by his backdoor
which should help him see suddenly-so-unexpected
can be a good thing. For example: an emergency appendectomy
keeps the apple picker on his toes. It’s not a stretch
to assume this is the evening the kids will take liquor straight
from someone else’s mouth. Nobody here is concerned
with pollution or how plastic bags suddenly become fashionable
over our faces. Bad days always beg the question
how much bath water must soak the ceramic tile
before we pull the plug? You’ve got your feet up
on the faucet and I mention, in passing, you are at your sexiest
in a ski mask. My compliments are like fish
going belly up, you say, a final attempt to be exposed as tender.
You’re making me out to be harder than I am.
I should confess in this city not even the cinder blocks
are innocent. If you saw the boy perched on the overpass
with his cargo shorts full of stones you would understand
the windshield glass in my hair. You would understand me
if you could see the boy. If you could see the boy drowning
you would agree it looks like he needs a buoy
steeping alongside in whatever body of water I left him.
A couple years before I started riding bulls, I moved back to my home town of Twin Bridges, Montana to help my father with his failing pharmacy. Since I was a college graduate, single, broke, and living with my dad, I felt like a failure. It was one of the most depressing periods in my life but eventually I found the rodeo arena. I started riding bulls and for the first time in a long while, I felt like I was worthy.

Rodeo is not like other sports. In most sports, the athlete shares the stage with many other people at the same time. In basketball, football, baseball, and track and field, there is never a time when a participant can be confident that every single spectator is watching nobody else but him. In rodeo, every competitor gets his or her moment in the sun. And when the announcer would say my name over the loudspeaker and that chute gate would open, I knew that every person in that grandstand was watching nobody else in the world. It’s an artificial, temporary morale boost when you are nobody.

The days before the rodeo, when I would walk the streets, I felt more like I was swimming in a sea of mediocrity than making my way in the world. I felt anonymous, invisible. But as soon as I pulled on that Stetson and threw my rodeo bag over my shoulder, I was transformed from an insignificant slob into somebody. It was thrilling. When my right hand lay pressed between a bull’s dusty hide and a tightly stretched bull-riding rope, it held a whole lot more than rosin, leather, and hemp. But that feeling only lasted as long as the ride. I constantly searched for the bull that would help me ride my way out of mediocrity.

***
In June 1997, in Gardiner, Montana, I was sitting behind the bucking chutes at a rodeo, waiting for my turn to ride, when I noticed a bull rider named Ronny. He was warming up his legs by slowly walking back and forth, kicking and shaking his front leg at the beginning of each step. A smoldering cigarette stuck out of his mouth just far enough for the smoke to rise past the brim of his low black cowboy hat. His mustache was so scant it looked as if his cigarette was holding it in place on his weathered face. He looked like he had ridden a thousand bulls. Ronny almost perfectly fit my boyhood mold of an ideal cowboy, except that he was so thin that his wranglers, typically tight across the legs, hung loose and baggy.

He had nobody to help him set up his riding gear. When his bull entered the chute, he started looking around for a good candidate. Bull riding is a young man’s sport, and he and I were older than most. That’s probably why he noticed me and asked me to help him wrap his riding rope around the bull’s chest. I agreed and jumped into action.

Ronny climbed to the right side of the chute. I held one end of the rope and lowered the other between the chute panel and the bull, slowly enough so the bull wouldn’t notice it. Once the rope was lowered, Ronny used a long wire hook to pull the rope under the bull’s belly and back up its other side, and then tied the ends of the rope together across the bull’s back.

With the rope ready, Ronny climbed on the back of the bull and slid his right hand, palm up, under the rope and clenched it in his fist. When Ronny was ready to ride, he pushed his hat down tightly and nodded. The chute boss opened the chute with a quick throw. The bull turned to face the arena and gave a half-hearted jump. The bull planted its hooves and hopped again with more enthusiasm as Ronny slid off its side. As he fell, his hand got tangled in the rope still attached to the bull.
The crowd gave a collective gasp as the rodeo clowns ran over. Ronny was getting dragged around the arena, in danger of being gored or trampled. Without hesitation, one rodeo clown jumped on the bull’s back to release the hand while the other ran past the bull’s head, slapping it between the eyes with an open hand.

When Ronny’s hand came loose, he hit the ground hard and grunted loudly as the air escaped his lungs. I had expected him to ride the bull for much longer, but was more surprised that his hat never came off during the entire ordeal. Ronny got up and ran to the same chute where he started his ride.

As the bull exited the arena, a rodeo clown picked up Ronny’s rope and returned it to where he stood in the open chute, recovering. Ronny threw the rope over the back rail of the chute and climbed out on to the wooden deck on the other side.

“You okay?” I asked.

Still breathing heavy, he responded, “I’ll be fine. It’s nothing that a beer and a few minutes to catch my breath can’t fix.” Ronny took off his riding glove and inspected the red marks on the back of his hand. “Wish I knew why I keep getting hung up on these bulls.”

Watching that bull drag around Ronny brought back a memory I’d cached away for years. In Ronny’s face, I saw the same look that I had seen seventeen years earlier, when I was ten years old and I saw a friend get his ass kicked by his big brother in the middle of his living room. He and his hard-drinking family only lived in our little town for a couple of months; I don’t even remember his name. I recall only one part in lurid detail, the look on the boy’s face during his beating. It was emotionless, like his mind had shut down, anesthetized, like he was sleeping with his eyes open; it was in deep contrast to the tensed body connected to it.
When the memory came back, it felt as if the boy’s facial expression had nothing to do with the violence, but I knew that they were together in one entangled souvenir.

***

During those years, I competed in a circuit organized by the Northern Rodeo Association based in Billings, Montana. I loved that little circuit and all of the small town rodeos it coordinated. I saw Ronny at many of them. Traditionally, after the rodeo, most competitors would go to the local bar. After I bumped into him again at the Three Forks Rodeo, I invited him for a beer. He entered the bar with his head down, eyes scrolling back and forth the way a cat does when it enters unfamiliar terrain. Out of his rodeo gear, he looked even frailer, like he was a couple of deep breaths away from passing out. The cigarette he sucked on only added to the struggle. His shoulders were turned inwards from a lifetime of looking at the ground.

He’d had a rough ride that day, so I offered to buy him a beer. I motioned to the bartender, “Two Coors heavy, please.”

“You mean ‘regular Coors’ as opposed to Coors light?”

“That’s right.”

The bartender shook his head and handed me the beers.

Ronny smiled and grabbed the longneck bottle. We drank beer and talked like two strangers would. The thought crossed my mind to ask him about jobs or where he grew up, but the information didn’t really interest me.

Most of my bull riding friends and I never talked about our pasts or any plans for the future. Bull riding doesn’t attract guys who are big into long-term planning. The sport is dangerous, risky, and can cause
permanent injuries with each ride. Your past doesn’t matter on the back of a bull. Your future doesn’t exist until you climb back over the arena walls to safety. Discussing anything but the present is a waste of time. But maybe I’m overanalyzing that point. Maybe they were just young men who didn’t see how a person could benefit from discussing each other’s lives. Besides, most of us riding in that small rodeo circuit were not superstars. I can only speak for myself, but I was embarrassed about who I was. I didn’t ask any rider about his personal life because it was the exact question I didn’t want asked of me.

That day at the bar, Ronny and I talked about other things. I was curious about his riding. I had seen him ride a couple of times, and each time he fell off right away. He said he was improving. He was proud of how he rode at Three Forks even though he only made it to the third buck, about a two second ride. He didn’t admit it but I knew that this two-second ride was his personal best. Ronny was not the legend that I’d taken him for at first sight.

Soon, three other riders walked over to us. Cody, the leader of the little group, was a typical brash bull rider. He was short and loud, and his chest popped out so far that it forced his chin a couple inches higher than normal. He started doing what he always did, making fun of any person he saw. Today, Ronny was in his line of sight.

“Every time I watch you ride, you get bucked off and hung up,” Cody said. His friends looked on, sidekicks.

“I don’t understand how you always seem to keep that hat on your head. What do you do? Staple it on there?” He reached for Ronny’s hat. In this crowd, touching another man’s hat is usually a sign of aggression unless you really know the person well. Whether Cody was in such good standing with Ronny was unclear.
A tall cowboy stood behind Cody, waiting to order a beer. His deep voice interrupted.

“I’m not so sure you little fellas can handle that. I’ll take it off for you.”

Cody turned to see the man reaching for Ronny’s hat. Cody shoved the tall man back and mocked, “Get back in the corner with your whiney team roper buddies.” Glancing back at us, Cody continued, “Ronny’s tougher than you anyways. At least he has the balls to climb on a bull and nod for the gate. The only time you ever nodded for a gate was when you let the goats out into the field.”

The tall team roper laughed. Before he walked away, he said, “I’ll try not to step on you when I order the next round. I wouldn’t want you to get stuck in the tread of my boots, little man.”

“Fucking team roping pussy.” Cody turned back to Ronny.

“Don’t give that dipshit any attention. When he has the balls to sit on the back of a bull, he can start giving shit to another bull rider. Until then, he needs to stay in the stands with the barrel racers.” Cody turned and motioned his friends to the end of the bar.

I looked at Ronny. He held his head just a little bit higher than he did before. Cody just verified it: Ronny might have been the worst bull rider in the circuit, but he still held the title. He was a bull rider.

I asked the bartender for dice so that Ronny and I could gamble. A bronc rider joined the game and got on a hot streak. I lost $40 to him just as the bar started filling up with patrons and the jukebox began kicking out Waylon, Willie and Cash. Since I didn’t win any money at the rodeo either, my right back pocket felt a little light. I decided to order my last beer.

“I want to get out of here before the fights start and we have to
trade a few hooks. Well, I suppose if they aren’t throwing the hooks at us, I’d be okay with it. I haven’t seen a good fight in a while.”

Ronny laughed, “Good point.” Almost on cue, I heard that old familiar sound of fist hitting flesh, boot heels stomping a running shuffle on floorboards and people shouting profanity.

I jumped up and slapped Ronny on the shoulder. “Come on Ronny, we got a fight to watch.” I took three steps, stopped, turned around and saw Ronny still on the barstool. He didn’t move. His entire body was frozen in place, his face washed over with a blank stare. His eyes fixed on the drunken rage spewing from the other corner of the bar.

The fight was brief, and only included some shoving and cursing. Ronny never moved. His eyes stayed glued to the spot of the fight. I felt like he was making himself small, unnoticeable. His hand held an invisible bottle to replace the real one that had slipped unnoticed from his hand and smashed on the floor below his barstool. I watched him come out of his trance like he was waking from slumber. That look in his face was vanishing with every second of calm.

We decided to leave after the fight. We walked to our trucks and drove away.

***

I found that the more I ran around with bulls, the more I learned how they moved, which helped to protect me in the arena. Once in awhile, I acted as the rodeo clown for friends while they practiced. I learned that bulls don’t turn quickly. They either move straight forward or spin in place, which made them fairly easy to dodge after I learned to read their body language. I soon felt safer with my feet on the ground facing the bull than sitting on its back.
I also hated to see guys get hurt. When a bull rider would get in trouble, I’d consider jumping into the arena to try to help. On numerous occasions, I saw riders get hung up on the bull only to have their friends jump into the arena, dodging the bull in an attempt to release their friend. I’m sure the rodeo clowns hated the extra traffic in their workspace. I secretly envied these men and their acts of solidarity, aiding a friend. I wanted to be part of that kind of camaraderie. I told myself that if Ronny got hung up again, I would jump into the arena, partly for Ronny, and partly for my self-serving desire to feel exceptional.

I saw Ronny again at a Friday night rodeo. He got bucked off at the second jump, as expected, but he was able to release his riding hand both times. He avoided another pounding and I was glad to see it. I knew that he would never be able to score an eight second legal ride, though. It just wasn’t in him. That also impressed me. Despite his utter lack of ability, he didn’t stop trying.

After the rodeo, Ronny asked me if I was going to ride in White Sulphur Springs the next day, and if he could hitch a ride.

Ronny lived in Belgrade, a small Montana town with railroad tracks splitting it in equal halves. Although Main Street was paved, it was so covered in dust that it looked like any other dirt road you’d find throughout the state. Main Street consisted of small businesses, thriving bars, and an imposing grain elevator at one end. Ronny’s street was void of cars except for a few paint-faded jalopies. The dry, hot wind gave the place a frontier, ghost town sort of feel.

Ronny’s house was not difficult to find, since it was the only trailer on the block. It was covered in faded blue and white aluminum siding and had straw bales stacked around the crawl spaces to insulate the plumbing. Ronny was sitting on the front steps of a plywood structure that jutted out
from the front door and served as a mudroom. He jumped off the step and walked to my little truck.

“My wife wanted to meet you, but I told her we were running behind.”

“We’re not that late.”

“I like to leave for the rodeo early, just in case something goes wrong on the road. Old trucker habits, I guess.”

“You’re a trucker?” I asked.

“Youp. That’s what I do in between rodeos.”

“Huh. I never knew that.”

“I guess it’s never come up in conversation. I don’t know what you do for a living.”

“That’s a good point. But it would be nice to meet your wife.”

We went in and Ronny’s wife was cleaning dishes in the kitchen. She was short and plump with pregnancy. The flat bridge of her nose separated smiling, almond-shaped eyes. She had a slight lisp, and spoke so softly that I struggled to hear her words.

“Well, it’s about time you let me meet one of your rodeo friends,” she said. “I was starting to think that you were having an affair instead of riding bulls.”

“Now Sherry, you know that I’m too ugly to have an affair,” Ronny said. Sherry let out a giggle. “You’re damn right. So ya might as well stick with what you got.”

“Besides,” he said, and gestured to her, “how could I stray when I have this cute little thing waiting for me at home?” He wrapped his arms around her as she dried a dish and kissed the top of her hair.

“Well, this is the hacienda.”

“I like it,” I said, leaning against the doorstop. “Hell, everything
I own fits in the back of my little Chevy S-10. I could really get used to a place like this.”

Ronny raised his eyebrows, a faint smile pushed up the corner of his mouth. He took a deep breath. “We’d better get going. Those bulls aren’t going to ride themselves.”

After about an hour on the road, I asked, “So, where did you grow up?”

“Oh, all over the place.” He looked out the window. “Oklahoma mostly. We moved around a lot though.”

“Why?”

“Because my dad’s an asshole.” Quieter now, “He was a mean guy.” He stretched out the word “mean.” “He was always pounding on us.”

We were silent for a couple of miles. I could see that he didn’t want to talk about his dad, but part of him seemed relieved. I looked for a way to open the door a little further.

“So, what did your dad do for a living?”

“All sorts of work.”

“What’s he doing now?”

“Don’t know, don’t care.”

He was done talking. I pulled into the next gas station to fill up. Ronny jumped out to buy beer. I waited in the truck and mulled over the conversation. Ronny wasn’t the same guy I saw get beaten by his brother years earlier, but he was the same guy in a different sense.

Ronny had never ridden a bull for eight seconds. He was too weak and didn’t have the ability. Plus whenever he tried, his hand would get stuck and he’d get pounded. Maybe, in his mind, taking a pounding while trying to beat the bull was better than not trying at all. But I knew that he was never going to win that fight. That’s one thing that was never going to
change no matter how hard he tried. Kind of like a person’s past.

***

During the second half of the trip, we started to loosen up and give each other a hard time. We drove by a feedlot, and the scent of stockpiled manure overcame the my truck.

“Damn, Emry. Did you shit your pants or something?”

It caught me off guard, and I laughed. His teasing made me feel good. I took it as a sign that he was comfortable around me. I responded, “Ah, that’s just the smell of money, my friend.”

We arrived at the rodeo arena in plenty of time. I spotted Cody, who came over to lend his expertise while I prepared to ride.

“I’m ready to take everybody’s money today,” he said. “Have you seen these bulls buck yet?”

“No, I just got here...”

Cody liked talking more than listening. “Man, I watched them last night. None of them can buck. They’re nothing but junk bulls. If I can’t ride one of these bulls, you might as well shoot me.”

He was talking so much that I almost missed when he brought up Ronny. He said, “I think that Ronny’s getting hung up on those bulls because he’s too afraid to let go of the bull-rope after he gets bucked off.”

It’s a phenomenon in bull riding with young riders. After a young rider gets bucked off, he’s so scared that he can’t let go of the rope. He thinks, “If I let go now, I’ll land under the bull and it’ll stomp on me. I’ll wait for the next buck.” Or he thinks, “If I let go now, I’ll get thrown and land on my head.” The rider keeps waiting, refusing to let go until it feels like the perfect moment. But it’s never perfect. He’s on the back of a
pissed-off bull, for crying out loud. It will never feel right. So he chooses to hold on and continue to take the beating rather than to let go and risk landing in a worse spot.

Before I knew it, our bulls were being pushed into the bucking chutes. Mine was assigned the fourth chute, and Ronny’s bull wasn’t loaded yet. Ronny did what he always did, grab a cigarette and start warming up his legs. My bull was a short little Brahma bull with grey hide, no horns, and floppy ears. When it was my turn to ride, I climbed over the top of the chute and eased my weight on to the bull’s back. I nodded for the chute boss to open the gate. The bull started out with three straight jumps. Just when I thought I was going to have an easy ride, the bull rolled its bell to the right, lunged forward and finished with a sharp spin to the left. I was caught by surprise and the bull’s loose skin slid over to the side of his body just enough for me to lose balance and fall to the dirt.

“No ride!” yelled the announcer. “He was bucked off at six point seven seconds. A rider must stay on the bull for eight seconds in order to have a qualified ride.”

Bull riding is an all or nothing world: ride for eight seconds or it’s not worth riding at all. When I got bucked off at six point seven seconds, I knew my night was a waste. But my friend still had a chance, though given that it was Ronny it didn’t look good. I walked behind to the chutes to help him prepare.

Cody was back there already. He said that, in his opinion, the rodeo clowns were too young and hesitant. “They weren’t anywhere near the bull when you came off,” he pointed out. “Look at them. They look like they’re afraid of the bulls. That ain’t no good, man. That ain’t no good.”

I paused to think about it. “I hope Ronny doesn’t get hung up. If those clowns aren’t going to be any help and he gets hung up, he’s going to
have to get himself out of it.”

But deep inside, I had some sort of perverse hope that he would get hung up. I was prepared to run in to the arena for the whole world to see. My daydream was sucking down my inferiority complex and preparing me for what could happen.

The rodeo bosses pushed five more bulls in to the empty chutes. Ronny’s was the first. It was a big Black Angus cross with foot-long horns. Combined with the width of his skull, his head was too wide for him to walk through the chutes, and he had to turn his head sideways to get through.

Cody and I looked down on Ronny’s bull. Tugging on one of the horns, Cody said, “Dang. Look at those stickers.” He slapped Ronny on his back. “That’s going to make a great photo op for you buddy, a big black bull and foot long horns.”

Ronny didn’t respond, he just looked down at the dusty bull. He was moving slower than normal, almost lethargic. I wondered if he was panicking, so I leaned in close and quietly said, “Are you doing okay, buddy?”

He seemed insulted that I would ask but just nodded his head and climbed on the bull. I noticed he hadn’t pulled his bull-rope up on to the withers of the bull yet, so I grabbed his rope, pushed it forward, and tugged some loose bull-hide around the back of the rope to keep it in place. We set the rope fairly quickly, but Ronny wasn’t in the right mindset to ride a bull.

Ronny was quickly on the bull’s back and lost his chance to back out. He nodded for the gate and caught a break. The bull wasn’t ready for the ride and jumped into the arena with a halfhearted buck. His front hooves hit the ground. Ronny’s body was so stiff he looked like
a mannequin. The bull’s second jump was a beautiful, long arching buck. The move was powerful enough to whiplash Ronny’s head backwards with such force his hat sprang from his head, exposing his bald head. But Ronny was still riding after the second buck. It was the longest that I had ever seen him ride.

The bull turned into his third buck and I saw Ronny loosen up and move fluidly in unison with the bull. He pulled on the rope to bring his center of gravity closer to the bull’s back. He made it to the fourth buck, a personal record for Ronny, then made it to the fifth and sixth spiraling buck, adjusting his position to every oscillating movement of the bull.

Stunned at the length of his ride, I leapt on to the top rung of the chute to get a better view. For a moment, I thought, “He just might ride this bull. He might finally ride one.” He needed a couple more seconds to make it to eight but the bull’s next move was too much for Ronny and he slid down the left side.

“Ride him, Ronny. Ride him. Don’t give up.” I yelled as Ronny’s right foot slipped over the left side of the bull and hit the ground. I could tell that he was hung up. As soon as he tried to get to his feet, the bull sent him airborne again.

The rodeo clowns didn’t know what to do. I leapt over the chute and in to the arena. Ronny caught another break. The bull was spinning to the right, away from the side that Ronny was hanging from. I ran towards the calamity, trying to time my arrival after the left horn spun to the right so that I could jump on the bull’s back. If I landed on the inside of the spin, the bull would gore me.

The bull’s nose was inches from the dirt and his head was facing directly toward me as he threw his head to the right. I dove, and his left
harnessed the bull’s power under my left armpit to carry my weight with every jump. This freed my right hand to untie my friend.

When I started pulling on the rope in an attempt to untie it, the problem became obvious. Ronny’s hand was not tangled in the rope. His hand, still clenched down on the rope, was the only thing keeping him attached to the beast. He was too afraid to let go of the rope. The moment I understood that, something very strange happened. Maybe it was the fear or the adrenaline, but everything around me seemed to slow down.

The entire world became extremely clear, like I was a small piece in a massive, slow grinding machine. I knew exactly where the machine was going and where every random piece of the machine would move. Just then, the bull spun again hard to the right. Ronny’s body was hidden behind a mound of shoulder muscle.

I waited for the bull to continue his spin, and Ronny’s entire arm came into view on the other side of the bull’s backbone. Ronny’s body followed, swinging outward. His head tilted backwards from the momentum, and he shot a look directly into my eyes that sliced through slow motion streams of bull hide, rodeo chaps, and dust. I saw that Ronny was afraid of where he was, but even more afraid to let go.

“Let go, Ronny. You need to let go!” I yelled.

He continued to grab the bull-rope. The bull again jumped to the right and I squeezed the bull’s neck to stay in position.

I shouted again, “LET GO!”
His gaze softened as he realized what he needed to do. The rope slid across his gloved hand like a hissing snake as he released it.

Immediately after the leather in his glove left contact with the rope, the world catapulted into full speed and I knew that I was in a chaotic, uncontrollable situation. A split second later, the back leg of the bull swung over Ronny’s body and landed a hoof right in between his knee and the ankle. I heard a dull thud that sounded like a car door slamming shut. Ronny’s lower leg immediately started to flip around in unnatural directions. I let go and the bull ran off in the other direction.

I ran to see if he was okay. Screaming in pain and tears he said, “Hold my teeth!” and spit a full set of dentures into my hand. His slobber-covered dentures slid across my palm. I shoved the slimy pair of teeth into the chest pocket of my shirt and turned back to Ronny.

In between the moans of pain, Ronny pleaded, “Am I going to make it through this Emry? Am I going to die?”

“You’re going to be okay Ronny,” I told him, “You’re going to be okay.”

Ronny’s leg was bent in three different directions. He was hatless, hairless, and toothless. It was as if he was naked.

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A couple of months later, I visited him at home. He was nursing his compound fracture and now had a newborn daughter. When I walked in, he was sitting in a worn out Lazy Boy recliner. His leg was in a soft cast, propped up to alleviate the pain. We sat and talked about rodeos and how he was doing, his daughter, and his truck driving future. His wife came over and handed him his baby girl. Ronny inhaled the aroma of his
daughter’s hair. His wife teased him, “Stop doing that, you are going to
sniff up all of that new baby smell.”

I couldn’t help but chime in. “When I stand behind you holding
your daughter, I can’t tell whose head is whose.” Both of their heads were
pale white with twenty or thirty long, thin strands of hair randomly placed
across their scalps. He giggled, the two bald heads snuggling up against
each other. After a few minutes of comfortable silence, Ronny looked
up from his daughter and said, “I think I’ve been on enough bulls now.”
Pausing to kiss his daughter’s cheek, he looked up at me. “Thanks for
riding with me, Emry.”
SILVERFISH CHORUS

Strophe
We embrace face to face, antennae trembling, 
sparking even. We lunge forward, step back, 
run for our lives before regrouping, 
telling ourselves to act like what we are, for chrissake, 
namely mercurylike blobs mad for starch and sugar, 
madder for toothpaste. Flush us down the sink 
and we’ll return hungrier than ever and more convinced 
that the world was created to delight.

Antistrophe
We are maddest of all for books, glue and pages, 
incapable of imagining beauty without melancholy, 
art without decay. Don’t you find what’s sweetest 
at the coda of decomposition, the instant 
before it all goes bad? We like the classics best, 
the brace of salt and bitters, the quotidian 
apochryphas, but in a pinch we’ll eat rayon 
or tin foil or any goddam thing at all.
Women already swimming
easily, their arms petal
around their swim caps, older

than twice the years I’ve rooted in
the earth. Afraid for my blood
in its blue stalks, of shock

and drowning. Older than
the woman I am the grown daughter of,
or than the man in the novel

though he also swam here. Salt bastard
-cold water sputtered the rock lip.
Swimmer, so brave!

The swimmer laughs,
un-depleted. Fortified,
for water...inches of fat.

I gather the spill of my stomach.
I too am considerable. Swimmer,
these hips are a furnace

for warmth; I’ve welcomed in
the stranded. I’ve washed
a woman with cancer standing in a shower,
hand on my shoulder
so she did not fall. I was held up
with a pistol. I’ve plundered myself
more elegant stories—I saw that flood
rising and grabbed at what
I’ve wanted. The swimmer
and I climb the cliff side
jump. No. You are just a little *slip* of a girl.
She is in these waters everyday.
MY SMALL GOALS

**Monday**

I dusted the light fixtures, deleted old emails, put my pills in a plastic pill box. I washed dishes, dried them, then set them in the cabinet. I peeled and chopped carrots into neat little sticks, a dozen per bundle, three bundles. I made hummus from a recipe on the Internet. I read an article about celebrities with psoriasis. And another about how to make a fortune without leaving home. I did three sets of thirty crunches.

Dr. Fitzsimmons said, “It’s anger turned inward.”

Dr. Luongo said, “It’s a loss of the sense self-efficacy, which means a loss of the feeling that you can get things done.”

“Fundamentally,” they said, “it’s a loss of confidence.”

“In what?” I said.

“In yourself,” said Fitzsimmons.

“In everything,” said Luongo.

“What should I do?”

“You’re doing it,” said Barbara, the nutritionist. “Eat well, exercise, rest. Watch the carbs.”

“What else?”

“Don’t drink, of course.”

“What else?”

“Give the medication a chance to do its work. Don’t worry. Set small goals for yourself, things you think you can achieve in a short period of time. Give yourself rewards for your accomplishments. We’ll see you next week,” they said.
Tuesday

I pumped the bicycle tires to regulation psi. I emptied the compost into the big bucket and carried the bucket to the back of the yard. I called to leave a message for Brenda re Todd’s orthodontist appointment, but her answering machine was full. I used to be the captain of a Special Weapons and Tactics Squad (SWAT). I changed the vacuum cleaner bag. Well, there were some complications. The cardboard aperture on the bag was only three and half centimeters in diameter and the plastic tube which feeds into the bag measured 4cms. The box of bags listed the brands of vacuum cleaners which are/should be compatible, and listed, as well, an 800 number for support. I called and waited twenty-five minutes, but never spoke to a customer service representative. With a damp rag, I wiped Todd’s soccer trophies until they sparkled. I polished the plaque in my office. Chief Hostage Negotiator, it says. It was given to me after my team successfully quelled a riot at the state’s supermax prison. There were no fatalities, no injuries even, except for the prisoner/hostage who’d bitten off one of his fingers in the midst of a panic attack. I extracted the finger from the prisoner’s clenched teeth, put it in my pocket and within hours a surgeon sewed it back on.

Wednesday

I called Brenda again; same result as yesterday. I called the company which makes vacuum cleaner bags and waited ten minutes before connecting with Imamu in sales. He told me that it was raining in New Jersey and that he’d come from Nigeria where he had a wife and three daughters. I liked the music of his voice. Did he ever imagine he’d be selling vacuum
cleaner bags for a living? I asked. No, he said. He laughed. “I have never imagine my life,” he said. He told me his name means spiritual leader before he transferred me to customer service and I heard nothing but a high-pitched squeal. I completed the moderate Sudoku in the paper and I read about a university student who gunned down six classmates before shooting himself. No one saw it coming. I read about a man who turned a weed-wacker into a small propeller for his inflatable boat. I read advice for a woman whose husband denies he snores. Once we leapt out of a helicopter onto the roof of a twenty-eight story tenement. We were caught in the cross-fire of rival crime families and we had to army-crawl to the nearest cover. Tim caught a bullet in the scapula, very near to his heart. I caught one in the backside. It took four hours for our snipers to reach their proper coordinates, then thirty seconds to neutralize the assailants. I removed the bullet from Tim with a pair of needle-nosed pliers sterilized in alcohol. I flipped Todd’s mattress, washed the sheets and pillow cases. Before bed I feasted on carrots and hummus.

Thursday

At 2:46 a.m. I heard a loud bang followed by a hissing sound. Why was there orange smoke emitting from my mailbox, plumes of it? I felt sure it was Barry’s idea, the crazy fucker. No, upon further thought, it had to have been Kevin, though Barry probably executed the plan with great enthusiasm, the crazy dumb fuck. I don’t miss the work, but sometimes I miss my team. I guess maybe they miss me, too.

Unfortunately, a neighbor called the fire department. I told the captain of the crew to please step back and he told me to please step back. “Have it your way,” I said. He chopped the four by four post with his axe.
and my mailbox tipped forward, spilling its contents onto the pavement: a fifth of Jim Beam (broken), a pack of Newport 100’s (my old brand) and a smoke grenade, of course. The cigarettes were very tempting. I put them in the glove compartment of my Sentra wagon, and while I was at it, I collected some of Todd’s loose CD’s and returned them to their proper cases. On my way back to the house, I picked up a couple of pressed logs from the shed. I split them, and fed a few pieces into the woodstove. A dark brown crust had formed on the surface of my hummus, but it was easy to remove with a spoon. I ate the celery I’d been saving in the crisper, then tip-toed back to bed. I lifted the quilt as gently as I could so as not ... and then I remembered ... Brenda hasn’t shared my bed in more than six months. Nights can be disorienting.

Thursday (daytime)

I sat on the edge of my bed and rubbed my feet. They looked old and withered. I pretended my hands were not my hands and for a moment took some comfort in the caress. I pushed myself toward the kitchen, pressed the button on the coffee maker, but apparently I’d forgotten to put any grounds in the filter. I watched the pot fill with water. Anger turned inward? I took the bowl with the remaining hummus from my fridge and threw it at the sliding glass door which leads to the deck. The glass door cracked but didn’t shatter, leaving a pattern like streaks of lightning, like Neptune’s trident, and the bowl fell to the floor sending up an ugly fountain of bean paste. “How’s that?” I said, as if I weren’t alone. “I’m turning my anger outward,” I said. I went back to bed.
Friday

At noon I made coffee, considered changing out of my robe. There was a message from Brenda on the machine: “Todd’s going to a dance tonight. Sorry, I forgot to tell you, honey. After, he’ll spend the night at Phillip’s. He’ll see you next week. Or, I should say two weeks because of the wrestling tournament in Windsor Falls.” I had the feeling that I should feel something other than relief. And another feeling, difficult to describe, like terror but muted. Something like the time we tried to defuse a bomb at the high school gym and failed. Seconds before the explosion we plunged into a swimming pool. I fear that one day, maybe soon, I’ll forget what I should feel, i.e. what’s normal. Okay, I thought, no point in running out to Safeway for groceries. No point washing the partially dried hummus off the wall. In it, I thought I saw the profile of a swan, slightly elongated. And it looked like an upright vacuum cleaner with a curved handle. And it could have been the figure of a man on his knees, his head bent in supplication. Curiously, it was all of these things, but only ever one at a time, and as hard as I tried, I couldn’t see the changes coming on, which is to say I couldn’t identify the moment of change or some activity of my mind which caused the man, for example, to become a swan or a vacuum. I don’t know how long I sat staring. Later, I called the 800 number. A voice said, “This is Gary, how can I help you?”

“I want Imamu,” I said.

“Sure,” said Gary, “but he’s helping a customer, I’ll have to put you on hold.”

I nodded, which of course is useless over the phone. “Are you there?” said Gary.

“I’m here,” I said. “I’m holding.”
A craw, sour thighs
and cooling laser burn. This is high accuracy recoil
and I caused it.

We were on the dash side when I
shouldered onto his shoulder, when I
crosshaired and calamitied the split screen.
I felt hot wax in my cut and it hurts,
but don’t think I’m not animal; scroll up, I caused it.

I did not fail the secondary objective
is another way of saying I lost,
my back erased.
I spent a summer expelling my hunting relics,
my house became a burning stove coil,
and meanwhile I rolled and wailed from my gut flip corrosion;
but scroll up;
scroll because he had a full set on him,
bust by recoil, it covered a sea worm, sand blue,
now left sick for its life, scroll up, scroll up, and he had arms,
a whole, scroll up, please scroll up
In the gazebo room there were curtains everywhere, we opened all of the curtains, we opened the curtains in the gazebo room.

There were hands coming out of the chimney and into the fireplace, thin hands, still, in the fireplace, we watched the hands, it wasn’t a choice, the curtains in the gazebo room closed, behind us the curtains were closed again, why were we in that room.

The tile floor of the birdcage room was brown with couches, a collection of couches, too many couches. We saw the first room, the small room, the all room, more dark rooms coming off them. All those rooms, why were we always in the same room.

I killed rooms slowly, I tried to find a new room. For one room I used a balloon key, for another I used my body type. One room was a dark hallway, dark floor covered in laundry, I went towards it and you went away, in the other direction, away from that hallway, then we were in the same room, we were always the same room, it wasn’t a choice.
My sister, Lemon, has told me in no uncertain terms that she will never forgive me. She stands firm on one point—mani-pedi in her bath robe on Bernadette’s wraparound porch, sweetgum shade on her exposed shoulders, those shoulders a white blaze paler than moonlight, sunk into the cushions of the porch swing with a mimosa that couldn’t get a three-year-old tipsy, moan of the swing, and rattle of the Sweet Gum’s leaves a melody she’ll recall in bed on the morning of her golden anniversary, bride’s maids, high school friends with husbands and babies who have perfected the art of anticipating acquaintances’ and loved ones’ paths of desire, who have forgotten their own paths of desire, musk of bruised petals fallen onto mahogany tables the only proof they aren’t ghosts—this is what I took from her. It is Lemon’s big day after all. But we are in a truck that’s never been accused of being clean, going to pick up her wedding dress because I ripped a mouthful of puckered lace at the small of the back where a string of buttons sit like old women in church pews, and tore a button clean off squeezing behind the armoire to hide. Out from behind the armoire, the dress crumpled at my feet like so much tissue paper on Christmas morning I saw for the first time that my hips and the space left by the curve of my abdomen were beautiful. Even now, when anger has carved my heart into a spit, I admit that I have never not burned to be ten years older, my sister’s best friend, sharing lipstick and bras, the one with steadier hands dipping a brush into a tin of eye shadow and spreading gold shimmer across the lids of Lemon’s blue eyes.

Rosemary. Mom said again, raised voice, allowing herself only the barest hint of impatience because we had company. It was time to open the gifts. I hung the dress in the armoire. I had an idea, which was delightfully nonsensical and perfectly irresistible; the idea—even if she notices, and it’s not that bad, I don’t care if I’m caught.
That was Sunday. Today Mom makes Lemon take me with her, hoping we’ll have to talk. So far nothing. Kirby drives with one hand on the steering wheel, whistling techno beats; Lemon stares out the window. She has so completely abandoned good posture that she would fall onto the road if the passenger door vanished. Our shoulders and knees parry but she looks straight ahead as if I am a stranger on the subway. The more I try to not squirm the more I’m aware of the parts of me that itch and the parts of me that are hot. At our feet are piles of junk food wrappers and empty chocolate milk cartons. We hit moon crater large potholes and dust explodes around us like confetti. I cough in spasms and Lemon purses her mouth. It smells like off duty firefighters, like Chad, who put a lei around my neck during assembly. You’ve gotten lei’d, he said and laughed at his own joke. Chad’s pickup doesn’t have a broken door handle. You don’t have to roll down the window and slam the door shut because Chad opens and closes doors. Chad is a gentleman. Dad says Kirby’s on his way to manhood, he’s just running ten years late. He did show up at 7:30 sharp. We hit every pothole and our limbs jerk like there’s someone at the other end of the string yanking. Already, I have to pee.

I’m being haunted by a girl whose body, wearing knee-high volleyball socks and a pink top, washed up near White City. That’s what we whisper about in the halls between periods. The details change daily. By the time Mom let me watch Channel 10 News they’d removed all traces of her body. When the cameraman zoomed in on the blackberry bushes, where a man running his chocolate lab found her floating facedown, there was nothing to see but flat, brown water sliding around bridge pylons. In the photo the family supplied she is every seventeen-year old, brown hair down
to there, half-smile concealing braces. We don’t believe it was an accident. No one came out and told it straight at church or at a school assembly, our parents just stopped letting us girls go anywhere alone. That night the rain began. Torrential, it fell for ten days without pause, but in the six months since, not a drop. A man died when a tree fell on his car and lightning started a fire that devoured an elementary school in Klamath Falls. In Ashland, Lithia Creek broke its banks and we waded playfully through a foot of water in knee high rain boots we’d purchased cheap from the grange. The red and yellow rain boots, the soda cans that zoomed past us, each dazzled us as only new experiences can. On day three, with nowhere to go and water seeping between the chinks in our bedroom, Lemon and I fought, first about about a spilt bottle of nail polish, then about a scarf, until we could not wrap up one fight before starting another.

In front of us the road unfurls, red-brown, dusty-dry, even the cottonwoods look thirsty, like they want to lie down. My skirt is pushed up around my thighs and my thighs are stuck to the vinyl seat. By now Betty will have resurrected the wedding dress. I have seen her kneeling in the cemetery on Sunday mornings, dressed in a blue corduroy jacket beside a pile of weeds. That everyday act, trowel in her right hand opening the earth, muscles in her arms clumping together, knock twice against the gravestone to separate soil from roots and her habit of pausing to bow her head, contains more devotion than all the hours I’ve spent sitting in pews.

Can you roll down the window? I ask.

Nope. Lemon says. It’s the first word she’s spoken to me in days and I can’t help but think it signifies a softening.

She was up before the sun doing her hair in the bathroom mirror. There’s so much hairspray in there she’d burst into flames if I lit a match.

We pass the Stateline and get on the freeway. I almost ask Kirby to stop so
I can pee, but he’s fiddling with the radio, trying to find a station that isn’t playing country music or evangelists. Kirby doesn’t go in for God like the rest of us. He finds nothing and goes back to whistling. The speedometer reads 70mph. Kirby swerves around the carcass of a deer in the middle of the freeway, another bad omen, and momentarily our bodies touch the way they once did, when things were good between us.

What time is it? Lemon asks.
8:30. Kirby says.

Kirby grew up on road kill. When the Uncles smoke they say things, say road kill stew is where all his weird comes from. Say Uncle Russell bought the highway patrolman a pint now and then in return for a phone call when something big was hit. It’s easier to say that than talk about the decade Uncle Russell spent unemployed and mean. Eventually he found God. And God’s love melted his pride like so much dirty snow. That’s how Uncle Russell tells it. Kirby says he got God and I got to eat what the neighbors’d been offering.

I don’t deny trying on Lemon’s dress or shoving it deep back in the armoire hoping she wouldn’t notice, but I didn’t intentionally rip it and I didn’t do the other things she accuses me of. The comb John gave her that went missing, and the red shirt that was her favorite until it came out of the wash with a jagged cut across the breasts. Lemon’s always been good. Course she might have had a second life—leaving sharpie notes on the walls of the Statesline bathroom and making out with boys in the back of cars— while I was playing with mud. If she caught me with a boy, Lemon would say that making out in the back of a car is undignified. What she doesn’t know is that I saw her and John in the hayloft of Martin’s barn before Mom and Dad knew who John was. Like her goodness, Lemon’s pursuit of perfection is as exacting and arduous as carving miniatures. The
first time she shivered into her dress Lemon looked like she ought to be on magazine covers. Beside her I was a scrawny sixteen-year-old in a pink tulle dress the seamstress wasn’t sure could be taken in at the bust.

Why are you sour? Mom asked.

Oh honey, she said when I explained myself, not everyone can be as beautiful as Lemon.

Wait here, Lemon says when we pull up, then slides out of the truck with a cherry pie in one hand and a bag of Dad’s tomatoes in the other. The door opens and Betty sticks her head out. She blinks vigilantly if sleepily, like an owl nestled in the knot of a tree. In its plastic bag the dress looks cheap. Lemon hands her the pie and tomatoes.

I wish you’d come. She says. The ceremony is at ten and the reception is at the old stagecoach house.

Suddenly Betty is in Lemon’s arms and she’s tiny, like a child who has been wandering lost in a field of corn. But if either finds comfort it is Lemon, who allowed herself ten furious minutes before settling into a state of impersonal efficiency. Betty frees herself and closes the door with a smile as soft and worn as an old couch. The aunts say Betty didn’t use to be this way; she’s having a big sad on account of her daughter dying from ovarian cancer and her husband having a series of heart attacks in a hotel four months after he left. Betty taught me quilting though we never finished. I think of Betty’s hands when I think about those months and also how certain she was when she dragged her fingertips over bolts of fabric trawling for the right piece, as if she understood hers to be a world in which things fell into place because she believed they would. How unlike the woman she has become. Betty said that fear is useful in moderation because when we lose our way it reminds us that we still love the people who drive us up the wall. She makes the most beautiful quilts, the kind
you hang on the wall. They aren’t your grandmother’s quilts, geometric pastels endlessly repeating as if suggesting that life is predictable. Betty’s quilts drip sorrow.

The dead girl, Susannah, and I were born three days apart. Her story enfolded in weekly chapters as old books used to. It was all we talked about. We were addicted to her story because it was so open ended that we could insert ourselves into the drama. And by the end we knew more intimate details than we ought to, which made us uncomfortable at times. When the paper began to report on Medford’s meth lab epidemic instead, we felt a strange sort of loss exacerbated by boredom. I imagined too vividly. My nightmares always began with me bicycling in a rain of leaves: red, yellow and orange. I would turn my head to admire the silken coils of the river and when I looked again a dark, featureless man would step into my path and I would have to get off my back to go around him. I was diagnosed with an unhealthy fixation by the women in my family who decided that quitting cold was the only solution. I lasted a week.

Paradise, in winter, when snow drifts creep toward heaven, encasing the first floor windows, enters our house in a 9x9 pie crust. The scent of coconut visibly hovers in the air just like in cartoons. I walked home from the bus stop and the ill omen, a black snake thick as my arm and still thawing after the long winter was stretched across the road like a jump rope. I ran through the front door red and out of breath to find the whole family there, Mom, Dad and Grandma Sheila sitting at the kitchen table, Lemon cooking.

Sit down Rosemary. Dad said.

So I did. Lemon wouldn’t look at me. If I had a notebook full of everything Lemon was to blame for that summer there wouldn’t be a blank sheet.
You act like you’re the only person in this family adjusting to Lemon leaving. It’s beyond the newspapers or the mood ring you stole. Yes, Lemon found that too. You’re sour with John who is family now. Tomorrow Lemon will take you to return the ring. Dad said.

There was a lot more to it than that of course.

I hate you. I can’t wait until you move to Pendleton. I hope you never come back. I hope you’re miserable living in the middle of nowhere, staying home while your husband is a prison guard in a prison full of psycho killers, I said.

Lemon stood with the poise of a dancer caught in the spotlight and waiting for the music to start and I wondered if she no longer cared enough to bother fighting. She picked up the knife and continued chopping potatoes for soup, the blade flashing in the sunlight, smacking the cutting board like bb’s hitting the trunk of an oak tree. The timer buzzed to say that the coconut cream pie was now perfect.

I have to pee. I say.

We are thirty minutes from the church, you can wait. Lemon says.

Lemon has hooked the clothes hanger though a hole in the ceiling so the dress lies across our laps. That way it won’t crease. We drive down an avenue of pines then turn onto Mt. Ashland road. At the fork a sign warns us that today’s fire danger is extreme bordering on catastrophic, like the summer of 66’ when half the town, including the mill, burned down. Catastrophic is represented by red behind black bars. All summer there have been fires just out of sight. When firefighters smother one, another is born from lightning. On their days off the fireman come to the Stateline for burgers and chocolate milkshakes. They bring their manly smells and Archibald
take up all three booths, appraising Lemon with their eyes. After I was pardoned, I rode my bike to Martin’s lake every afternoon and watched the water planes circling the lake, diving like a team of synchronized swimmers.

I can’t. I say. I’ve been holding it since we left. Please, it will only take five minutes.

Five minutes. Lemon says.

I want to say thank you, but the words won’t come. Something stagnated between us and now it has petrified. Kirby hauls ass on the freeway. We pass a minivan. A kid in the back seat smashes his face against the window and his shit-eating grin makes him look like a cartoon character that’s been flattened by a giant roller. We pass two Hells Angels who speed up and make vulgar gestures. The woman on the back of the bike has a bluebird tattoo on her neck and shoulder.

We pull into the Stateline and I run for the bathroom, stumbling a little in the stupid, strappy sandals Lemon choose for her bridesmaids. Mine are a size too big because by the time they arrived there wasn’t time to return them. Lemon follows me inside so she can knock on the door if I take too long. Kirby stays in the truck with the engine on. Someone has to watch the dress because the doors don’t lock. The bathroom smells like pee and vomit with a sickly sweet undertone of peaches. Now that I’m close to a toilet I think I’m going to explode. I fumble with my pantyhose and tear them.

Hurry up. Lemon says.

I take my time, read the bathroom graffiti, and fantasize that one day some girl sitting where I’m sitting, will see a heart dug into the wood with Chad and my initials inside, and feel jealous.

There’s no soap or paper towels so I wipe my hands on my dress.
Lilac is their color. The whole wedding is dainty, like having tea with the Queen.

Come on. Lemon says.

The clock above the soda machine says 9:30. At the register a whippet-thin boy-man fingers a rabbit foot, rubbing it between his thumb and pointer finger. His nails are dirty and his clothes are wrinkled but clean like he’s been sleeping in his car. He asks for a pack of Marlboros and a fifth of Jack Daniels. Mr. Junckel scans his ID for ages before turning around and opening the liquor cabinet. That’s when he pulls out the gun. Lemon grabs my arm. I feel her trembling. She puts her finger to her lips and pulls me backward toward a shelf of candy and trail mix. I smell thyme and lavender mixed with the Chanel 5° she normally rubs on her wrists. For years I thought the way she applied perfume, spritzing her left wrist, rubbing them together, then rubbing her wrist along her collarbone, was the height of sophistication. It was elegant and intimate, more intimate than the way she undid the buttons of her dress at night, but not as intimate as when she took down her hair, pulling one bobby pin out at a time and placing them between her lips, and her hair, piece by piece, coming to rest on her shoulders.

I’ve heard that in moments of crisis there is a rush of adrenaline and the body acts without thought. It’s not at all like that. My legs have buckled like the just born foal I saw fall again and again in the straw while his mother nudged him with her velvet nose. I have never seen anything so relentless since. I hear my heart, but not the jukebox music, and I’m certain he can hear my heart too. Lemon drags me toward the shelf. Her nails dig into my arm, and I cling to this singular point of pain as if it is the only proof I still exist. I believe Lemon can save me just as ten years ago I believed Ariel the Disney Princess would come to my birthday. As we edge
around the shelf my feet slip inside my shoes, my shoulder knocks into the shelf and I watch as a bag of Oreos hits the floor. The package rips and an Oreo rolls across the linoleum until it is intercepted by a red stool. The man’s head swivels our way, but he keeps the gun trained on Mr. Junckel.

"Sit where I can see you. He says, pointing at the floor with the rabbit foot."

Susannah died on a Wednesday, and the following week Lemon returned from a peach picking trip in the Applegate with a ring on her finger. John’s ok, sweet and serious, and blond like Lemon, but it’s only been four months. Mom and Dad grew up together. Sometimes I wonder if I’ll still love my family when I graduate and go off to university and I’ve got sixteen years worth of memories. All the best ones involve Lemon. Does John know that Lemon wants to live in a cottage in Normandy with chickens and donkeys instead of a dirty town in Oregon where she’ll always have in the back of her mind that there could be a manhunt?

Lemon squeezes my hand and stares at the floor. I know I should too, but I’ve got this idea that this is the man who killed Susannah and that if I remember the right detail it will lead the police to him and she’ll stop haunting me. I don’t want to move or let go of Lemon’s hand, but I want to wipe the sweat from my palms. I feel it trickling down my wrists.

"Cigarettes. The man says. Vodka. He points with his gun at each item."

"Put it in a bag. He says. Make it a double."

With his left hand he scoops up packets of gum and candy, dropping most of them. His pants are baggy. I see spots of blood where he cut himself shaving and patches of hair he missed. He reminds me of...
Derek Milhauser, the first boy in our class to grow facial hair, only red-haired and scarecrow skinny. Derek would obliterate him on the football field. He checks his watch every thirty seconds and I decide he’s not good for Susannah’s murder. His eyes are big and brown like a hound dogs’. Just a scared kid neck deep in trouble, doing this for a big brother who has already got a couple violations. Crime runs in families, according to John.

I squeeze Lemon’s hand, wishing I could rewind the last six months and remember this ending. It feels like I am living someone else’s story. Not in the sense of inhabiting another’s body, but because everything I think is a cliché. God is a natural starting point. I will do better I promise, though I’m vague about whom and what better encompasses. Lemon, yes. God, unlikely. To be clear, when I say better I mean perfect, I mean a mini Lemon even though Grandma Sheila firmly believes I will grow into a discerning appreciation of the ‘grey area.’ I have flashbacks, weird memories, like the time we lay on the couch sprawled on top of each other watching a documentary on European rivers, which I’ve never considered significant, significant being top one-hundred.

The man keeps tugging on his baseball cap with his right hand, his gun hand. He is ordinary; another reckless, white boy made stupid by a beautiful place where nothing happens that isn’t pathetic (a meth lab exploding one wall of a sagging house) or sicker than the things his friends joke about (Susannah).

This is neither prophecy nor curse. Lemon will walk down the aisle and become the woman she has been becoming since birth. They won’t catch the boy this time. I decide he is just a boy who drew the short straw. Three friends are waiting in an 83’ Camaro spray-painted red. Kirby saw them. At the reception John will stand before me, extend his hand, and we will dance to the twang and pluck of a banjo solo, like old people
who are no longer obliged to act conventionally. I will write Lemon letters frequently at first and then not at all. Every summer I will visit. I will look forward to these visits, but after a week under her roof I will quickly grow restless and sharp tongued, the urgency of a love inflated by distance fading into the patchwork of exasperation, loyalty, and sweetness we established long ago. Lemon strokes my hair. Her engagement ring catches, pinches, and I bury my face in her shoulder, understanding finally, as I imagine she has always understood, that there will always be something outside of us bringing us together even as the things inside us threaten to tear us apart.
KUMBAYA

For this porch circle’s transubstantiated, I’d play the guitar, but I can’t play the guitar, nor strum it even lubberly as air. They share a swallow of Deb’s fuzzy navel; I down the rest. I take whiffs of the vent’s mystic, fragrant discharge; they dwell not on our brief visit to the most jam-packed Wawa east of Willingboro, New Jersey. We are in love.
REST

His nonchalant gaps/in conversation/his careless way of caring/but his gold filament
lack abstracts time and makes me clench my own nervepacked structural artifice.

In dreams we pull out the world’s teeth together/with mousetrap doorknob
swimming hole sweat/we tug floss taut until

water passes through a snapshot meant for filling/with icecream sundaes torn/and
unable to hold in the pit of my belly incidentally a womb.

If I grew teeth to replace his would my own fall out too soon? I show up late, naked,
disoriented, undesiring/of fist hollowed walls

screaming sorry. I swallow my father’s lost teeth to regain time that’s missing/
between when we talked sideways and not

at all. Tangled in a bit of bloody tissue/our roots measured by the pain of pulling.
SPIDER

springs from my scalp showering/I think. Instead, your hair in mine/untangled only through shampoo. An excuse for women too obtuse
to encounter god. Face to face we wink to avoid blindness/trading tenets
for tic-tacs in grocery store aisles that whisper

we are soul mates to flickering florescent/flawless. My fear of squeezing
limes/in kitchens lit by our eyes. It looks like love but not

through a glass darkly. I am Arachne to your Athena/whose jealousy over
obscene tapestry infuriated her pride with miles

of silk I spin/stronger than withholding. We have woven metamorphoses
with eight exhausted legs/pretending not to see our own taxonomies

walking out of closets. The warp hangs heavy with your spur. Unthread
the weft of my loom with your shuttle but I cannot feel

loss. Echoing creation deity Kwaku Ananse/anglicized Aunt Nancy/your
spider tales linked to sovereignty. Anansi toree

teaching Maroons how to capture utopia with their webs/how to let it rest
in the spiders on your chest/then set us free.
The lights from the fire engine flashed against the tree trunks and brick buildings that loomed over us. We stood in the rain, the orderlies in their scrubs and us in our pajamas. Our oversized t-shirts stuck to our wet skin; the hems of our sweatpants were splattered with mud. Someone whined that he was cold. Someone else started barking, sharp punctuated yips. One girl ran around catching raindrops on her tongue.

The hospital looked like the campus of a posh private school, tall oaks and manicured lawns, flowerbeds with azaleas and hydrangea bushes. Marcus stood between two orderlies, shoulders slumped and jaw clenched. He dragged the back of his left hand across his nose, wiped the snot on his pant leg. He started the fire with an orange Bic lighter. We all had to stand in the rain. We all could tell he wasn’t sorry. I looked up at the coal-dark sky and laughed.

The room was vibrating. I could feel it in my hair follicles. I turned my head and watched sound ripple. Marcus’s bare feet slammed against the padded door.

“Fucking bastards! Fucking pigs! Let me out, you motherfuckers!”

I closed my eyes and tried to steady my breath.

“He’s just some dumb state kid.” Brady strummed his guitar. It only had three strings, but he liked to think he’d mastered the three he had.

“This isn’t like some foster home. They don’t just send state kids here unless, you know, like something’s wrong with them.” Tiffany tapped the side of her head, rolled her eyes up until I could only see white.
My journal was open in my lap. In neat, straight lines I wrote: *I do not belong here* until my hand cramped and the tremor returned. I had filled three pages. Tiffany asked if I was writing a story about her.

We had spent three days guessing why Marcus was there. He didn’t wear his diagnosis like some of us. He didn’t have the pale white lines of a cutter or the thick, puckered scarring of a failed suicide attempt. He didn’t have the ticks of Tourette’s. He didn’t talk to people we couldn’t see. He wasn’t anorexic.

“I’m telling you. He’s a throwaway. They’re just keeping him here until they can ship him off somewhere more permanent. Trust me. I know the type.”

Brady liked to think he was well versed in the ins and outs of the system. His father was a psychiatrist and his mother a psychotherapist. He blamed them for his sexual maladjustment, his multiple personalities, delusions of grandeur, and prolonged periods of clinical depression. He blamed them for caring more about other people’s kids. He told Tiffany and me that he’d checked himself into the hospital. He could walk out any time, but he was choosing to stay and get straight.

When I was ten my mom drove a spaceship the color of shiny dimes. It held seven passengers and had the kind of windows that vented open an inch and a half, enough to stick your nose through but not an arm or leg. The windows looked like half moons. We never had seven passengers. Monday through Friday we traveled thirty-one miles to a school where I learned the art of raising mealworms, the practicality of a Box Step, and a love for inventing foreign languages that resembled hieroglyphics. I practiced embalming worms and considered changing my name to
Tutankhamen. I spent a lot of days in the nurse’s office because I didn’t have any friends, but it was easier for me to say I had a stomachache than I’m lonely. I lied. I had some friends, but they were boys. Boys with Band-Aids on their elbows and dirt under their nails. Boys who carried hacky sacks like multicolored hand grenades and tucked long strands of hair behind Dial-scrubbed ears. Remembering is very much like lying. My memory is a game of Mad Libs. Adjectives become verbs, become nouns, become adverbs. I learned the Box Step but not how to follow. I learned how to lie but not very well. I developed headaches instead of stomachaches. I cried when people touched me. I cried harder if I loved them. The windows looked like half moons and for thirty-one miles I tried to remember how to release the locks and let myself fall.

In the dark I heard Tiffany sucking on the ends of her hair.

“What do you think his dick tastes like?”

“What?”

The buzzing in my ears sounded like a million angry hornets, their iridescent wings flicked my eardrums.

“You know? Brady. What do you think his dick tastes like?”

I didn’t turn to face her but I could feel her eyes burrowing into my skull.

The beam of a flashlight flooded the room, scanning across our faces like a wandering lighthouse – once, twice, three times. Tiffany said they scanned three times to make sure we were still breathing. Bed checks were every two hours. The ones on suicide watch had to sleep with their doors open.

“Go to sleep, Tiffany.”
I watched a pair of antenna emerge, a small, slender body flew out of my right ear.

“He says when we get out, we can like be together or something. You know, like a couple.”

I willed the smudge of yellow and black to sting her.

Tiffany said she was named after the 80’s pop star. Her arms were covered with black rubber bracelets. When she talked her arms flapped like skinless chicken wings. She pulled at the cracks of her lips, leaving strips of herself on the linoleum floor.

“Sometimes I watch you when you’re sleeping. Does that freak you out?”

She couldn’t sit still, fingers dug into scalp; feet tapped the floor, eyeballs rolled around in their sockets.

“Before I was here I used to sleep all the time. I’d like fall asleep and wake up someplace totally different, like different towns and shit. Do you believe in aliens?”

She said she was a natural blonde, despite dark roots growing out of her part. She kept her hair twisted at the back of her skull; the loose strands that fell around her face were greasy and sucked on. Her front left tooth showed signs of rotting and the rest were light grey.

“Guess how many stitches? Like thirty. I thought my arm was an envelope, so I fucking opened it. Bad trip. Woke up and thought I’d gone swimming. My own fucking blood. That’s how much a body bleeds. Truth.”

At night she crawled into the shower stall and talked through the crack in the wall. The boy on the other side did the same. They
said they were in love. He wrote her ballads on a guitar with only three strings. They were all set to the tune of *I Think We’re Alone Now*. Depending on the day, he responded to the name Brady, Stephen, David, or George. She said only Brady knew her deepest level. She said she had eight.

“I didn’t see anything. I mean, I almost died, but I didn’t see anything. No lights, no angels, not even my dead brother. What do you think that means? Do you think that’s bad?”

My eyes were closed.

“Do you believe in souls?”

I could feel her watching. It was beginning to feel normal.

“Marcus, do you want to share?”

We sat in orange plastic chairs. We pulled them into a circle in the shared space outside of our rooms. The walls were the color of coffee ice cream. There was no natural light, just florescent tubes buzzing. We chewed our cuticles, jiggled legs, tugged at hair and picked at the crust of our scabs. We sat cross-legged, arms crossed, fingers laced behind skulls, tongues cemented to the roofs of our mouths. We said head-bobbing words like: “forgiveness,” “acceptance,” and “commitment.” We said nothing but flipped off the therapist with her beige suit and French twisted hair.

The new girl stretched out on the couch across from the pay phones. No one told her that she had to share the couch during group. She rested one ankle on top of the other and stretched her arms above her head. If it wasn’t for the burn along the side of her face you might have called her beautiful. In group she had shared that her worst day
was giving a blowjob to a seventy-year-old man for crack. She paused before she said this like she had multiple “worst days” to choose from.

“I drank bleach,” I said. “I guess that was my worst day.”

“Marcus, do you want to share?”

The group therapist was young. She did not wear a wedding ring. She wore sensible shoes, black with one-inch heels. She painted her nails in clear polish. She insisted on making eye contact. Her eyes were hazel, but more green than brown. On the days she couldn’t come her replacement was a therapist named Carl. He wore dark colored shirts, sweat-stained beneath his armpits. When he talked he stared at the floor. Sometimes he stuttered.

Marcus stared at his white, secondhand sneakers. They were missing their laces. All our shoes were missing their laces. He shoved a finger up his nose and dug. He looked at what he pulled out and flicked it. Nina, the anorexic, pulled her legs up and wrinkled her face. You could see every part of Nina’s vertebrae when she bent over. She was required to drink two bottles of Ensure a day. She said this was progress. Two weeks before, it was only half a bottle. She was still not allowed to use the restroom without supervision. She said this was a violation of her basic human rights. She said her father was a lawyer and he was going to sue the hospital if she couldn’t piss in private. I thought her shoulder blades looked like knives. She had a tattoo of a rainbow on the back of her neck. She told me when she gets out she was going to add a pot of gold.

“Marcus, you should use a tissue if you need to blow your nose.” The therapist handed him a tissue from the box at her side. Marcus
stared at the tissue but didn’t take it.

“I didn’t need to blow my nose. I needed to pick my nose.”

In kindergarten there was a boy who lived in a small white house with weeds that came up past his shoulders. He carried his lunch in a brown paper bag. He had holes in his shirts and dirt on his elbows. On the bus no one liked to sit next to him. He picked his nose and flicked the boogers on the back of the seat in front of him. We called him Frog because his eyes bulged out of their sockets. He told me he had a kitten named White but it died.

“You’re fucking disgusting, Marcus, you know that?”

I turned my head slowly. My eyes lagged behind the movement of my head. I fought the weight of my eyelids to stay awake.

“Brady, please express yourself using appropriate language.”

Brady rolled his eyes.

“Your appropriate and my appropriate – different animals.”

“Woof.”

There was a girl in our ward that thought she was a dog. She had been living in a condemned building since she was six. Construction workers had found her curled in a corner, sucking her thumb. She whimpered in her sleep and kicked her legs like she was running. She and Marcus were the only two people who had single rooms. Late at night she howled at a crayon drawing of the moon. She had taped it on the wall where a window should have been. She growled when she wanted to be left alone. She preferred to sleep on the floor instead of her
bed. She bit a nurse when the nurse tried to take blood. She didn’t comb her hair. Tiffany called her Rat’s Nest. The rest of us called her Beth.

Marcus shot his hand into the air.

“Yes, Marcus?”

“Can I go to my room?” His hand was still raised above his head.

“Not right now. We haven’t finished group.”

Marcus’s hand slapped his thigh. I felt the sting across my face.

“But I don’t have anything to say!”

The therapist straightened her back and elongated her neck. She found the orange seats as uncomfortable as we did.

“That’s fine. You can just sit here and listen.”

“But I don’t want to.”

I jotted down: *Neither do I* in my journal.

“Marcus, you know the rules.”

Leticia breathed through her open mouth. There was a rattle in the back of her throat. I could see the vibrations in snaking ribbons around her body. Her folds spilled over the edges of her chair. She held her bulging stomach and willed the child she had lost to return.

Leticia’s cousin Benjamin was six foot four. His family wanted him to play basketball but Benjamin preferred video games. Benjamin’s father called him a good for nothing. Benjamin’s mother called him her sweet angel.

After school Leticia went to Benjamin’s house. Her parents worked third shift jobs. Her aunt and uncle made sure Leticia did her homework and got to bed by 9:00PM. Leticia’s house was one house away from Benjamin’s.

Eight months ago, Leticia went to Benjamin’s house and her
aunt and uncle were not home. Leticia laid out her homework on the yellow kitchen table. She heard explosions in the living room. She asked Benjamin if he wanted the extra Ring-Ding left over from lunch.

Eight months ago, Benjamin raped Leticia. She watched her homework papers flutter to the floor. She watched her pencil roll off the table and under the stove. She closed her eyes and imagined what it would feel like to fly. That month, Leticia did not get her period. She knew what this meant. She’d gotten an A in health class. When she told her parents they shook their heads, told her the baby was her boyfriend Ronny’s. Not Benjamin’s. They told her she had to have it. They told her not to mention Benjamin again. Every day after school Leticia went to her aunt and uncle’s. They gave her extra food at dinner and watched her swallow pre-natal vitamins with large glasses of milk. Benjamin told her she was getting real fat.

A month ago, Leticia drank a handle of whiskey and a bottle of aspirin. She lost the baby. She named him Peanut. Sometimes her face twitched and she flopped on the floor like an elephant seal. The doctors told her she was lucky to be alive.

“Sometimes I still feel him. I hold him real tight, like this. I tell him all about the life we’re gonna have. He swims inside me like a fish. Sometimes I see him in my dreams. Sometimes we fly.”

“Fuck the rules.” Marcus teetered on the edge of his chair, his fists pounding his thighs.

“Language.”

“Fuck your language. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!”

Marcus stood and gripped the back of his chair with both
hands. We had seen this before. He was about to go full-blown nuclear. Blood dripped down the wall in front of me, long, sticky rivulets. I closed my eyes. *That’s not really there.*

“Marcus I need you to sit back down.” The therapist placed her notepad and pencil on the floor next to her. She emphasized down with her hands like she was talking to a puppy.

“I need you to shut the fuck up.”

I opened my eyes. The wall was red. It was seeping onto the floor.

Dan, the day orderly, who was built like a pro linebacker, approached the group. Marcus scanned back and forth between the therapist and Dan.

“Don’t you touch me, you faggot!”

“Marcus, if you can just calm down, Dan doesn’t have to do anything.”

“Yeah, right. You think I’m stupid or something? You think I’m retarded?”

Marcus lifted the chair off the floor. Dan took a step closer. The chair flew over the head of Beth who started to howl. Dan sidestepped, the chair clattered, Dan’s arms wrapped around Marcus’s shoulders, pinning Marcus’s arms to his sides.

My feet were submerged in the thickness of it. My ankles were wet. “Don’t touch me! I’ll kill you! I’ll fucking kill you!” Marcus’s left sneaker flew off his foot, his legs kicking wildly in the air.

Dan wasn’t even sweating. Marcus looked like a toddler throwing a temper tantrum in his father’s arms—small, frail, hysterical. Dan walked calmly toward the padded room. Beth let out a low growl. Leticia was crying and rocking in her seat.
“I hear you, Beth. That dude is psy-cho!” Brady leaned back in his orange chair, interlacing his fingers behind his neck. He winked at Tiffany.

“Totally,” said Tiffany.
“Lang-rage,” said Brady.
Tiffany giggled.

We lined up at the window, three rows deep and watched water pool in mulch. Recreation time had been cancelled. It was raining in the gymnasium, the result of a leaky roof. Legs that wanted to run buckled, feet fidgeted, toes became restless. Marcus leaned his forehead against the glass.

“How far down you think that is?”
A stray cat darted across the road, a flash of grey into chokeberry bush. Red rustled back into place.

“Not far enough,” said Brady. “You thinking about doing the deed?”

Socks dispersed, dragged across carpet. Legs tucked into chairs, feet into couch cushions.

“Nah,” said Marcus. He pressed hands against glass on either side of his head, fingers splayed. He peeled his forehead off the window, leaving an inkblot of steam.

“Elephant,” said Brady.
“Cunnilingus,” said Tiffany.
Brady flicked his tongue in and out between his lips. Tiffany giggled and elbowed my ribcage.

“I know what that means. You’re nasty, dirty, shitheads.”
Marcus, Brady, Tiffany and I turned in synchronized motion.
A small boy, striped t-shirt and elastic band jeans jutted a scuffed chin in our direction.

“What’re you, four?” said Brady.

“Five, fuckface.” The boy’s mouth looked swollen, purple and puffy. He spit out his words, hurled them at us like it took great effort.

Brady nudged Marcus with his hip.

“Didn’t know you had a brother. You’ve been holding out on us, buddy.”

“Don’t call me that,” said Marcus. Marcus looked at the boy, started at his feet and worked his way up slowly. I could see Marcus’ hands tremble.

“What are you looking at, faggot?” said the boy.

Marcus pursed his lips. Twisted, neck first, followed by arms and legs, eyes turned back to the window. He left the boy to us. The boy puffed out his tiny chest. He took the retreat as a sign of group weakness. One down. The boy pivoted, narrowed his dead fish eyes and pointed at Tiffany.

“You a lesbo?”

Tiffany snorted and squatted down, resting her palms on kneecaps, got eyelevel.

“Sweetie, are you lost? This is the big kids hall.”

“This is the retard hall.” The boy’s hands were white-knuckled fists; red crept up his neck in splotches.

“Jamie, there you are!” An orderly with a deep fried perm and adult braces scuttle-shuffled her way to us. Coffee drips patterned the front of her shirt. She noticed me looking, and brushed over the stains with chipped blue nails. She throat chuckled and shook her head, like she was remembering an off-color joke. “Jamie here needed a little break
from the upstairs ward, didn’t you?”
   “No, stupid. You needed to shake your titties in some asshole’s face.”
   “Jamie. Language. Come on now, don’t make me dock you. You already lost TV privileges.” The orderly smiled at us; stretching violet lips over bulky mouth gear. “Too bad about the rain.”
   Marcus was plastered against the glass again, sixty-degree angle, forehead supporting body.
   “How far down you think that is?”
   Jamie’s hair was long in the front, ends brushing eyelids, making him blink. He reminded me of someone. He reminded me of brown paper bags and dirt caked on elbows. He reminded me of white kittens.
   “Tell the chink to stop fucking looking at me.”
   “Oh, she’s not Chinese,” offered Tiffany.
   “Marjorie, TELL HER TO STOP LOOKING AT ME!”
   “How far down you think that is?”
   “MARJORIE!”
   Marjorie, the orderly, glanced at Marcus and then at Jamie, bit her lower lip, drummed nails against wide thighs. She cleared her throat.
   “Uh…does he need…should I get –” she stuttered and reached out a tentative hand in Marcus’ direction.
   I couldn’t stop looking at Jamie. I stared at his chest. I had almost remembered a name.
   “STOP FUCKING LOOKING AT ME YOU CUNT!”
   A striped blur crashed into my body. Tiny fists pounded hipbone and sneakered feet crunched my socked toes. Jamie’s spit landed in splatters across my jeans. I didn’t move my arms. I stood. I took it. I
tried to remember. Faster. Jamie pulled out clumps of his hair and threw them at me.

“TAKE IT! TAKE IT! TAKE IT!”

“How far down you think that is?”

I watched brown tufts float between dust specks.

Marjorie pulled Jamie off and gathered him in her arms. “That’s it, Jamie! Enough! I didn’t want to do this. I really didn’t. But, you know, you haven’t given me a choice, have you?”

Jamie buried his head in Marjorie’s shoulder. I could see blood where hair follicles used to be, red beading on angry pink, on skin that would scab over and itch.

“You okay?” said Marjorie. She jiggled up and down like she was trying to soothe a baby.

I nodded my head. Brady yawned and cracked his neck. Tiffany practiced her concerned face.

“He doesn’t mean anything by it. Just been through a lot, haven’t you, kiddo? Poor thing.”

Jamie howled a muffled word like cocksuckers into Marjorie’s shoulder. My hip stung where he’d made contact. She turned and b-lined for the exit.

“Jesus Christ, the drama!” Brady threw a hand over his brow like an overwrought woman. “Come on, babe. Let me play that song for you.”

Tiffany’s concerned face broke. She winked in my direction, blew me three kisses. I didn’t catch them. I let them fall.

“You have to forgive them. Even if they’re monsters, right?” Marcus rolled his head to look at me. His cheeks were slick, eyes bloodshot. He sniffled.
I nodded my head. My neck split at the spine, head broke off, suspended somewhere above my shoulders. My medication made my head levitate. From near the ceiling I watched Marcus slide down the window to the floor. He was bent at all the wrong angles. I grabbed the top of my head and tried to anchor it.

“How far down…”

I stopped up my ears, plugged fingers in holes. I walked away before he could finish. Far.

The officer secured handcuffs around Marcus’s tiny wrists. His body shook; tears and mucus ran down his face.

“They’re going to kill me. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.” His eyes frantically searched the room, looking for someone to accept his apology.

In an hour my parents would be there to discharge me. I would go home to a house with flowerboxes in the windows. I would go back to a school with perfectly straight desks. I would be a good girl. I would eat all my peas.

Marcus was going to a juvenile detention center in Worchester. Marcus would be given an orange jumpsuit that many other boys had worn. He would wear his orange jumpsuit until he turned eighteen. After that he would be on probation until he turned twenty-one.

Marcus’s shoulders heaved up and down. He craned his neck forward and let his head drop. I wanted to reach out and touch him. I wanted to tell him that I didn’t think he was a monster. I wanted to tell him that he was just a kid. But we were not allowed to touch other patients and all I could muster was:
“It’ll be okay,” which we all knew was a lie.

“Marcus, do you want to share?”
Marcus licked his lips slowly. They were chapped, his lower lip split open and bleeding. He sucked on it, drew his whole lower lip into his mouth.
“I’m getting arrested today.”
Brady’s head snapped to attention.
“And what is that bringing up for you?”
Marcus wrapped his arms around himself and squeezed.
“I guess…well, you know, I’m scared? I mean, the thing, what I’ve done…a lot of people…people hate me.”
“And what are you scared of in particular?”
“You know, of getting hurt. You know, that they’re gonna hurt me.”
“Shit, man. What did you do?” Brady leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.
Marcus hesitated. He rubbed the edges of his sneakers together.
“My neighbor’s baby…I.”
“Yes, Marcus?”
“I…I touched it.”
“Jesus, fuck!” shouted Brady.
Leticia held her elbows and rocked her invisible Peanut. Beth whimpered and got on all fours, tried to cram herself under her chair. Nina drew her arms into her oversized shirt like a turtle. The new girl yawned and massaged her puckered skin. Tiffany picked at the scars on her arms.
“I want to remind everyone that we are not here to judge. And what is said here remains here, right?”

The therapist made sure to make eye contact with each of us. Brady balanced his chair on its back two legs and rolled his eyes.

“So, you’re okay that this thing touches babies? That’s okay with you?”

“I’m asking you to respect the rules of group, Brady.”

“I’m not Brady. I’m David.”

“Well, the rules apply to you too, David.”

“Fuck the rules. I mean, seriously, how many of you actually feel sorry for this piece of shit? Did you like it? I bet you fucking liked it. I bet you’d do it again too. Man, you deserve what’s coming to you. You fucking deserve it.”

I was sweating. I could feel droplets running down my back. I tilted my head and watched ants cover the ceiling, crawling over each other, over fluorescent lights like a panicked mob. My throat was burning. When I stuck out my tongue it was covered in a black swarm of moving bodies. I gagged, felt acid hit the back of my throat. I pinched the inside of my arm where it hurt the most. Just breathe. It’s all in your head.

Marcus was fifteen the day he was arrested. His top lip was covered in peach fuzz. He had a habit of thrusting his neck forward when he walked. During visiting hours, Marcus sat in his room holding a pillow to his chest. During phone privileges, Marcus occupied a payphone and held the receiver to his ear, listening to dial tone. Sometimes he pressed the buttons of the keypad until his time was up. He liked The
Simpsons. He wanted to play the saxophone. Marcus was one the first
time his mother’s boyfriend molested him. The only pet he ever had
was a goldfish he carried home from school in a Ziploc bag. He named
it George after the monkey in those books his teacher read. Marcus
was molested until he turned eleven. His mother refused to throw her
boyfriend out because he was good to her. Marcus didn’t know his
biological dad. He used to tell people his dad was an astronaut who
traveled to the moon. Marcus’s mother didn’t go to his trial. When
asked, she told people she didn’t have a son. Marcus used to dream of
being a firefighter. He said he wanted to save people.
from THE OFFENSE OF REGULAR BLACK SELF DEFENSE
WHARF WORRY
CHAPLINESQUE
IN THE MISSION ON A MISSION
Pho To Gra Pher’s No, Te

Maybe, it keeps occurring to me—with a sort of anti-poetic shutter redundancy—that the camera is simply a failed, technical extension of human behavior. It is, there, in every mechanical inhale (not shot) that the camera is imitating you—if you are not a lie. If you are alive.

A fist-shaped spaceship, underground, under glass, between you and the galaxy.

It is, also here, in the hand-held copycat precision of Leica, Nikon and Mamiya that words like “take” in “Take a picture” or “capture” in “That photo really captures her” have led us in a very narrow direction away from the original and widest purpose of seeing, us continuing an action toward another us or us rejecting the paralysis of separation, us unable to reach us.

As wings, shoulders.

As balance, elbows, the anatomy-prison of gravity.

The trap is evident, decisive as false evidence, as reality-false as the photographs you are about to not-see. The kind of seeing the camera refuses to teach us, the kind not limited to sight or the literacy of eyes. If there is a stance in these images, a place to stand in the creation of a belief or being. If there was, then where has it gone and where can you go with it. They could leave you there, here, turning the pages. Cold, alone. They could be buried and you could be the burier, digging a pictorial grave, a one size fits all just by your need to see—untouched as art can be. And embalmed.

Hard to trust the bridge,
or any Earth with more than one African foot.

So many viewers running behind the trained and predictable, behavioral shadows of themselves where the things they take, mostly, weigh note-thing. Imagine a history where the camera bends and the camera picks, bends and picks, the bale you print (or drink like gin) and send your kids to school with the profit from. Essentially blind. He or she who needs numbers to turn a page, identify and epoch, and to think and feel is essentially spine-bound to blindness. Un-see these.

All enemies of the car note love driver-seat darkness.
Children, Broadripple is burning & the girls are getting sick.
–Margot & the Nuclear So & Sos

It’s a mess. The Thai place
in Fountain Square. That bookstore, the box
in its basement full of a dead man’s wigs.
My father, who art not here, who art in heaven, possibly, possibly
not. Anything north of 34th is asking to burn, typical Rome,
typical martyr move, the intersection on College
selling quilts, blocked off since

the pedestrian got hit-&-run-killed leaving with sushi.
Here I am, Julie of Yeah I live right off Rockville, of ode
to the township line. Where is the cemetery
with the statue of Christ in the center,
the one that makes me whisper Jesus every time I pass?
Oh grief is like reverence made from Popsicle sticks.

At some point I was attempting to live local, but I couldn’t
afford it. Neither could I bring things back from the dead,
not even a little bit. Not even half-baked, not even Lazarus
who already knows the drill.
Is it sacrilege when I drive the old streets, check if people I know are hanging Christmas lights or if someone is driving to Kroger on 16th street to buy tofu to eat in the dark? It’s easiest to say *it happened like an accident*, rather than *the place is cursed*. This city coated

*RIP RIP Rest in peace, Daddo.* Write it underneath any bridge. What small protest. Oh grief is like graffiti. Julie of. Below that, what about a likeness? Two arms, ten fingers, etc.
Do greet everyone with a strong, steady hand. Do appreciate their condolences. Do make them comfortable. Do pretend you know who all of them are. Do not think of yourself.

Do read your eulogy without crying. Do make the audience laugh. Do tell them you consulted an online article entitled, “How to Write a Good Eulogy,” that encourages eulogizers to use humor. Do not tell them you did this in your sister’s hospital room with her still warm in the bed.

Do not get drunk. Do not get drunk with your dead sister’s friends. Do not get drunk with your dead sister’s friends after the funeral and get dared to make out with your dead sister’s best friend and then make out with her. Absolutely do not have sex with your dead sister’s best friend.

Decide to have sex with your dead sister’s best friend.

Get told: “You kiss just like her!” Get told: “Your sister and I slept together lots.” Get told: “She said you were probably a good lay.” Shudder, laugh, cry. Have no idea how to react. Seriously, because you have no fucking clue.

Spend the next night in your parent’s garage. Go through your dead sister’s things looking for a homemade sex tape directed by your sister and starring the friend of your sister’s that you just slept with and two other girls. Do this because you promised the friend you would find the tape and destroy it. When your dad catches you thigh high in your dead sister’s VHS collection and asks what you’re doing: lie. Lie your ass off. Return to rummaging. Give up and steal all the tapes because there are dozens and
any one could be it. Yes, even the tape labeled: “Buffy the Vampire Slayer – Series Finale.”

That night, sleep in your sister’s room. Pray. Pray to her even though you don’t pray because prayers only go into a vacuum, the same vacuum where she is now. Say, Julia, I miss you. I love you. Say, I never did enough for you. Say, Julia, when you were dying and we all knew you were dying but no one would say you were dying, I’m sorry I didn’t call you. I was scared of you. I was scared of your oxygen tank. I was scared of your empty bottles of Oxycontin, your bedpan, your blue biohazard containers filled with mucus, the way you didn’t always remember who I was.

Say, remember our first Halloween trick-or-treating alone when you lead me through the neighborhood by the hand — you a witch, me a cowboy — the slush cutting through our shoes and curling our toes into stumps while our breaths plumed in front of us like tiny ghosts? Remember how I complained and complained, and we only went one block before I stopped and cried and said, Julia, this is too cold, Julia, I don’t even like candy, Julia, we’re missing The Simpsons? And how you yanked me up by the hand and said, you little dumbass, The Simpsons is on every Thursday, Halloween is only once a year, now get up. And remember how I got up?

Say all that and say even more. Say you taught me, you lead me, you showed me not to be scared. Say, you went first. Say, you always will.
The ocean makes day break
an antique porcelain platter,
everyone wondering whose fault it was --
slivers scattering the sun.

They say waves of high frequencies
can shatter glass if it’s hand-blown thin

thinner in after-dinner hours when
the back yard is up to its shins in fireflies,

thinner than the time
we didn’t speak for weeks.

How does the sun collect itself after that,
go on with the day’s routines,

paying attention to oranges, curtains,
the memory of African ant hills?

Of course the ocean is always tending,
napkin on arm, refilling the glass.

But we can’t say anything, really, about fault,
lost as it is, in waves washing back and forth

until they reach a point of confusion,
pause to think, turn back and drift away.
CLEANING, DRINKING, AND A HORSE

To get the drudge of scrubbing, mopping, glass wiping, wicker dusting out of your system, you can think about a horse.

They say you can never love too much. You can lead a horse, house a horse, horse around but you can’t solve the drinking problem.

You can’t make him drink, but if you keep trying, you can, as love is the best way to get results, though it’ll soon turn to something else.

House cleaning is the horse’s problem. If he thinks he’ll have to clean the sink or tub one more time, he’s asking: what’s the use of love if this is what I have to do all day and that’s when he thinks he wants a drink.
I had dreamed about fire again that night, slept fitfully, clutching my blankets around me in a cocoon, contorting my neck until it was sore in the morning when the alarm jarred me into a still-blurred world. A wildfire in the distance, its plume of smoke billowing darkly into the sky made both clear and hazy by my dream world. We knew it was coming, had to pack up our valuables, decide what to leave behind. Then, rain—a torrential flood that put out the fire but made me worry that the house would begin to leak and then cave in, that water would pool in the crevices of my grandmother’s Biedermeier desk, already fading from the harsh sunlight. In my dream the land shook and the sky was dark.

November in Los Angeles. The ocean flat and silver, a coffee haze of smog resting above it. The familiar curves of this highway I have driven, or been driven on, for twenty-five years. I know this road with my eyes closed. What it feels like to speed down it on a weekend morning flanked by hordes of bicyclists. What it feels like to be stuck behind a chorus of brake lights on the way home from work.

On the side of the road, a dead deer. Its neck ripped out, left broken and bloodied on the side of the snaking road by some coyote. It’s not the first I’ve seen but the image is always jarring. Makes my insides twist. What an animal can do to another animal.

I found the last one when it was already a skeleton. Bones picked clean by buzzards, entrails and heart placed neatly off to the side as if by the hand of some methodical serial killer. The ribcage as big as my own. The delicate hooves, patches of fur still clinging to the ankle bones. I was walking, watching my feet on the asphalt, my shadow stretching in front of me, and there it was.

A carcass lying on the side of the road under a vast blue sky that stretches over baked red cliffs. An ocean that lies flat and calm and steady
one day, threatens to overflow or break your neck or sweep you under
the next. It all feels precarious. These roads that wind up and up and
up, these dry canyons through which predators creep, their glossy eyes
reflecting fear and headlights. These neon signs that hum and flicker over
a silent street. A sky glowing orange after a rainstorm. A sky threaded with
telephone wires. I imagine cutting through them with scissors.

How can a person be there one moment, laughing, drinking too
much, brushing his teeth, making oatmeal, fighting with his wife—then
broken on the driveway blooming blood. Squeezing his daughter’s hand in
the car on the way to school, then a shell in a white bed with a gaping hole
for a mouth.

I am barefoot on the deck. Step in a certain place and the wood
bends under your weight. Dangerous, they say. Someone could fall through.
The wooden boards shed flakes of pale grey paint like skin. They stick
to your heels. The deck slumps outwards towards the canyon, defeated,
sighing on stilts over a garden my mother used to tend. The barren beds
filled with hardened dust, rotten lemons that drop from the tree. A rusted
spade. Fragments of broken glass left over from a harsh winter wind that
shattered an outdoor table. A hose not used in years. The pool heater,
encased in a stucco cubicle where I used to hide as a child when I did not
want to be found.

I have my father’s feet and my mother’s hands.

A graying half-dead cactus reaches plaintively towards the sky
with crooked arms.

My mother’s roses are gone. The deer ate them all and she lost the
energy it took to replant them. What would be the point. The deer would
just eat them again.

The terracotta pots that flank the swimming pool are empty.
I try to think back to a time when lush green succulents grew in these pots. When the deck was firm and solid and could hold my weight. When the cushions on the chaise lounges were new and plush and did not spill stuffing like guts from open wounds. When African daisies grew wild and purple on the hillside. When the grass on the front lawn was green and healthy. I try to think back to roses and birds of paradise and eucalyptus trees.

I try to think back to a time before my father fell. Before wheelchairs and caregivers and hospitals and tracheotomies and tubes and machines and adult diapers. Before he coughed up his meals at the kitchen table and hung his head in shame.

His hands were once strong and warm and could grip yours tightly. His noble cheeks once ruddy.

We say we are going to clean out his clothes. Divide up his things. One of these days. But we never do. The idea terrifies me. My brother comes over with his new dog, shows me where Dad kept his pistol, his French fisherman’s knives. Says I should take the Swiss Army knife engraved with Dad’s nickname. Tells me about the time he saw a ghost walk through his living room wall. Drinks too much vodka, falls asleep on the trampoline.

I go to sleep thinking about the pistol.

It seems everything is fading, dying, breaking, rusting, peeling, cracking. This house is closing in on me. Collapsing piece by piece.

There are rooms which we do not go into.

The den. A room in which my friends and I watched movies and told ghost stories and fell asleep on the green leather couch with melting pints of ice cream. A room in which I found an email that made me hate my father for a few years. A room into which my brother snuck a girlfriend on a stormy night when my mother was pregnant with me. The room
where my father’s hospital bed was set up. A room that smelled of baby powder and moisture and illness.

My father’s office. A room which was the bedroom I grew up in. You can tell from the peach-pink walls. Daddy left the traces of his little girl on the walls: glow in the dark stars, exercises from my oil painting classes, faded Lion King stickers in a corner, a Balinese wooden angel in a pink sheath dress that hangs from the ceiling, missing one arm, standing guard over the room. Promising protection and pleasant dreams.

Sliding mirrored closet doors. Open them and sink your face into layers of heavy tweed, seersucker. Silk ties, mothballs. White buckskin shoes. The old cameras that you keep saying you’re going to take in to Samy’s and get fixed up. Leica, Nikon, Minolta, Hasselblad. On the desk, dozens of rolls of film. I wonder whether it’s expired. My father’s stationery, business cards, customized envelopes printed with his name and return address.

He is gone.
He is gone and we cannot bring ourselves to begin cleaning away the traces of him.

His ashes are sitting in a priority mail box on the dining room table.

The accident: it was as if I had always known it would come. It was almost a sick sort of relief that now it had happened and I didn’t have to worry about whether it would happen anymore. Seventeen, in the middle of my senior year at boarding school across the country. I was sitting in a windowsill looking out at the snow and suddenly my heart dropped out of my body.

It was February. Bleak white. I was wearing a men’s Ralph Lauren sweater Daddy bought for me in Boston. Several sizes too big. I held the
cell phone to my ear and shrank inside the sweater and everything else fell away and I didn’t know how I would survive when this thing had happened. *Daddy had an accident.* Fell on the driveway and split his head open.

They flew me back to California where I sat in hot cars and cold hospitals and waited and waited and watched and held my breath.

At Cedars Sinai we had to put on masks and gowns and booties just to enter the room he was in. As if a brain injury was contagious. Later I realized it was because we might have infected him with germs from the outside world. Everything so cold and the doctor spoke without emotion. I just wanted to hug my dad but they said I couldn’t touch him. He woke from time to time, eyes rolling back in his swollen head. Bruised and cracked and stitched back up. He mumbled little things, kept talking about oatmeal. His favorite breakfast. “A special treat,” he called it, though he had it every morning with blueberries and fresh-squeezed orange juice.

I hated him for falling, for breaking himself, for breaking our lives. I hated the heaviness. How I couldn’t find the words, or they were too sharp, coming out like plastic edges of board game pieces I had choked on now pressing their corners into my throat. The dull ache and sinking. That is what was there, no matter what other lightness lifted me.

*I am unfinished.*

*How can this happen before I am finished?*

My mother says he’s in the birds. She sees him in each red tailed hawk, each crow, each buzzard. Calls his name through the canyons. Yesterday he was a blue jay, fluttering through dry brush like a heartbeat. Today, a bald eagle that soared above my mother on her hike. Following her. Gliding on pockets of air. *It was him,* she says. *I know it.*

Open the front door and stare at the spot where the grass is brown.
and dead from his wooden wheelchair ramp, the one your brother built five years ago, the one your mother broke into pieces the day after he died. The day you and your mother held each other in bed for hours and hours. Unable to sleep. Drifting in and out of consciousness. The image of his body—that shell of him—hard and cold and sunken and gaping on a white hospital bed—seared into the space behind your eyes. It haunted you for months.

You are trying to hold onto the pieces of the life you had. The red playhouse Daddy built for you in the backyard. The lemon trees. The trampoline. The memory of a garden, of dogs and play dates and rising when it was still dark outside to practice violin with your father. The way he squeezed your hand when he picked you up from school, and called it your paw. *Hold my paw*, he’d say.

I see the ocean from above, as a hawk would. Warm wind blowing leaves into water. A tangle of cactus growing wild on the hillside. My father’s hands, the way they could fold mine up in them. His blue eyes burning. The sky stretching out above me, strung with telephone wires.

I hope he is in the birds.
You listen to a harbor being built.

The ocean strangled
to a swimming pool,

blueprints collapsing.

I know an image shifts
with tongue swell,

distorting love
to a counterfeit shipwreck.
PLASTIC SONNET 26

Ghost-dim
we’ve already said
how these visions are warm milk
to my child-throat

a limited nutritional value

you say this means unreal
though what is real is not
always felt on the tongue

let me keep the soft people
on my playlist
these sweet visions

until they move only dust

let me keep
these hauntings
rhythmic
dave wrote poems with his dick, he bought me
a book of poems by jim morrison,
who would also write poems with his dick
and even called himself the lizard king.
dave wanted to be like that, but he went
to college and studied with a poet,
a real professional poet who wrote
a whole book about the poetic line.
now dave’s lines are fucked, not in a good way,
and he sells real estate outside boston.
HITS

grandits studied psychology so I
told him everything, we all did, he kept
tabs on everyone, he knew exactly
what points to hit when he was mad at you,
sometimes we’d huddle outside in the cold
while they smoked and wrestled, he’d always shake
your hand after, sometimes they’d say fucked up
shit to each other, mostly he’d sit there
listening like a monk, unless you were
a girl, then he’d just push you to the ground.
Some tasks get inherited, passed down like a package at an office, and I’ve become the *de facto* mail girl: with no one else left, at least not in the immediate “nuclear” sense (though my Aunt Joanne would have a coronary if she heard me say so), my role as *heir apparent* to a whole world of unpleasantness keeps getting clearer. I’ve had to comb my father’s phone list for well-wishers and spend hours speculating the resale value of old toys, days meeting with real estate agents about market appraisal for our now-gutted house. I’ve had to fly to the Pacific to process and bury a body. In the midst of it all, my eulogy’s ended up having the color and coherence of an afterthought – I drafted it on the plane back to Seattle and, to tell the truth, it’s all television fantasy, the same run of quirks and praise that always passes for a meaningful epitaph. Beyond the complications from septicemia, it could be about anyone. I call him “Daddy,” even, and talk about his twin loves, French cooking and golf, “neither of which he will ever be able to enjoy again” and neither of which, I suspect, he enjoyed as anything but busywork while he was alive. For a eulogy, it’s awfully elegiac, which seems a poor sendoff for anyone with a life worth mourning.

To my mind, the trick to a memorable farewell speech is a little humor and sarcasm. But Dad was an army vet, Vietnam even, and thus not much for being funny or ironic (or, at least, not enough to break out any black asides). Even more, though, the eulogy depresses me for reasons other than its cause, which is doubly depressing, and I feel I’d be remiss if I didn’t write something else down – a real story to tell people at the wake when they start to understand, listening to me wander on about pheasant-hunting and vacations in Aruba, that I’ve been describing someone else entirely.

In 1973, after a rare father-daughter day of ice skating and city food, our
bus overturned in Seattle when a dented, shark grey limousine of prom dates swerved first around, then into the bus’s rear tires, fishtailing into a fulcrum that made the whole wobbly hunk of metal shiver and flip just shy of the Sound. My dad, sitting against the window, hopped up just enough to avoid breaking his neck, but still cracked apart his jaw against the frame and started drooling blood onto my powder-blue pinafore. He clutched me against his chest and I flopped around until, mid-skid, I fainted. When I awoke, both of us were strapped to gurneys and flying downtown in an ambulance. The van smelled like sugar and ammonia and the orderlies kept insisting to me – I was just nine-years-old, but I was the only one conscious – that there weren’t any casualties. No one in her right mind could have believed them.

At the hospital, girls in scrubs kept carting crew-cut, bloody boys in tuxedos past me in the lobby. I counted at least six and tried to sit up in my gurney to get a better look, but I couldn’t, and so couldn’t see their faces. Our doctor was a tall, pale, Eastern European man with a curly mustache and a brown velvet vest under his white coat. He muttered about “nightmare drivers” in a sweaty Brooklyn accent as he wired my dad’s mouth shut and his sunken eyes seemed to follow my twitches without paying them much mind. My arm was bent out, broken, so he smiled with his whole face, a painful smile, and set it in a wet cast. He offered me a coin-sized lollipop on a looped stick. I could feel the hairs of my arm soak and harden in the excess plaster, already starting to itch as he cradled me into a sling.

Dad tried out some soft moans, then must have stopped and motioned for a piece of paper like someone begging for a check. The hospital staff had dressed him in a papery pink gown and, as he hovered into sight, he looked womanly and oddly antiseptic. I looked up at the
stubble patching his face and head – even as a civilian, he maintained a military buzz – and cringed; he looked me over for a few seconds, enough time to take something important in, and started crying. I swallowed. I was losing lots of blood, mostly from my head; later, I’d find out it was split open on some loose glass, tearing apart the space between my left temple, eye socket, and scalp. But, as it turned out, this wasn’t the reason he, a thirty-eight-year-old steelworker with a bullet already in his leg, started bawling. After all, I was alive. Rather, it was that he couldn’t call my mom and tell her we were alive and had almost died. “Someone call her,” he scribbled into the paper. He didn’t realize that Mom’s information had already been fished from his wallet in the ambulance – that it was she who let them wire him up and fix him in the first place.

When my ex-husband Simon met me in college, he knew my scar, a sand-colored seam that made me look perpetually worried, as a war wound from a punk rock concert; my arm just suffered a nervous condition. Dad’s sidelong jawline became an onsite slap from a girder. The accident lodged in both of us like a gallstone, like time served: the event happened, but we resisted analysis. After the initial run of reporters, doctors, and policemen, we ceased discussing it at all, at least not between us. I myself wouldn’t mention it again until college, when my sophomore roommate, a perpetually track-jacketed Indian economics major named Shashi from the Chicago suburbs, admitted that she hadn’t been to her parent city since getting carjacked at the age of ten. We traded shots of whiskey over our shared victimhood and smoked a pack of clove cigarettes; I glazed over as she talked about post-traumatic stress, therapy, and resolving her issues with men or pedestrians or whomever. I said my dad saved me and she gave me a meaningful nod, said hers had done the same. He’d “cooperated,”
which was “all he could do,” and I almost told her that therapy must have made her oblivious about the jacking, that she mistook sanity for heroism. But she was nice enough and kept passing me her bottle. I wanted to relate.

“We almost died, Jaclyn, but we’re alive,” she said, measured, proclaiming our existence like a word in a spelling bee. She was drunk and it was snowing, so we burned jasmine incense, lit votives, and listened to side A of Bruce Springsteen’s *Nebraska* on repeat. When I said that most folks on earth could likely say the same as us, Shashi just laughed. I laughed, too, and spent the next morning throwing up.

During that winter break I visited my only living grandparent at the time, my maternal Grandma Eleanor, and so my memories of that Christmas center around her Anacortes homestead rather than my folks’: her maize-yellow rugs with fringed brown tartan curtains; the nest of pale red hair she’d accumulated like a natural, straw-like bob to offset her pitted cheeks and frown lines; her heavy Irish diet of corned meats, fried hash, cabbage, and potatoes; and her melodic, vague advice about the journalism grad student I was dating and would eventually marry, which revolved around withholding sex and acting like a pedestal now so that I could be placed on one later. (She was full of absurd counsel like this, often gleaned from her life with Grandpa Zachary, though not always – for example, she once declared that, for a woman and especially a mother, four years of biology and one semester of word processing would amount to the same income. This ended up a major fight, our only one, with me storming to the guest room and her cooking a pancake supper in apology.) My parents had decided to vacation in Spain that year and, as they paid my tuition and board in full that October, they encouraged me to stay on the mainland to catch up with my studies and elders. “You should cherish both,” Dad
insisted, intoning over the phone in a prayer voice. “Cherish them while they’re still around.”

Mom and Dad wrapped boxes of hair curlers, socks, and sweaters in brown paper and sent them ahead to Eleanor, who tucked them in her bedroom closet behind a bin of shoes until Christmas, when they were opened over scrambled eggs and a pot of honeyed coffee. But in spirit, I was alone with a maid for three weeks, left to quietly pine over Simon (who, being a few years older and rootless, had stayed in Iowa City to string for the local paper) and read about pharmacokinetic events that dissolved chemicals into bloodstreams, tissues, endocrinal processes. I suspect my parents understood Grandma’s powers of distraction or, at least, ritual – like any Irish Catholic worth her palms, you could set a watch to her churchgoing, eating, and television habits, most of which appeared to revolve around *M*A*S*H* reruns and the variety of special masses that stacked up at year’s end – and she exuded a metronomic presence, a forcefield of routine. I didn’t grasp her absence until the bus ride back to catch my plane in Seattle, when I daydreamed I was returning from a cozy, coastal bed-and-breakfast. It was strange, I thought, that a person could spend that much time with someone related to her and not absorb that relation on some essential level. I told myself she was simply too old and self-contained for me to understand.

I spent the early months of my next semester chewing ice cubes and leaf lettuce, having decided that growing into myself – developing a modest figure that was destined to droop – was a reversible process and, more than that, one worth reversing. Some of the more Catholic Chicago transplants on my floor had, perhaps due to coke and cattiness, become fascinated with the mod revival trickling over from the U.K. and started taping
old magazine spreads of Twiggy, as well as any number of anonymous, raccoon-eyed punk girls and hippie waifs sutured from their parents’ yellowing *Times* and *Saturday Evening Posts*, to their dorm walls as a hex against the Fawcetts and Locklears of the world. Some of the hipper girls became raccoon-eyed and nihilistic themselves, discussing Dick Hebdige, post-ERA feminism, the cynicism of nostalgia, kitsch, and subculture as a source of self-definition, but mostly they just self-examined themselves and the rest of us into a kind of physio-academic oblivion. Physical addition, both in terms of height and figure, felt impossible and even unwelcome, so it made more sense to subtract oneself into a form that was more tolerable.

Shashi, for her part, didn’t understand the impulse. “You’re blooming into a bud,” she said, but she was already thin and built that way — as tiny as a twelve-year-old, likely even now in her mid-forties. She ate hamburgers in the dining hall, practiced yoga with a thick blanket on our tile floor, graphed utility charts, and stared through the rest of us like we had already withered away. My silent wilt played against the only meaningful conversation we’d ever really had, and she began to spend evenings at the library.

As for me, I felt and acted pious, an errant Catholic inventing my own Lent. I sometimes wandered off campus to a strip of restaurants downtown to remind myself what I was giving up and inhale the scents, pretending I had just walked out of one with a full stomach. To feed on air seemed monastic, not the natural function of an eating disorder. It was the casting of a spell, an appeal to some inspecific god of youth. And, looking back, that’s the head-scratcher: as a group, our short-lived anorexic fit was more philosophical than competitive and, like most philosophies, more interesting than sustainable. To compare the arrowheads of our shoulder blades or spines or breasts or biceps was a *faux pas*, an insult to our collective

*Martin* 101
intelligence, and we never prized physical decline per se — after one of the
girls on our floor, a Nordic-type stick figure named Constance, collapsed
in the bathroom and ended up in an emergency room (and, later, a psych
ward), the rest of us scattered and started eating chicken tenders in the
dining hall again. Constance had, or had developed, an actual problem.
By comparison, we were the worst kind of fakers.

In late March 1983, I found a letter from Dad in my mail-drop. It read
like a telegram without the STOPs, but they were implied, and I inserted
them as I went:

Jaclyn STOP Your Mom is very, very sick STOP Sick enough
to have a hard time writing letters herself STOP She began her
treatments Friday afternoon STOP You should return home
ASAP STOP Call me collect when you receive this and we will
arrange a plane ticket STOP Dad STOP

“STOP,” I said aloud. The letter, black ballpoint on cheap pad newsprint,
was thin and damp from sweat. I crumpled it into a ball and shoved it in
the pocket of my pea coat, a hand-me-down from the now-condemned.
My throat closed with a violence usually reserved for rejection and I
understood why they had gone to Spain. “You asshole,” I said. “STOP
STOP STOP STOP STOP STOP.

***

But talking about the events surrounding Mom’s death to a funeral par-
lor rife with her friends, most pushing seventy or eighty, seems like the
wrong key and rhythm for this particular eggshell walk: lazy, interminable patches of dinner table silence in lieu of small talk; polyps the size and consistency, according to the surgeon, of caviar; a chemically shredded woman in a bicycle-spoked wheelchair; a man in his late forties kicking a coffin as it enters the ground, the graveyard stinking of manure and rainwater; the sister of the deceased wailing at no one in particular; a pale, dry-eyed daughter like a silhouette in a spiderweb, her high heels slipping into the mud and wedding her in place. Little of this is funny or sarcastic or even necessarily about Dad, which is why none of it makes the eulogy “cut.” It’s history, extended and pointless obituary.

So, instead, a story about Dad –

“You have no sense of romance,” Simon told me when he announced our separation in 1994, which felt a bit romantic on its own. The call came late from the New York Times’s Paris bureau, the time zone adjusted for my lunch break. I was working part-time at a local florist’s while our six-year-old, Wesley, was in school and Simon was overseas – after paying graduate dues in Iowa, working years of paste-up and photography for the nearby Port-Au-Prince Post-Dispatch, and freelancing when possible for the Associated Press and the Tribune, he got the Times to deposit him in Romania in 1991 and then Bosnia in June 1994. This was all before the States got involved, and he explained the political situation in Bosnia to me once before he left; when I asked why America should help, should act like the world’s police force, he called the question “absurd” and claimed he’d already explained. I said he hadn’t, that he didn’t understand the difference between the personal and the universal. It was a problem of his.

“There are women out there who aren’t so…” He paused on the line and I sipped a Coke. I wanted to feel upset, but I just felt tense, like I
was in an E.R., waiting. “Content. And cynical.”

“And you’ve met one, right?” I said. “Jean Seberg! The New York Herald-Tribune!”

He sighed with what appeared to be both frustration and admission. “Things are really awful over here. I mean, don’t you care? It’s like the end of the world. It feels like the end of the world.”

“You have a son,” I said. This seemed like an important point to make, though I didn’t want it to be the cure-all. I didn’t want that kind of marriage.

“We can discuss him later. This is just the declaration.”

“Well, I hope you get shot,” I said, and hung up the phone.

“That’s a good line,” Dad told me when, later that day, I got home and gave him the story. It was late summer and he’d been traveling around the country, visiting friends and extended family like he was on some kind of tour – a “tour of duty,” he called it, though it never came out that funny. After eight years of keeping on in my mom’s wake, working every day and devoting time to the church and visiting Simon and me once a year, retirement seemed to remind him he was alone, so he got in a car with his pre-pension savings and visited any and all surviving in-laws, high school friends, army friends. He’d planned his arrival in Port-Au-Prince to coincide with the Ice Capades, which had been purchased by Dorothy Hamill that past year; we planned to take Wesley while it was still around, convinced that it would be bankrupt within a year. The Ice Capades were slowly being replaced by Holidays On Ice, Stars On Ice, Disney On Ice, and even the best reviews of Hamill’s skating career couldn’t save them.

“It’s the end of the world,’ he says,” Dad said. His baldness was involuntary now, his forehead was well into an old-man fold, and his beard
had frosted over the past year, but he was still hulking and tan and every
time he talked, he sounded like he was reporting something. “One day,
he’ll learn that it’s always the end of the world.”

“He said I had no sense of romance,” I said. “He called me
‘cynical.’”

Dad smiled joylessly. “Let me tell you a story,” he said. I stared
at him, trying to look as nonplussed as possible, but he just pulled at the
collar of his brown and yellow shirt – one he’d owned since I was in high
school – and straightened it. “A couple of days ago, I was in North Carolina
visiting your Aunt Joanne, shooting the shit, and she started asking me
about the bus crash. Do you remember the bus crash, when you were ten?”

“Nine,” I said, and switched on – started babbling about the event
itself, the bloody teenagers, the Czech doctor with the accent, the itchy
cast. “I broke my arm and there was blood,” I said. “In my eyes. And there
was you, in this pink number, crying.”

“Right,” he said, like I’d fed him lines in a vaudeville routine.
“And then your Mom came and picked us up from the hospital that
evening.”

His hands were moving between a praying grasp and quick, one-
handed gestures – pinched “A-OKs” and pointing – and he seemed to be
enjoying himself, talking about the crash as though it was an anecdote
honored at neighborhood tea hours. It made me anxious. A shaft of white
light poured through my kitchen window, picking out dust in the air, and
I got up to shuffle the curtains around.

“I don’t remember that part,” I said.

“Joanne was asking me about it,” he said again. “She said, ‘That
must have been some drive home.’ That’s what she cared about, I guess,
the drive home. It had always bothered her, made her curious, what that
drive home must have been like. Apparently, she already had an inkling about the crash, didn’t think there was much to say.”

“Oh yeah?” I felt curious, as well, which was likely the point. Dad had a manipulative streak in him, the type that helped him tell a good story when needed. “So what did you tell her?”

“I told her it was odd,” he said. “If she really wanted to know, it was good she wasn’t asking about the crash itself, because it’s long gone – I was in shock for a good while that day. All I could remember, I said, was what you said on the car ride home. I remembered that perfectly.”

He chuckled and leaned back in his chair, resting his fingers on the edge of the table. I was still at the window, my hands on the curtains. I pulled them in until the kitchen felt cool and the dust disappeared. Dad didn’t wait for me to prompt him.

“I said your mom was crying,” he said. “And I was mute on account of the wires on my jaw and the radio was playing ‘Earth Angel,’ which just made your mom tear up more. The mood in that car was plain awful – it was like cheating death just did not make any difference, because it made your mom remember death was around, remember her dad and grandparents and my time in the war and all that. She just sat there, remembering, steering a Buick in her black dress with her black bag, her hair pulled up in the back like she’d expected a funeral.

“Well, at some point, another car side-swiped us on the highway, nearly finished the job, and your mom started screaming obscenities!” His hand hit his forehead as though he was popping a blood packet in a play. “‘Motherfucker! Bastard!’ I’m surprised you don’t remember it, because it was unusual for her, a first and last, Alpha and Omega.”

He sipped at a glass of milk he’d been nursing since I arrived home, smiling to himself. “And then you! You turned to her and said –
and I quote – ‘Goddamn it, Mom, quit sobbing! We’re alive!’”

He laughed, this time from the gut, an animal roar of a laugh. “And that’s when I smacked you upside the head, the side without stitches, and you started crying,” he said, still laughing. I laughed, too, like he’d just delivered a punchline, and collapsed onto his head from behind. We shook against each other in hysterics, with the curtains drawn, laughing until we couldn’t breathe – horribly, and for a long time.
Three boys on a fjord beach pull at a house-high mound of cargo crates and diseased birch, whole trees, half trees, pieces. Three small boys pull together at a crate lid in the middle bottom of the mound. I guess I sense the mound will not collapse or drop a tree, as I remain up the slope in a field of blown blood-brown barley-like grasses and purple and butter-white flowers the size of the tip of a child’s tongue.

Three sons of strangers drag a crate lid from the mound. One mounts it in the shallows. Two attempt to push him out to sea. Magellan dies on Mactan. Cook on Hawai‘i, felled by a shark-toothed club. The boy aboard has a gnarled stick of birch for an oar. Any change in the wind and one can smell the ammoniac-acetic odor of the mound from where I sit and write. One boy floats one man’s length out to sea. I’m getting up. Let no one say poetry saves no lives.

I remain long after a guardian in green bikini in the arctic wind and sun of nightless days arrives to take the boys away. The raft became then very beautiful, light-shot, floating alone, trapdoor in the sea. Certain religions allow no figurativity, only geometry.
The bulbs on my back grew regardless of precaution. The dermatologist asks about my habits: How much chocolate do I eat? How much grease? Am I taking anabolic steroids? I am thirteen, and I am afraid of anything that might puncture my body, anything that could bruise or burn or maim it. But one summer your parents played a trick on me, and I applied coco butter to my skin instead of sunblock. I spent all day in the water, then I two weeks in bed. My skin bubbled and broke and oozed. I stuck to the bed sheets. When I was all new skin, pink and tender, I figured myself cured. But the old acne soon followed. It was, according to the dermatologist, the pH of my skin. Or that I was lying to him about what I ate. Or puberty. Or stress. Or the aluminum flakes they put in deodorant to keep men from sweating. My theory was that I didn’t sweat enough, that the dirt and oil on my skin tunneled through my pores, internalized and festered until I discovered the affliction as growths, red and violent. I was given soaps and salves, pills and pieces of looped steel. I was told not to pick, but how could I not? I obsessed over my body, tortured every inch of skin. Beyond the spots of blood and oil on my shirts where bloomed a pimple, my problem was invisible unless I stood naked, unless one were standing close enough to detect a bouquet of creams and chemicals. No longer so marked, I still examine my pores in the mirror, flinch when I press a handful of moisturizer to my face. Someday, I hope, my skin will yield to the touch. Until then I skim my surface for flaws and imperfections, something to cut out or squeeze. Rarely do my sentries fail.
089. Muk

“Thickly covered in a filthy, vile sludge. It is so toxic, even its footprints contain poison.” – Pokémon Red

Everything between us is so toxic that my mother sends me to Catholic school. She dresses me in business clothes and cuts my hair short. I wear Hush Puppies and learn how to knot a tie. I step into a lawyer’s van for the first day of carpool and know that I am an impostor, that I have traded one kind of poison for another. I pull all day at the starched collar of my new shirt, which jabs sharply at my neck. When I take it off at home, I learn that garment manufacturers put pins in the collars so their shirts won’t look rumpled in the box. The pin gives me an invisible tattoo. It heals quickly, but my new way of living always reminds me of my place. The lawyer behind the wheel agrees with the radio that auto unions are sucking our city dry. A classmate asks me what it is like, being raised by a single parent in a state of sin. Another wonders where my father lives and what he does, if he’s a deadbeat. They’re curious about my mother and her factory, the job she performs on the assembly line, the people she knows, the fact that one day she will be replaced by a machine. Every day there is a new question, unless my mother is driving. On those days, she buys us all McDonald’s. We are quiet then, sated by salt and fat. But it’s not all bad. In homeroom, I meet the first person my age I can identify as gay. He never says it, never says, “My name is X, and I am gay.” Or maybe he did and I wasn’t there. But he is beyond such gestures. He has an aura about him and everybody respects his decision, which is how
our priests referred to orientation. I admire him for knowing what he is so early and for being so cool about it. It will be years before I know myself, and I will struggle with that knowledge. Until then I think I missed something by going to a new school, but really the only thing I missed was you.
Of course, the whole school was upset about what happened to me, each person for his or her own reasons. My instructors were pretending publicly that the entire thing had never happened. They had begun to grade me on an absurd curve, handing out As for all the assignments I never wrote and assuming I would snap out of it by the end of the semester, a week away. (Each essay read “tktktktktktk” ad infinitum, until I had taken up the required three or four pages.) The editor-in-chief of the school paper, a pretty and ambitious woman, was at her wits’ end working to get an interview with me, frantically attempting twice every method from empathetic indignation to a seduction. The Dean of Students, a too-thin, too-young administrator in a cheap suit, had tried to have a heart-to-heart about it all but was not successful in broaching my silence. I sat still on his couch and breathed inwardly, letting Dean Kearsey’s babble wash over my head. It was a meditation. I was almost sad when it ended. The Chief of Campus Safety was staying away on the orders of the school’s lawyer.

Given the quiet panic with which the institution reacted to my continued presence, I was not surprised when Chancellor Diggs, shrewd behind his joviality, called me into the office with the wood panels, where an administrative assistant brought me water in a paper cup. Nor did it entirely shock me when the Chancellor pawed at my shoulder with his giant hand and opened up about how hard it was: “You and I,” he told me, pointing at my delicate features then at the blunt brown expanse of his own forehead, “are too damn clever for certain people.” The Chancellor paused and stared intently out a window at a group of white kids playing with a frisbee. “It makes them jealous.”

I didn’t know then that anybody would be jealous of me, certainly not the version of myself that sat in that office. The Chancellor’s words buzzed and buzzed and made my ears burn.
I stood up while the big faker was mid-sentence. “You’re right,” I said. “But I’ve got to go to class. You’re right.” That seemed to be enough for Diggs, who nodded.

“I know it, my man,” he said.

I endured one last hearty clap, this one on my back, without even flinching, and then I was free. I dashed back out into the halls of the Administrative Building, where I kept on dashing, letting my eyes rest on nobody and nothing.

I remember that back then I believed my fellow students were of two types. They either knew nothing, not being important enough to stay informed regarding such matters, or they were the involved ones who frequented the student centers. One of the latter had recorded the whole thing on his phone as the officers electrified me over and over, and the rest huddled around laptops watching the video on repeat and whispering: “Oh my God!”

Before the incident, which to this day I recall with both terror and a certain vagueness, a series of screams and tongue-biting and blood, I had been well-liked by the ones in the student centers, especially the Haitian American Student Union and certain sympathetic members of the Queer Student Center. Indeed, it was after some long talks in the Q that I had decided to take my first course in something other than the sciences: Asian-American Women and Gender with Professor Fulan, who later became my adviser. I am neither Asian nor a woman, but something about the frank discussions in that classroom, many of them with people I knew from the Q, felt like a defense of my truest self. (It was around this time that I began to hide my transcript from my grandmother, who was a little old-fashioned.)

So I had taken many courses with the members of the Queer Stu-
dent Center before I decided to avoid my old classmates, the entire Ad-
ministrative Building, and anybody who might ask me how I felt. To fill
my time, I usually stayed indoors with my grandmother, speaking with her
in French, which she insisted on instead of Kreyòl and which I had, every
evening and weekend throughout my undergraduate career, helped teach
in one of Daltona University’s Language Institutes. Fredeline and I would
read together, when we were not talking, as Fredeline did not own a televi-
sion. She would cook for me, and I would put her to bed every night, tuck-
ing her under the soft quilt in her yellow room, which always smelled—as
she did—gently sweet.

She had not manifested an interest in my tragic misadventure and
was, if such a thing were possible, even more wary of discussing the is-
sue than I. She spoke on my behalf over the phone to aunts and uncles
and cousins, and as I would, pretended not to hear their questions. One
aunt, a woman who had lived in Brooklyn during the time of Abner Loui-
ma (having since been priced out by the Jews and the fashionable young
people), was not so easily deterred. Tantin Mahalia asked in Kreyòl, and
then French. “Mais qu’est-ce qu’ils lui ont fait?!” Finally, and forcibly, she
switched to English, yelling into the phone about plunger handles, so Fre-
deline, her lip quivering, hung up.

I was present throughout the conversation—although in her
defense Mahalia could not have known—contemplating my next move
in our third warri game of that rainy day, and I heard my aunt’s yelling
through the phone’s speakers. When it was all over I crossed the room
to my grandmother, patted her on the shoulder, and told her in very few
words that truly, I had not been sodomized, and that it was her turn. I
found this worked best, distracting her before she could ask me yet again if
I could not try for the sake of my soul to have lunch with a young woman
she knew from church.

Of course, one can’t be sure. I have retained so little of the day that it’s perfectly possible those men bullied me and I just don’t know it. But that’s not the point. The point in those days was always Fredeline. The movement in her lip upset me even more than the idea of being pinned down by dough-faced men in uniform, and I knew that I could calm her, guide her through this catastrophe. I wanted to honor what seemed to me our mutually agreed-upon position: Never talk about the things that happen.

I have mentioned that Fredeline was old-fashioned. Indeed, she was by that time aware—I had received a prestigious award from the Women’s Studies Department the month before and had felt I must disclose—that I occasionally wrote on the topic of homosexuality. She had not taken this revelation well, had even, like the more awful among my French students, accused me of being a vodou practitioner! (She was an active member of the Assemblées de Dieu herself, and it made her unusually intolerant of other religious practices.) I want to believe, you see, that Fredeline hung up on Mahalia because she could not bear to think of my being violated, but it’s just as likely she was upset by the idea of any sexual contact between me and another man, regardless of that paltry matter of consent. It’s been a long time, but I still feel keenly the unfairness of such a sweet woman being so quick to anger regarding our only sticking point.

As for school, well, I did all right in school despite my newfound inability to turn in anything but tktttktttktktkt—more than all right, as I had always done, making up for my lack of homework with what was for me a surfeit of in-class participation. The departments had once fought for me
as if I were a prize, and those two that had kept me, Women’s Studies and Computer Science, were appropriately grateful for my ability to explain intersectionality to my fellow students (who ought to have taken the pre-requisites but did not) in a manner they found accessible, along with my firm grasp of and enthusiasm for Scheme.

I had my job teaching French and a separate internship, both within the same building—the internship, writing code for one of the startups in the Capital Center was my internship, paid much better. James Ungerve, the Director of the Capital Center, had taken a special interest in me early on, noting something just a little serious in my demeanor that he thought might be malleable. He intuited that I was capable of becoming a harder worker than the others, and by finessing his connections, Ungerve had performed the singular feat of getting me another and rather more exclusive internship for the summer after my graduation—something that might become a career if I played my cards right.

I was blindsided when Ungerve mentioned to me, casually, on the last day of classes, that he and Professor Fulan had spoken about the tktktktktktktktk. I hadn’t even been aware they knew each other.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” Ungerve said. “These people don’t deserve you. Just pass. Just take your exams, get up at Convocation and give a little speech about how much you like it here, go work your internship, and maybe in a few years you could even go for a PhD. You’re good enough. A lot of disadvantaged students in computing fields could use a mentor.”

Ungerve let it sink in. He was an unabashed corporatist, an individual whose paycheck was justified by his ability to help the university get a stake in the right company before said company had technically even formed. He believed quite frankly that it was my duty to evangelize startup culture throughout the homes of Little Haiti, even the ones as broken
as my own, just in case there were more young men like myself to be found there. His views were in their own context admirable. And so I let him say whatever he wanted to me that day but I did not hate him at all. I tried to use my eyes to transmit whatever it was he most wanted to hear directly into his brain: That is not panic on my face, Sir, because it could not be, ever. Ungerve grasped my fingers tight, squeezing my joints almost violently with his handshake before letting me get back to work. I was helping a particularly petulant engineer assemble his robot that day; funny enough, I forget what the robot was supposed to do.

My talk with Professor Fulan went worse, or possibly better. She called me into her office to clear up a misunderstanding over something that had never happened before at Daltona: I had the highest grades within the College of Liberal Arts, as well as within the College of Science and Math. After the main graduation ceremony, the two different schools usually had two different, smaller Convocations across campus from each other. I had been invited to speak at both, but Fredeline had grown too fat and too acclimated to the mild Mid-Atlantic weather to be much good at running between places, even to see me honored twice. I had to pick just one ceremony then.

Professor Fulan, who knew that my allegiance to her field, to the social sciences in general, was real, and who believed incorrectly that I drew no joy at all from any work done with machines, assumed I would speak to the other members of her college. She had even asked the Dean for the privilege of introducing me, had all but forgotten the troubling line of tktktktktktk where each end-of-semester assignment should have been. She was wounded indeed when I revealed that I would give my speech to Vishniac
the computer scientists and mathematicians instead.

“Why Jean?” she asked. “I know you’d rather be talking to us.”

“Not really,” I said, and I grabbed this much older woman’s hands, held them, didn’t speak a word. Professor Fulan started, but then she shrugged, and gave my knuckles a squeeze in return.

She dropped her guard, her face loosened in some indescribable way, and she told me, “I wish you were leaving under better circumstances.”

“I don’t care. It’s fine.” I smiled at her, a smile of appeal. “People keep expecting me to care, you know? I do care, but it’s not easy like that.”

“And what, Jean? You’re not bothered? I don’t think that’s possible.”

“I am. I’m bothered,” I said. My eyes had gone wide with the smile still pasted onto my face, and Professor Fulan seemed to find the effect alarming. I gripped her hands tighter.

“It’s not like you can fix it,” I said. “You think you can go chat up the Chancellor and make life fair? I’m just trying to keep my head down.”

My face was hot and wet. By way of apology for my outburst, I bowed a little, bringing my professor’s hands to my lips and kissing the fingers lightly, a supplicant. I’m sure I put her in an impossible position, one only slightly mitigated by the open secret of my actual romantic proclivities. How do you comfort a student when he is distressed? She might have been sued. To her credit, she put the legalities out of mind, placing her hand on the back of my head and stroking the place where my neck met my hairline. I focused on the nearest object to my left eye, her ring, a Beijing enamel piece she’d worn every day for the three years I’d known her.

The main Convocation took place out front of the campus on a hot day,
and I sweltered in my black robe at the very front of the crowd. A parade of men for whom I cared nothing walked across the stage in garb far more ridiculous than my own: the Chairman of the Board of Directors, the President, the Provost, and the Deans of every school in reds and purples and blues, with accents in white and yellow, pins and medals in green and black and all other colors.

Fredeline was comfortably installed in a chair in the shade, enjoying some tablet cocoye she’d purchased at People’s Tropical on Ritchie Street. She’d braided her hair for the occasion, and it looked perfect. At the same time I was worried about her dress, which, while it was as dignified as Fredeline preferred (a pastel purple and entirely closed over the stomach), still somehow resembled something from a textbook about the islands, a karabela, in a way that left me feeling glaringly ethnic, overformal, embarrassed.

“I’m not getting married,” I’d quipped when she first stepped out into the kitchen, but she glared at me and boxed my ears. In retrospect, mentioning marriage at all was a mistake, given the source of our tension. She’d told me, “Je vais m’habiller comme je veux. C’est tout,” before muttering several profanities under her breath. I’d left her alone after that.

In any case, the ceremony itself really was almost as profoundly boring as a wedding. I was practically asleep by the time the Chancellor, from whom I had not heard once since our brief interlude in the swank office, came to the podium. I listened to Diggs’s speech, which was typical of Diggs: a basso profundo booming out of a series of buzzwords aligned into near-poetry with great care, then spiced with a few intentionally placed colloquialisms.

“All y’all know my main man, my good friend, Jean-Louis Rou-
main—

And at this, Diggs interrupted himself and looked straight at me. My stomach dropped all the way to the ground, as low as Fredeline’s bunions in her best orthopedic sandals.

“Did I say that right, man?”

I nodded. The crowd laughed. Diggs’s pronunciation had been exaggeratedly perfect.

“Well, don’t be shy, dude! Stand on up!”

I stood.

“This young man has a 4.0 GPA.”

A smattering of applause. Fredeline’s delicate clap.

“Not only that, but he speaks three languages! Haitian Creole, French, and English. Not only that, but he tutors his fellow students in French. Not only that, not only that! Not. Only. That. Not only that.” Diggs was really warming up, or perhaps he had forgotten the next line of his speech.

“This guy right here, he works at Daltona’s startup incubator, the Capital Center, writing code for TextUp Inc., a biotech company founded by his fellow students that’s going to revolutionize the way people do laboratory research. Revolutionize it!

“He’s a double major in computer science and women’s and gender studies, and did I mention that Daltona has the oldest Women’s Studies Department in the country? Everybody give a shout out to Women’s Studies!”

Screaming from a dozen or so of my classmates, and a pronounced, serious silence from Professor Fulan, who sat frowning on the left-hand side of the stage near the back, whose courses had been cancelled at an alarming rate for the past several years due to what the Chancellor’s Office
deemed her failure to attract enough students to the major.

“But not only that, not only that, not only that, not only that—Jean has won the Timothy Grenade Scholarship for Students of Caribbean Descent and the Antoinette Bellin Award for Excellence in Queer Studies.” (I did not have to look at my grandmother to know that she was hissing, sucking in her breath, but the Chancellor kept speaking as if Fre-deline didn’t matter.) “He won Governor O’Malley’s Award for STEM—he’s won a bunch of them. I don’t remember them all. He’s won just about every award there is, I think!

“But not only that, not only that, not only. Not only that. Jean-Louis is…” And in a stage whisper: “Modest.” Diggs waggled his eyebrows. “He’s modest folks!”

Laughter.

“So modest! He is! He’s a quiet kid!” Diggs put on a look of genuine shock.

“But not only that, I took him up into my office two weeks ago, and he didn’t say much of anything at all! I don’t even know what he’s going to say today!

“You’re going to tell them something good about us, right Jean?” Diggs asked, pleadingly, and the audience laughed some more. And on the side of the stage, Professor Fulan frowned more deeply.

“Of course you will! Okay, Jean, my man, get up here! But first, everybody give him the loudest round of applause you can!”

I floated forward. The applause sounded muted, and I wondered if I might not have had some sort of ear infection. When it died out, I was at the podium, and when the many watchers in their fold-out chairs began to look around and at each other, confused, I still did not speak. My tongue was lead.
“Well, what do you have to say?” Diggs was by my side elbowing me. The audience, feeling that they were in on the joke, tittered collectively.

“Nothing,” I told him. Or did I speak at all? Certainly I’m sure that I tried to say something, anything, to Diggs, but I may not have succeeded. It was true that I had prepared some remarks the night before, jotting down enough officialese to fill a minute or so. But my heart wasn’t in it for some reason, and my mouth was rebelling. My jaw was wired shut. My very teeth glued together. I still can’t explain this.

“I’m sure you have something Jean,” the good humor fading.

More wretched than I ever had felt in my life, I stared out at the crowd. There were something like seven thousand in attendance; Daltona was a large school. Fredeline was still there in the shade, under the awning, but she looked worried. I could not will myself to speak and would not have known what to do if my vocal cords had been working in the first place. Did I say that I jotted down my speech the night before? How silly of me, how untrue. I’d never prepared a thing. Instead, I’d stayed up for twelve hours in front of a computer screen, the circles under my eyes deepening, working hard to express my gratitude to the institution that had educated me for free and only beaten me savagely the once. But the only thing I’d come up with was tktktktktktKTKTKTKTKTKTKTKTKT. Next thing I knew I’d smelled Fredeline’s mais moulu cooking and it was time to get dressed.

So I stood at the podium patiently and waited for words to enter me while Diggs and the entire audience fidgeted. I leaned into the microphone and took a deep breath. I decided to start with acknowledgments. I would at least say something for Professor Fulan—possibly Ungerve, whom I knew loved to hear his name said aloud at these sorts of events. I
made my mouth round and small and prepared to speak the first word of an improvised speech: “Thanks.”

I’ll never know if I would have been able. I was interrupted before I could get it out, when a middle-aged man sitting with the anthropology majors, a returning student, yelled, “Is that you in the video going around?”

“Yes.” I spoke into the microphone, so that they could all hear, and “yes” felt better than “thanks” by miles.

A short teenage girl: “They tazed you for like an hour! You didn’t even do anything!”

“Jean,” Diggs said, as the students started to yell all at once, even strangers and the ones whom I had thought knew nothing of the incident.

“He didn’t even do anything.”

“They were punching him in the face!”

“He just didn’t want to show his ID!”

“You don’t even need ID in the library!”

“I heard them call him the n-word!”

Diggs began to speak. “I appreciate your input everybody, and I hear your concern, but today is a beautiful day. Beautiful beautiful. And I think that’s something, that’s something, that’s something, that’s something to be grateful for, that we can talk these things out here at Daltona, Daltona! Daltona University—”

And so on.

Campus Safety came running up from their posts at the entrance to the tent where Fredeline was worrying maniacally at her braids, and the officers stood by the gathered graduates, just stood until the students got nervous. “Daaaallltooooooooonnnnaaaa!” Diggs rumbled, once everybody else had stopped talking.
“Give him a hand, ladies and gentlemen!”

I walked stiffly off the stage and into Fredeline’s car. I did not attend the College of Science and Math’s Convocation, and I was not missed. During the ride home, Fredeline glared at me as only the elderly can, which I was aware, in some part of myself, was nothing more than I deserved. It was one thing to be the wrong sort of grandson in the privacy of our home, and another entirely to be the wrong sort of grandson in public. When we got out of the vehicle, she threw her shoe at me and called me a masisi, a faggot. I went inside to the kitchen, but she followed me. It was a slow chase, a weird dance that involved my trying to maneuver her toward the hallway. Finally, she loomed in the corner between me and the bathroom, framed by a harsh light, and I was able to bound past her and up the stairs. She was crying and taking lame swipes at my face with a wooden soup spoon, and then I wasn’t there. She must have felt so dejected.

I went into my room and shut the door, then locked it. Ignoring Fredeline’s huffs as she climbed the stairs, then her frantic pounding when she reached my entryway, I rolled my robe into a ball, threw it out a window—my aim perfect—and watched the lump of cheap material sail through the air into a dumpster in the courtyard of my grandmother’s landlord. Then I went to my closet and stroked the tailored suit inside with the very tips of my fingers. My internship would begin that next Monday, and in the meantime, I felt I had earned some rest. I waited for Fredeline to wear herself out, and when I heard her run away wailing, then I slept for a spell.
There was a blue door,
it opened. Breath

swarmed in, brought order. Night
flowered stars, a field of scattered arrhythrias. Love,

you were a knot, a lamb,
a cloud in a pelvic crib. And pain,

a clutch of it,
entered the factory of endings.
Glacier

Intelligent god for whom diminishment
is revelation my glacier
slides towards fever

I open the cabinet
a sun scrap, a small stream

My mother and father,
if it were asked, would ache
their bodies into capacity: carry
me and my brothers, our stories
into the rising era of sea

Table of blue light Provisional, milky
THE WOODS

Thick orange light beat at the window. When I went to look, I saw the woods behind my house were burning. The flames had spread to the edge of my property, where a wide concrete drainage ditch separated the neighborhood from the wilderness. The treeline was backlit and crackling. There was nothing to be done.

I reached for my phone on the windowsill. Two hours or so until sunrise. Standing there at the window, I felt as though this were happening the world over, that it wasn’t just one neighborhood in the suburbs of Dallas. It was a silly thought that I entertained anyhow.

The cat came out of my office and followed me down the hall. In the kitchen, the tiles were cold on my feet. The coffee pot was still on from the afternoon. I poured some and went outside, nudging the cat with my foot to keep him in. I stood out on my back lawn in just gym shorts and a winter coat. A helicopter ripped through the air overhead, the air full of panic—by which I mean insects, locusts and wood roaches with nowhere to go in a hurry. I felt them more than saw them, though a few were backlit in the flames. The birds and larger animals had probably fled ahead of the heat. They were long gone.

The coffee left a bile taste in my mouth. I didn’t need the coat this close to the flame, but I was shirtless underneath it. I already felt foolish being out here. Before she left, Tess had looked me over and said: You’re a mess, Trevor. Well.

There was someone moving behind my neighbor’s fence. When I stepped over to see who it was, he froze. It was the neighbor, a high school kid who always kept driving through the strip of grass between our driveways, spent hours banging a basketball against the eave of their garage. The noise of it grated on me. I’d moved into the house because I was tired of sharing walls with people, but as it turned out there was no escaping the
sound of everyone else.

It’s not so much that I minded the kid, though—the thing was, he was a kid, and I held that against him. I tried to let it go, but it was hard.

“You see this?” I said.

“Yeah. Shit.”

“Shit is right.”

We stood there, separated by the fence. A fire is a fire. Happens all the time. Still it was strange to think what the woods would be in the morning. Like, what would we call them? Former woods? Land? Or would they still be the woods? Is the place staked out by nature, or my own mind?

It smelled like a campout.

“Where are your parents?” I said. I didn’t care, but it made my allegiance clear. I couldn’t really make him out between the fence slats, but he cleared his throat a little.

“My mom’s in Melbourne. Business.” He leaned on the distinction of it being only his mother, like I should’ve known.

“You okay alone?” I said. The woods crackled and something broke in them. “Well I mean, I’m over here if you need anything.”

“Listen, man,” he said, “who are you even?”

“Nobody. A neighbor.”

“Nobody. That’s right.”

He walked off. I watched him go, or really, I watched the way his body blocked the light through the fence slats. The screen door bounced shut against his back door. I turned back to the fire. A large bug hit me in the face, and I swatted it away. I looked down and couldn’t make out my coffee, what was left in the mug, like if any insects had fled the fire just to drown in it. It was a shadow in my hand. I flung the liquid out on the lawn.
The fire had burned itself out by early morning, leaving blank trees behind my property that seemed to change my whole home. I spent ten minutes on my porch with a fireman, who told me they were looking into the source of the blaze. Some friends called to see that I was okay. The cat slunk through the halls. I avoided him. The fire had jumped the gap a few blocks over, and someone’s house got singed. Otherwise it was just the woods that had gone.

The smell had gotten into the kitchen some, but I didn’t mind. From the window over the sink I would look out each morning while I drank coffee. This morning it was different. The trees were dumb and bare. Nothing moved in the yard or beyond. The squirrels used to take daredevil leaps from one tree to the next. It would be more impressive to see now, without the cover of leaves.

I thought about Tess, thought about calling her, thought that this was a fair enough reason. But we would just fight if I called, most likely about how I wasn’t supposed to call, though we could fight about anything. One time she said that the problem was that both of us were axes, neither of us wanted to be the tree. Actually, she hadn’t said it was a problem. She had just said it. Both of us are axes. Honing each other’s meanness with each blow. I wanted to talk to the kind of person who would say something like that, something poetic but unthinking and a little cruel.

Still, I wasn’t welcome, so I stood at my kitchen window breathing in coffee, waiting for something to happen. The cat rubbed at my legs. Something moved between the burned trees, too far away for me to make out. The zoetrope geometry of the motion bothered me, like it might be a trick. I thought of the neighbor boy moving behind my fence, whether he was just lost like all of us were lost, or if there was a specificity to it, something he needed. That he might have something to do with what had happened, or at least might know something, had not escaped me. Mostly,
though, I was lonely. The cat was no help.

***

I lived in a cul-de-sac, and only the back of my property and the one neighbor’s actually faced out into the woods, though our houses were at such an angle from each other that I could see their front door from mine. I hesitated for a moment and went over.

A girl I’d not seen before answered the door when I knocked. She looked at me with a practiced and snotty distrust.

“Is the neighbor kid home?” I said. “I don’t know his name.”

“Why?”

“I just need to ask him something.”

She closed the door. I waited for what seemed like too long. It was foolish. I was a fool.

He opened the door. “What’s up?”

“I’m heading out for groceries. Wanted to see if you were good.”

He looked back into the house. “Yeah, I guess I’m good.”

“Are you sure? It’s no big.”

He looked at me like I was selling something. Then he said, “What’s my mom’s name?”

I pictured his mother, tried to remember if we’d ever been actually introduced. “I guess I don’t know.”

He stepped out on the porch, closed the door, and lit a cigarette without offering one. The way he leaned against the doorframe, I could tell he was the kind of trouble I’d known in high school, scrawny and vaguely sexual in a faded black t-shirt and jeans he’d cut off at the knee with dull scissors. I grew up in a herd of dangly-armed white boys, each

130 VandeZande
one of us this kid.

“I’m Trevor,” I said.

“Darren.”

He looked down the street so he didn’t have to look at me. “Well,” I said, “if you’re good, then I’ll be heading out.” I turned to leave.

“Hey.”

“What?”

“Are you gonna say about the girl being here?”


He looked down at the one burning in his hand. I left before he had a chance to say anything.

I kept finding myself at the kitchen window, looking at the ruin of the woods. I didn’t like living alone—the house was a little too much for just me. I felt like I couldn’t keep track of the whole space at once, which made me nervous. It’s why I kept the cat, though Tess had loved it more than me. She was the one who had left the door open for it during a snap freeze that left it yowling on the porch. She was the one who had purposely not named it. In the end, when she moved out and I half-heartedly offered that she could take him, she had said this was his home, and I didn’t disagree. I think she saw the desperation in me, like I needed to hold on to whatever I could.

Now the cat kept me from indulging in my irrational fears and bad impulses. He’d pawed at the door to Tess’s empty studio when I tried keeping it shut. Now it stood open for him, though it bothered me. I thought
someone might walk out at any time. My anxiety was kind of like a ghost that way. The cat was a real and explainable noise.

I stood at the window a few minutes. Nothing moved in the woods. Then I went and found the cat in my office and told him I was being paranoid. He looked up at me, uncaring, and left the room.

I tried to work the rest of the morning and into afternoon, but I was distracted by the woods, though the office windows faced the front of the house and my desk faced a blank wall. Around one o’clock I gave up—I was freelance, and the work wasn’t going anywhere. I sat on my back porch drinking canned High Life and watching for anything. Each of my knuckles cracked when I pressed them, and I knew I was trying to get up the nerve to go out there and poke around. After I killed the third beer I took the rest of the six-pack inside.

Underneath the bed was a double-barrel shotgun I’d taken from my grandmother’s house after she died. Tess thought it was ridiculous to keep the gun under the bed, so while she lived here I’d moved it into the hall closet. When she left I couldn’t sleep, and one night I put the gun back where I thought it ought to be.

I broke open the breech. It was empty, and I didn’t own any shells. Still, the feel of it snapping shut again was heavy and good, and I felt a little better. I hung what was left of the six-pack off of the barrel by one of its plastic rings and went outside with the thing on my shoulder.

It was overcast. Maybe rain was coming. The grass crunched under my feet, stiff and dead from a dry winter that was finally ending. North Texas wasn’t easy to understand. One year we’d have weeks of snow and ice, the next it was shorts weather as early as January. I jogged down into the concrete ditch and back up the other side. The earth was thick with gray-black ash in places, but the wind had pushed it around, exposing
scorched ground beneath and piling it up elsewhere. A blackened tree held firm against my pushing. I put a boot into the ash, expecting the powder-crunch of snow. It was like stepping in spilt flour. I yanked a beer off its ring and cracked it open. It foamed, and I took a longish pull to keep too much from spilling. Imagining what I looked like, I felt pretty good. Like I looked seminal and American. A man in a burnt wood with a beer and a gun.

I wandered further into the wilderness. Here and there were little patches of green or brown left where the trees and brush were spread thinner, and up high some of the evergreen tops hadn’t gone. Mostly, though, everything was colorless. I had never been out here. The ditch line used to be bordered by thick brush that stood as high as I did and all blended together. Wind kicked between the trees, stirring up the ash, which stuck to my shoes and the bottoms of my jeans. I thought about later, when some construction assholes would come through and clear this wood, replacing it with a bunch of shoebox houses. It was already going to happen. The nature of the suburbs is to expand, to change without changing. I decided it was good that the woods had burned first. I could pretend that when they were knocked over by bulldozer and crane that it was to make way for new trees, and then I could move out before I was proven wrong by someone else’s yard butting up against mine. Probably I was a little drunk.

I tromped around out there for maybe twenty minutes before I found them. If there had been leaves on the ground, they would have had warning, but my footsteps in the dirt and ash were too quiet. I saw the boy first, Darren. It looked like he was standing there facing deeper into the wild, but then I saw the girl on her knees in front of him. I froze.

The boy didn’t quite have his back to me. They both were fully dressed, but I could tell his jeans were open. I thought the best thing to do would be to turn away from them and leave quietly, but she moved back
from him for a second and saw me.

Her face flushed a deep red and she put her hands by her side. Dar- ren looked down at her and said something I couldn’t make out. Then he turned toward me. I didn’t know what to do, so I lifted my beer hand in what was meant as an apologetic wave, realizing too late it looked congratu- latory.

He zipped up and moved toward me.

I yelled out an apology. He flipped me off and yelled, “Beat it, you stupid fuckstick. You fucking perv.” He jogged back over to her, and they headed back in the direction of the neighborhood.

I finished my beer and crunched the can flat, ripped another one off the ring. Overhead, a bird landed on a branch, the first I’d seen out here. I took aim with my empty shotgun and squeezed the useless trigger.

When I got back home the back door stood open. I’d left it unlocked, and the wind had pushed it wide. I filled up with panic about the cat and called out for him. He came up from the hallway. I bent down, and he ran his arching body under my hand.

“You piece of shit,” I said. I tossed two crushed beer cans on the counter and pulled the last one from its ring and cracked it open.

There was a loud knock at my front door. I went to the kitchen entrance to see Darren’s face up against the window of the entryway. He didn’t look angry, particularly, but his knocking was urgent enough. I probably would have let him sweat it out until later and then gone over to apolo- gize if he hadn’t seen me. I put the beer down and started walking to let him in, but I stopped at the front hallway. It felt like instinct that I looked in the direction of my bedroom, Tess’s studio, and, further down, my office.
Something was deeply wrong. I felt it before I understood what it was, that gut drop of realization when the world betrays you in a serious way.

The door to Tess’s studio was shut. I hadn’t done that. The cat liked laying in the empty room, liked stretching out on the wood floor that Tess had insisted on because she said carpet dulls the sunlight. That door stood open every moment of every day. Darren stopped knocking. His face was lost beyond the window. I eased open the front door.

“Darren, there’s someone in my house,” I said. “Look, I know you’re mad, but I need your help right now. There’s someone in the back room.” I was all coiled up inside of myself and my breath was hot and short.

I pulled him into the entryway and pointed down the hall. “That door hasn’t been closed in four months.”

“Dude,” he said, matching my nervous tone. “You shut it. The cat bumped it.” He pointed over my shoulder at the cat on the counter in my kitchen. I shook my head. He wouldn’t look me in the eye because I was right and he knew it and he didn’t want me to be.

“Do you have your phone?” I asked. He didn’t. “Okay, well, mine is in my office, which is down there. I get it, I call the police, we both leave the house. I just need you to watch for me.”

“Police won’t come for a shut door,” he said. “They will.”

He shook his head. He was probably high.

He shook his head again, but I needed him to stay. I got him by the shoulders and said, “Look, stand here, just a second.”

I went into the kitchen and took the shotgun off the table, a knife from the block on the counter. The cat had disappeared somewhere. I walked back to Darren, who was staring down the hallway, and pressed the
shotgun to his chest.

“It’s not loaded,” I whispered, “but they won’t know. That’s power.”

He nodded and clutched it to himself. My feeling sorry for him let me not feel the awful fear in me. I needed him here mostly so I had someone to live up to.

“Hey,” I said. He stood there with a dumb look on his face. I touched him on the arm and he flinched. “What’s the girl’s name?”

He didn’t answer, so I asked again.

“Cory.”

“Did she leave?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you like her?”

“We’re dating.”

“Well, sorry about the woods. In a few days, it’ll be funny.”

I felt almost fatherly, so I went on. “I mean, you didn’t do anything wrong. If y’all care about each other and talk about it and no one is hurting, it’s all good.”

He wasn’t listening. We were both thinking about the door. I felt guilty putting the kid in this, but here he was, and I didn’t see another play.

We moved into the hallway. Darren put the gun against his shoulder, pointed it out in front of him, tensed and leaning forward on his feet. If the gun had been loaded and he had cause to use it, he would have fallen over standing that way, but I didn’t correct him. I held the knife at my side and slid past the door to the studio.

I held up a closed fist at Darren and he nodded. We had both seen movies. If I hadn’t been terrified I might’ve laughed. Darren, at least, had
the excuse of youth. It was fine if he played at being a man.

My phone was in my office where I left it. I thought about calling right then, but I didn’t like the thought of being on the phone in here, having to explain a danger I didn’t understand while I was still in it. Then I realized that the plan should have been to leave and call from Darren’s phone, but this was the play we were making, and it was moving towards something whether I liked it or not. My hands shook. I put the phone in my pocket and moved back to the hallway.

Darren had his hand on the knob of the studio door. He looked at me as though everything next was fated, inevitable. I started to shake my head and he turned the knob and threw the door open, whipping the shotgun back up in the same motion. The door bounced off the wall and settled most of the way closed again. Darren looked in.

I moved to the door.

A man was sunk into the far corner. At first, I thought he must have always been there. He looked at us but didn’t move inside his ramshackle clothes. There was no way to get an idea of the body inside of them, except that he was filthy with soot and grime. His eyes were red and wet. He’d clearly been in the fire, and looking at him here in my house broke something open in me.

He tried to speak but was stopped by a coughing fit. When it was over he turned away from us and pulled his knees into his body, the last of the daylight cut across the lower half of him.

I took a step forward. “Did you live in the woods?” I said. “Were you in the fire?”

He nodded, then shook his head. He looked at Darren, who still pointed the gun towards him.

“Put it down,” I said, and he let the gun hang at his side. I asked
the man his name. He didn’t respond. “You don’t know? Or you don’t want to tell me?”

He turned away from me and dropped his face onto his arm.

I thought of what Tess would do, but couldn’t come up with anything. I thought of what any person would do. I didn’t know. I looked from the man to Darren and back. When a thing mattered, there weren’t ever any answers. Whether a thing you did was right or not comes later.

I cleared my throat to say something before realizing that there was nothing for me to say. The man watched me from the corner. He didn’t have anything with him. No backpack, no plastic bags. Just his ash-stained self and some clothes thick with the smell of sweat and fire sitting in the corner, which I already thought of as his corner, seeing as Tess wasn’t around and I’d made no attempt to claim the room for myself.

I said the only thing I could think to say: “Come on, then. Let’s get you cleaned up and fed.”

It was going to be a big batch of curry anyway, so that I could eat it through the week. I wasn’t doing anything I wouldn’t have done already. There was a comfort in that, but also a strangeness. Darren was balanced on the edge my kitchen sink, his ass hanging into the bowl, a cigarette pointed out the open kitchen window. The cat kept jumping up on the counter, and I kept throwing him back off. I stood over the pot of boiling vegetables—carrots, onion, celery, and cauliflower. The man was showering. I’d given him an old shirt and some cargo shorts. He’d offered a weak smile in return, a whispered thanks. When I helped him up he’d seemed like he might crumble. His voice was gone from the smoke.

After that I’d walked him into the bathroom. I’d said, “Turn it up
hot, let it steam up. It might help. Take as long as you want.”

“Do you trust him?” Darren said.

“About the same as I trust you.”

“I mean, he could be a murderer.”

“I doubt it.” I walked to the counter near him and started cutting potatoes. “Besides, he’s in no shape for it.”

He flicked his cigarette out the window. I could tell he was dancing around something in his head. His foot bounced in the air. I thought of him out there the night before, watching, doing nothing. Well, neither had I.

“Stop being so fucking nervous,” I said. “It’s fine. Plus no one is making you stay.”

He looked out the window, clearly a little hurt. He was invested in this. We might even be friends. “I’ll go.”

“You don’t have to. That’s not what I meant.”

The cat looked up at us. Darren put an arm down toward him and almost fell.

“What’s its name?”

“Fuckstick.”

“No, really.”

“He doesn’t have one.”

“What kind of pet doesn’t have a name?”

“My girlfriend is the one who didn’t name him. She said it was undignified, limiting.”

“That’s kind of dumb.”

“Well, she’s an artist.”

I went to the fridge and got two beers, walked over to Darren, and said, “Are you on something that makes drinking a bad idea?”
“No. It was mushrooms, but they were pretty weak. I got shook out of it pretty good.”

I handed one over, and he cracked it open over the sink. I went into the dining room to check that the shower was still going. It was.

When I walked back into the kitchen Darren said, “Think he’ll be okay?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t seem burned, but smoke inhalation’s bad any way you cut it.”

Darren ashed his cigarette into my sink. “Gimme one of those,” I said.

He held the pack out to me, then his lighter. “Should we take him to the hospital?”

“I asked him. He didn’t want to go.”

“So?”

“He’s grown. He’s his own person. That counts for something.” I shrugged, lit my cigarette and took a full drag.

Darren’s phone buzzed. He’d run to grab it when the man first started showering. I said, “You can invite her if you want.”

“I don’t know.”

I shrugged. “Your call.”

“She doesn’t like strangers.”

I finished my beer and went for another. “Probably she shouldn’t.”

“I don’t know. We’ve been fighting a lot. Like, a lot. She’s crazy.”

I shrugged. “No such thing as crazy.”

“Of course there is.”

“You’ll see. You just think that because you don’t live alone. When you get your own place, you’ll do all kinds of irrational shit when nobody’s looking.” I spilled some beer on myself and looked down at my shirt. “Everybody’s crazy, so probably nobody is. We just use that
I grabbed the cutting board of potatoes and slid them into the pot. Some water splashed over the side and sizzled into the gas burner.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Come on,” Darren said. “Really? You’re gonna pull rank on me?” “Fine. I wanted a family. She didn’t.” I turned to him. “I say this not to say you’re dumb, but I know you go to public school, and public school is garbage. You know what cognitive dissonance is, yeah?” “Yeah. Sorta.”

“The short version is that it’s trying to believe two opposing things at the same time.” I stirred the pot of vegetables. “I mean, the thing about cognitive dissonance is it eats at people. So: I want this future. I don’t want this future. Those two things banging against each other.” I tapped my temple. “It makes you mean.”

For a long while after she left, I’d blamed Tess for that meanness, for the ways I’d shown it, for the ugly place where it all ended between us. I used to believe that she’d pushed me to that place, but the truth was she hadn’t really. I went there all on my own.


Darren grinned. “I keep getting the feeling you’re trying to teach me things, and look, it ain’t happening, because, I gotta be honest, I’m just seeing a sad old man drinking a Miller High Life like that makes him cool.”

I raised my beer. “You’re like a son to me. In that we don’t understand each other and I’m very disappointed in you as a person.”

He raised his beer back. I heard the shower go off.

In my clothes, he was a different kind of out of place—when I saw him I
thought, that’s me. That’s who I am. We looked nothing alike, though, and
I shook off the feeling. His cheeks were pink above his beard, which looked
darker in its wetness, but otherwise he looked frail and small in my too-
large Jawbreaker shirt from college.

I took the towel from him when he held it out and tossed it into my
bedroom. “Do you need anything?”

“No.” His voice was pained, throat-scratched, and he followed
the word up with a coughing fit. He grasped my door frame and bent away
from me, hacking into his opened palm.

When he turned back toward me, I said, “Let’s maybe not talk.”
Darren came up the hall behind me with the cat in his arms. I went into my
office and got a pad and pen, handed it to the man. “If you need something,
can you write it for me?”

He nodded.

“Okay.”

I led him to the living room. “You’ll stay the night if you want.”

He shook his head.

“Nope, shut up. You’re welcome to stay.”

He scratched something into the notepad. *Too much.*

“Listen,” I said. “I’m just trying to keep society going. It’s what
anybody would do. Besides, Darren’s staying too, right?”

This was the first I’d mentioned it, but Darren looked over at us
and nodded. The cat jumped out of his arms.

I checked on the curry. It was bubbling and the vegetables had
gone soft enough. I liked Thai curry, the kind with coconut milk and lime
and mouth-searing heat. Tess had liked the milder stuff, and this was one
of hers, a British curry, all mush and root vegetables. It seemed a nice thing
to offer strangers. I felt good about what I was doing, a thing I might’ve felt
hollow about if not for all the beer.

I got out big bowls and scooped them full from the rice cooker on the back counter, then put a heap of curry on top of each one, then cilantro, some green onion.

I enlisted Darren to set the table while I got us drinks. The man nodded that it was okay when I asked if he wanted one. I thought of his throat, so I got down the whiskey from the top of my fridge and I poured it over ice. I topped each drink with a squeeze of lemon and a Luxardo cherry I’d made myself the week before. Since I’d been alone, I’d been learning new things as a way to pretend at self-improvement, and the cherries were one of my projects. I wanted to give the man something good, something he maybe hadn’t had before. I carried the drinks into the little dining room and passed them around.

“What’s this?” Darren asked. I told him.

He looked a little impressed, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that this whole thing might be him making fun of me. For being older than him, or for being uncool, or both.

We ate in silence for a minute. I caught Darren making a face when he took a sip of his drink, which he tried to hide. The man ate slowly, blew carefully on his food.

“Does it hurt? Is it too hot?” I asked.

He nodded, then shook his head.

“What can I do?”

He shrugged. I let it go.

“So you live in the woods?” Darren asked.

The man nodded again.

“That’s so weird,” Darren said. I shot him a look. “I mean, not like, you’re homeless and all, but—I’ve been hanging out in those woods since
I was a kid. There was a little hole behind my house in the bushes, and I would cut through it and just be out there for hours. I mean, I’ve thought of them as my woods since I was eight. I didn’t think anybody else was ever out there. Not that the woods were mine, really. It’s just weird is all. How’d you get to live out there?”

The man scribbled something on his pad. *Sad story.*

I asked, “What about the fire? Did you see what happened?”

He wrote *Accident.* Darren put an arm in front of his bowl and bent over it to eat.

“What kind?”

The man put his pen to the pad, but hesitated. “Leave him alone, Trevor,” Darren said, then to the man: “We don’t care, all right?”

“Am I bugging you?” I asked it to the room more than to either of them. The man shook his head.

“So what was it, a campfire?”

He underlined and then tapped the pad. *Accident.* Darren looked away, and the man looked over at him for a barely perceptible moment, and I had to admit to the thing I’d already sort of known. Darren had been out there, teenaged and angry, maybe after a fight with the girl, smoking cigarettes, or just a bored kid with a lighter. It had been a dry winter. He got out through the little cut in the brush and stood in his yard watching it all go down. There was no point in taking the story any further. If that’s what happened, the man was trying to absolve Darren of the blame.

And I wondered: Who was I in this story? What did my opinion matter? I came in after the action, I had my own story I had to tell. But it did matter. Whatever had happened out there had changed things for each of us, with Darren at the center, his youth and drugs and stupidity, which I was powerless against. I came up against the hard edge of myself.
“I can’t fucking believe—” I said, but the man’s eyes started to water, and he shook his head. Darren had his hands in his lap, his face pointed down toward them. The man tapped what he’d written on his pad. *Accident*.

I looked at it but didn’t comprehend. “Darren, you did this?”

Darren set his fork down and sat quietly with his hands under the table.

“Darren, talk to me.” He still didn’t say anything, and I felt this ugliness rising up into the back of my mouth. I slammed my palm hard against the table. Everything rattled. “Say something, damn it.”

The man scribbled and slid the pad over to me. *Accident. He didn’t know. Don’t. Don’t be like this. He’s your kid.*

The words were deflating. Of course the man thought Darren was mine. And there was no point in explaining right then, in making it otherwise, because in the ways that mattered he was exactly right.

“Okay,” I said, though a part of me still didn’t want to. I looked to the man, and then to Darren, and said it again.

Darren wouldn’t look at either of us. “Hey,” I said, “Hey, it’s okay, man. You’re okay. I mean, fuckups, they occur. Happen every day. And then there they are, and we gotta live with them. So look, Darren, it’s yours to live down, and I got nothing to add or subtract. Y’all want another round?”

The man nodded.

“A beer, if that’s okay,” Darren said.

The man coughed while I was standing, and I froze. His cough had a power to it, a danger, like trying to start a lawnmower. The yanking motion and the sputtering and also the promise of blades. When he was done, he let out a weak apology that I waved off.

In the kitchen, the last of the evening light had faded, leaving the
harshness of fluorescence. I could hear Darren speaking lowly to the man, not secrets, but something serious and hushed. It was a crime, whatever happened out there. The authorities should know about it. Probably they would figure it out anyway, if they bothered to look into it. And the man had been in it and then forgiven it like it was nothing. Probably I should follow his lead.

I thought of Tess, who I missed less and less as the days went on, how slowly we move from misery to not even minding the loss. Whiskey sloshed into the glass, and some spilled. Darren came in with two empty bowls and started refilling them from the pot. The cat slunk through my halls as always. Outside, the animals were returning home, picking over what was left, settling in or moving on. I could see them out there. Or I couldn’t. What mattered was that they were out there. There was a warmth to the fullness of my home, and I stood there for a moment letting it find a place near my breastbone. I made welcome.

This moment, of course, was soon to end. After dinner, Darren would step outside to call his girl and end up walking home, saying he would be back, each of us knowing he wouldn’t. I would make up my couch with spare sheets. That night, the man would have a coughing fit that would leave him doubled over and gasping, and I would call an ambulance. I would sit there with my hand on his back while he wheezed, feeling the struggle of his lungs to get air. I would say things to him that I thought might matter. I would suddenly feel too drunk to go with him in the ambulance, too much of a burden and a stranger. He would go into the hospital and not come out again. A few days later I would walk over to Darren’s home and ring the bell. His mother would answer, and we would look at each other, and I would think of what she may have heard coming
from my home, how the person that we are is never quite the secret we want it to be, and instead of answering her question I would look away, I would turn to face my home and the woods beyond.

I picked up the two drinks. Darren grabbed his beer out of the fridge, balancing the bowls in one hand. The refrigerator door was going to close on him, and I stopped it with my foot. He muttered his thanks, and we returned to the table, where the man sat. He nodded when I set the drink in front of him. I looked at each of my guests. I was drunk, yes, but I was happy too. We had a place where we could be who we were without the burden of being who we were, and I had helped to make it. May there only and ever be now, I thought. May this be the story we tell. I raised my drink. We all raised our drinks. Like most everything, it wasn’t enough, but for just then it seemed like it might be.
ELEGY: JEZEBEL

Piecemeal, portioned
in little boxes of a design
precisely carved, precise
the portion each containing precisely one portion of she
who paints her face before sliding out the window, before
dogs.

Over and over nothing if not devoted to the god which bears her name
embedded, the god within her name god of windows, god
of rotation, god of bellies marked with lacerations bring me

to this nation and give me my portion. leave them
piecemeal.

Rotated, wedded
to death: and interested in who belongs
to whom: who belongs: to death. I am a jealous
god, and I will have none other.

I am a jealous wife, and I will take this place piecemeal.

Jezebel, whose name means:
devoted whose name means collar whose name means:
she who is wedded to a single mind, a single name, whose name means golden
cover this body in golden

and all of his people shall be torn piecemeal, and

all of his people shall know of me. jealous god, he

and his people. candle, briefly lit in a window

wherefrom

the queen met the faces of they who appeared legion

in her dreams, golden eyes wet ears, foam about the

mouth. in death, even, the dogs lick their yellow teeth.

What love I’ve given I’ve given piecemeal. What devotion I’ve promised as I
light a candle in my window: a ritual that dies like a language spoken by the
dead.
That light was not mine to give. I give it piecemeal as if to mouths under the table.
ACCIDENT PEDESTRIAN

I am looking at the sidewalk. The cracks extend outward in all directions. This has happened before. When I was a child, a green truck pulled up to our driveway and stopped. My mother stood at the window watching for several minutes with the cordless phone gripped tightly in her hand. Then the truck turned around and drove away. I can feel the movement of the traffic under my feet. The same water that falls rises and falls again. When I was a green truck, my child stood up and pulled pieces of glass from his mouth. I am looking at the sidewalk. My mother the window phoned for several minutes, hand like birdless recording. I remembered the name of that song I was telling you about. Then the truck bent across the sky. This has happened before. I see the headlights and I feel my body change shape, a subtraction.
How exits this life.

In which we are a portrait

of sand.

The wind burns

our corners.

We watch the sky.

An exodus of rain.

Viscera knifed from silver.

How join these things.

This other skin,

but I mean to say

*night throat.*
I mean to say

child who holds apples.

Your break the body

and you are eating this thing

and you are here

and you are here.

How small the hearts.
KIRA ARCHIBALD grew up on a haphazard farm in Oregon. She likes science, succulents, and the ocean and daydreams about living in a castle with secret passages and hidden rooms.

MARINA BLITSHEYN is the author of Russian for Lovers (Argos Books) and the forthcoming $kill$ from Dancing Girl Press. She works as an adjunct instructor of literature and composition.

DANIEL COSHNEAR is the author of two story collections: Jobs & Other Preoccupations (Helicon Nine 2001) winner of the Willa Cather Award and Occupy & Other Love Stories (Kelly’s Cove Press 2012). He is currently working on a third collection called The Second Lowest Common Denominator.

THEODORE ZACHARY COTLER is the author of a novel, Ghost at the Loom (MP, 2014), a critical monograph, Elegies for Humanism (Rare Bird, 2015), and three books of poetry, House with a Dark Sky Roof (Salt, 2011), Sonnets to the Humans (Ahsahta, 2013), and Supplice (Center for Literary Publishing, 2014). His awards include the Colorado Prize, the Sawtooth Prize, the Amy Clampitt Residency, and the Ruth Lilly Fellowship.

CAROLINE CREW is the author of several chapbooks, including the forthcoming Caroline, Who Will You Pray to Now That You Are Dead (Coconut Books). Her work appears or is forthcoming in Conjunctions, Salt Hill Journal, and Black Warrior Review, among others. Her full-length collection, Plastic Sonnets, will be out from Big Lucks in 2015. She’s online here: caroline-crew.com
Poet and photographer THOMAS SAYERS ELLIS was born and raised in Washington, D.C and is the author of *The Maverick Room* and *Skin, Inc.* (Graywolf Press). His poems have recently appeared in *Oxford American*, *Poetry*, *Tin House*, *The Nation*, *The Paris Review* and *Best American Poetry* (1997, 2001, 2010 and 2015). Ellis has recently been a Visiting Writer at Wesleyan University, the University of San Francisco, and is currently the Richard Hugo Fellow at the University of Montana. He is a founding member of Heroes Are Gang Leaders, a gathering of poets and musicians.

CAIDEN FELDMILLER lives in State College, Pennsylvania, and will begin graduate study at Penn State this fall. Saddle Road Press published his chapbook *Pig, Smoking* in 2013.

ANNABEL GRAHAM is a writer, photographer, actor and artist. Her work has been published in *Pas Un Autre*, *Autre Quarterly*, *Surface Magazine*, *Out of Order Magazine*, *L’Obs*, *Bullett Magazine*, *Eunoia Review*, *Atticus Review*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *YOLK*, *The Courant*, and *The Gallatin Review*, and is forthcoming in *No Tokens Journal*. She lives and works in Los Angeles.

ALICE GRIBBIN is a Teaching-Writing Fellow at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. Her poems have appeared in *LVNG* and *Prelude*. She was born and raised in the north of England.

BRIONY GYLGAYTON grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area, and earned a BA from the University of California at Davis and an MFA in Poetry from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. She has been the recipient of the Prairie Lights Poetry Prize, the Elliot Gilbert Memorial Prize, the Ina
Coolbrith Memorial Poetry Prize, among others. She has taught Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Iowa, and now lives in Iowa, where she writes poetry, does freelance editing and book illustrations, and paints.

Kim Hagerich is an English teacher currently living near Kyoto. She received an MFA from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and is at work on a novel and a cycle of love poems about environmental disasters.

Julie Henson’s work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Southern Indiana Review, Iowa Review, New Ohio Review*, and others. She was a finalist for the 2014 Iowa Review Award in poetry and semi-finalist in Boston Review’s 2014 “Discovery” contest. She lives in Indiana.

Denise Jarrott is an MFA Candidate in poetry at Colorado State University in Fort Collins. Her work has also appeared or is forthcoming in *Petri Press* and *Dusie*.

Originally from Moldova, Ruth Madievsky now lives in Los Angeles. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *ZYZZYVA, The Journal, Harpur Palate*, and elsewhere. She is working on her first poetry collection. You can find her at ruthmadievsky.com.

Joseph Martin hails from Baltimore and teaches English, journalism, and criticism at the Maryland Institute College of Art. His writing has appeared in *The Believer*, the *L.A. Review of Books, Bookforum, Bookslut*, and *Fourteen Hills*. 
EMRY MCALEAR grew up in Twin Bridges, Montana. He is pursuing a Master of Fine Arts at the Vermont College of Fine Arts. This is his first publication. Emry currently lives in England and returns to Montana whenever he can.

EMILY OLIVER lives in Ithaca, New York. She co-runs Knox Writers’ House. Recipient of a Sicca grant and the Corson-Browning Poetry Prize, she is currently a lecturer in the English Department and Prison Education Program at Cornell University.


ALISON REED’s Pushcart-nominated poems have appeared in several journals including *Ocho, Matter, Skin to Skin, Cactus Heart, and So to Speak*. She is completing her PhD in English at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

PAUL ARRAND RODGERS lives in Athens, Georgia. His work has appeared in *BOAAT, Hobart, The Atlas Review*, and elsewhere.
Eliza Rotterman’s poetry, reviews and interviews have appeared in Quarterly West, Colorado Review and Poetry International, among others. An interview with Oregon poet, Endi Bogue Hartigan, is coming out soon in Jacket2. She lives in Portland, Oregon and studies nursing.

Brandon Rushton teaches writing and edits Yemassee at the University of South Carolina. A finalist for the Indiana Review Poetry Prize, his poems have appeared in The Louisville Review, Southern Humanities Review, Ghost Town, and others.

Maxwell Shanley is an MFA candidate at San Francisco State University. His work has appeared in Camas: The Nature of the West, Slipstream, Border Crossing, and elsewhere. He resides in San Francisco where he works as a bookseller.

John Surowiecki is the author of four books of poetry, the most recent being Flies (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2012), a semi-epic comic poem. John is the recipient of the Poetry Foundation’s Pegasus Award for verse drama and others, including the Pablo Neruda Award, the Washington Prize and the White Pine Prize. John’s work has appeared in Alaska Quarterly Review, Carolina Review, Indiana Review, Margie, Mississippi Review, Nimrod, Poetry, Prairie Schooner, Yemassee and more.

Paul Vega is a managing editor for Pacifica Literary Review. He has been published or has work forthcoming in BULL: Men’s Fiction, The Collagist, The James Franco Review, The Portland Review, and elsewhere.

Cady Vishniac is a former human statue and current copy editor studying creative writing at UMass Boston. She has work out or forthcoming in Spork, WhiskeyPaper, and Slush Pile Magazine.

Olivia Worden was born in Seoul, Korea and grew up in Dartmouth, Massachusetts. Her work has appeared in Dark Phrases, The Sarah Lawrence Literary Review, and Point of View Productions. She is currently completing her MFA at Sarah Lawrence College.
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