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BEES

When she undressed, she revealed that her body was composed of hundreds of swarming bees. He should have seen this coming—the way her gloved hand purred into his, the way she called him honey. But, he went with it, unwrapping her shawl and letting her dress hum to the floor. She scattered over his body, rubbing her stingers against his. He wasn't sure if this is how it worked. It was painful, confusing, loud. The next day, he brought her flowers. He began to love her body, teasing her by pulling handfuls of her and giving them back. But, over the years, parts of her kept dying. When he locked their fingers, parts of her would lose grip and drop to the floor. When he kissed her in the bathtub, he could feel small wings between his teeth and bodies against his tongue. He would sweep them up or spit them into a container, giving them small burials in the garden. This went on. Soon, she felt only like a small handful of electrons. Even that died down. When she dwindled to the last five, he took them to see the flora in the garden. When they slept, he went to the shed, took the smoker can out, and fumigated. He pulled out each of their stingers and dug a hole in the garden the size of a softball. He knelt, cupping them in his hands and parting his thumbs. He blew into it, his hands, enough to feel them rise against his fingers, and then he buried them too.

REMAINS OF A FELLOW ADVENTURER

William, who has been dead and buried for seven months now, calls me on my phone. I'm always grateful for this, every time. I'm happy I can still speak to him, despite the fact that it's not really him, but only his voice, that deep red-blooded timbre, a little gravelly, like stones tumbling down an escarpment.

On the phone, he talks about the neighbor's mailbox we had stolen when we were kids, how we lifted it straight out of the ground in the middle of the night and carried it to the small copse of woods near our subdivision.

"You remember?" he says. "How we snuck out that night?"

"Like it was yesterday," I say. We had been giggling idiots that night, drunk on the absurdity of our prank. Our father brought it up during Sunday dinner the next day—it was the talk of our little cul-de-sac, although nobody, including our father, had any idea we committed the prank—while William and I stared down at the little moons of ravioli covered in red sauce before us. We bit our tongue; nothing would make us confess to our crime.

My dead brother and I talk for a few more minutes and then he hangs up, and all I can do is wait for him to call again. I can't call William. That's not how The Line works. As of now, the technology behind The Line only allows the computer-generated voice of the deceased to call you. Although they keep promising a patch: a 2.0 that will change everything.

Every time a call ends a memory rushes forward and this one—summoned by our mailbox conversation—is from when William and I were kids: William hovering over my shoulder, listening to me mumble the words written on the screen of my Commodore 64: "You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front door. There is a mailbox here." And then me typing *open mailbox* and my brother saying, "Let's go," the maps to Zork spread out across his lap. "To the back of the house!" And so I typed our way to the back of the house because that's what my brother told me to do and he was a genius. Even back then, at an age when siblings should be rivaling, I stood by his side, listened to him, watched his

eyes widen and light up when he spoke. I could feel his energy pulling at my own skin with its intense static.

The drive to my parents' house is typically short, but today there is traffic. There's been an accident up ahead; two police cars are off to the shoulder, lights flashing. I call my parents, let them know I'm going to be late for that most holiest of days for Italians: Sunday dinner. Even now, at forty-two, I think of my mother and father as food deities, concocting flavors handed down to them from their own divine ancestors. William relished his last Sunday meal with my parents before moving to California for his new job at The Line. After dinner, William and I went out for drinks at a neighborhood joint called the Red Lantern, home to a jukebox full of bands like New Order and Sonic Youth and Psychedelic Furs. He explained The Line to Yo La Tengo's "Cherry Chapstick," their indigo sound layered thick and dark, filling up the place in a dusky swirl:

*Wondering what it would be like if I could be that smooth
I could think about all that I missed out
It's hard to do*

I lower the volume on my radio now and sing along, listen to my voice give shape to the lyrics. The traffic rolls forward a little. I stop singing and hear William's voice in my head:

"The company records your voice when you make calls," William had told me that night, his face half lit by the lights of the bar. He was scruffy: he hadn't shaved in a couple days. He continued: "The computer stores your words, letter-sounds, vocal nuances—"

"Vocal nuances?" I said.

He shrugged, gave a what're-you-going-to-do smirk. "Lingo." Then he finished his beer, and we soaked in the nebulous mash of Tengo's rampant guitar, the quick swells of feedback. It was one of William's "desert island bands," and he asked to be buried with his old Painful tape, which I made

sure happened when the time came.

“There’s these things called Programmed Conversations,” he said. ProCos. A storage of topics and talking points. “Kind of like that.” He pointed to the Red Lantern’s jukebox. “The topics are in there, ready to be played, thousands of them. And when you die, family and friends randomly receive calls from you. The ones you selected back when you were breathing.”

“And if I try to steer the computer off course?” I asked. “Change topics?”

But he didn’t answer. He was lost in the moment, in the frothy music, in the things-to-come at his dream job.

The scent of Sunday gravy—tomatoes, hot and sweet pork, garlic. A mound of fresh cavatelli on the wooden cutting board, tiny curls of pasta waiting to be submerged in bubbling, salted water. My father pulls meatballs out of the oven, and my sister Nancy gently drops them into the sauce. Before William moved to California, the meatballs were his job. It was William who made my father switch from frying to baking them.

“We talked about meatballs for fifteen minutes the other day,” my father tells me as he gently places them into the gravy. “I told him I wished he was here to make them, and you know what your brother said? He said, ‘Pops, you always were better at making the meatballs.’” My father smiles, but there’s hurt there, at the corners, and he shakes his head. “Jesus Christ Almighty.”

It’s hard for my parents. They’ve canceled The Line three times already, but always call back hours later, to re-enroll. They know how The Line works, but there’s still a sense of confusion that rises from that part of the brain that deals with logic. He’s dead, but here’s his voice.

Now the stereo plays Sinatra’s “Three Coins In The Fountain” and my mother has to leave the room. Last month, on The Line, the late William said to her, “I hear Frank and I think of you, Ma. Every time.” This house is painted thick, coat after coat, with memories of music: Claudio

Villa, Matteo Salvatore, Dean Martin. Louis Prima singing, *Oh Marie, in your arms I'm longing to be*, which was extra special because my mother's name is Marie, and so William, when he was alive, would take my mother's hand and spin her around: *Tell me you love me! Tell me you love me! Kiss me once while the stars shine above me!* Sunday dinners: an eddy of scent and chatter and melodies and sweeping movement. And always, for me, a sense of nostalgia, even while it's happening, a conscious understanding that the moment will be revealed in later that night and perhaps even in the distant future.

I go into the den and sit next to my ma on the couch, photos of her three kids on each end table, the sconce that's been on the wall since I was a child. I put my arm around her, look over to the olive-green reading chair in the corner.

"Remember I used to read over there," I say.

"You used to read behind the chair, hidden," she says.

"I liked my privacy," I tell her. I pull her close to me and we sit like that for some time. Then she's better, and we make our way back to the dining room.

At the table, we sit in our usual chairs: me next to my sister Nancy, my mother on the other side, followed by my father. William's seat remains empty, and sometimes I catch someone glancing toward the cavity at our table. I do it as well, even now, seven months after he was plucked from the mouth of this world. The feeling is cousin to the desire to look at the awkward or deformed, a force that cranes the neck, pulls the eyes toward curiosities. And so we scoop macaroni onto our plates, grate Reggiano over it all, sometimes add ricotta, converse with those who are still living, and feel the void right beside us.

My genius brother, at twelve years old, took apart an old Commodore 64 computer and put it back together again in minutes. He created a working alarm clock with Legos. My mother joked that when he was born he came out of her holding a working robot. She told us that joke when he was eight

and, when he turned nine, he gave my mother a present: a working robot he constructed with an erector set and an assortment of electronics.

These are my thoughts when I pass the Red Lantern on my way home.

“Are you going to record your voice?” I asked him that night of Yo La Tengo. He shrugged and left it at that. The next day, he moved to California. I drove him to the airport, watched his plane peel off the ground. Nancy was with me.

I said, “I can’t believe he doesn’t live here anymore.”

“He’s lucky,” she said,

“Why don’t you move if you want to leave?”

She snorted and walked away. Nancy and I are in a place between disliking and accepting each other. I dislike her boyfriend, Rick, whom I feel mistreats her. He talks down to her and she takes it, and there are occasions when I hear her crying on the phone while talking to a friend. One Sunday, I let Rick know I didn’t like him and he stormed out, and my sister never really forgave me. We have a love through genetics—a gentle sea-swell that carries us along, but never actually breaks into anything tangible like a hug or a goodbye kiss. I thought that William’s death could force the wave to finally breach, but it only stirred up a short-lived, foamy crest that eventually faded back into the glassy heap of water.

William died three years after moving to the West Coast. A few weeks later I got a phone call from him. I felt as if someone had ambushed me from out of a dark corner. I could feel my heart trying to break its way out of my body. I hardly remember what we talked about that day. Something about the Yankees, how Dad used to take us to the stadium as kids. And then we hung up and I had this weird rush to the head, as if someone had rung a giant church bell in my skull and I was feeling reverberations, the droning shiver of its alloy shell. When things calmed down, I felt a swarming happiness, the kind I used to get when I smoked weed and the good stuff would finally step through the front door. I still get happy pins and needles when William calls. The joy lasts a couple hours before I start

coming down again, but it's a soft landing. Unnerving, but still: soft. He'll call again; I just have to wait.

There is a way I can receive a call without waiting, and that's by visiting his grave, which I do every Monday on the drive home from work. At the cemetery now, stone-grey nimbus clouds gather above me, their bellies full of water. The geo-locator embedded in my brother's headstone detects my phone, so William calls me as I sit on the cool grass, a breeze passing over. He tells me he's thinking about getting a dog, a golden retriever.

"You always did like the idea of having an animal," I say. In the distance, I hear a couple children laughing, the sound of running, the swish and crackle of fallen leaves.

"Particularly goldens," my brother says. And then I hear something through the phone: a blurt of static, raw and metallic, and a far-away word that sounds something like 'rye'; a short, garbled mess that's there and then gone.

"Do you remember playing Civilization?" William says, referencing an old computer game we used to play, where each player starts out as a lone settler and eventually builds an entire empire. "I'm playing now. I'm the Germans under Bismarck. The best. Expansive and industrious."

And then I say, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to call bullshit on you, William. The Persians kick the Germans' ass any day. Expansive and creative. They build, sure, but they also spread culture."

"Culture," he says, "Oh, Mikey. A military win is the only surefire win."

We talk Civilization for an hour before we hang up. It's the best post-death conversation I've ever had with my brother. He calls me a couple more times later in the week, and I try to bring up Civilization but it never really sticks. He'll say something about it, then quickly switch the conversation back to what he had originally brought up when he called, and I always think about that burst of static. The strange sound that resembled the word 'rye.' Every call, I wait for it. I've associated it with our Civilization conver-

sation. I've become obsessed with the static. Please, I think while talking to him. Please come.

The following Sunday, it's baked ziti. Layers of ricotta and mozzarella and red sauce. Dotted between the tiers are marble-sized meatballs. As it bakes, the rooms fill with its scent. I leave the house for a couple minutes and then come back in, just so I can smell the scent anew.

Sitting in the chair I used to hide behind as a child, Matteo Salvatore's "Mo Ve'la Bella Mia da la Muntagna" plays on the CD player, with Salvatore pining, *Mo ve'la mia dalla muntana*. Now comes my belle from the mountain.

Salvatore's voice and the lullaby-strums of guitar carry on, when a video message from The Line appears on my phone. I hit play and the video opens with an aerial view of water gently cascading down a waterfall, splinters of the rushing meltwater winking in the sunlight. It cross-dissolves: a forest of trees, where a covey of birds bursts out of a copse as if suddenly inspired to discover new frontiers. The shadows of those same birds flicker across the wide expanse of a grassy clearing, past a meandering brooklet.

The Line is calling, the text on the screen informs me. Answer.

The camera glides over green knolls, a sweeping steppe, a pasture with a house. I hover across an Amish town, into a bustling city with fists of grey and white buildings.

Even when you're not there, you'll always be there.

And then it holds on a mid-sized brick building on a city's fringe, and the way the camera is keeping steady is enough for you to guess that this is The Line's headquarters. A slow dissolve takes us inside the building, into an office where a middle-aged man with a tamed poof of brown, curly hair sits behind a desk. He's dressed casually, in a denim button-down shirt with the first two buttons left open as if to say, "It's all good, I'm just like you." The man talks about how the mind holds the song that is our life and the voice is the instrument that makes that song come alive, etcetera, etcetera. In essence, The Line is trying to convince me to record my voice with

them while I'm still alive.

Salvatore sings, *Fa subbeto bella mia allu merchete*, as the camera returns to landscapes: rolling hills, the blue sky streaked with glades of sunlight, the copper-colored rooftops of a European city, spires of old churches spiking upward. "When we pass on, our bodies might disappear," says the man's voice as we fly over a lemon grove, a pasture of ambling sheep, a tree-lined lagoon, an English garden. "But our voices can live forever. Let us grace our loved ones with our voices after we've moved on. Let our spirit carry forward through connected speech so that we may help our loved ones live easier." And now just a blank, white screen and a soft instrumental with, if you listen closely, ambient noise: drops, like rainwater falling from trees and gently landing in a still pond; birdsong; something that sounds like the beginning churn of a sprinkler on a muggy summer morning, distantly chugging away in, say, the suburban yard of your childhood home, Mom and Dad in the kitchen looking out the window leading to the backyard, where you and your brother devise an obstacle course for your little sister that involves the swing set, a sprinkler, sporting equipment dug out of the old shed, back when everything was going to be okay, everything was going to be fine.

Lu bene mio 'mpazzi me fà.

One Christmas, when I was in my mid-20's, William gave me a present that would end up being my all-time favorite. We opened gifts at our mother's house that year and, when I unwrapped mine, I sat there stunned.

"I used a real C64 motherboard, Mikey," William said. "Hacked off some inputs and keys, rewired and assembled a keyboard frame. I used a GameCube power supply for it."

I had no idea what he was talking about. All I knew was that I was holding a Commodore 64 laptop, despite the fact that laptops weren't even around when the original Commodore 64 came out. I wasn't around when the original Commodore 64 came out, but I grew up with a computer geek who owned every home computer ever made, so it became part of my child-

hood.

“Do you remember that, William?” I ask him now, sitting at home in my reading chair with the computer in my lap. The room is dark save for the screen’s blue glow. The only sound is the whoosh of tires from cars passing by outside and the hushed rattle of treetops from random breezes. “Remember how we played games on it the rest of the day. Space Taxi mostly. You loved that game, how the character said, ‘Hey, Taxi! Pad 1, please!’”

“Sure,” he says. “But can I tell you about this gift I got Mom? I wanted to send it, but the Post Office was closed today.” I try to steer the conversation back to the Commodore, but it’s no use. William says, “The gift has to do with the Trevi Fountain. Remember?”

“I remember,” I say. “I especially remember that one guy, that rose seller.” I was a teenager, maybe 16, the year all five of us went to Rome. The sky was blue as a robin’s egg, and the heat baked into your skin. Occasionally, a blast of cool breeze rinsed the heat off, leaving you feeling restored and, strangely, wanting to feel that oven heat again. There was the sound of falling water. Near the fountain stood a guy with shoulder-length black hair and a bushy mustache, as if a black rabbit’s foot charm were stuck to his lip. He was selling roses to tourists. He caught me looking at him and scowled at me so hard his eyebrows crossed. Moments later, Nancy walked up to me holding a rose. When I looked back at the rose-seller, he turned away from me and walked toward the other end of the fountain, where tourists sat huddled among the giant, ecru rocks. It was one of those snapshot moments that stayed with me over the years, and even today the man materializes in some of my dreams—dreams that have settings far from the Trevi Fountain. And he’s still angry with me. He never says a word, just shoots knives out of his eyes. Once, a couple years back, I woke up from one of those dreams in the middle of the night—my head still lightly humming with some dark sound from the dream—and there he was, standing over my bed in the darkness, staring at me silently. I startled, shook my head and he disappeared into the night, little by little, like a black and white TV that had been turned off.

"I don't remember him," William says, but I don't care if he remembers. I want to talk about the Commodore 64.

"Can you do me a favor," I say. "Just one thing?"

"What is it, Mikey?"

"Can you say, 'Hey Taxi! Pad 1, please!'" I needed to hear him say it again. The idea—maybe 'lie' is the more appropriate word—that William was still alive would seem truer if he just said those words.

"Why?" William says.

"We used to say it all the time, joking around about the game. Please."

"I just don't understand why," he says, and I shut my eyes tightly. I can feel my heartbeat.

"Please."

"Sure, Mikey," he says, and I breathe out a long exhale. He says, "Hey taxi! Pad 1, please!"

"Thanks," I say. "That means a lot to me."

"Sure thing," he says.

I lie in bed and let my mind wander, try to reach to deeper recesses, the places where dreams come from—thoughts and ideas floating down there like clusters: miniature galaxies, tiny labyrinths, unintelligible unless you let yourself dive deep enough and hook one, reel it in until it's palpable.

I can understand my parents' confusion about William and The Line when I think about his voice in the post-death phone calls. The vocal chords that produce his voice, it all begins with the lungs. You need those hallowed organs to live. So, if there is a voice, shouldn't there be life? The computer is William's lungs now. It's his vocal cords, his articulates. And yes, I know this. It's obvious, but probably more obvious to someone who isn't enrolled in The Line. Because with The Line, it seems so real. So very present.

I wake to the sound of a ringing phone. It's 3 a.m. and I forgot

to shut my window and so the world breathes in, the white sheer curtains billowing, the bottom lip of the blinds lifting forward and smacking back onto the window in a random beat. I look at my phone: it's my brother. This doesn't make sense. The Line promises 'No calls between 9 p.m. and 9 a.m.' Outside, a song blaring from a passing car swells and rolls away. I lift the phone, say hello.

"Hey taxi! Pad 1, please!" William says.

"William?"

"Hey taxi! Pad 1, please!" he says again, and his voice sounds different. Metallic. In the brief pause before he says it again, there is a sound like a shovel scraping a sheet of wrought iron. And then again: "Hey, taxi! Pad 1, please!"

"William," I say, trying to interject. But it's no use. He keeps repeating it—"Hey, taxi! Pad 1, please!"—and something keeps me hanging on, hoping he'll say something else, anything else. But tonight it's only this. Five minutes go by before I tap 'End' on my phone and lie back down. I close my eyes, hoping for silence, but all I can hear is my brother's voice in my head saying that phrase over and over and over and over until I can see the tiny taxi itself floating through empty, dark space, thrusters firing off behind it, sending the car up, left, right, and all I can think is, Please don't let the phone ring again.

The next afternoon, he calls and, before I pick up, I hesitate.

For the first time, I hesitate.

But I do pick it up. My desire to hear his voice, to live in this other world, is stronger than any surfacing unease. Right away, he mentions something about eating frog legs, and a memory immediately comes to me, and I ask him, "Remember that frog?" When I was nine years old and a friend of mine whipped a frog hard with a jump rope in my parents' backyard until the frog lay on its back, apparently dead. I buried it and, a few hours later, after my friend left, William and I dug it up with a garden shovel and the frog launched itself out of the hole, somehow alive and kick-

ing. I stumbled and I tripped over a tree root popping out of the ground. I don't know if my friend had just knocked the thing out and William and I dug it up at the right time or what, but I didn't care. We laughed and laughed and laughed.

"Did we cook frog legs together?" William asks now.

"No," I say, "the frog that Greg thought he killed? When we were kids?"

"I don't know what this has to do with f-f-f-food," William says.

A stutter. Where did it come from? Then from the phone comes a noise: something like a distant clang, like a sledgehammer meeting rock. Now there's a light, steady buzz in the background.

"Rye," William says.

"What?"

"Rye," he repeats.

"I just wanted to talk about that frog that we dug up—"

"I don't remember ever eating a frog."

"We didn't eat it."

"Well then why bring it up?" A little annoyed now.

"I'm just reminiscing," I say.

"What?" he says.

"I'm just—"

"WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT RYE RYE RYERYE!"

It's the voice of a madman, guttural, angry, the cadence robotic. I feel dizzy. An image claws at me: a cloud of bats flitting around telephone wires at dusk, something my brother and I saw one summer night during our childhood while sneaking a cigarette at the gazebo in our old neighborhood park. We were alone, and the bats seemed to fly about in chaos. That's what my brother's voice sounds like: chaos.

I hang up on him. He does not call back.

Nancy calls for the first time since before William left for California. She tells me she canceled *The Line* today. I can see that wave starting to foam at

the crest again, promising to finally breach.

“Why?” I ask.

“I can’t do it anymore. It’s creepy. There are too many glitches lately, and I…” and here she starts crying.

I let her go for a little bit, and then I say, “The glitches go away. They always do.”

“It’s been three nights in a row. It’s always been just a day here and there, but three nights?”

“It’s been two for me,” I tell her.

“You’re an idiot for even thinking about letting it go for three days.”

You let it go for three, I consider saying to her, but I let it go.

“Do you want to know what happened this last time?” she says. “What he said to me?”

“No,” I tell her. “Don’t relive it, if it’s just going to make you more upset.”

“Fine,” she says.

We’re both quiet. I try to dissect her ‘fine,’ wonder if there was animosity behind it, or if she appreciated my sentiment.

“You should consider it,” she says.

“Consider what?”

“Canceling.”

I tell her I’ll consider it. I don’t want to hang up yet. But the next thing I know we’re saying our good-byes.

The next night, the phone rings again. I look at the time on my stovetop: 2:33 a.m. I know who it is. I know it’s a glitch. So why look? Why not just go back to sleep and let the phone ring? I close my eyes and the phone eventually stops ringing and I congratulate myself. I try to wade my way through the hard currents of sleeplessness and find myself thinking about the time William and I stayed up all night playing Zork on his computer. I had been 12 or 13, and we were both hopped up on Coca-Cola, tortilla

chips and the queso dip our mother used to make. The memory comes to me so quickly, I feel shaken, the feeling of being too close to the street when a truck barrels by you; there is this invisible surge that pushes at your whole body. Me typing, William over my shoulder, the room dark, save for the desk lamp illuminating the map to the Underground Empire. And there are high points in this memory, peaks of vividness that stand out from the more monochromatic moments. We were in the maze and we stumbled upon that pile of bones: *a skeleton, probably the remains of a luckless adventurer, is here.*

“Touch the skeleton,” my brother said.

I asked him if he meant *search*.

“No, touch it.” I did. A ghost appears in the room and is appalled at your desecration of the remains of a fellow adventurer. Then the ghost cast a curse on me. William laughed.

“You knew!” I whisper-yelled.

Out of his laughter, I heard him say, “I did.”

My phone rings again. Without opening my eyes, I reach over and pick it up.

“What took you so long? You screening your calls or something?”

“No,” I say. “I was sleeping. You’re not supposed to call this late.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

His voice sounds completely normal. No signs of an angry machine running it, no buzzing drone in the background. It’s my brother, coming in clear as crystal.

“Never mind,” I tell him.

“Do me a favor, would you?”

“What?”

“Let me in,” he says.

The glimmer of a car’s headlights shine through the blinds and then it’s dark again. I close my eyes and I can see that line on my old computer screen again: *a skeleton, probably the remains of a luckless adventurer, is here.*

“What do you mean?” I say.

“What do *you* mean?” he says. He sounds out of breath.

“How can I let you in?” I ask.

A car door slams outside.

“Don’t be dense,” William says. “I’m right outside your front door.”

I hang up, hands shaking. My stomach drops. I hear that buzz humming like an electric current in the back of my head. Death. It’s the ultimate break in routine. Death stops it all. Death says, you will no longer do what you’ve been doing for decades: breathing, seeing, tasting manicotti, listening to *Tic-tí, Tic-tá*. It’s routine—not life—that we long for at Death’s door. We want to keep doing the things we’ve been doing.

But no.

I move off the couch and walk to the front door. What do I expect to find? I imagine a wormhole, a circle of blackness pulling the night into it and, on the other side of the wormhole, William sitting in a dark room all by himself with a phone to his ear. He apologizes for the glitches, blames it on remnants from the Big Bang, and I just nod in agreement. Or maybe I’ll open the door and find a puff of fading smoke—some kind of symbolic sign of life being snuffed out a split-second before I opened it. Or maybe I’ll find a small mound of dust lying on the doorstep, or maybe an article of clothing—one of his Converse All-Stars. Or maybe I’ll find nothing at all, just the middle-of-the-night—maybe with a bit more weight in the air as if gravity were extra-heavy at my doorstep.

And so I open the door, my eyes closed. I’m scared to open them. Afraid to see him there. Afraid to not see him there and be disappointed. I have to open them at some point, accept what’s there or what isn’t there. But I decide to first revel in this: the idea that he’s there. The possibility. That seems much less frightening than his actual ghost, and much more hopeful than the empty night air. Let me just hold on to this one moment. As indefinite and fantastical as it is, let me just hold onto it a little longer. Then I’ll open my eyes.

CATS IN KOREA

It will take 6+ months until I hear back from my birthmother.
My childhood Korean friend used to sign e-mails with this: =^.^=

so I thought Koreans must like cats!
but I made friends with a PhD candidate who taught me the power of Oma's kimchi

and cleanliness and she said it's just not true. Our friendship didn't last
because she doesn't like the sound of music.

In Korea, cat meat was historically boiled
and made into a tonic as a folk remedy for neuralgia and arthritis,

but @Just1WayTicket says that cat cafés are on every corner (see: just get off at Hongik
University, exit 9)—just don't spank the cat.

VICTORIA MCARTOR

WHAT CHAOS

we played
a childish attempt
to baptize
each other

& found each other
undead

for the time being

as if the ablutions
were working

but we've seen
how imitation
& daily use

make for a placebo
that waits

as waiting is all
a completed thing can do

to replace itself

like I could feel
the second death
coming

when I
think about

where they know
my name & make me

answer by it

BOMB

I could have shown you a swimming pool perky with turquoise light had we planned the last sunset right but instead I'm cancelling plans and taking the first flight out of Oklahoma because even though a ripple slows it never quite comes to stillness so I'm leaving this watch on the security belt although I'm pretty sure they would have let me bring that bomb onboard

BIPOLAR SUNSHINE

the day has its daily breakdown

as darkness brushes
sideways from the base of a cloud

something natural
in the way she kisses my hand
while little tremors of electricity
organize a rainbow

something contrived in the way
she approaches my mouth

as if she's looking into the pool
realizing what was blue turned black
as it got deeper

she says the same thing
every afternoon it rains

but I'm tired of hearing the body
is mostly water

tired of the spilling narrative
evaporating as the clouds break

but she was on to something

when she said everything
would to purge eventually

so we watched men gone stupid

with color

collecting branches from a gray pool
for a moment the expectation

of pretty & pleasantry
hardly existed

& therefore might have been possible

tonight might be okay
after all

MATTHEW SPIRENG

BEEES

(for Keith)

You remember at seven visiting the farm,
watching the dogs loose in a far field
suddenly come running as if being chased.

The old man shouted Bees! and ran for
his truck, you and your father yours, and
got in just as the dogs, panting and frantic,

jumped in too, fur alive with yellow jackets
that took to you, so sixty years later
the memory is still as sharp as pain.

BREATHE

Quinn and I used to swim together. Before we became a couple we'd go to Chicken Ranch Beach and circumnavigate the No Boating area, trying to ride the buoys. Holding my breath was not so bad and not so hard; gliding below the surface quiet as a sigh, blood pressure rapping against my eardrums, I felt calm.

At Drake's Beach, ocean waves crashing hard and loud, Quinn wouldn't let me swim alone. For starters, there were always reasons why I shouldn't swim: "It's too dark," "There's that rip tide," "You'll get attacked by a shark," "You're drunk."

I never listened to his reasons, and unwilling to relinquish them, Quinn would stand stern and steady, navel-deep in the frigid water, while I swam past the breakers. When I fell in love with Quinn he was thirty years old. I was twenty-two.

*

When you don't breathe, your system releases adrenaline. Your heart beats faster. The carbon dioxide that's normally released in exhalations builds up in your body and it's this, not oxygen deprivation, that makes not breathing uncomfortable. The carbon dioxide floods your cells, overwhelms you. Your blood will begin to acidify. Given enough time without air, your lungs themselves, not your throat or voice box, will start to scream.

If you're holding your breath voluntarily, your body will eventually force you to breathe. If you hold your breath until you pass out, you'll inhale once you lose consciousness; this kills some divers in the form of shallow water blackouts.

Hold your breath long enough and your diaphragm will begin to spasm uncontrollably, trying to suck in air, trying to pump oxygen back to your starving cells. These contractions will hurt.

It's called the *critical line*, the point at which the carbon dioxide amassing in your blood causes you to feel pain.

*

When I heard Max's voice on the home message machine, I sucked in air. I was holding the front door open with one hand and my car keys

with the other.

“Gina... Gina... if you’re there pick up. I need to talk to you.”

Max lived with Quinn and me. I ran to the phone.

I’d been trying to reach Quinn for hours. It was the day before I turned twenty-three, and we were supposed to do errands in Petaluma together before meeting my parents for dinner in Point Reyes. I knew Quinn was running a load of yard waste to the dump with our neighbor, so I left for Petaluma alone. When I returned to an empty house, I texted Quinn, “Are you okay? Where are you?”

On the phone I asked Max, “What’s going on?”

“Quinn was hit by a truck. He’s in Marin General Hospital right now.”

“Is he okay?”

“He has a broken leg and a brain injury.”

“How bad is it?”

“We don’t know yet.”

I said I’d be there as soon as I could. My life tumbled into itself, beyond itself, and landed with Quinn in the hospital. I took a breath the moment I heard Max’s voice and held it, uncontrollably and complicity, and waited for Quinn get better.

*

“The body can be trained,” states pulmonary specialist Dr. Ralph Potkin, who helped train German diver Tom Sietas to withstand twenty-two minutes and twenty-two seconds without air. According to Dr. Ralph Potkin, with approximately an hour of professional help, most people will discover that they can hold their breath for about four minutes.

Training involves learning not to be scared or distressed by your body’s normal mechanisms, by the natural responses you’ll experience to oxygen deprivation and carbon dioxide overload. A huge part of Sietas’s training was pushing back his own critical line. Different people reach this point at different times, everyone having their own boundaries and limits, their own parameters for pain. Even though I love to swim, I can only hold

my breath for about a minute and a half.

*

Maya, a close friend of Quinn's who used to live with us, hugged me when I got to the intensive care unit. I could tell she'd been crying, and she smelled like smoke.

"You'd better go see him," Maya's boyfriend's mother said when I asked how bad it was.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Maya asked. I nodded, and she plucked my hand from my side and walked me past the double doors, the nurses' desk, and into Quinn's room.

When I saw him and began to shake, Maya wrapped her arm around my shoulder. I held my mouth.

Quinn's head had been partially shaved to expose a huge laceration that arched from his forehead to behind his ear. A series of staples held the skin together. There was another gash above his eyebrow, stitched with black thread. A clear tube ran from a hole in his skull to a bag somewhere, letting excess blood drain, relieving the pressure. There was another laceration in the back of his skull. Multiple IVs dangled from both of Quinn's arms. One leg was suspended above him, immobilized. His hair and face were crusted with blood.

"I think he can hear us," Maya said dreamily. "I think he knows we're here."

He'd just tipped into a coma that would last five days.

*

When Quinn was in the hospital, I visited him every day. I slept there often, first curled on chairs tucked together, then later spread out on folding hospital cots.

Sometimes at night, with my cot shoved against his bed, our hands would find each other and my critical line, the point at which holding and staying would cause too much pain and I'd be forced to exhale and let go of Quinn, would leapfrog eons away. I'd think, *I'll do this as long as I need to.*

One morning around four a.m., two nurses turned on the lights

and checked Quinn's vitals. One leaned over him, another eyed an IV bag. Quinn shifted and moaned: I put my hand in his and his finger pressed into the back of my palm.

"He seems cold, can you get him another blanket?" When they left for a moment, I kissed his hand. We remained touching, like a lifeline for the both of us in the dim room. At that point he still wasn't speaking, or eating by himself, or using the bathroom on his own.

I did graduate school homework beside his bed, I ate meals in the cafeteria or my car, and didn't sleep for more than half an hour at a time when I was there. I hardly slept at home. I didn't see my friends or my family and I didn't want to.

What I wanted was Quinn, dancing with the passenger side seatbelt of my car while I drove us to San Francisco. I wanted him trying to convince me to wear a lifejacket when I swam, or waving at me from the shore. I wanted his hands on me again, his mouth on me, and beyond that I wanted the idea of what he was more than what he'd been—Quinn was totally separate from everything about my life before I met him, and when I met him, I wasn't very happy with my life.

And slowly, so slowly, he did get better. I almost cried, laughing and hopping up and down and calling over the fence to the neighbors, the first time he left a message on my voicemail; finally, in the hospital, they let him have a phone. *Since when is he so coherent?* I thought. There were times I drove home at midnight, singing along with the radio, elated and manic because he'd called me "Sweetie" and bought me a lukewarm cafeteria coffee. Those nights I'd stay up late, even if I had work the next day. I'd dance with the dog in the living room, and eat a large meal with my fingers, standing over the sink.

But there were other nights, too. There were nights I cried on the long drive home because I knew the house would be empty when I got there, or because Quinn called me *Bitch* at the hospital, because he wouldn't speak to me, because he'd been swearing at the nurses, went to the bathroom on the floor in protest, or wouldn't take his meds. Those nights

I'd get home, let his dog, Tashi, out to pee, then crawl under the covers. Sometimes, I wouldn't even turn off the lights. I wouldn't lock the doors—and if all those unnamed, faceless shadows we sometimes fear wanted to do horrible things to me, then let them. I wouldn't eat, wouldn't change into pajamas. I'd just lay down in bed, Tashi circling my body to find a warm space against my thigh or abdomen, and let myself feel crushed.

*

The Water Torture Cell was a mahogany and metal tank with a glass front, built in England in 1911. It was one of Harry Houdini's great escapes—he'd be suspended by stocks on the cell's lid, ankles put into restraint braces, then lowered into the water. Lastly, the lid was locked. At the beginning of his performance, he'd always take time to outline the risks and precautions, and to inspect the locks and restraints in front of the audience.

In the only known recording of Harry Houdini's voice, he talks about this tank. "Should anything go wrong when I am locked up," his carnival voice echoes, "one of my assistants [will] walk through the curtain, ready to rush in, demolishing the glass, allowing the water to flow out, in order to save my life."

Houdini never failed this escape. His execution was so flawless and capable, so wholly magical, that some believed Houdini didn't *actually* break free of the restraints and escape the cell; they thought he could dematerialize and reappear outside the apparatus.

*

Finally, after I didn't die of sleep deprivation or in any of the cruel ways unnamed, faceless shadows can conceive of, after Quinn survived a coma, after he re-learned how to swallow, talk, and walk, after almost two months of hospitalization and a few weeks at his parent's house, Quinn came home. To the falling-down, fire-warmed ranch house we'd been living in before he got hit. On one of his first mornings back, Quinn spent hours looking through old boxes of memorabilia. He pulled out pictures and T-shirts to show me while I sat at the kitchen table drinking coffee and pretending to do homework, when really I was just watching him. The way

he walked, the way his back muscles moved, the way he lit cigarettes, how his mouth looked when he leaned in to kiss me.

“Did I ever show you this?” Quinn asked, bearing newspaper clippings from when he was a paramedic. Bearing patches from when he was a firefighter. Photographs from parties.

“I found this, I want you to have it,” he kept saying. Hair sticks, wood he’d carved, baseball caps, old shirts, all of it grew on the table next to the no-where-near-finished graduate thesis I wasn’t working on.

“You’re a beautiful creature,” Quinn kept saying. “I love you.”

He repeated that over and over, too: *I love you, I love you, I love you.*

He’d come into the kitchen just to touch his lips to my cheek and pour more coffee in my cup which was never less than three quarters full.

“See this picture?” he’d ask, pointing. “That’s me, right there.”

And that felt like him, right there. That felt like him the way I wanted him, the way I’d imagined he would be when he came back. The way he felt when I brought him take-out and we sat in the hospital together, laughing while we ate, him promising to take me to the restaurant I’d ordered the jalapeño poppers and burgers from once he was released. Sometimes the way he felt matched my idea of him, the way I fantasized our possible life.

It didn’t last.

I came home from work one day and he was swearing and stabbing his bookshelf with a knife that had an eight-inch blade. He’d have a bad conversation on the phone and I’d hear *tunk, tunk, tunk* ringing from the bedroom—he’d be shooting razor-tipped arrows at a board leaned against a wall. The first time I went to investigate the sound, he convinced me to shoot one, too; the arrow didn’t stick, rebounded, and almost hit me. I quit. He shot another; it rebounded and almost hit Tashi. Quinn laughed and said it’d serve her right.

One night, I woke up when Quinn shifted abruptly. In the almost absolute darkness, I could make out the shining streak of his knife held to

Tashi's throat. When I was at work, he'd hit her. In front of me, he hit her. Max's girlfriend said Quinn held Tashi between his legs, knife to her neck, and screamed, "Don't tempt me, Dog." When I refused to abuse drugs with him, he'd yell, "What the fuck is this? Am I some kind of fucking addict or something? Why doesn't anyone want to have any fun anymore?"

Where was my breath then?

I'd thought the waiting was over. I thought I'd held up, outlasted, dealt with the burning lungs and the contracting diaphragm and would be able to stand in the free air again. But having him home was worse than having him at the hospital. I didn't feel like I was holding my breath anymore, I felt like someone was holding me under. I'd close my eyes and try to exhale carbon dioxide while taking up as little oxygen as possible.

"You were never supposed to see this," Quinn told me once, after he'd just scratched his face and cheeks so hard they bled. He was right, I wasn't. Even Max didn't see it, spending the time in his room with the door closed and TV turned up loud. That rage, that darkness, it was supposed to be Quinn's secret, but it became mine, too.

*

When we breathe, inhalations draw air into our lungs, and oxygen is absorbed through our alveoli. Our blood holds it. We need oxygen to digest food, to perform any physical activity whatsoever, and to maintain bodily functions. Blood dispenses this necessary sustenance to our cells. Blood trades oxygen for carbon dioxide, swapping something useful for something poisonous. When we exhale, we make room for more oxygen.

Being in a relationship with someone who's angry and unpredictable is like overloading your system with carbon dioxide; you annihilate any room for growth. You block yourself to healthy exchanges, deny your body what it needs, and slowly the acidity level of the blood coursing through your veins rises. You burn from the inside, out.

*

Quinn claimed to not remember it in the morning, but on the drive home from dinner at his parents' house one night, he kept threaten-

ing to do things: to jump out of the car, to grab the wheel and crash it, to hit me, to kill himself, to run away, to call the cops on me. His breath was weed-smoke green and pharmacy-medication metallic.

“If you leave me,” Quinn snarled, his face inches from my cheek as I stared straight ahead and crested my Honda over a hill, “I’m going to come after you.” He waited a beat, so this could sink in. I’d seen him do dive-rolls with a sword off of a fifteen-foot-tall roof. He’d broken a stranger’s hand and dislocated someone’s shoulder because they grabbed me at a club. He’d thrown two of our house kittens out a window, and although it was the first story, I still screamed and ran outside to check. And this—the armed dive rolls, the two strangers, the kittens—this was all before the accident. I know that I knew, in some recess of my emotional-logical self, that Quinn was not right for me. That I was putting myself at risk, that I was getting into trouble. I wonder now, why did I try so hard to make it work?

From a young age I’ve collapsed the terms “danger” and “safety,” and if they weren’t totally synonymous they were at least so inextricable that one never seemed to appear without the other. Love stood at the epicenter of this dynamic, the pivot point for danger and safety, and this increased my tolerance for making poor decisions, for being reckless. But the way Quinn was talking to me touched a new level of danger, a colder, harder one that safety couldn’t reach.

“You won’t hear me coming,” Quinn continued, “you won’t see me coming, and I am one vindictive motherfucker.”

I kept my eyes on the small wedge of road illuminated through the mist by my headlights. I thought if I glanced a look at Quinn I might die, that my heart might jump the tracks of my ribs and head North: going, gone, gone.

This, I knew with every fiber of my being scared shitless, *this is my critical line*. It didn’t matter if it was the brain injury, didn’t matter if it was the drugs, didn’t matter if I loved him because I did, deep down and rooted into myself, raw and bloody, but that was my limit. That was the moment I knew I couldn’t hold it, couldn’t stay. I didn’t respond, just pushed down on

the accelerator. Twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five, forty.

*

Often during submersion escapes, Houdini would invite the audience to hold their breath with him.

Imagine the fear, the suspense. Half the crowd might've been screaming and the other half might've been desperately holding their breath and one man behind a curtain battling impossible odds.

An advertisement for Houdini's escape from a sealed, oversized milk can read, "Failure Means A Drowning Death."

Every time he appeared dripping wet and victorious, I imagine there to have been a moment of quiet awe, a total collective exhale that revved into a sudden explosive cacophony of shouts and applause.

*

At five-thirty a.m. Quinn didn't know I was leaving. I'd stayed up late with him the night before—prescriptions and street drugs, anything to keep Quinn at bay, anything to keep his yelling to a dull roar with the promise of my escape breaking over the horizon—then slipped out of bed before dawn. The stars were bright and focused, and in the darkness there were no clouds. My head throbbed with a pharmacy hangover. When I walked or turned my head, the floor spun. It was cold out.

I didn't move so much as I poured the contents of my physical life from the house to the car. Without time to gather boxes, I used paper grocery bags to relay stacks of books straight into the trunk. I shoved all my clothes into a traveling truck, and two suitcases absorbed almost everything else. Each time I got close to the door with an incriminating armload of belongings, I held my breath. Each time I turned the knob, I looked over my shoulder to the room where Quinn was sleeping. I was terrified that door would swing open and he'd catch me, then execute one of the scenarios that had been keeping me awake at night.

But the only door that opened, over and over, was the front door. It would yawn into the darkness outside, and whenever I crossed the threshold and crammed another load into my car, I exhaled a sip of carbon

dioxide and each one of my hapless, starved cells cried out in relief.

I drove to my parents' house with a carload of belongings shuffling and falling all around me. Tashi was there, too, shanghai'd to the backseat. His dog now my dog. My life now my life. All of it for keeps.

I was stoic on the first trip, but when I returned for the second pass and removed every piece of myself from that house, I felt like I was shattering. Like my fingernails were peeling back. For awhile I winced in silence, shoulders tight. But before I got onto the main road I bent forward against the wheel, leaned back into my seat, and let loose a frantic, maniac scream that hit the roof of my mouth like a freight train and echoed through the car like a swear word. I wheezed and cried and screamed and howled. I beat my hands against the steering wheel, my fists against the car door, my foot against the gas. I didn't realize it then, but at that moment I finally stopped holding my breath. Everything relaxed, and the terror and anger and rage and love that I'd been holding onto passed through me in waves. Even though my throat stung, even though burned with the freedom of escape like rain that sizzles soil after a long drought, I kept shrieking. I wanted my manic, brutal catharsis to break me wide open to prove I hadn't already split.

*

How long do you think you can hold your breath? We can train our bodies to withstand immense amounts of pain, to survive without oxygen and cope with the overwhelming burn of carbon dioxide, to push past our critical line, but eventually we will always fold. And when we do break and succumb, it doesn't mean pain has triumphed over us—rather, it means that our will to live, a vague term that exists at the nexus of Life and Love, has just walked through the curtain, rushed in, and demolished the glass so we can take another breath. We splay on the floor in those moments, tired and beaten and bloody, but alive and safe and wiser, the danger a passing pool at our feet.

Driving to my parent's home from the ranch house, I shook and cried and cussed at the top of my lungs all the way through Point Reyes,

and then Olema, and then Lagunitas. When I finally exhausted all swear words and desperate curses, I hyperventilated. Inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale.

I rolled down the windows and let fog wash through the car, chilling my face where tears ran.

AMPUTEES

This guy I knew at school when he asked his girlfriend to marry him and she said no went a little crazy and changed his name like it was the most normal thing in the world and it wasn't even a regular name either. It was the name of a hero in some Kung Fu movie. From then on he made me pretty nervous and I couldn't put my finger on why but when he moved to Alaska I was kind of relieved. It's a lot of pressure being around new people and he was the worst kind of new person—one you already know. You'd be surprised how many of these people with heroic sounding names weren't born that way. Most of them have to get pretty fucked over to get a badass name like Siegfried or Freya. So when Linda came to work one day and told us she was going to be called Nike from then on none of us knew that Nike was the winged goddess of victory but we all knew that her affair with the boss was over.

GOD

It's easy to get judgmental and just say better buddies would look out for a friend but when God has been hitting it hard in the poolroom since happy hour you don't want to be the one trying to cut him off so if you think of a strategy for that I'll be happy to listen. Still there are fail-safes in the system. First off closing time is closing time so fuck the hell off and second is the only other absolute in the universe—The moment it crosses your mind that the bartender might go home with you that's when you've had enough. So God oozes up to the bar with that look on his face like "Hey I'm just here to settle up" which isn't fooling anybody since he hasn't paid for a drink in this place in like three generations. And nobody heard what she said but Karen never even stops drying glasses while she shuts down Yahweh like he was the UPS man. To this day she never talks about it but legend is she did it with just two words. "Go home and sleep it off big guy." There are no exceptions to the rules. Big guy. You don't recover from shit like that.

CIRCLES

1.

My mother has a mole above her left eye. It circles like a dark, mysterious planet yet to be discovered. When I stare at her, which I often do when she washes her face in the morning, I imagine that her mole is pulling me in like a magnet.

2.

Beauty as defined by imperfection was an appealing concept for me. According to Teen, I had many. In the fourth grade, I tried to recreate Cindy Crawford's signature mole. I stole my mother's eyeliner and sat atop the bathroom counter with a picture of Cindy taped to the mirror. She was on the cover of People's "50 Most Beautiful People in the World" and by the age of 9, I knew the world had billions and billions of people.

3.

Between the ages of 4 and 5, I only drew circles. My teachers tried to make me trace the bottoms of coffee cans and yogurt lids, but I wouldn't have it. I prided myself on my ability to draw circles in free form. Circles both empty and full, circles with the grace of a lake expanding during a flood, the clumsy trees drawn inextricably toward the center.

4.

Mao Zedong's "heavenly mole" is located in the center of his chin and follows a strict belief in the struggle against imperialism and capitalism. His mole represents determination, resilience, and the promise of growth.

5.

I got greedy. I kept circling the spot by my lip like some lost ship circling an unlit lighthouse. My fake Cindy mole grew to the size of a curled up mouse. When my mother found me, she thought a pen had exploded on my face and proceeded to remove all the pens from the house.

6.

In “Circles,” Emerson writes: “The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end.” The compound eye of a fly perched on my dinner plate repeats.

7.

In 1991, Donald Rumsfeld created Whack-a-Mao, an arcade game. Whack-A-Mao featured Mao’s head popping in and out of gopher holes. When Whack-a-Mao was upgraded, the game replaced Mao’s head with his iconic mole. As if the mole had a life of its own. As if the mole could incite revolution, swim the Yangtze River, starve millions of people during the Great Leap Forward and remain just a mole.

8.

If a mole changes color, shape, or grows, you should be concerned.

9.

To be “repeated without end.” When I return home to visit for the holidays, it always snows in the middle of the night and someone always beckons their cat inside. This scene repeats again and again:

my return, the snow, the cat, the caring of the cat.

10.

In 2009, at 43, Cindy Crawford spoke out about cancer concerns related to her mole. Now protruding from her face, she makes sure to get her mole checked. She reports to the Daily Mail: “It’s not something I really like to talk about.”

11.

My grandfather has a liver spot on his chin. This is one of many, but this spot is my favorite. A long whisker juts out from it and sometimes he strokes it when he reads the newspaper in the evening. Sometimes it falls into his tea when he reaches to take a sip. The last time I saw him, he was wearing a flannel hunting cap and was curled up on his left side like a fallen deer. Above his bed at the hospital, there was a laminated sign with 15 phonetic spellings of Cantonese words in English, one of which was the word “sorry”: *deui mh jyuh*.

12.

I dreamt once that all my beauty marks, moles, and freckles gathered together to form a large, black cloud floating above the center of my chest. The black cloud shook at its edges like an egg frying. The cloud gathered everything around me –my water glass, my glasses, bee pollen, the light underneath my bedroom door. You should have paid more attention to physics in school, the cloud says to me. You have no idea how the world works.

THIS GIFT OF ROCKS

On our last morning together, I'm brushing my teeth when you emerge from the shower, your hand cupped like you've brought water for me to drink. You beckon me closer, invert your palm over mine, and smile, expectant. I clench the toothbrush between my teeth and squint at the small piece of metal, jewel-sharp and red with blood. These fragments of galvanized steel work their way out from under your skin while you bathe. They are a record of you, 15, turning your back to a pipe bomb, of you, young, testing your limits.

It's a tradition we established, this gift of rocks. Moonstones from my race in San Luis Obispo. Lapis lazuli from your deployment in Afghanistan. Gravel from a helmetless ride to Milwaukee. This shard from beneath your skin—the closest I've ever been to you.

I spit into the sink and meet your eyes in the mirror, hoping to see regret for that night we swatted mosquitoes on the patio and listed all the reasons I should follow the job. *Come with*, I say, though I know the reasons you can't: your daughter, your service, your home. Still, I need to hear it again—that syllable as rice-small as the metal in my palm: *No*. You're not unkind when you say it, though you continue toweling yourself, under the armpits, between the legs, behind the neck.

The first time I touched your back, I recoiled. The hills of your flesh were waxy and hard. Boils, I thought. Something arcane, Biblical. When I gathered the courage to ask, you laughed, easy as that *no*. This, despite what your mother told me later: your skin didn't grow back easily. It took years of dermatologists and ointments, and still the repair isn't finished. Still, there is a piece of not-you in my hand.

You disappear into the bedroom to dress, and I close my fist, the fragment knuckling the flesh where my head line and fate line meet. In college, I told the palm reader that I didn't believe in destiny or soul mates, and she traced those lines with a shake of her head meaning, *you fool* or maybe *you liar*.

I carry the tiny fleck to the back patio and imagine you in the house behind me: the army t-shirt you've pulled over your head, the blood

dotting the collar. I'm hurt by your refusal, and perhaps you're hurt I'm leaving. Perhaps it's a lesson: we break our own hearts.

With my eyes closed, I blow the metal into the garden like a dandelion seed. I wish—not with words so much as with feeling—for the last piece to nose through your skin tomorrow, for the scars to be petal-soft and pink. For dry riverbeds of limestone, quartz, and shale along my drive south. For the courage to skip these rocks across July-boiled blacktop, my back to you.

BRANSON

I'm a caring mother. My children are grateful for me, so grateful they ran off to Afghanistan. They thought I'd be mad but I just threw my head back and laughed, drove down and had a wild time in Branson. I remember my brother, how we used to conspire together under the stairs, giggle about our parents and how against them we were. Now he's fifty-two. Married a girl with a loose hinge and his kids hate his guts.

My children like pickles and I wonder if there are pickles in Afghanistan. If only they'd call me I could send them a jar. They're pretty salty, the pickles. I'm sure they'd keep.

I read a parenting book once. It advised spanking for those defiant times so I spanked and now—Oh, Lord—what a villain I was when I told my daughter she ought to give that devil-toddler a good swat just below the diaper line. Nothing painful, just a quick tap to let the kid know, “Hey, the world's a dangerous place. I can be dangerous, too.”

How do they handle all that dust? I bet it smears their clothes, coats their eyelids and changes the color. It always looks so red on TV. I wonder if my children will come home with red eyelids.

My neighbor Beth has good kids. They all stuck around within a half-hour's drive. One son's a deacon and a state trooper. But their house took a heap of damage in that tornado last year, so how good could they be?

I'm seeing a counselor since my kids left. There's this thing inside me, like a new person frowning just under my skin. I'm not sure who I am. My counselor told me to talk to her—the frowner—get to know her a little. My counselor told me not to go to Branson.

My husband's name is Perry, which isn't much of a name for a man. He's not a great husband. It's all wrapped up in love languages. He brings me little gifts, mostly flowers. It was nice the first time. I smiled and said “But what on earth do you *do* with these?” I told him not to but he keeps bringing me flowers. I don't know where he gets them but I'm worried they're cheap.

Perry's been so selfish since the kids left for Afghanistan. He paces the house saying, “I'm their father. I'm their father.” And I sit there knitting

and think “What am I, a turd?” He wants them all to himself. He was never that affectionate before they left. Now he talks about hugging my children like they’re dying. The counselor called this “a reversal.” I thought that sounded too fancy for what it was.

You ask anybody around town if I love my kids. And they always loved me back. As kids they were cuddlers, burrowed their noses right up to my cheek. Now they stand across the room and stare me down with those acid eyes. Blame me for petty nothings I said years ago. It really changes your perspective on things. My counselor asked me to elaborate on that, but I didn’t know what to say.

My kids will be all right. They’ll return to me. They’re in the midst of chaos, but God has plans for them. Ever since I bounced them on my weak knees, I *knew* they were destined for greatness. God was going to walk through them and leave a little bit of himself behind.

Those plane people don’t let you send pickles in the jar. They don’t like the glass. I wonder if that’s a terrorist thing. Imagine some A-rab digging out a jar of pickles, slamming it against the luggage—you’d never get that juice out—and rampaging through the cabin with the shards. Could you slit someone’s throat with a broken pickle jar? My counselor wouldn’t want me thinking about that.

I don’t know what they’re doing over there. They told me—humanitarian something or other. I don’t quite believe them. They can be sneaky like that. My children. They’re just too focused. They get it from me, so really I blame myself.

WILDERNESS

For my sister

Out on the plateaus, it was winter. If you had slept, you woke with your tarp blown halfway off, its plastic heaped with snow. To build a shelter, you had been told, was a privilege. Something to be earned. So in those early days you curled into the tarp like a burrito. The heated water bottle, wedged into your canvas sleeping bag, cooled within minutes, and you spent nights quivering, packed into every piece of clothing they gave you. You cried, although you hoped no one could hear.

No one told you where you were. That was against the point. That would help you to run. You weren't a runner, not really, but they had to assume if town was nearby you'd slip out in the middle of the night, follow a road in, beg a ride somewhere. Disappear. For this reason, they took your shoes at night, and sometimes you peed sock-footed in the early morning, squatting in the snow. During the day when you went to the bathroom you counted out loud, *three, four, five*, so they could tell you weren't running, or throwing up if you were one of the bulimics. (You weren't.) When the group fanned out to collect firewood, you all counted together, each of you hollering your assigned number in turns. If you took too long, they'd come after you.

The plateaus were quiet, empty. Your group ran into no one. Your group trudged uphill through the mud. At gear issuing, the closest boot size they'd had was a 10. You were an eight and a half. So your feet hurt.

You knew, at least, that you'd begun in Roosevelt, Utah. The escorts had dropped you on a farm in late October, after the flight from Atlanta to Salt Lake City, after the drive south and east to where the land flattened and browned. It was never clear why you were on the farm, except maybe that they knew more students were coming and this was the easiest way to integrate them, before you went out onto the plateaus. During these days, you did things like dig pits, tear down sheds, feed the horses and the chickens. The memories are splotchy. What you do remember is that there

was one bed in the boys' room and one bed in the girls' room, and once you all rotated, those nights, each of you got to sleep in a bed once. You remember they'd taken down the shower rod and curtain in the bathroom so no one could hang themselves. During your one shower you had to leave the door wide open and count. You were last. The water was cold and it went everywhere, and there was no shampoo or conditioner. But it was a shower. In the living room, you weren't allowed to sit on the couches or use the coffee table. After all, you were at Wilderness.

There were lots of reasons a person ended up at Wilderness, but they could be summed up like this: you weren't doing what you were told. This started forever ago. In the suburbs. You saw your first therapist in fifth grade. You didn't know why you had so much rage. You just did. You talked back to teachers you hated. You got caught shoplifting. You told your friends you'd been raped, that you were pregnant, that you had cancer, and these things fit the kind of darkness inside you even though they weren't true. You hated that there were all these darkneses and no good reason for them. You knew you weren't really a bad person. You screamed at our parents. You cut yourself.

When our parents sent you away your junior year of high school, after you'd started with the pot and the club drugs and the disappearing, it was to the boarding school in Georgia, where strangers controlled every part of your life. They strip-searched you. You had to bend over to make sure nothing fell out of your vulva. You were put in a Peer Group and given Writing Assignments. You were supposed to Tell Your Story to two people per week, and get signed off. When you didn't do what you were told, you ended up on Restriction.

On Restriction, you lived away from the General Population. You ate ham and white bread sandwiches two meals a day, although sometimes the anorexics snuck you their cheese. You ate bruised apples and slept on the tile floor in the hall under the fluorescent lights, near the night guard. The other kids there had stolen cars, blown out their nasal passages with co-

caine, committed armed robbery. You didn't belong here, you thought. Your story was made-up. But you got caught smoking or refused your therapy challenges, and so you were on Restriction a lot. There was a tipping point. You got sent to Wilderness.

On your first night on the plateaus, you were told to make a spoon if you wanted one. They showed you how to press a hot ember into a flat piece of wood until a divot blackened. You made a bowl this way too. There were no pots and pans.

There were tricks: if you got the Spam on a rock by the fire just right, it tasted like bacon. And the canned peaches: warmed in the fire and covered in graham cracker crumbs, you could make a kind of cobbler. It would almost taste good.

You all learned to make fire. The bowdrill. You kneeled in the mud and worked the sticks against each other, breathing carefully on the embers. If the designated firestarter for the day didn't get the tinder to light, no one would get to cook. Then one day Ramsay found matches, and socked them away. After that, on the nights someone had trouble with fire, he would go over to "help," and suddenly the blaze would go up. This was the end of the cold-food nights.

Ramsay was from your school too. You didn't know he was coming. In the first days of Wilderness, back at the farm, you'd seen him walking up the path to the house and you'd gone running toward him, crying, embracing him. "Ramsay!" you said. "I'm so glad it's you."

The counselors pulled you off, as this was not allowed.

In the mornings on the plateaus, you spread the campfire ash. You were told to put it in pits at the bases of the junipers. Then you piled all your gear onto your tarp: the five-gallon water jug you carried on your back at all times. The worthless sleeping bag. The extra sports bra and four pairs of underwear and one pair of thermals and two black t-shirts and four pairs of wool socks you weren't currently wearing. Your spoon and bowl. Around

you, everyone wore matching army fatigue pants and hoodies and bandannas. You all wrapped the gear in your tarp with your piece of rope. You used an old seatbelt-style strap to fix the pack onto yourself. You got better at this every day.

If you wanted to speak, you had to say “Excuse me” first.

Most days you walked eight miles, some ten, occasionally three, in your big shifty boots. You could see that this might be a beautiful place, if your boots fit. If it was June or September instead of November. If you had a better sleeping bag and had chosen to come. Some afternoons the light slanted down to the west and everything got golden. The scraggly pinon pines. The broad brown canyons. Everyone in the group was tan. Your body had become taut with muscle. These days the sun would flare before it went down, the sky turning an aching red, and maybe you got to talk and laugh with someone while the fire got going. You could see that after this place, you would be a person who knew how to do some things, like light a bow-drill fire and make a pack and shit off a log.

But other days you got your period and you had to burn the waste in the cooking campfire in front of everyone. The sopping tampons would sit heavy on the logs, smoking, spreading blood for a long time before they finally caught fire and smouldered away. And you smouldered too.

It was somewhere in those cold weeks that it happened to you, at last. After you'd spent those nights sobbing and shaking, scared, breathing on your numb hands and looking up at the endless stars. After you'd curled up against the gusting icy wind. The trees on the plateau shook. Snowflakes swirled onto your forehead. You were so far from everyone. You were so far from where you'd begun.

You'd said they'd never break you. That no one could break you.

But you began to beg them to send you back to your dumb school. You'd do the work, you said. You'd do all the levels in a few days. You'd do anything.

You saw how they shook their heads at you, how they left you with

your five-gallon water jug and a tarp to roll. You saw how when John Paul sat on the trail and refused to move, nothing got done. And you and the others were the ones pleading with him. “Just get up,” you said. “Let’s just get to camp so we can start the fire.”

And suddenly you knew the word. Surrender. You would have to.

When they finally took you off the mountain, it was Thanksgiving. Your last night on the plateaus they brought you cans of yams and cranberries that you put in the fire. The group passed the cans around, hot, and everyone took spoonfuls. Your friends filled your journal with their addresses, though when the counselors packed up your things you would never get the journal back.

Faye was the one who drove you out, and on the way to the farm she stopped at a house, went into the fridge to get leftovers, and collected someone’s razor and shaving cream. At the ranch, you took your first real shower in a month. Your hair was dreadlocks by then. You used someone else’s razor and ate someone else’s leftovers.

That night, waiting for your ride to the airport, you sat on the big brown couch for the first time. You’d earned the right.

to fall, to body

body : as unprotecting
body : un-pink colony
body : mother unnamed blood

blood new once it clotted around invasion blood decision automatic synapse misfire
we can wrongthink can't we can't we we can body however we wake up
city ram colony acrylic boy fingernail who does these
it's hard to get the shape right it's hard to ask for what you want when
shifting rapidly I don't have a clue who lives here anymore

Maggie in Greenpoint

Brad in Astoria I am a bus stop
nobody takes buses

in the atrium of my favorite organ
a tunnel of rope a praying
towards what flowers

body: water, safely captured
bloody: water, give or take
bitter: but still rooted

let it die in the space you won't keep
little person seedling crushed by what's dominant
I'm accidental / not a city

DM MACORMIC

THE ONE ITEM ON HER BUCKET LIST IS TO BACK A CAR
THROUGH A GARAGE DOOR

Barbara is ninety-one and wants
as any of us do, to bust through

a door. Considered it
my entire life, she says.

I ask her why
& where the urge dug in.

It's not about sex, she says,
my husband has been dead forever

I don't care for that sort of thing.
It's neither violence nor

the heart pacing ruddy in her—
vague eagerness to attend

some shattered space. I offer
to blame war, or American

tastes for bad tradition.
But Barbara knows something

about the black-quiet
garage and an engine's fixed potential.

Each time, she talks
herself out of it. Oh sure, she says, I guess

love is kind of like that
but nothing is symbolic, I just want

to blast a hole
through that fucking door.

ON TEN YEARS OF NOT DROWNING

Ten years ago they told us we could, and should, expect a death. At least a very serious and emotionally-scarring injury. We were opening a new facility, and all the numbers from all the other facilities said that within the first twelve months of any new facility, something bad was sure to happen. A whole different neighborhood with a whole new set of kids to get to know, lifeguards getting used to all the hidden angles of the pool walls and sun's changed glare, lack of experience among the younger and newer hires, all of us adjusting to the way the weather hit the pool now that it was a real hole in the ground and not just an oddly-shaped dog's water dish on a well-lit table in the city council's office. The discomfort of a new thing yet to be worn in, the jury said, so havoc overall. Keep your eyes out.

The polo-shirted people from the district office kept us sitting in our plastic chairs for hours in the community center ballroom, watching tape after tape after shitty DVD of drowning incident and Red Cross instructional video—even all the old ones they could find, back from as early as the 80's—while the air-conditioner roared and our eyes strained to see the small TV (they couldn't get the projector screen to work) at the front of the room but, really, scanned each others' faces, really, hunted for something nicer to look at for the present hour than an image of a busy pool with a passed-out body hidden somewhere in the shot. They brought a big guy in from OSHA to say the final words and rules, and told us to be really on our game, or it would be on everybody's backs.

“Remember,” they all said, and fourteen-fifteen-sixteen-year-old us looked up with lazy, glazy, still-scared eyes. “The first twelve months.”

“Probably sooner,” our real boss in the blue shirt said, “since the waterslide and all.”

The man from OSHA nodded.

“That puts your risks”—he brought his hand up around his temple, like a side-salute, like he'd had it up to here—“way up.”

The polo-people nodded behind him, standing stern like emperor penguins, only with arms crossed across their gutty chests like flabbing bodyguards of public population.

Our blue-shirt boss asked for a round of applause for our guests, and every one of us obliged. The polo team moved off the low stage like a blob and ushered OSHA guy outside. We watched our boss watch after them out of the corner of her eye, and give one more instruction deep into the mike:

“I want two people on the waterslide.”

We'd imagined, in our own time, how it would have been if it had happened. The summer would stop entirely. The air from the bay would settle hot and heavy on our little 'burban town, would take a long nap in the hammock of the valley and bake us all from slip to singe inside an arid inland kiln. All the city's seizing ceiling fans and overworking outside sprinkler systems—their nightly hissing so loud and rolling across the neighborhoods in blocks like the wave at a baseball stadium, their spray always moving somewhere, never ceasing, drowning out even all the feline fights and caterwauls that happened on the dryer sides of streets—would break right to a halt and let the lawns turn yellow and the air inside our houses set like a crab mold in our rooms.

At graduation-time the administrators would stand there bored, the hems of their black gowns waving only with their shifting weights and the fringes of their tassels sometimes whipping back a little when they went to wipe their sweat or whack a fly with it—no little brothers launching water balloons for them to go after in the stands, instead just boys squeezed somber in between their sitting thickened parents, their mothers' skin-heavy, sunscreen-slippery arms around them still despite the sweltering heat. Keeping them too close now (like all mothers of living sons and daughters do after news of someone else's loss, like holding one not-dead tighter would somehow bring another dead one back to life—and it's certainly not, they'd say if asked, just good enough to remember how short and precious life is. I know. But if it could bring her back I would keep him here all day—so strong our empathy here, to without words or actual bars or chains prevent a little rowdy formal fun, to keep the sweating graduates from a little artificial concentrated rubber rain). The senior girls would re-

main poised with pride and every range of milemarked emotion during the valedictorian's speech, no need to shriek and squeal under unexpected fire this year, no squeegeeing the water out of their flatironed hair (oh how they sweat there in the summer bathrooms, even with the AC on) or brushing any neon rubber scraps off onto the stage or field below them.

No one cheered for one another, that would be the almost-worst, and hardly even for themselves (the worst of all), their own accomplished progeny moving across the stage in sweat-soaked silence, a fake diploma exchanging hands and almost tearing from how wet it got in the receiver's hand as he sat and waited for his entire class to walk that nearly-flaming stage, as he turned it around and around and around again in his oven of a lap, as he thought about almost nothing sitting there, as he let four years go by without a second thought. Would he remember how this happened? And the rest of us—how would we remember this height of public education with only a zombie-murmur voice over a set of melting speakers? But everybody would, because it would be the year the bad thing happened at the brand new pool.

Yes, they'd ahh and nod when they remembered. That summer.

That summer, they'd say. That was too bad.

It never was how anybody dreamed or wanted, but this year in particular would be a bad bad thing, a serious one like from real life, not another quirk or chain of midtown life. Graduation here was always the hottest graduation anybody's sat through, and everybody always talked about it for days and days on end, kept aloe on their sunburned shoulders and frozen washcloths on their reddened necklines after work. Some cheeky local journalist who couldn't make it out in Washington, D.C. would put it in the paper as "Summer Starts with Pomp and Sweltering" beneath a picture of the tossed hats falling in the air. It was always something to smirk about, always something we secretly appreciated, the sort of pain we sat through for each other, and we liked to say it.

But this one—this one after what was meant to happen at our pool here in the first 12 months—this would surely be the hottest, too hot and

sad for anyone to say a thing. The dads would wipe their cheeks and not even try to say it was sweat, look at their little boys beneath their woman's pudgy tanktopped arms and feel a surge of familiness, feel the swell of what-if-it'd-been-my-kid-instead and just have to sit there with it, have to wait it out in stillness there in the still-packed grandstands. Afterwards he'd hug his graduating daughter and kiss her forehead with tightened grad-dad lips, take her graduation gown from her and toss it in the back seat of the SUV, get in the car and blast the AC while he waited for the final pictures to be taken (still pictures to remember, though not so many this year; our dad wouldn't have to wait so long, would have to hold in his heaving sobs when he heard the click of the back passenger door and the shuffling of his smallest kids into the middle seats).

"This is a summer facility," our blue-shirt boss reminded us. "We get most patrons between the months of May and August."

She paused. We fidgeted in our chilly plastic chairs.

"So it's more likely that an incident will happen in three months instead, not twelve."

We kept imagining. Saw empty stores downtown, and streets with hardly any trash, and movie theaters still packed full in matinees but without the chatty conversation after every show—that would be the town outside us in the summer if it happened. School starting in September would be a relief, a chance to start anew and force our brains into other information, another intellectual zone besides grief counseling and individual therapy, other facts besides those ugly ones of life and death.

Inside the newly-mortared walls and freshly-painted gates of the pool, the emergency would look like this: at first, people wouldn't come. They would boycott swimming and water entirely, even cut their showers short. They would turn against all city departments entirely because of what we'd done—it would be all over the news and the news would be all over us.

Close down the pool, they'd say, to the cashiers at the grocery stores and in the minutes at the city hall meetings, yes that's what they should do. (Later, and not much later, only after the back-to-back realiza-

tion that the first and best way to prevent drowning aside from steering clear of H-two-oh forever was to teach kids how to swim, to make your kid feel safe and strong in water, some mothers—the kind that read each and every article in the news and every parenting book and magazine around—would cave and get our personal numbers from the front desk and call us up for private swimming lessons, where they'd sit and watch us hawk-eyed. We'd meet up later at someone's house, still in our Speedos, halfway in and out of hot tubs on an August night, and exchange stories of the hugest homes and hottest moms and biggest tips. But for now, Home Depot would be sold out of locks and iron fences so that kids couldn't get near a backyard pool.)

Close down the pool, yes that's what they should do. But then where would we go to swim?

"No one's swimming anymore," we'd say under our breaths at city hall.

"But what about keeping our tax dollars in town?" Some woman in a blazer would stand up tall and talk. "We don't want our people driving out to Woodland to use their pool."

We'd put our foreheads to our hands and roll our eyes while the adults got riled up and politicked. What about, we'd wonder, how we're always on the ballot every year to be cut anyway? Recreation always on the chopping block to go? Why is shutting down a pool we just used millions of local tax dollars to make even an option at this point in time—not even twelve months out? But mainly: what about our jobs?

We had been happy just to have another summer job, a relatively easy one with suntans where we got to watch bodies all day and splash in the water on our breaks. Until this bad thing happened and reminded us of death, of a thing that meant taking away life—life, this thing we were barely starting to get to know, a thing we still thought happened mostly inside school hours or in passing periods, in dim and dusky hallways. We thought work was easy, that even forty hours wasn't bad if you were going to do it outside with other people. For most of us (aside from one or two of

us who'd lost a grandma here, an uncle there to cancer or old age) this was our first blush and brush with death, and all it meant was that these forty hours stopped being fun. We wouldn't be so far off from the truth, only underselling it a little, underestimating its white-knuckle grip on everything we did. We didn't yet know about—and weren't prepared for—the other hours we'd be putting in, the ones late at night where we'd dream up images of the little drowned boy's body (even if we hadn't been on shift that day, we were seeing his dead white body float beneath), where we'd rack our brains to think why, of all the kinds of death we knew there could have been, this seemed the most unfair of all, where our stomachs would turn and turn and turn in hunger and disgust. We'd become zombies during every waking hour, except stuck in our own heads instead of trying to chew out someone else's.

"Who did this?" Dan, our manager, would yell, beside the open fridge, holding a half-eaten sandwich in his hand.

We'd sit there in the break room shuffling cards or fake-reading someone else's book and shrug. It was just like normal, only there wouldn't be a fight, wouldn't be any tattletelling (Ashton ate it, saw him do it) or guesses-turning-gossip (Tyler probably did it, he said he hates Kim, he probably thought that it was Kim's). We wouldn't look him in the eye but it would be from apathy not fear, from what-does-a-sandwich-matter-now instead of will-you-kill-me-if-you-think-I-did-it. And Dan could read that, too, could interpret everything besides the eyes as well, and he'd say it back in the way he shut—not slammed—the door: you're right, the sandwich doesn't matter now.

We'd go back out when our twenty minutes ended to the still-empty pool, still empty but still open for everybody's business even if no one wanted to get or give a thing. For a few days nobody would come at all except for an out-of-towner who heard how great this pool was supposed to be from their crappy local paper.

"Where is everybody?" they'd ask.

We'd lie and say, "We don't know what the deal is."

Or maybe we'd be honest and say we had an incident.

"What kind of incident?" they'd ask.

"A submersion incident," we'd say, like we were trained to say in training and trained again to say in grief counseling sessions and in other hours after. We'd leave it at that. A timid mother would leave it at that, too, the nice kind, the kind who didn't mind driving out of town to check out a new pool with her three kind and quiet kids who just splashed around gently and giggling echolessly in the shallow end. But a brash mother—the kind who parked her sunglassed ass inside a lounge chair and let her kids loose like pitbulls in a dog park, yelling and running around (Walk, we said, walk. I said Walk, we said) and realizing that they were the only ones in the area (that was the saddest part to have to see—the first touch of self-consciousness, of suddenly being aware that they were being watched and, worse than that, the only ones being watched. It would make us feel guilty upon guilty, to see their tails drop like bricks between their legs. And worse, confused: if it had been just this before, just four kids running rampant, then nothing would have happened; we would have kept an eye on every one all day, so why feel guilty now for keeping order)—that mother was the kind of mother to come up to us and ask:

"You mean a drowning?"

And we'd nod. The girls would tear up underneath our sunglasses, and the boys would let their eyes glaze over—just stare at her and try not to see anything, especially the little dead boy floating down below.

This kind of mom, though, was the kind who'd get her money's worth. The kind who didn't care if someone'd died there just a week or any month or year before. It was her place now and hell, she was alive, so let's all live, shall we? She'd stay there all day (how do they do that without getting bored? It's just a pool); her kids would stop yelling and running and instead just lurk around the pools and decks, looking into gutters and running their hands along the tiles. They'd team up here and there, try to play Marco Polo and then stop when everyone'd been "it" already. They'd ride the waterslide without a whoop or whee, just go down and splash into the catch pool and

get back out and do it again and again until we all got goosebumps at the sunset and the wind, but neither of our parties budged. They'd stay all night until close and we'd have to be there with them and only them alone, and so with all kinds of space and time for dead boy thoughts to wander in—we'd have no choice but to think about it all for hours and hours and hours, a nonstop comparison of the one kid swimming alive in front of us and the other one not swimming not alive somewhere else away (God, where else?). Even when the brash mom's older kids got out—already tainted by a too-self-conscious world and so more prone to let discomfort interrupt their fun—her smallest one would stay and stay (Isn't he cold? we'd ask each other as we rotated positions. He has no body fat, no blubber) and swim and swim around the shallow end, tossing his goggles across the pool and then hunting around on the bottom like a nurse shark 'til he found them, over and over, over and over and over again. We shivered, watching him, and felt relief each time he popped up with the goggles in his hand.

The first mother, the nice and quiet one, would have left if she'd dared to ask that second question, if she'd found out for real—she'd be too respectful and concerned to stay. She would see the dead boy, too, and see the pool his grave, and couldn't let her family's presence disturb all that, or that disturb them.

"Oh," she'd say. "Oh. How awful." And she'd let her children splash for ten more minutes while she sat there and decided what to do. We could see it in her, her shoulderblades creeping up her back, her chest swelling with thicker breaths now, her pulse quickening. Quietly and kindly she'd ask them to come out.

"Come on, Quinn," she'd say. "We're going now, help me get your brother dry."

They'd pack up and go.

God, we'd wish it were that easy, to get away from a dying place. But she'd seen the dead boy underwater once now, and she'd see him after. We think of her, too, when we'd toss and turn in our sleep.

But as it stood those first three months the pool was full of all

alive. Not a single hint of death but every kind of life instead: the fat ones who floated better, and the skinny ones who somehow found it comfortable to lay there on the concrete even though their ribs and hips jutted out like that. There were big ones, where you'd turn to answer a question about the snack shack and realize you're looking at a chest, a firm and furry manly chest and there's miles of gold chains between there and his beefy head. And there were small ones, where we'd take bets from the back on whether she was a child or a mom, and everyone involved would find surprise every single time. There were day camp packs with their lines of kindergarteners in matching neon t-shirts that fell way down past their knees, and middle school girls who pranced along in just-too-loose bikinis, looking down at their own chests so often it was like a tick or twitch. And there were lone wolves. We kept our eye on these—most grown men free to lounge at city pools on weekday afternoons aren't the type that moms want near their kids.

There were red ones (just when we thought we'd seen the mother of all sunburns, in walked some other lobster of an even crimsonier hue, plus oozing pus and flaking like a pattycake to boot), blue ones (a kid would wander to the guard room crying and we'd scan his tiny skin for lesions, check his bones for breaks—but then he'd burst to us My daddy left my mom and we'd just have to find his mom and tell her he's okay, he's fine), tan ones (of course, the ones who used their sunscreen right), black ones, brown ones (when a white kid couldn't swim it was simply slow development, someone sign that sucker up for Level One; but if a not-white couldn't it just reinforced every awful stereotype we knew—we cringed when they came true before our eyes but cheered inside when Mexicans beat gringos in a race across the pool).

"It's still the first three months," our blue-shirt boss told us at the mid-summer staff evaluation. "We're not out of the woods yet," she said. "In fact, we're never out of the woods. We are in an endless forest of scary, scary trees."

Somebody yawned. The rest of us thought of how when someone

yawns then everybody does, and then we all tried not to, and then we all did, into our hands or the insides of our elbows or just out there in the open.

“Ten minute break,” our blue-shirt boss said. “Go stretch your legs. Get some air. When we come back in it’s CPR.”

The waterslide did prove a trouble zone. The water at its base was only three feet deep, but all the twists and turns and the rush of water at the bottom left lots of riders disoriented and smaller kids caught in the swirling current. We jumped down from our chairs to pull them up so often that we moved one right to the very base of it, so all the slide guard had to do was bend down and reach her hand out and help the rider get a grip. In July we figured out that if we turned the water pressure down just a little bit, the problem went away, and no one had to get out of any chair or even lend a hand—riders started saying “wow” instead of “ow,” and little kids left the slide pool smiling and not scared.

We didn’t allow much else in the way of fun—no alcohol, no running, no blow-up pool toys, no riding down the slide in chains or pairs—so all things considered, the pool deck was a pretty equalizing place. When all you have is water and your body, all signs of individuality are in the open, and there’s no room for distinction. We saw all birthmarks, moles, tattoos, scars, skin discolorations, weird growths and hair patterns, tons of muscles and lack of them entirely. It didn’t matter if they wore clothes over, or if those clothes were loose or tight or long or short. The water made them heavy and let gravity pull them harder all the same. We saw them melt in the heat, watched the way they hung all over and learned precisely where the sweat and chlorine caked and pooled on their bodies—and exactly which parts of them pricked up or pulled tight away inside when the slightest breeze came through.

We saw all sorts of inside people, too: moms who got there early and made a beeline for the shaded spots beneath the couple trees and overhang, other moms who came in later and picked catfights just to share a corner out of sun. Moms who’d had enough the second they came in

and moms who stayed all day with whining kids without a harsh word or an eyebrow. Single dads who brought their kid as bait for single girls who embarrassed themselves terribly in front of obviously chaste and married women; single dads who brought their kid in really simply just for good time with their kid and wouldn't flirt with anyone, not even the most gym-rat single mothers, not even the oldest and the prettiest of us. We saw kids in every kind of giddy glee and every kind of tantrum—over tiredness and hunger, over winning watertag and losing, over getting bullied and getting left behind, over who got the best ice cream or who got the last barbecue potato chip, and always mostly over nothing.

Our favorites were odd pairings that we couldn't figure out: how were they related, or why were those two holding hands? We loved interracial families, awkward early-high school relationships where taller girls hugged short fat boys, and adults with unclear affiliations. Were those guys father-friends or gay? Was this pair just chit-chatting or was an affair occurring right before our very eyes? Weird things happen in early afternoon. People surprised us with their affections and attentions, with their choice of focus.

But our focus was set ahead of time. Just keep our eyes on them.

And we did. Three months passed, then twelve, and we saw it all except for a shadow of a body on the bottom of the pool.

"This is still a new facility," our blue-shirt boss said, a year after we opened. "We got really lucky last year."

"Is she disappointed?" we whispered to each other. "Do you think she's sad it didn't happen?"

"It could still happen," she said into the microphone. "This facility is still the newest in the county. And that waterslide didn't walk away."

We shivered in the air conditioning and drew swirlies on our information packets, little stick figures riding in the waves to look like we were taking notes.

"Pretend like it's the first three months," she told us, sternly. "I want every training minute taken seriously. This year could be the year."

We kept imagining and practicing, though every year it never was. Every year we play-drowned in the deep end, pulled each other off the bottom and fake-gasped when we pulled each other up on deck. Every year here we rehearsed for death, and in between, our lives happened. We came back each progressing summer with new things: bigger breasts, stretched hips and shoulders, dyed or different hair, a deeper voice, an attitude adjustment, a hidden piercing, a not-so-hidden ink job, a shift in confidence for better or for worse. We were passing adolescence and we were always changing, but our job remained the same.

In '09 we thought that this was it, but we had our eye on him from all the way across the pool, were walking over as we saw the kid go from froggy-kick to still below and we got right in and got him out and breathing right before you could say nine-one-one. The years went on and there were one or two more deals like that, but nothing major happened: a knife-fight just outside the gates, a couple drunk parents we had to call the cops on here or there. A baby choking on a piece of pineapple, another choking on a leaf (A leaf? we wondered. Really, mom and dad?). A girl who bit the tip of her tongue off while chewing on a popsicle. A little boy whose lips turned blue at least once an August evening. A thousand different toes stubbed in a thousand different ways.

“How are we supposed to save anyone on an empty stomach?” Dan said, when we came into the break room. He was sitting on the counter with half a sandwich in his hand.

We took our sunglasses off and looked at him, set our guard tubes on the table.

“Stop eating my shit, you guys,” he said. He took a bite, hopped off the counter, and walked past us out onto the deck.

We didn't get hit with accident or casualty, but we did get hit with budget cuts. Trainings got shorter—even with thirty new guards to us every year, we only watched one DVD, only did one eight-hour session in that cleaner-smelling ballroom instead of a full week. The polo-shirted people said that lifeguard certification classes were enough, even though we'd paid

for that ourselves. They still kept the pool from closing, still said we had to be ready, but they said it like they were bored and tired too. They brought in printed copies of sorry headline pieces from other local papers, from drownings that had been in other towns, but we didn't see our own names, didn't see our own dead boy floating around in other peoples words. Those first three months turned into several years and they still tried to keep us sharp.

But it was hard to do: we changed. No one kept a deck of cards in the silverware drawer anymore. We walked in to the break room and the new kids, the youngest of us, wouldn't even be looking through each others' books, wouldn't be all up in each other's business telling sultry summer stories or other sorts of secrets, wouldn't be fighting for the last Otter Pop inside the freezer or the rights to the best positions in rotation (umbrella guard or top of slide). Dan would come in with a dummy in his arms and make us do CPR there on the med room floor, and we'd all feel good for bringing a plastic torso back to not-live life.

We all kept each other's space, learned after a couple yellings not to eat each other's stuff and to put our name and date on ours; learned to let our dinner sit 'til after we'd picked up trash and checked the bathrooms and the showers for weirdos and for injuries; learned to drop whatever we were doing to help when someone came in with a skinned knee or a bee sting. Plenty of little tiny injuries all day all week all year, but nothing serious or scarring or emotional at all. At least not emotional for us, anyways—plenty of kids about to hyperventilate just because they'd seen blood come out of their knee, plenty of moms about to strangle us in case we got the bandaid on just right right now. Plenty of things we were happy to forget and that were easy to, as well.

The summers blended all together, all the ones we'd had and all the ones we hadn't. So every year of all of that and what now did we have to show? A couple bumps and scrapes, a long list of band-aids given out in the med kit log, but certainly no death or drowning. We hadn't even had a single-limb paralysis.

We forgot the summer of the hottest saddest graduation because it never happened. We couldn't remember all the lives we'd seen, could barely keep track of our own at this point, had graduated from high schools, trade schools, firefighter and policeman programs, colleges and universities, EMT and nurse trainings, grad schools; had people our size and smaller living with us now; got cats and dogs and different bikes and cars and most of us insurance. We had a lot of letters to our name.

Now we were here, at the front gate, all of us. Someone (Who? we wondered, who there now would think of us, with all these years gone by?) had spent the better part of an evening calling all of us—we could see the stacks of phone lists on the counter there inside the office window, and we'd read the message threads in email inboxes online. Our blue-shirt boss—her hair was grayer now, the shirt was just as blue—came out of her closed door and looked at all us calmly, scanned all our faces just like we were patrons in the pool.

"I'm going to be in here," she said. She said it with such disaffection that it made us scared. "Dan will tell you what to do."

She went back in and Dan came out, led us out onto the deck.

"Well, the covers are on," he said, and looked at us, like, time to get them off. We hated him, right then, if he'd called us for the covers.

But he didn't say another word. He pulled off his shirt and threw it in a pile with his flip-flops. And then he ran. We looked at one another, and then we all took off after.

How do you explain cover running? The covers float atop the pool with just enough viscosity to be a kind of ground for a certain kind of earthling, to be a different type of land for those of us, like us, who live for contained waves. If you go fast enough across the covers you can keep your weight from sinking down, can get from one edge of the pool to another without getting anything but your feet wet. If you go fast enough you are like a Jesus lizard. If you go fast enough you walk on water; you are like Jesus Christ himself.

Teams of us stayed at the corners to pull the covers back real tight

and fast so the next of us could go without a wait. When we got across we traded places, held the corners down ourselves so the other us could run. We ran with big light strides. We strode. We flew. We flashed our tans across the blue. We relayed back and forth and back and forth until our thighs and calves got tired from being picked up so hard and high to heaven, until we felt like men and women once again and sunk into the tarps mid-pool and stayed.

We laid there in that blue cover like eyes in potatoes, like stars in a fat night. We could hear our breath. We could hear the displaced water sloshing into gutters at all four of our sides.

And then someone yelled—we couldn't see who, because all around our face was starry dark and tarp blue—let's get these covers OFF!

And we crawled out of the covers, swam under-over to the sides and got out of the pool, went and got the metal roller racks and pulled the dripping covers right off that deep and shallow place we knew, just the way that we'd been trained to do.

THE LIQUID CRYSTAL FREQUENCY

The doctor shines his otoscope past my ear canal, and into the ossicles, searching: cochlea, waxy tubes, auditory nerves. His breath drips down my jaw line, heavy and viscous. I explain to him that I can hear everything. The click of his tongue and the opening of his esophagus. The way his knee chafes against his pants. I hear a mayfly's wings. The buzzing lamp in the corner. Hearts and lungs and other things, too.

What other things? the doctor asks, and I know he is talking about voices. But it's not just a ringing and it's not a voice. Or the echo of a voice.

It's the echo without the voice, I say. If that makes sense.

He says it doesn't and shoves his otoscope in further. I imagine the light shining even deeper, excavating my brain for empty shells.

+

It has been one hundred and three days since the girl disappeared, and Jack is supposed to be on television for the first time today. I was supposed to be with him, but we were advised against it. It's best if he sits next to a woman, they said. A pretty one, with sad eyes and no makeup. A sister or a mother. Someone wholesome. You don't want them withholding help because you're a couple.

Jack hates being in front of people, but he's the blood father. He is asleep and he is cringing and I can hear the ache in his chest. His ribcage beats like a song played in steady rhythm. A funeral march to begin the day.

I listen to the streets beside our house and how the morning gains momentum. With Jack's every toss and turn, the cars outside chew through gravel. The voices on the street fill their echoes. Morning parts through braids of night, and I try to think of something to say when he wakes on my shoulder. Good morning, I will say. Did you sleep well?

+

If I were going to talk about the girl, I would talk about how she was always

moving. How she was a girl with a heavy head and a small frame. When she was young, we would spend almost every day with her in the garden, watching her crawl through the dirt and scrape her knees until her entire body was mud-blood-drool. I don't want to talk about her, but if I had to, I would mention how she loved the taste of rhubarb or how she was hypnotized by the television screen. I might even add that sometimes, when we looked away in the garden, she dug herself a hole in the ground.

Get out of there, we said. It's not clean.

No. I like how it sounds.

+

During breakfast with Jack, my ears begin to ring. He is standing there, flipping pancakes, his mouth moving, and on the outside I'm laughing, but inside, I'm filled with the echo of a scream without a voice: a sound like the remnants of a record scratch, a time lapse, a stone weathering in reverse.

I've gotten pretty good at this.

Jack continues to ramble, and as he does, I close my eyes. If he notices, which he usually doesn't, I'll say I feel asleep – not a hard thing to believe. I let my ears concentrate on the construction workers down the street or the house noises in the attic. Sometimes, I listen to the neighbors next door. Before long, the echoes fade and I hear the placid voices of a mother and father with a fifth grade boy. The type of voices you might hear on TV.

+

Here darling, let me fix your tie. Here honey, there's a smudge on your shirt.

+

At the television station, there is a woman named Wanda, and everyone says she hosts the worst fucking show. She has white-blond hair and glue-on eyebrows. Jack is going to be her guest at 7:45. Wanda has something she likes to call the 4th minute cry. In her experience, she says, the most successful parents are the ones who with one minute left in their five-minute segment begin to break down. You should never sob because that's just pathetic, she says, but it's best for all of us if your eyes get a little bloodshot and you let your voice crack one time. Practice with me, she tells Jack: Bring our daughter home. He does so and she smiles. A security guard points us towards the dressing room.

+

The girl used to say there is a ghost that lives in the garden—that if you dig deep enough, you can hear her scream. She is the reason that the rhododendron withers and the roses grow thorns. At night, she tries to chew a way out. During the day she sleeps. One night, Jack and I woke to a rattling outside the house. We looked out the window and towards the garden. We saw our girl's shoes erect and upside down, her body in the ground, as if she was hanging from a taut line between the brush and wilting green.

Jack pulled her out by the legs, and I expected her to cry: this dirt caked girl with brush scars rolling down her shoulders. Instead, with empty eyes, she asked to dive back in. She said the ghost was protecting her. She lit candles at the dinner table. She wore a red-checkered apron. She had her hair tied in a bun. She was missing teeth. As Jack rocked the girl to sleep in the hopes of calming her mind or maybe just calming ourselves, I picked a plum from a tree in the garden. She took a bite, and we watched the juice spill like venom down her chin.

+

The audience is silent. Jack sits in front of a green screen with a woman by

his side. Wanda is slurping up words and spitting them onto the ground, and sometimes Jack catches them, and sometimes he doesn't, but all I can think about is how I should be there too. Crying. Looking into that camera with glass eyes. Jack should have his hand on my thigh, a handkerchief in his pocket. The "we" should include me, and just as I am wrapping my mind around this jealousy, there's a ringing in my ears.

This time, it is a seismologic phenomenon. Waves are sent through my ear and into my body, creating tremors in the crook of my spine, leaving my bones shaken.

I try to close my eyes and let the echoes drift. Still, there are aftershocks. Houses that crack in the canals of my head.

When the noises fade, I look up and see Jack, his face twisted in a way I have never seen. He looks past the camera and I wonder for a moment if he is speaking to me. His eyes move down towards his lap, and he smoothes a crease in his shirt. The camera cuts to black.

+

Before the girl disappeared, her principal called a meeting for the school's parents. Jack was supposed to come but he texted me ten minutes before saying he wouldn't be able to make it. Work ran late. I sat in the back of the class, suffocated by a room of husbands and wives and wives and husbands, and I thought about all the different ways I could walk out of the room. How easy it would be to leave.

The principal stood at the front of the classroom and bit her manicured fingernails. She projected pictures of laughing children onto a screen and lectured about how girls need a normal home life to succeed. She smiled like a spider and scanned the room until she settled on my eyes. That passive aggressive sort of thing.

After all, she said, growing up is a kind of vanishing act. One day they're here and the next they're a stranger. A fractured reflection. An ulcer or an anchor tied to your gut.

She continued to flip through photos. Slides like STABILITY and FOCUS and ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT and HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD BECOME THE PERSON THEY ARE MEANT TO BE. As her voice flattened, I began to look out the window. The sky was a dusty orange. There were no leaves left on the trees.

+

I wake Jack in the middle of the night. I tell him the ringing is back. He says not to worry; it's just the ghost outside.

+

Here honey, I made you a coffin. Please darling, come back to bed.

+

Wanda invites herself over to our house. She brings a bottle of expensive wine, and one of those cheese rounds with the waxy paper. Thirty minutes later, she's three glasses in.

All she can talk about are metrics. How at four minutes into the second hour, there was a 70% peak. Florida donated x amount of dollars at three times the standard average whereas Connecticut, and really the entire northeast was coming in at well above five. And that's all good for us, yes, all good for us, and her too, well obviously, of course. But it's mostly good for the girl—and when Wanda says her name it sounds poisonous.

My head rings again, but this time it's quiet: footsteps at the end of a hallway, a tapered breath suffocated by soil and shovels.

Wanda offers an hour for Jack to come back onto the show, and she says that this time he can even bring me. An entire hour. A history of the girl's life. Candle light vigils and visceral interviews. The story of two fathers falling apart at the seams.

It will be progressive and profitable and everyone will watch it, she says. And yeah, maybe if you're lucky, you'll find the girl too.

+

I don't know why, but Jack and I end up at a cemetery. He says he wants to go searching. I walk in between rows of headstones, and can't help but read every name.

I lose myself in the mess of trees and bodies, and I find a house. The kind that a great-grandfather haunts. The chimney is cracked and the windows are boarded. Its front door has a hole smashed in like a wet, empty mouth. I walk toward the building, unable to imagine this hole as anything other than a black hole, the other side containing a gravity so heavy it could crush my skull. I rub my hand over the knots in the wood and consider what would happen if I stopped the ringing, what would happen if someone found me in the middle of a cemetery, with a full body and no head. For the first time I can remember, everything is quiet. I bend over and place my head through the door. Scanning the darkness, I see a star on the floorboards, but then I realize it's a discarded tooth.

+

Jack says that he doesn't think the girl is missing. He thinks the ghost pulled her into the earth. I say that I believe him, but leave out that she might not have been forced.

It could also have been the man they saw at the bus station, Jack says.

Or the math teacher at her school, I say.

Or really anyone, he says.

I nod my head, and rest my arm on his shoulder. He's colder than I remember.

It doesn't really matter anymore, I say. Either way, she's in the

ground.

+

Here darling, I burned you a star. One cold enough to hold in the hand. It's gas and plasma and light so dead that it rings inside your head.

+

Wanda calls every day, but we don't answer the phone. There is only so much we can keep intact. After a while, the calls thin away. I start to wonder if she has gone missing too.

+

Eventually, we lose track of days but the echoes still hang at the edge of my ear. I sit across the dinner table from Jack. He cuts his dinner in a slow, methodical way. We talk about work, what we saw last night on TV, and I almost say something about how we don't really talk about the girl anymore, but I decide against it. I try to smile but my mouth just hangs open as if the creases on his face surprise me somehow.

I think about making a joke: how when we're done with dinner, we should watch Wanda's show. His eyes still look tired though, and again I steer away from the girl. There's no reason to bring it up anyway. It's all bone dust and fruit rinds, now.

The echoes start to ring in my ear again, but I'm better than I used to be. These days I can completely shut the noises out. I rest my eyes, and close out the room. I focus on the whirling of the ceiling fan or the sound of falling rain. I listen to honeysuckle withering in the garden, and the voices of children running through the neighborhood, louder and louder still. Most days though, I listen to the earth, and search for some trace of the girl: a rattling bone or a shallow breath—a sign she is with us. I hear the

ground compress into her, slowly churning her body into something akin to a heartbeat. The ringing in my ear fades, and she seems closer to us than ever. There are three seats at this table. No one makes a sound.

MARCELA

Ana Chilacatla Momotla¹ — “once upon a time,” they say — fell in love with a man because she understood that none of us belong anywhere without love.

The villagers (which probably means a man) named the town after this woman — San Gabriel Chilac, Puebla — because Ana was beautiful like a dividing ocean, and because they remembered her through the image of her husband, an Aztec leader who dedicated the village to corn and cotton.

But the Aztec leader’s death, a skipping stone in Ana’s broken heart, became el coco — a shadow-figured man whose reflection does not appear in dreams and who visited me once when I became a mother to tell me I will not remember the bedtime stories my mother never told me.

“Your mother never said, ‘once upon a time,’” his lips whispered.

“And if she did,” I replied, “she meant to say, ‘It was, and it was not so².’”

¹Ana Chilacatla Momotla was the governess of San Gabriel Chilac long long ago, sometime during the sixteenth century. She was married to a man named Toltecatl, the governor of el pueblo, who was Achimalacatla, one of the many ethnicities of the Aztecs. Thinking of Toltecatl makes me think of my son because my son’s face has many indigenous features: a bent, bird shaped nose, a square jawline and high cheekbones (he’s quite handsome). Sometimes in dreams I see him riding alongside other men on horseback towards Spanish settlers — a rebellion effort once made by indigenous nomadic groups to stop the northward expansion of Nueva España. In these dreams my son rides through the ahuehuetes, the immense trees that it is said the Aztecs planted long ago, and passes el Árbol de la Noche Triste, where Hernán Cortés wept on the night he had to leave México City (June 30, 1520) after being driven away by a great Aztec slaughter. Today the tree is surrounded by an iron fence in México City.

²Traditional storytellers in Majorca, an island in the Mediterranean Sea, would begin their performances with this phrase. It was meant to convey the stories about the certainty of uncertainty — a reality I know all too well. It has almost become my being.

In the United States it is simple, I tell the girl sitting in front of me who knows my son. You cross a street to interrupt a memory: February 28, 1989.

But crossing *allá*, through the freckle-stoned mountains of the Imperial Valley desert, it is not that easy, for the devil's highway is long and vast, seemingly never ending. To cross his street tests the body, the mind and reminds you that until you (if you) reach the other side, memory is all that has become of you. And sadly, memory is the last thing that can serve you when you cross *la frontera*.

Sifting through her bag, the girl who knows my son shows me images of newspapers that are marked with the date of my crossing. "February 28, 1989", I think to myself, "has scarred these histories too."

The day I crossed, the girl tells me, The Boston Globe wrote a story about a man who returned to Tennessee to visit the places he remembered from his youth. "Over 60: Scenes frozen in memory," reads the headline. It makes me wonder if I will ever get to do the same.

The New York Times, she went on, said it snowed in New York that Tuesday. Snow mixed with a little rain. Wednesday morning they predicted it would be partly sunny. Back then, I explain, I had never seen snow.

When she arrives at The New York Times obituary, I stop her. Listed are the names of 29 men and 23 women. I count the women:

Dorthy	Marisol
Esther	Anne
Marie	Sophie
Alexandra	Lillian
Gertude	Mary

Carole	Martha
Jean	Rose
Beatrice	Slyvia
Evelyn	Laura
Carolyn	Ruth
Myriam	Ann
Evelyn	

The girl who knows my son does not know I am counting, so she asks me another question: Have you ever come close to death? I sit looking at her, searching for my answer. She looks back at me, but not because she's waiting. I think she might be listening.

"Mi prima Conchita died crossing la frontera," I tell her, because it seems fitting. "La migra called to tell us three years ago in February."

I keep talking, and as I talk I move my hand into my jean pocket to feel for the safety pin my mother once gave me. Recently, I bent it in half.

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I keep talking, and as I talk I move my hand into my jean pocket to feel for the safety pin my mother once gave me. Recently, I bent it in half.

My mother didn't tell her children bedtime stories, because she couldn't hear the sounds of a Chilac night — the crickets chirping or the way my eight siblings and I whined in sleep, me dreaming of the city of churches, the bells and their iron knocks ringing just two hours north of us.

My mother couldn't hear Chilac's sounds because my father hit her on the head with the butt of his silver pistol. But, even so, I'll always believe she couldn't hear because, even then, she didn't understand that none of us belong anywhere without love.

Twenty-six years ago, a February 28, we wore black to blend in with the night. I had dreamt of leaving México since I was 13, the year I fell in love with a boy named Oscar, but who I would later leave for a man who told me he would take me to los Estados Unidos if I gave him my hand.

I knew this man four days when I accepted his offer. And in a matter of months I would give birth to a girl and name her Verónica. I was 17. A year later we crossed the desert together, but not holding hands. And with his back to me, meandering through the alleys of mountains, I decided I'd name my next my next child, a boy whose face would later grow to resemble mine, after this man.

I would name my son after his father not for love, or because a woman should, but because in México I had just one bra and two panties and allá in Nueva York I was sure their father would give my children more. Verónica slept in my arms as we crossed. Her hand held mine.

In México, when my mother said goodbye, she asked only one thing of me: to pin my name to the black clothes I wore that Tuesday, so that if I died under the sun, at least the memory of my life and the weight of my body dragged between wrinkled, stony mountains and abandoned

along the edges of the devil's highway, would not go unread when la migra found me and took me away.

Holding my hand, my mother offered a sliver of paper pierced by the thorn of a safety pin. But to document this crossing is nothing but a curse: shame and humiliation, a record of the desperate migrant who failed and died crossing under the sun.

I did not pin my name to my body, because with or without a papered name, too many migrant bodies and theirs memories are buried in unmarked graves on both sides of the border³.

Besides, in dying, my name would not have been listed in The New York Times obituary: Marcela Sandoval Islas.

³Last summer a woman from my building shared with me a newspaper article that us Mexicanas later passed amongst ourselves as a way to share the burden of what it told. The article reported that researchers had dug up migrant bodies from 52 graves in a Texas cemetery named Sacred Heart Burial Park. This cemetery, the article said, is less than two hours away from the Mexican border. These researchers were apparently hoping to maybe, somehow, identify the bodies – whose number was unclear because the body remains had been all mixed up. In one grave three bodies were found stuffed in a single body bag — imagina. In another, they found at least five people, some stored in small garbage bags. But this was not the first time this cemetery and its spirits had been disturbed. The year before researchers dug up 110 bodies. These were also nameless. Supposedly, a local funeral home named Funeraria del Angel Howard-Williams had handled these burials, and the county paid them to do this. This had been their business for some 16 years. But in México — this I know — the bodies of migrants are treated worse, because the gangs care very little for anything but themselves. Some, oh, five years ago, I remember hearing that 55 bodies that were guessed to be the bodies of Central and South American migrants were found in an old mine near Taxco, Guerrero. A month later another 50 or so were found at a trash dumpsite in Nuevo León. And one month after this another 70 something were found in a field somewhere in Tamaulipas. Mexican officials, I'll never forget, said it was unclear if these bodies had been killed all at once or over time. All this...all this... happened in a summer.

We (which probably means us sisters) always understood our mother belonged

to the distant

constellation

of islands

inside

her name:

Beatriz

Islas

where love never docked along the borders of her divided island shores, but where my father found his way towards the corners of her mouth that now tell me when I worry she will die having never found happiness: “No hija, yo estaba feliz con ustedes. Pero, dime, ¿porqué no me fui cuando me preguntaste, verdad?”

“No sé, Mamá, no sé,” I say, lying through my teeth.

It’s only then that I remember my mother in the shadow of my father.

I wish happiness between a married man and woman was as easy as a bar

of soap in the shower, like it was for the doctor and his wife in the book on their (as well as another's) love in a time of cholera⁴. But with, or without, soap in the shower, my marriage was an unhappy one.

It is hard for me to speak about the violences my husband brought into my life, as many years ago I taught myself how to forget them. There are no details in these memories, no faces or words or songs. I do not even say his name. I remember only fear.

In 1991, after three years of living in Nueva York, I gave birth to a son. I named him after his father just as I always said I would, but I would only ever call him Junior.

Shortly after his birth we returned to México so my son could meet my mother.

Marcela Sandoval Islas — “once upon a time,” they say — found love in Chilac, Puebla, but left it behind to take her chances dreaming herself across el camino del diablo. There I believed, they say, that if I hummed through the desert and its noche negra, (where dew is born in the night, like flowers are born in the garden, and love born in the soul) I would find what I was looking for en el otro lado, but never realize that none of us belong anywhere without love.

⁴ I once read the novel *Love in a Time of Cholera*, and was so struck by the happy simplicity of the marriage of Dr. Urbino and his wife Fermina Daza, that it always stuck with me. So happy was their marriage that only until the doctor is showering one morning and notices that Fermina forgot to replace the bar of soap in the bathroom does the couple experience their first conflict in 30 years of marriage. He blames her for this. She refuses to acknowledge her mistake. And they carry this conflict around with them for many days. So many days pass that the doctor begins sleeping in an other room, until one day he falls asleep on their bed while reading. When Fermina wakes him and instructs him to move to the other room, he looks at her and pleads, “Let me stay here. There was soap.” The fight ends. They go back to being happy.

In the Zamora Valley of Michoacán there is an hour named “la hora de ausencia.” It is an hour not to remember the spirits stuck under river stones, or the ghosts who rise in the steam of boiling water, or the voices of those passed whose names have faded across their tombs, but for those of us far away,

en el otro lado

so we can send letters and messages and special songs to our families and lovers *allá*, and so the little voices inside radios can read our words aloud for all those in México to hear; for all those who care to listen.

On the phone with my mother I tell her all the things I’d like to announce to the world during *la hora de ausencia*: about the time my son went to visit her and she made him *papas fritas* and later told me of the incident with the words: “Le enseñé el amor.” Or the time my mother and I fought because I told her not to ship me her *mole rojo* and she consented if I promised to make it for dinner exactly the way she taught me. And then there was the time I told her, “Mami I will come back to you” and she replied: “You’re already here, *mi’ja*; in the steam of every morning’s tea.”

But in Chilac, Puebla, *mi pueblito natal* of orange blossoms and overweight dreams, where my mother couldn’t put her children to sleep because she didn’t know the lullabies of bedtime stories, there is no such hour.

In Chilac, wives left behind hear no love songs. Mothers go without hearing the promises of their children until the ring of a phone. A grandmother down the street, my mother tells me, hoards the boxes of chocolates her son sends home. It is all she has left of him, she says.

In Chilac, Puebla, there are days, months, there are years, named *ausencia*. In them are the hours that arrest the mechanics of time, that re-

member spirits stuck under river stones, ghosts rising in the steam of boiled water, or those who fell in the desert, or drowned in the river, bodies still dreaming of a place called home, buried in nameless graves.

And after my message streams through the radio, I would request the song *Levántame la moral* by Los Caminantes because Mami always loved to dance to *las canciones de los mariachis*. “Mamita,” the small voices inside radios would say my words, “ahora ya te puedes morir porque ya escuchaste el mariachi de tu hija.”

When crossing, my husband carried the temper of my son across his face. From behind him and *el coyote*, I carried our daughter and walked beside my husband’s sister for many hours humming *La Negra Noche* under my breath.

When we went to rest in the shadows of desert mountains, I listened for the iron church bells of Puebla, México (that hazy place my mother and I might meet) that I thought I could hear deep inside my ears.

In sleep I dreamt of my mother whispering the tale of a little girl in red who is torn from the belly of a wolf who has led her...
...astray.

The second time I crossed *la frontera* was very fast and, perhaps due to the nature of such a speed (20 minutes sprinting), also very sad. It was five on an April morning and *la migra* chased us from behind as the fifty-something bodies ran through the southbound lanes of the San Ysidro port of entry — a bygone way of crossing that the girl who knows my son tells me is called a “*banzai run*” and which is meant to reference the high-speed outlaw racers who cruised the streets of Southern California in the 1980s. “It’s

the Italian philosophy of driving,” the girl who knows my son quotes one of these outlaw racers from a 1981 newspaper article she has brought with her to my home. “You drive so fast you don’t have time to look back.” She is translating from English to Spanish. Her Spanish needs work.

Weaving through the heavy traffic, I looked straight ahead that morning. My vision was impaired as the tears from my father’s words (“¡Váyanse! Espero que tú y tus hijos mueran.”) lingered inside the crevices of my eyes and along my eyelashes like dew on a spider’s web. In his telling me this, I knew I was leaving México for good, and that I would never go back.

No he vuelto.

My husband and I had returned to México so our son could meet his abuelita. When we crossed back across the border, I did not know that I would be leaving my husband and six months later crossing alone; though alone I went, leaving my husband in México because he was a bad man who also, like my father, made me cry.

It was in leaving my husband that my father told me he hoped my children and I would die.

It was in leaving my husband that I left my mother with hers.

It was in leaving my husband and going north that I hoped I would escape the towns in México that are built so women have to depend on husbands.

Te quiero, Mamá. Cuidate y un día regresaré por ti. No para Papá, solamente por ti.

Apparently, in Southern California there were frequent banzai runs, in which men in expensive and sleek cars drove so fast above the speed limit (200 miles per hour) that they went beyond the reach of law. Later in the 1990s, the girl who knows my son tells me, migrants like me did the same. The sheer number of those sprinting across the highway meant la migra couldn't possibly catch us all.

It's clear to me now why we outlaws didn't look back. We were, due to the nature of speeding, momentarily freed. Looking back only allowed one to enact the charms and thorns of nostalgia, and when one moves faster than they ever thought possible, there's no time for that.

But if I had looked back that morning I worry that I would have tripped on the words my mother said to me when I came back to México so she could meet her grandson: "You've made me cry, mi'ja. I was waiting for your return."

But I did not look back, for my own two children were waiting for me up north in Santa Ana.

Gracias a dios fue rápido.

I will be remembered by no man;
as no man lurks in my shadow or skips stones in my heart.
I only ask that I find the way back

to the constellation

of islands

that make up

my mother's name:

Beatriz

Islas,

A woman from my building who works with a Polish woman cleaning houses told me that this Polish woman said that in the Poland countryside they used to ring a bell when death visited. The rang the bell, she said, to remind those still left with memories to pray for the soul departed. She said they ring these bells in other places too, some places one knock for each life lost and others one knock for each year they dreamt under the stars.

I'm told this was meant as a kind of ringed hiss to keep the devil who crouches behind death's shadows away. And I like this image, to imagine fear on a devil's face, because the bell I ring and its low riding song blurs, erases even, his reflection and fills that February desert space with a field of dahlias and the ocean and a stove melting butter.

(What does a bell singing in the desert sound like, anyway?)

Because she, mi prima, would have had 49 knocks on that bell; and maybe one for her soul departed would have been enough to scare a devil's dust mirage away.

La migra called mi prima's sister, who called me before dawn. She had no water, la migra said. Not enough water to cross, she told me. And I remember thinking, Wow, agua was my son's, Fernando's, first English word.

(I want to know, what does a child know, really?)

I hear these death bells no longer ring in Poland and that the rest of the

places have also stopped their ringing. But when I hear outside my window Brooklyn's sleepy church bells hum the hours, I wait for the third hour of every afternoon because 49 hours don't exist in a day, and I'm afraid one knock wouldn't scare the devil away, and mi prima Concha died three years ago today.

so I can tell my mother we are lucky no ocean

divides

us,

and that I've found a kind of love in the birth of my baby boy,
torn from my bellied darkness in the month of May,
whose love (despite his anger) might let me belong to this new
place.

At least, that's what they say.

It is October 16, 2014 and I tell the girl who knows my son: "I don't think I ever had dreams."

"Do you dream in sleep?" she asks.

I pause. She listens to it.

"Sometimes I dream of having returned to México to see my mother. But then I dream that I have no money or food or work. So when I go to hug and kiss my mother, I tell her, 'Mamita ya vine a verte pero mañana ya me regreso.'"

Para mi esos sueños son ciertos.

If I can learn to listen to the night, the sirens and guns snapping as my children whine in sleep because they are dreaming of chiming places we all might meet, then maybe the violences of this new life will turn into the crickets chirping...a song I long ago stole from the other side.

And in learning to listen, it's then I'll tell my children next time they go to dream: "It was, and it was not so."

"Here I sit on what looks like a stone. Only my memory knows what it holds."*

In the 1500s, Spanish missionaries built great stone palaces in what was then called Nueva España, and what is now called México. These palaces were where los indios learned to speak a different Mother Tongue and where new ideas of discipline became the condition for living. This condition included time, or rather, another time. Clocks and bells were raised and hung inside those stone palaces, bestowing on los indios European notions of time. It was a gift, the missionaries said. The gift of another time.

My mother and I also live in another time, though ours is different from the gift of the missionaries.

"Present time," I tell the girl who knows my son, "escapes us. It eludes us. We have only the past and parts of the future; whatever parts those may be."

I visit my mother in dreams where she still walks about the house and laughs, though she tells me neither is true because she is sick and no

one besides my father (who is not a funny man) is there to make her laugh. Sometimes, my mother says, the woman I pay to bathe and feed my mother brings a smile to her face because sometimes she mistakes her for me or one of my sisters.

According to my mother, she visits me in daydreams, a place she says I am still the 21-year-old girl I was when she last saw me. I am now 43. She says she cannot picture it.

In my fantasies my mother and I walk the streets of Puebla, México, the city of churches whose bells keep straight time.

“That is where I’d like to meet you, Mami,” I tell her over the phone.

“¿We never went there cuando eras niña, verdad?” she asks.

“No Mami, nunca fuimos.”

I also see my mother each night when I undress for bed, the hook shaped scar on my right arm that my father gave me for falling in love with a boy reminds me of how my mother didn’t stop him from hurting me. (“Pégame Papi, porque palos por amor no duelen.”) I was 13-years-old. Mi madre se fue al cuarto.

“Some scars go away with time,” my mother tells me on the phone when we speak of love – though she is not speaking of body scars.

In Elena Garro’s novel *Los recuerdos del porvenir*, a servant obeys an old custom of his master’s house by stopping the clocks each night at 9 P.M. In doing so the house and its people are able to escape “the shackles of mechanical time.” But one night the servant forgets to do this, and the girl

of the house, Isabel Moncada, is finally able to move to a future she clearly remembers.

“A mi mamá yo la quiero mucho y sí quisiera verla, pero a veces el orgullo es más que el amor,” I tell the girl who knows my son who has asked, “Who is responsible for the suffering of your mother?” If I was to turn to stone it would be of onyx, because in Puebla onyx comes in plenty and the stone’s color mirrors a black hole and black holes not only do not keep time, but deform it.

“I am only a memory and the memory that [my mother] has of me.”**

It
is
possible
to step
outside
of shadows,
Mami.... to cross
a street, the rivers
inside our names,
and interrupt
a memory.
Once I believed you
could do it.
I think, Mami....
I believe in
you, now.
I can help,
si me permites.
Permíteme, Mami....
la agua no es tan escalofriane.

P.D.

My mother, Beatriz Islas, passed away on April 12, 2015 in the night. I spoke to her by phone before she went, and told her I was sorry for not being by her side. She hushed me, her tired voice telling me she understood.

That night when the girl who knows my son called to console me, I couldn't help but think of Conchita — not mi prima, but the girl from Ismael Rodríguez's film *Nosotros los pobres* — and the moment when she is reunited with her unknown mother just before the mother dies.

“¿Marcela? Habla Alana. ¿Qué pasó? ¿Estás bien?”

“No niña, ahora si ya tengo una tumba para llorar.”

** The first sentence of chapter one in the English translation of Elena Garro's novel *Los recuerdos del porvenir*

** A sentence from chapter one in *Los recuerdos del porvenir*

GARDEN/GARDEN

vermiculture in a Tupperware box
and a sustainable future drag the lake

where animals grow in our lungs
this is an introduction to space-time

wireless communications a vine is now
a six-second video what wondrous

planned space has been made for us
eating Little Caesar's Pizza in a strip mall parking lot

and a sustainable future dirt paths
circuit the plants into the concrete

recycling can happen almost anywhere
a plastic bucket full of batteries

and a sustainable future their cells are my cells
I can feel them in my grafted/recycled

lithium face and a sustainable future
it makes my womb tired just thinking about it

THE LAST KARANKAWAS

Carly finally admitted something was wrong a couple of months before the hurricane, when her grandmother brought home a whole pompano and tried to eat it raw. She walked in just off her shift and found Magdalena crouched on the living room floor, tearing strips of fish flesh with her fingers. The linen pantsuit she had worn to 6 a.m. Mass bunched at her crotch, her waist, and tightened at the thighs and hips. Juice wormed down her hand; bone and meat snagged beneath her manicure. She looked up and with her mouth full said, “This is the way of our people.” When Carly snatched up the newspaper-and-fish bundle, Magdalena sat back on her haunches and hissed.

Carly hurried into the kitchen and dropped the whole thing in the trash can. Then she leaned against the stove and pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes.

She waited for a few moments, until she no longer felt the burn of tears threatening, or the urge to scream churning in her throat. When she opened her eyes and found herself looking into the open trash can, the pompano stared back up at her. Its face was ravaged—Magdalena had always liked the head best. Still, one eye was intact, black as a piece of tar, Gulf-polished. Fixed on the fragments of a life she couldn’t see anymore. Bitter all over again, she slammed the lid down. And as her grandmother stormed into the kitchen, she braced to face her.

There had been bad days with the dementia, but none like this. Today, Magdalena thrust her face into Carly’s and battled. Her breath smelled of brine and the coffee that was still warm in the pot and the Listerine she gargled each morning before Mass and had done so just two hours earlier. In her anger, she’d lost all English and slipped fully into Spanish. Carly stood still, recalling the training. Relax your face, keep your hands loose and non-threatening in front of you even though they want to rise up, fist. Accept the flecks of spit on your chin. Translate, translate, shape Spanish to English. Imagine the words as toy blocks, the ones kids in the hospital pediatric wing play with—turning over from Spanish to English. One side A, one side a. One side *yo sé bien lo que piensas de mí*, one side I know what you

think of me. *Niña ingrata*: you ungrateful child.

Carly couldn't even blame the dementia. Not for all of it. For the vitriol, yes, her grandmother was always firm but not hateful, had never been hateful—but not for the fish, not for what Magdalena thought was the way of their people. Their people, being the Karankawas.

Her grandmother had believed they were descendants of the vanished Texas tribe since Carly was a child—long before she grew old enough to witness the threads of Magdalena's mind begin to fray, then fuse again in the wrong places. Magdalena offered up her musings as fact over breakfast (*Our people went days without food, and look at you, wasting scrambled eggs*); at Mass (*Sí, somos católicas, niña, pero it's not sacrilege to offer prayers up to the wind and the sun. It's hurricane season*); walking around Galveston (*oleanders, yes, they are dangerous but our grandmothers wore them because they are dangerous*). Her own father had told her they had Karankawa blood, Magdalena claimed, and his father had told him, and she came from a day when elders were believed.

So Carly had believed. Once.

Once, in the stillness before bedtime, soothed by the humming of the window AC, she had listened to the tales her grandmother weaved. The Karankawas were as real as Laffite, she said, as steeped in legend as the tree on Fourth Street that marks his buried treasure, the one tourists search for and none as yet have found. They became real to Carly, too—real as the uneven coils of her hair and the freckles that fireworked her shoulders. She sensed centuries of stories running in her veins: a presence of secrets that the body and not the mind could remember.

She believed. Even when her mother scolded her.

Don't be silly, Bernadette said, hands planted on hips, whenever Carly walked into the house with mud smeared across her cheeks or white oleanders twined into the band of her ponytail. *Your grandmother's people are from Texas, from Mexico. I am from the Philippines. You have no Indian in you anywhere. The Indians could not last here.*

Neither could Bernadette, as it turned out; one morning when Carly was six and at school, Magdalena at Mass, Bernadette packed a small bag and left without any word. They assumed she returned to the Philippines, to her island just south of Manila and the extended family they had never met.

Some people are not fighters, Magdalena had said, stroking the young girl's hair where it lay tear-tangled in her lap. For some people that is not their way. Ya. Enough crying, Carly Elena.

Grandmother and granddaughter crafted their own rituals. A tribe of two.

After the pompano incident, Carly pulled strings for weeks. She got a few of the UTMB doctors who liked her to call in some favors. It was worth it when she toured the place. Bay Pines Care Center looked more like a luxe condo building than a nursing home, all soothing beachscape paintings and plush armchairs in clusters and wide, clean floors. There was even a doorman and a guy at the check-in desk to escort visitors to your family member's room. The room itself was spacious, with both a hospital bed and a real bed—Carly had paid extra to make sure Magdalena would have the option. She'd also paid extra for a solo room.

The TV had HBO, so she wouldn't miss *True Blood*, and Telemundo, so she wouldn't miss *Más Sabe el Diablo*. Carly planned to bring her colcha from her bed at home to lay on her bed here, so the quilt she knew from childhood would keep her grandmother warm. She'd stick the neon green "BOI: Born On the Island!" bumper sticker in a place of pride on the mirror, where Magdalena could see it every day and remember that she held that coveted status among islanders. She'd hang the replica of the Virgen de Guadalupe on the wall beside the door, ready for the touch of fingers kissed in reverence.

But Magdalena took one look and shook her head, tossing her cloud of curly hair that had been sterile-swab-white since Carly's infancy. "I can't see the beach from here."

"There's no beach here, Grandma," Carly reminded her. "We're in League City, not Galveston."

"No. That won't work. I need to be on the island."

"There aren't any good homes there."

"Our home is there."

"Grandma, please." Carly's fingernails bit into her own palms.

"I belong on the island," Magdalena said cheerfully to the nurse—an LVN, it said on her nametag, as noted disdainfully by Carly Castillo, RN. "Somos las últimas Karankawas."

"She thinks she's the last Karankawa Indian," Carly said, and stonily ignored the look her grandmother shot her, her grandmother who hadn't missed the purposeful translation from *we are to she thinks*.

"I need to be on the island. I can't be gone forever," Magdalena said. "La isla sabe."

Carly again reached for a lie and, like her stony ignorance, found it too easily. "This is only temporary, Grandma. Hurricane season, remember?"

"Ah, yes. Our home is going to be very damaged," she told the nurse. "Very badly damaged from a storm this season. My granddaughter thinks I'll be safe here."

"That's nice," the nurse offered.

"My granddaughter has everything handled. She's very smart. She's going to be a nurse, too."

"I *am* a nurse, Grandma."

"You will be, *niña*. I wouldn't miss that graduation for anything."

It was a pinning ceremony, and she hadn't missed it. She'd sat next to Jess, sandwiched between his big frame and another, smaller, man. And when she'd tried to crane her neck to see Carly striding across the stage, Jess—who was 6'3—had simply taken her camera and snapped the picture himself. *Jess-eye view*, Magdalena had said of the perfect picture later. The three of them had laughed. It had been six years ago.

The nurse gave them some privacy. Carly showed her grandmother

how to work the remote for the TV, how to adjust the mechanical bed to her liking. Together they arranged the framed photos Carly had brought on the dresser, the nightstand, the windowsill that looked out at neatly landscaped courtyard. There was Carly as a red-cheeked, nearly bald infant; as a child playing on the beach, with frizzy curls and a tan line; beside Magdalena at her First Communion wearing borrowed lipstick. Magdalena's wedding photo beside Carly's grandfather, long dead now. Her hair gleamed black beneath her veil, her hand, where it rested gently on her husband's arm, gloved in lace. Neither smiled.

Magdalena sat stiffly on the bed, her hands folded in her lap.

"I'm working the next two days," Carly said, "but I'll be back on Thursday."

"I know." She didn't move.

"Call me if you need anything."

"Bueno."

Magdalena rubbed her eyes, and Carly took that as a sign that she was tired. She leaned in and kissed the paper-thin skin of her cheek. "It's all going to be fine. I love you."

"I'll see you soon," she replied. "When you come to take me home."

Jess was waiting for her by the car as Carly emerged. He took one look at her face and walked around to the driver's side, taking the keys from her cold hands as he passed.

The great thing about Jess was that if he didn't know what to say, he didn't say anything. He just laced his fingers through hers. Stayed quiet the whole drive back down I-45 while she pressed her face against his shoulder, tears and snot soaking into the sleeve of his Ball High T-shirt.

He rolled down the windows as they began to climb the causeway. It was August and the air of the Gulf was swampy, laced with sun and salt and tar.

"The water looks kinda blue today," Jess said, but he was lying. The water of Galveston was always brown.

Jess had never minded lies. Even now that they were older, after Carly had learned how ridiculous was the idea that she was descended from a long-vanished clan, he shrugged off her bitter rants. Shrugged whether Magdalena's theories were dropped into conversation offhandedly (*put on your shirt, Jesus María, only my people could walk around the beach naked*) or with the detail of delusion (*this is the spot, yes, here, míralo Jess, this is where my fathers made landfall when they arrived, here is where they sacrificed a sea turtle they'd found on the journey across the bay*). Even when she used his full name, which he hated, he always smiled. He had delighted in Magdalena's stories since he and Carly were kids together in Fish Village, playing pick-up ball in Lindale Park.

Stories. Carly knew them by another name.

She'd done a history project in eighth grade on the Karankawas. She stood in front of the class and restated what her peers—most of them BOIs like her—already knew: that the tribe of Indians had settled the swath of coastline from Galveston to Corpus Christi; that they'd vanished long ago; that no one really knew what happened to them. Some historians theorized they joined up with the Tonkawa, abandoned the Gulf and moved further inland. Or maybe they migrated down to Mexico and the Coahuiltecan. Most agreed they died out, killed or driven out by white settlers. Most also thought they were cannibals—a notion Carly disproved, using Cabeza de Vaca's own accounts of interacting with them.

Her teacher had smiled indulgently, pleased at the presentation, until Carly said her family was descended from the Karankawas; then she had frowned in disappointment. Afterwards, she pulled Carly aside.

"I want you to know that it's a tale—a nice tale," she said. "And I'm sure it's something fun you could believe as a kid. But history class is not the place for wild theories."

It was the first time Carly had heard that—*wild theories*—to describe what she'd considered as much a part of her past as her grandmother, her lost mother, her long-dead father. It was a theory, and not even a good

one, not even a shred of reason to it.

“No way,” Jess countered, kicking strewn palm fronds out of her path on the sidewalk as they walked home after school. He thought Magdalena’s belief about their ancestry were great, that Carly was rooted here in a way he, the child of Valley Mexicans, wasn’t. He was jealous, really.

They neared his house on Barracuda, but she knew he wouldn’t turn—he’d walk her all the way home first, then backtrack. He could be a good boyfriend, she realized. He’d been a steady best friend all these years, after all.

“It’s true, though. I can get that now.” Carly furrowed her brow. “My grandma’s been lying.”

Jess shook his head. To comfort him as much as herself, she slipped her hand in his. Held fast.

His apartment was little more than a hole in the wall in one of the city’s shittier corners, so after Magdalena moved into Bay Pines Jess moved into Carly’s house in Fish Village. Even splitting the mortgage, it was a little pricier than his rent, but the shrimping had been pretty good this summer. And oyster season would start soon.

They’d been together so long now it was anticlimactic to finally share a room, a home, for real. She’d imagined it would feel gleaming and new to combine their things, to make space in her closet for his jeans and superhero T-shirts, to have one nightstand for her lip balm, one for his glasses. But she and Jess were broken in. She already knew how far left in the driveway she’d need to pull her Accord so she wouldn’t clip his Silverado when she left for work; he had learned years ago that on days she was training a new nurse she’d be too annoyed to cook and they’d have pizza that night. He’d have to plan ahead and pick it up: Most delivery joints on Broadway still considered Fish Village and its distinctive street names—Bonita, Pompano, Dolphin—out of their range. Carly’s house was on Albacore.

In high school it had been different, hadn’t it? He’d been the ace

pitcher, a crappy student, popular in every circle. But he'd been quiet, more comfortable lying with her on the couch than tapping a keg somewhere. Their date nights usually ended on the western stretches of the beach, past the city limits, parked on an access point only islanders knew about. He opened every beer bottle for her, even if they were twist-offs. When they got tired of the sand, they'd move to the bed of his truck. She'd have salt snarled up in her hair for hours.

Back then he was getting scouted by schools, big schools like UT and Tech. And Carly was pushing for them hard. Tech in particular—she found something beautiful in the pictures of Lubbock on the Web, flat lands and real snow and wind turbines reaching out like giant, many-winged cranes. But Jess had already started working weekends out on one of the oyster boats during the November season, and whenever he wasn't there or playing ball he was talking about oystering. He described the breadth of the boat, the way the flat bottom sat so delicately on the ever-rolling water. He told her about how they tossed shells and too-small oysters overboard, back into the bay where maybe, just maybe, some alchemy of salt and spore would help them find each other. They might fuse to a sunken car or ship and form a new reef he'd one day dredge. Jess never spoke so much as when he spoke of working the bay.

"I can do this full-time once school is over," he said. "Be out every day during the oyster season. Work as a shrimper on a trawler the rest of the year. Why would I go anywhere?"

She'd smile when she really wanted to shake him. He could have left at any time for a place as far away as Lubbock, as exotic. Could have driven north on I-45 or west on I-10 and kept going, going. Could he not see that? She had pictured it countless times on the nights when she crossed the causeway to take nursing classes inland. She fantasized driving between the fringe of tall trees north of the Bay Area, flanking the interstate like guardians, the giant white statue of Sam Houston gleaming in the darkness of Huntsville, welcoming her to Something Else. Anything Else. She imagined a future on those solo drives to the mainland and wondered if this

was how her grandmother imagined their past: as something shaped from delusion.

On one such trip home, Carly remembered the Karankawas. Christ knew why. She was exits away from the causeway still and the blinking lights of Tiki Island that signaled the ascent were just coming on, and suddenly she found herself thinking *they were nomads, they never stayed at a single place for more than a few weeks*. She heard the words in her own voice from childhood, speaking to a class of eighth graders.

Nomads, did you know? They were expert swimmers and lithe, powerful runners. Built for moving. They would wait for a clear day, load their lives into canoes carved from the hollows of a large oak, and paddle into the shallows off the coast. Make their way from one craggy pile of Texas sand to another. The men studded shards of cane through their lower lips. The women wrapped themselves in skirts of Spanish moss, capes of animal fur draped across their shoulders—not from modesty but protection from the sun. No, not modesty, they were anything but modest. Their skins gleamed with the shark grease they smeared over themselves to ward off mosquitoes. Whether by foot or on sea they traveled in a V formation like the geese that they would look up as one to watch come south, then, as the days waxed, watch wheel northward again.

She could see it, hazily, as if she peered through a curtain of heat. How? she wondered as she approached Fish Village. Was any of it real? And did it even matter?

She turned onto Albacore and there were the lights behind the drapes her grandmother had hung. There was Jess's truck in the drive, tires coated with the grit of the docks, flanking—with Magdalena's Grand Marquis—the space where Carly should be.

A churning in her blood began. An urge branched like lightning through her muscles—to wheel, to paddle, to sprint. Between the Karankawas and her wayward mother, wasn't she built for moving, too?

But she imagined, clearly this time, her grandmother behind those curtains stirring a pot of chicken and rice. Jess, pouring her beer into a glass

because she liked it that way. Her people were here. She held that in her mind, took a deep breath, and opened her car door with a smile.

The storm started forming a few weeks after Magdalena was situated in Bay Pines, but no one paid attention until the weather service gave it a name: Ike. Jess thought he was the first to make the Ike Turner comparison, and he repeated it for Magdalena during their weekly visit. She cackled while Carly rolled her eyes. They ate breakfast tacos and cookies they'd brought from Magdalena's favorite panadería.

It was a good day. Her grandmother's clothes were pressed and clean, her hair neatly pinned back. Her dark eyes were sharp, lighting on every movement Jess and Carly made, a bird hopping from branch to branch.

"Tell me about this Ike," she said. "Will it be big?"

"They think so," Carly replied. She reached for the TV remote and flipped it to the Weather Channel. As one, they watched the swirl of silver that was out on the Gulf, far, far from them, so far away from the crescent curve of the coast. "They say it's headed our way."

"Gonna hit the Caribbean first," said Jess, "do some damage there, then pick up speed in the Gulf because of the warm water. Or something." He took the last of the macadamia nut.

Magdalena nodded thoughtfully, eyes fixed on the wind and water that had just been given a name. "I'll need to find some palm fronds."

"For what?" Jess asked.

"My blessing. For protection. I need to burn them, we always burn them, but they don't have palmas here, do they? Niña, you bring me some from home, next time you come."

Jess looked at Carly, who felt her face settle into those hard lines it always did when the delusions came on. "You don't have a protection blessing, Grandma. You never have. You usually just light a candle and pray."

She clucked her tongue. "That won't do any good. I need to burn the palms. They need to be from the island."

Her eyes were sharp. Shouldn't they be clouded, Carly wondered, if her mind had slipped again?

"You're not allowed to burn anything here," she said. "Not even candles. I'll go to Sacred Heart and light one for you."

"You'll be on the island, that's good. You won't leave even if they tell you, will you? Not like last time, look how that turned out." She meant Rita, when it had taken them six hours to make the two-hour drive to Jess's friend's house in Sealy. And they'd been lucky—in the gridlock, cars ran out of gas, stalled out, overheated in the blistering sun. A bus carrying nursing-home residents caught fire. And Rita, quite contrary, had veered north.

"No, Grandma," she lied. "I won't leave."

"I should be there with you. This storm, it will respect me. I'm the elder."

"Well, you can't. You're staying here."

"It's going to be fine, Mrs. C," said Jess. "You just pray for us."

"I will. You'll need me to."

Back on Galveston, they stopped on Seawall for an early lunch. It was the middle of the week, early enough in the day that the public beach wasn't swamped yet with late-summer tourists and swimmers. As a habit, Carly rolled up her jeans and cuffed them mid-calf, then checked Jess's glove compartment and confirmed he still had a bottle of baby oil to get any oil smears off. They might need them; even at a distance she could see tar globbed across the sand, washed in from the tankers on the bay. After a while, the tar became part of the landscape, moles on an otherwise even-toned complexion.

She and Jess kicked off their flip-flops and left them on a dune. Clouds had gathered, just enough to break up some of the heat; sunbeams lanced through, spotlighting sections of the water. Jess pointed to a pelican a few yards out. It flapped its wings and dove toward the water at high speed, then leveled out, belly feathers kissing the water.

Magdalena loved pelicans. "Just watch them," she had told Carly once. "No one thinks anything of them, because they're ugly. But they're the

most beautiful fliers.” So Carly watched this one now, the way he flapped his wings only once or twice, then coasted. Effortless. Low to the water, so low and never wavering. She watched him until he curved around a bend, toward the jetties, and she couldn’t see him anymore.

By then Jess had disappeared. When she spotted him he was further down the beach, bending down to gather things, and she realized he was picking up discarded palm fronds for Magdalena. “You’re an idiot,” Carly told him when he returned bearing them. But she took them from his hands, carefully brushing the grit and bits of trash away, and laid them gently atop her flip-flops.

The next visit was worse. Jess couldn’t make it, so Carly went alone. She brought the palm fronds and another box of cookies but found Magdalena in her robe rocking back and forth on the floor, curled up almost in a ball, chanting nonsense. She claimed it was the ancient Karankawa tongue—*I’m letting the spirits speak through me so they’ll protect us from the storm*. We don’t know anything, Carly insisted. It could move away somewhere else like Rita, dissipate over the Caribbean. But Magdalena slapped her palms against the floor and then lowered her forehead to the ground and began a rosary in Spanish and Carly threw the palm fronds in the trashcan by the door and left without another word.

The storm didn’t dissipate. It absorbed warmth from the water and doubled in size. Whenever she could see Jess’s mouth move, taking the shape of an Ike-Turner-better-not-beat-the-living-shit-outta-us joke, Carly leaned in and kissed him so he would shut up.

Storm preps were second nature by now. While he hammered boards over the windows she emptied out the refrigerator and freezer, tossed anything perishable. She unplugged all the electronics. She dug around in her own boxes for the only thing she wanted safe—her diploma—then dragged the waterproof lockbox Magdalena had kept beneath her bed and opened it.

She'd expected the birth certificates—her grandmother's and her own—and the photo of a very young Magdalena holding a baby that Carly knew was her father, Marcos. But there was one more, one Carly had never seen. Her fingers trembled as she lifted out the wedding photograph. Marcos Castillo was twenty and wore full Army dress. He tilted his head in the curious way of posed photos, smiling just enough to show the upper row of teeth. His hair was cropped short, of course. He had her grandfather's bones, his heavy eyebrows, but the crinkles beside his eyes were her grandmother's. Carly's, too. She recognized nothing else in him, but she wouldn't—he had died before she was born.

No, it was the woman beside him who earned Carly's careful looks. A younger, crisper version of the woman in her memories, Bernadette Velasquez Castillo had thick dark hair that waved appealingly about her round face. The curls were styled—Carly knew this because her mother's hair had been Pocahontas-straight. She recalled being a child and thinking that; her fingertips fluttered with the sudden memory of movement, of slipping softly down that waterfall of black where there were no bends in sight.

Here, her mother who had rarely smiled was smiling a full smile, one that crinkled her small, tilted eyes even smaller. She was leaning her right ear toward Marcos's shoulder. His hand rested lightly, fingers bent possessively, around her waist. They were young and bright with promise. Carly turned away from the bitterness that rose up like bile in her throat. She took the whole lockbox and put it in the back of Jess's truck, the photo still clutched in her hand. He was leaning against the driver's door, waiting for her.

“We need to make a stop,” she announced.

The air on the drive to the mainland was close, tense, even inside the cab of the truck. Radio announcers had used the words *certain death*. Remembering that made Carly shiver. Jess leaned over and patted her hand, the one that didn't hold the photo. He'd seen it and known enough from the angry red of her face, the tears in her eyes, to stay silent.

They maneuvered past a good deal of traffic crowding the League City streets. Jess said he'd wait in the parking lot, so Carly headed in to see her grandmother alone.

She was watching one of her novelas; a man was shouting, a woman was crying. That was nothing new. But then the woman rose up tall and, with a look of righteous fury, slapped the man. He stared. She lifted her chin. Commercial break.

"Grandma?"

Magdalena turned. "Mi niña." She reached up for her hand, tugged her down for a kiss.

"I just wanted to check on you before the storm. And ask you about—"

"Oh, I'm fine. We have generators here, you know. And I've been praying."

"That's good, but—"

"Oh! And thank you for the palmas." She winked. "They're perfect."

Carly stared for a moment before she realized. "Oh my God." She planted her hands on her hips, furious. "You dug through the trash to get them? You're not actually going to go through with that shit, are you, Grandma?"

Magdalena's eyes sparked. "Qué dijiste?"

"You heard me. You can't break the rules like that! You can't burn things here."

"I'll do what I want, soy una mujer—"

"Say you're a Karankawa and I'll lose it. I swear to God I will."

Her grandmother stopped speaking. Her mouth fell open.

"Burning palms won't work. Chanting made-up words won't, either. This is a storm coming and you can't stop it." Carly leaned forward, locked her hands onto the arms of Magdalena's chair and leaned in close.

"You. Are. Not. A. Karankawa. They're dead, Grandma. They died a long time ago. We don't come from them, you and me. We're just us."

Magdalena turned sharply sideways, looking away, but Carly saw her blinking back tears. Guilt seethed in the pit of her stomach and she sighed. She shifted her feet, then decided. She opened her mouth to apologize when her grandmother turned back in a sudden movement. Her face, like that of the novela actress, bore the sheen of righteous anger. The tears in her eyes seemed to reflect it, bounce it back like an echo.

“You know better,” Magdalena said in a quiet, hissing voice. “We fight. *You* fight. Una niña mia no es una cobarde. You used to believe what I told you, even when *she* didn’t.”

The mention of her mother shocked Carly’s mouth open. Magdalena steamrolled past. “I tell you we come from fighters, es la verdad. Because we say it is.”

“We don’t get to make up what’s real.” Carly found the words, pushed them through in a voice that cracked. “That is your sickness talking.”

“Carly Elena.” She sounded so sad.

“I don’t come from fighters, Grandma. I come from runners.” She dragged the wedding photo from the back pocket of her jeans and thrust it into Magdalena’s face, so suddenly that her grandmother recoiled. “I found this in the lockbox with your things.”

Magdalena stared at it for a moment, head cocked, and Carly looked at it again too. In the photo she thought her mother was happy, tilting her body and her mind already to her husband. Was there something in there that would show how she’d implode after he died just a year later? How she’d shrink to a point and keep collapsing until she was a spore that was once a person, no room for a daughter, or a mother-in-law, nothing except the urge to seek out another shell, another reef, start over again?

“Tell me where *she* fits in my blood,” Carly begged. *Please tell me.* “She runs. She leaves everything. And sometimes I want that, too. I want to leave.”

Her grandmother took the photo from her with careful fingers and held it close to her face. She stared at it for a long time, tilting her face

in various angles. Carly took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “You can’t fight everything, Grandma. I’m not going to fight this storm. I came to tell you that Jess and I are on our way to Sealy. We’ll check on you on the way back, once they open the roads.”

Her grandmother nodded distractedly, eyes still fixed on the photo, thoughtful.

“Grandma?”

She blinked, as if stepping from a dark room into sunlight, and looked up. Seeing Carly she gave her a smile—so gentle, so hopeful that the tension drained from Carly’s body because she knew already what was going on in that mind even before her grandmother did, even before her mouth crafted the words that betrayed that mind of a few moments ago. When she did speak, Carly closed her eyes against one wave of pain, bit her tongue to counteract another.

“Qué linda esta pareja,” Magdalena said with approval, and that smile. “Who are they?”

Ike roared in at 2 a.m. two days later. Wind screamed against the glass panes of Aaron’s house in Sealy, peppered with hail or maybe just hard rain that sounded like hail, Carly couldn’t tell. The power had gone out hours before. On their air mattress they were sharing in the living room, she pressed her cheek to Jess’s chest and listened to the drumming of his heart and the hail. He rubbed her back in small circles like he was soothing one of his little sisters and eventually she fell asleep.

The seething sounds of the wind worked their way into her dreams, became her grandmother around a bonfire on the beach, her face lifted to the sky. She wore a wedding veil. She was screaming.

They didn’t open the causeway for days. The ferries would stay shut for even longer than that; only helicopters and rescue vehicles were on Bolivar, picking up survivors, the remnants of people who didn’t, or couldn’t, leave. From Sealy they watched the news reports and when aerial footage showed

boats, fragments of boats, random scraps of wood tossed across a barren and churned-up stretch of beach on the west end of the island, Carly gasped. There were long lengths of timber sticking up from the sand—stilt legs. All empty now.

“Our house?” she asked aloud.

Jess shook his head. “We won’t know until we go.”

The phone in her pocket buzzed. She looked at the caller ID. Bay Pines Care Center.

She’d set a fire during the hurricane—a small fire, but a fire. She’d let the palm fronds dry completely, then tore them into small strips and shaped them into a pile and set them alight with the lighter she’d borrowed from a resident who smoked. Jess pointed out her genius; she’d even ringed the fire with small, smooth rocks taken from the gardens in the courtyard so it wouldn’t spread. When the smoke alarm in her room starting blaring, the nurses and manager had found Magdalena in her nightgown, her hands in the air and cupping the smoke as if she could lift it to her mouth and drink. Her eyes were red and streaming but she couldn’t stop laughing. Neither could Carly, from the time she answered the phone to the time they drove Magdalena away from Bay Pines, a disgraced former resident. They embraced, laughing together, walking back to Jess’s truck hand-in-hand.

They began the climb across the causeway, and Magdalena clapped her hands with delight so Jess rolled the windows down. “Isla de malhado,” she said from the backseat, over the rush of wind and 97.9 The Box.

Jess glanced at Carly in the passenger seat, raised his eyebrows. “Malhado?”

“Misfortune. Doom.”

“Never heard it.”

“It’s an old word. No one really says it anymore. But that’s what Cabeza de Vaca called Galveston when he shipwrecked here. Isla de malhado.”

“La isla mia,” Magdalena said, then she reached forward and

scratched the back of Carly's head lightly with her fingers. "Nuestra."

Jess navigated down Broadway and various side streets, past fallen trees, piles of soggy junk, closed roads. An obstacle course of downed palms and mattresses and lawn furniture. They were going home. Carly smelled Jess's aftershave, smoke from her grandmother's hair, the sea. She closed her eyes and drifted.

She is eight, and she's heard the word *malhado* for the first time. Even with her Spanish—which is fluent, not broken into chunks of *excuse me* and *no thank you* and *motherfucker* like Jess's—she doesn't recognize it but she knows it means something bad because of the way her grandmother says it. She hardly moves her lips; the word darts through her teeth like a forked tongue.

Carly doesn't know what she's done wrong. All she has done is ask, "Do you ever hear from my mom?"

Magdalena straightens where she's facing the stove; her shoulders lower and set, as if beneath plate armor. "Nunca," she says, her voice firm but not unkind. "I don't, and I don't think we ever will." She looks at Carly over her shoulder. "Llena de *malhado*, esa. You be glad she's gone."

Tears prick at the top of Carly's nose, but Magdalena turns fully now to face her. "Don't you cry," she says. "No tears. Would the Karanka-was shed tears over this?"

She knows the drill, and shakes her head.

"Would they cry like sad little chickens over every hard thing?"

"No."

"No. Who were they, our people?"

In the living room, the window AC rumbles to a stop; instantly the air becomes heavy, losing the cool of the conditioning, swelling again with the warmth and salt of the Gulf. Her grandmother seems to swell with it, too.

"They were warriors."

"Claro." She takes Carly's chin in her hand, shakes it gently. "So are we."

SMALL PRINTS

Face smashed
to a panel of bus
or shoulder
of Spouse: she rolled
inside a happy
field of clement
and unusual
vegetation eleven
years ago.

Going alone, asleep
and awake, asleep
and awake, one cobble
stones, sky
scrapes, small
prints: home.

Her
blemishes
were Korean
islands.

SMALL CAR

In a cut, a field of war
you eat.

Let this be a hand
missing a finger.

In a lost
stage of prayer
the thing grows back.

His stones a tower of amusement.

A son, the soldier is only a breach.

Hard parents
are the quiet taste of dried fish.

The coily hills you coast.

They become the mountains.

ISHI WILDERNESS

Chief said there was this fire down in the Ishi Wilderness, and DeQuan was always on my ass about dropping some Molly as we fought fires across the north state, and not just weed again, but electric stuff that would morph me into the savior I was, and there was no smoke in the sky, no fires anywhere in the universe, so Fine, I said as we rolled in the back of the Cal-State Fire rig on Highway 36, and I stuck my tongue out like I used to do in church and DeQuan placed the pill there and I kept it safe and warm for a bit just thinking about Kendra and if I'd ever lick her again, and Mister said, We fight fires by lighting fires, isn't that weird to anyone, but he was new and had his yellow contacts in so we told him to sit on his thick thumb and spin, A thousand times, DeQuan said, I don't care if you were in the Marines, Mister, spin a million times, and then the rig swung a left turn and we rammed into one another and Swallow it, he said, You're a savior, You need to feel the world, so I did, but Mister had his trencher in his hand saying, I'll kill you Quan, I've killed kids, don't think I won't kill you, and Mister let out a screech laugh, the same belly sound that Kendra laughed when I licked the back of her knees, low and full of hate, and I was there for a pulse with Kendra and her Mickey Mouse and tomahawk tattoos, but the road turned to dirt, to rocky dirt, and Mister had had enough and showed us his brown teeth, and someone said Lightning, Matches, Campers, It doesn't matter, and my legs were thinning out in my stiff pants, and my skin was alive and swaying when DeQuan asked, Iraq or Afghanistan, but Mister said, Africa, so I said, Where's that, and we parked by Mill Creek under Black Rock, and finally, smoke and rattlers everywhere, and Chief told us to watch the flames and watch our feet, and I was digging and digging the lines and sweating my lungs out while the flame throwers started new fires, and I wondered if Kendra's girl was eight yet and then I wondered what would happen if these flames crested the hill and splashed all the way to Sacramento, and DeQuan took his gloves off and touched a lava rock and said, It's warm, man, still warm, and I said, You know Mister was right, that dude will kill you, but DeQuan didn't care about that because we were in the Ishi Wilderness fighting fire that lit the pines above

us, yes, we dug like saviors, yes, like kings saving the promise land where Ishi watched his mother die, where he wandered out of the hills, the last of his people, and I wanted to touch the water and flames and the lava rock too, so I asked, Is it still hot, but DeQuan was dumping orange Gatorade over his face and shouting Regeneration, Regeneration, and Mister yelled, A fucking arrowhead, and held a pointed rock above his head, and I knew right then that Mister would die that day because of his sins, I could feel it on the tip of my hot nose, and later we found him in Mill Creek, face up, dead, but happy, because every dead person is happy in their own way, and later someone told me Mister was never in the Marines, had never killed any kids, although I understood why he'd lie about it because it's a lie that works, a special lie I used later at The Ranch House when a young drunk said my brother was a fag and I couldn't take another jail stint but wanted to see genuine fear, and another time the night before Kendra came in and said I was right to belt her kid, but I knew she was lying because she still wore the white hospital band, but I didn't care, no one wants to be alone, and she had dyed her hair red and drenched that jasmine perfume that curled my toes, so I bought her four Miller Lights and led her back to my place on Birch Street, and I tucked her girl in on the green sofa with my Oakland As blanket and smelled her girl's dirty sweet smell when Kendra made her girl hug me goodnight, and then we went out on the back deck and watched the lit smoke of the lumber mill rise up into the night, and I took off Kendra's pants and turned my mini-Maglite on and spread her legs and touched her tattoos with my thumb, so soft and careful, first Mickey Mouse with a frown on her left thigh then a red and green tomahawk on the right, and I leaned in to lick them when she said, Not tonight, Not tonight, Look, and she held her left arm out to me and I saw the jagged scar on her inner forearm like she'd meant it, and when I went inside I heard her girl snoring and I knew Kendra wasn't worth it and her girl wasn't worth it, and I knew then that her girl would eventually crack her femur on the back of a Harley or catch a bad pill, so I let her sleep and snore because I had that incredible power, and I tried to sleep, but I heard Kendra rocking

on the back deck probably fingering her scar and cursing the fact that it's so hard to die, so I gulped some NyQuil and listened to the deck creak under Kendra's chair, lulling me to sleep, her jasmine smell still in my nose, and I wondered if anyone else in the world was happier than me.

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MATTHEW SPIRING's books are *What Focus Is* and *Out of Body*, winner of the 2004 Bluestem Poetry Award, and five chapbooks. His poems have appeared in publications including *Louisiana Literature*, *North American Review* and *Tar River Poetry*.

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GINA WARREN is a nonfiction writer living in Marin County, California. Her work has appeared in *Orion*, *Creative Nonfiction*, and *Bacopa*. When she isn't writing, Gina enjoys reading, hiking with her dog, and practicing vermiculture in her kitchen.

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JANE WONG holds an MFA from the University of Iowa. She has been awarded a U.S. Fulbright Fellowship to Hong Kong and scholarships from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, Squaw Valley, Kundiman, and the Fine Arts Work Center. Poems have appeared in places such as *Best American Poetry 2015*, *Best New Poets 2012*, *CutBank*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Salt Hill*, *The Volta*, and others. She is the author of *Overpour*, which is forthcoming in 2016 (Action Books). Currently, she lives in Seattle and teaches at the University of Washington and the Hugo House.



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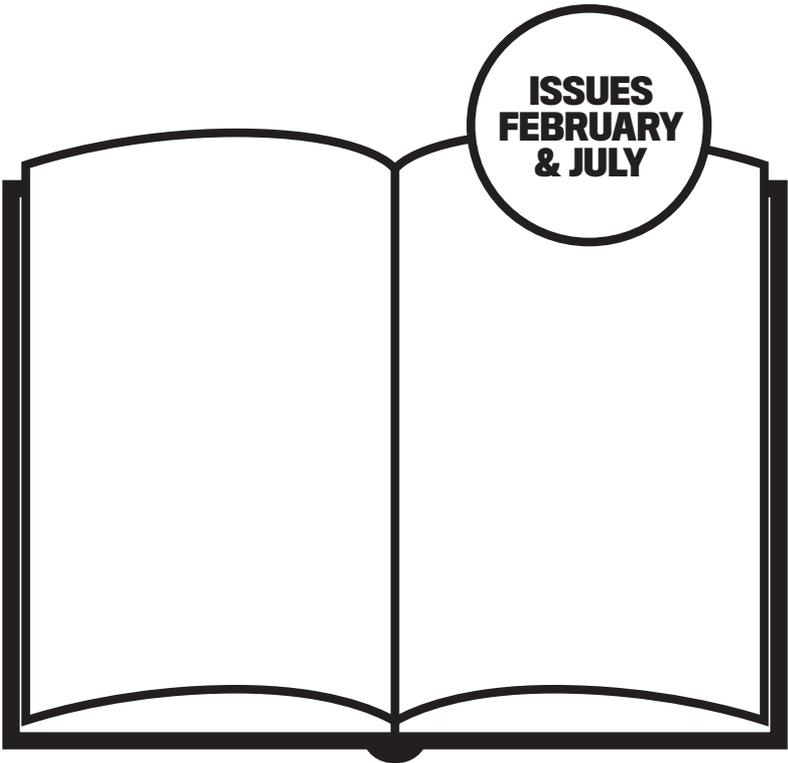
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