

2015

It Looks Something Like This

Courtney M. Bird

University of Montana - Missoula

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bird, Courtney M., "It Looks Something Like This" (2015). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 4447.
<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/4447>

This Professional Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

IT LOOKS SOMETHING LIKE THIS

By

COURTNEY MELISSA BIRD

BA in Art History, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 2008

Professional Paper
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in Creative Writing

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2015

Approved by:

Sandy Ross, Dean of the Graduate School
Graduate School

Kevin Canty, Chair
English

David Gates, Co-Chair
English

MaryAnn Bonjorni
Painting and Drawing

Contents

The Tenshi Project
Page 1

A Boy Named Tutankhamun
Page 16

The Diamond Girl
Page 30

Another Cinderella Story
Page 49

Still Life, with Mummies
Page 73

The Tenshi Project

Almost everyone agreed that the death of Rodrigo Bradley had been an accident. It wasn't like Rodrigo to leave his mother, forever, without a note. It wasn't like Rodrigo to wear turquoise gym shorts and a windbreaker on his last day (the gym shorts with a tear over the left hip, or was that from the fall?). It wasn't like him to pick somewhere quiet, somewhere in Brooklyn, if he intended to kill himself. Had Rodrigo intended to die, he would have done something flashier. The Empire State. The roof of his parents' apartment building on the Upper East Side. He would have worn a black suit, like Johnny Cash.

His obituary said things like captain of the basketball team, editor-in-chief of the literary magazine, straight A student. It said that he liked to take the subway up to Fort Tryon Park and watch the sunset over the George Washington Bridge with his girlfriend Frances and that his favorite sunset had been on September 19, 2012, because of the way the raindrops, still clinging to the branches, refracted the light. Frances wrote the obituary. At his funeral, she read a sestina. Frances was a poet. She didn't mention his wings because wings are clichéd. Someone could pull it off, like Cummings or Rilke or Emily Dickinson—*Hope is the thing with feathers / that perches in the soul*. But we were only in high school and Frances said she wasn't famous enough to write about wings.

Someone photographed the body for the coroner before they peeled it from the road, before they cleaned the feathers and the blood from the hood of the taxi that had been parked outside the abandoned paper warehouse. The next day, the photograph was on the cover of the Post. Rodrigo was lying face down, with his wings splayed out all around him, the left one reaching towards the sidewalk, the right bent inward at an unnatural angle. The feathers were the burnt copper of a prairie hawk. The caption said *Icarus Grounded* and a lot of people found that offensive, like the

newspaper had forgotten that he was just a normal kid with friends who would miss him. The photograph itself became instantly famous.

“He wasn’t exactly the sharpest knife in the drawer. Like, street smarts,” Molly said. “I mean, the bottle comes with a warning. There’s like a whole information packet they send with the kit.”

“How do you know?” I said. It had been two weeks since Rodrigo died. Frances hadn’t come back to school and our teachers taught in the half dark, too disheartened to turn on the lights, or maybe afraid that the light would illuminate things they didn’t want us to see: the bags under their eyes; the taut muscles behind their jaws. Molly wouldn’t talk about anything but Rodrigo. His wings were too big for the coffin. His feathers were selling on eBay for \$20.00 each.

Molly turned her back to me and glanced over her shoulder. “Notice anything?”

“Not really,” I said. Molly was my girlfriend of maybe a month and she was always asking me to notice things. Her hair. Her shoes. Whether or not I thought her pearl earrings brought out the whites of her eyes.

She looked disappointed. “Oh well, you will.”

“Wait,” I said. “What does the warning say?”

“That the wings aren’t for flying. Duh. I mean, look at Annabelle.” She nodded towards Annabelle Stevens, who stood outside the English room down the hall. Her wings, a warm midnight black, swept the floor behind her. It was true that when Annabelle laughed, the sound was richer than any other laugh; when she looked sad, her eyes were deeper than anyone else’s eyes. But maybe she had been that way before? I couldn’t remember.

“So it’s to make you prettier?” I said.

“It’s not just about being pretty. They show you who you are inside. And they make you more yourself. Like Lena’s wings? Kind of a color that isn’t a color? And she’s like that, you know. A hippie girl. She likes simple things. If she were a bird, she’d probably be a sparrow.”

“How do you know sparrows like simple things?”

“Have you ever seen a sparrow?”

“I think so,” I said.

*

That night, Molly called me and told me to turn on Channel 356. I was lying on the living room floor with my homework spread out around me. My dad was on the couch in his flannel robe, earphones in. He had this new thing about listening to audio books because he said it hurt his eyes to look at a computer screen all day and then come home and look at more tiny letters. Now he was listening to something called “The Rise of the Third Reich,” which meant that sometimes at dinner he’d talk about the difference between a good leader and a good person. He opened one eye when the phone rang and said, “Is it your girlfriend? Mary?”

I shook my head and mouthed the right name. *Molly*.

“356?” I said to her. “But this is a shopping network.”

“Ben, what do you think my wings would look like?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Like rusty kind of?”

“That’s rude.”

“A good rusty?”

I imagined her on the couch with her slippers on, her hair pulled back in a long French braid. Maybe laying on the floor just like me. Both of us watching the same commercial for tea tree oil shampoo.

“Just wait for it,” she said. “It will come on again.”

By the time it did, my dad was breathing that sleep rhythm and I could hear the slow whine of his book like white noise. The infomercial was in Japanese. Everything but the phone number at the bottom of the screen. It wasn't the typical thing—a woman with a painted-on face holding some earrings while an old guy in a suit said, “And the way the light bounces inside the diamond.” Instead, there was a monastery with a red stone promenade and mountains popping up out of some mist. Then there was a stone room and two monks by the window, the old monk sitting on a stool with his back all hunched over and the young one painting along his shoulder blades. Then there were people with wings walking the streets of Tokyo. They wore suits. They stood on their roofs, watching traffic seventy stories below. They hung laundry. They climbed to the top of the dripping mountains. They knelt in the rice paddies, their wings folded on their backs, but stretching every few minutes. The children played hopscotch, the downy flakes from their feathers scattering on the pavement, their wings clawed up towards the sky.

At the end, it said in English *Call for your starter kit today*. Is this what Rodrigo did? Watched the shopping channel in the middle of the night and called some 800 number? Did Frances tell him to? Did she know he was doing it? It wasn't like he was the first. I'd been seeing them everywhere: Central Park, the library, the subway platform, disappearing into a taxi, a hand reaching out to pull the feathers in.

“Jesus, they need a new marketing guy,” my father said.

“Weren't you sleeping?” I said.

“I don't sleep, Ben. You know that.”

He stood up, put the audio book player in the pocket of his robe. Then he said, “It does seem to be catching on, doesn't it? Every asshole wants to carry around twice his body weight. Worse than being pregnant.”

*

The next day, the New York Times printed an op-ed celebrating the photograph of Rodrigo's body on the pavement. The writer called it a Pulitzer Prize contender, for the way it captured the plight of human existence. She called attention to the caves of shadow beneath every feather and the dark patch of blood above Rodrigo's right shoulder. She asked what the photographer had meant by the cross hanging from the rearview mirror of the cab, as if he'd put it there for the picture. She pointed out that the viewer could almost make out Rodrigo's face reflected in naked, impressionistic strokes on the cab door.

"Human existence?" Klaus Taylor said when it came up during math. "But it's so profoundly inhuman."

"Is it?" Mr. ten Holder was younger than the other teachers. He believed that math was the foundation of all knowledge. He often told us that his greatest fear was to die before someone mathematically reconciled the concepts of quantum mechanics and general relativity. "What does it mean to be human? I think the answer to that is constantly changing. Changing exponentially. How many people in this school alone are growing wings? How many people in the United States? In Japan? In the world?"

"Well, not the poor countries," Klaus said.

"So how expensive is it?" I said.

"Do you think wings make *me* less human?" Lena called from the back row, where she sat perfectly upright on a stool. Lena's hair was nearly to her waist. It ran over her shoulders and down her back between her wings, like water. Lena was the girl that every guy in school secretly loved; that every girl secretly envied. She was effortless. That day, she was wearing a dead daisy behind her ear.

"I don't know," Klaus said. "I'm not a biologist."

“I’m not talking about biology,” Lena shot back. “Why are they different than the tattoo on your shoulder? Or Monica’s nose job?”

“They’re different,” Klaus said.

*

When Frances came back to school, her feathers were tipped in blue. Sometimes, she wrapped them around herself and disappeared and no one asked about it. Over the next few weeks, other people stopped using backpacks. They cradled books in their arms or slung messenger bags over one shoulder; Ernest Penman carried his father’s briefcase. I began to see the outline of a chrysalis underneath Molly’s t-shirt, like the skin on her back had expanded and grown lumpy. She complained that her ankles were swollen and that her skin was extra-sensitive. When I touched her chest, she pushed my hand away and said it hurt. When I kissed her, she said her lips hurt too. Everyone was changing. I don’t know if it was about Rodrigo. Some people said that we were celebrating his life. But other people said that Rodrigo was a blip, that the world was heading inexorably in one direction and that it was our responsibility to move forward. They said that Rodrigo’s death shouldn’t slow us down. We were looking for what it meant to be human. To reach. To strive. To become our best selves. Wasn’t that what we’d been doing for thousands of years? Today, the wings might not enable us to fly but fifty years from now? One hundred? What couldn’t we do? Where couldn’t we go? It was our duty to Rodrigo. Didn’t Leonardo DaVinci build shoes that could walk on water? Didn’t he design flying machines?

“But it hurts,” I said. “Why would you do something that hurts?”

And I said, “Isn’t this why Rodrigo died?”

And Molly said, “Exactly. He’s an inspiration.”

They called the rest of us conservative and old-fashioned. They said we were scared. When their wings hatched, they clustered together and compared their colors. Molly still pushed me away,

saying my lips hurt, my lips hurt. But then I saw her kissing Dylan Thompson on the sidewalk and their wings were curling in towards each other. They disappeared in a gazebo of feathers and I was left to eat lunch with Patty the Fatty and Lou, who had never kissed a girl at all. Sometimes I thought to myself, this is the breaking of a weak heart. And it appeared to me then that the wings made their wearers strong.

“How do we know it isn’t simply evolution?” Mr. ten Holder said. “Is technology some evil force? Is it not a legitimate expression of life? How can we say, this is wrong or that is wrong? This is not a natural process because *we* created it? This *is* nature.”

He unfurled his own massive wings, a deep brown like wet soil.

“I guess we’re going to have to raise the ceilings in here,” Klaus muttered. He looked diminished. Everyone else’s wings rose around him like a forest at night. I wondered if I looked the way he looked. Smaller than the smallest tree. No leaves. Pale. Silver, almost. And everyone else flush with new life.

*

I called the 800 number at three in the morning. My parents weren’t against it—on the contrary, my father had invested in the Tenshi Group, the Japanese lab that originated the formula—but it was embarrassing to want so desperately to change myself. To admit any kind of discontent in front of my parents was, I felt, like telling them that they had created an imperfect kid. I waited for thirty-seven minutes to speak with a representative. I almost hung up, but I kept thinking of Molly kissing Dylan Thompson and Klaus and Patty the Fatty and of Frances, whose cheeks were red again and who now walked on her toes, as if her wings were drawing her upwards. And I thought of how the news anchors on NBC had begun reporting from outside the studio because their wings couldn’t fit through the doors; and of the pope, who said maybe this is the way of God; and Mr. ten Holder saying this is merely a return to what we are and weren’t we familiar

with the Hypostasis of the Archons or at the very least, the Gospel of Truth? No, we said. We are not.

The woman on the other end of the phone had a British accent. She sounded like she was sitting in an office, in a long row of other women paid to be chipper, with headsets on.

“We recommend two serums,” she said. “The first for the hatching and the second for the healing. It’s eucalyptus, so it feels nice. Cooling,” she said. “It reduces swelling.”

No one at school had mentioned swelling.

“Anything else I should be aware of?” I said. “Like side effects?”

“Not really,” she said. “I mean, it’s not FDA approved or however you say in the U.S., but that’s only a matter of a time.”

In History the next day, Frances told me I looked different. “At peace,” she said. She’d started brushing her hair again, which we took as a good sign. Sometimes, she raised her hand in class and when she did, it seemed obvious that she was doing homework.

“I did it,” I said. “I ordered the stuff. The wings.”

“Oh, right! I got mine before—you know,” she said. And then she said, “After it happened, I tried to cut them off. I blamed them for Rodrigo.”

“Then why—?”

“What’s the sense in blaming? Accidents happen. Think of how many people *haven’t* died, for instance. And anyway, now I love them. It’s like what Plato says. Before the gods got angry, we each had two sets of arms and two sets of legs. Two hearts. And then the gods chopped us in half and now we spend our whole lives trying to feel complete again.” She looked down the hall, at wings crowding like lines of laundry, dancing, obscuring the people behind them. “I feel like I’ve found that other half and it’s *inside* of me.”

“How did Plato know?” I said. “How can you know?”

But she was right. It wasn't imagined; it was universal. We all felt abandoned. We all wanted to be a part of someone else. Molly holding Dylan's hand.

I walked around in a daze of anticipation. To feel whole!

*

The serums arrived on a Saturday morning. My parents were gone for the day, at some country retreat put on by the board of the Museum of Natural History. It wasn't a big deal. It wasn't like my parents were major donors. Not as major as Lena's, for instance.

In the small white box, underneath layers of brown paper, I found the vials. The liquid inside moved with the lethargy of jellyfish, dense and bubbling. The instruction manual was thicker than the manual for my contact solution, thinner than the manual for my cell phone. It said, side effects may include nausea and dry mouth. Avoid direct sunlight. Do not use while pregnant. Do not operate heavy machinery. Avoid sitting in hard-backed chairs, especially in the final days when the wings could hatch at any moment. It said, apply hatching serum for two weeks, at the same time every day for best results. Apply to the shoulder blades only. Application to feet or other body parts may result in deformity. The English text was in a tiny font on the verso of each page, a translation of the Japanese characters. It looked like an afterthought.

In the bathroom, I took off my shirt and dipped a Q-Tip into the first serum. The liquid coalesced hungrily around the cotton bulb. I fingered the curve of my shoulder blade, watching my hand trawl my back in the mirror. This was the path that a wing should take. I double-checked the drawing in the manual.

*

Pain, my mother taught me, is produced by the brain. The body sends a message that says "I am damaged," and the brain sends back a message that says, "This hurts. This needs to be fixed."

The brain is not the same thing as your imagination, she said. Just as every square is a rectangle, but every rectangle is not a square.

*

I reapplied every night and every morning. Two long valleys appeared. Then hills pushing against my skin. On the fourth night, I couldn't sleep. I took out an old picture of my mother lying on the beach, her pregnant belly cradled in a hole my dad had dug to fit me, the baby. I'd seen the picture a thousand times: my mom turned towards the camera with her cheek resting in the sand, smiling as if the coolness of the sand was a relief.

I wondered if my mom felt back then like I felt now. If she was giddy all the time. If the joy hurt. If it electrified every single cell. And was Molly the same? Did she feel like a million sea monkeys had been let loose in her shoulder blades?

When I looked at myself in the mirror, I was surprised by my eyes. Had they always been so blue? Had there always been a brown freckle at the edge of my left iris?

The pain was localized in my back. I felt branches of something twining around my spinal cord, almost caressing it. I told myself, pain means it's working. By Wednesday, I couldn't fit my backpack over the ridges. My mother asked and I told her. She shook her head.

"I don't know what you want me to say," she said. "It's your body."

When I told my dad, he said, "I hear the molting process is a messy one. I hope you're ready."

I went to school and the hallways seemed to be flooded with golden light, as if the light from the florescents was richer now. Everyone smiled at me; we shared a secret that grew inside of us and we carried an energy that was for ourselves alone. Independent of the pavement and the steel buildings and the computers, everything outside of our bodies. And I was getting close. The skin on my back was stretched thin, nearly transparent. There was a darkness there beneath it.

*

It began on Thursday. The unraveling. Klaus didn't even notice when his skin split open until Lena saw the puddle behind his chair and screamed and then everyone was standing and backing away and Mr. ten Holder said, "Ben, please go get the nurse." Who had ever seen blood so black? The tiny talons were scratching to get out until finally the wings yawned out and up, with all of us watching and Klaus looking over his shoulder. There was nothing beautiful about them. They were bent and wet and paper-thin, like a gargoyle's wings if gargoyles weren't made out of stone. The skin was traced with the hideous mapping of raised veins. The top wing twitched involuntarily.

I felt a tug in my back and realized with horror that soon it would be happening to me. Maybe not right now. Maybe not tomorrow. But it would be happening. Still, it was true that everyone else's wings had feathers and they were beautiful and strong. It was true that we were happy in our beauty and our strength. It was true that the wings revealed us and I had nothing to hide.

"What is beauty?" Mr. ten Holder said, once the mess had been wiped up and Klaus had been taken, crying, to the nurse's office. "Why did we shrink at the sight of Klaus's wings? Isn't it arbitrary?"

"It's a natural condition of the brain," Annabelle said. "Social constructs of beauty only exist because we're instinctively drawn to beauty."

Mr. ten Holder was pale. "Klaus has different wings. So what? It's superficial."

"But the wings tell us who we are," Annabelle said. "The serum is supposed to interact with your genes."

I wasn't like Klaus. Or like Veronica Wagon seller, whose back was covered in one hundred and eighty seven pairs of tiny wings. Someone said it was because she slept around, but I couldn't remember whether that was true. My genes were pure.

“It’s not the serum,” Lewis Anderson said. “It’s something to do with Klaus.”

“It’s a new technology,” Mr. ten Holder said. He was sweating. “There are bound to be accidents.”

“Rodrigo’s wings were beautiful,” Lena said.

*

There was no pain for me. I woke up in my bed, warm and sticky with blood. They moved against the sheets and I felt the muscles in my back spasm, a nausea bloom in my stomach, then the slow sensation that I’d given birth to something alien, with its own beating heart and its own mind hunkering down into the cracks of my vertebrae. It felt parasitic. Uncontrollable. Hungry. When I stood, I almost fell backwards with the weight of them. When I ate breakfast, I felt them leaching my nutrients.

*

It was just like anyone else’s hatching. Everyone at school touched my feathers and said how beautiful, how soft! They offered me tips on products—this one will make the feathers shinier, this one will make them fluffy. Molly baked me cookies. Said I looked handsome.

When Klaus came back, his arms were thinner, his face greyer. He would sit on the front steps at lunch with a cape cast over himself, reading his comic books. I was afraid of him at first, but they say misery loves company.

“Even if it were my genes,” Klaus said. “I don’t have any control over them.”

“I know,” I said.

We were sitting on the steps. My wings were all around me and I was warm. But still, everything ached, like a homesickness in my bones.

“Do you ever get the feeling that they want something?” I said. “Like they have a mind of their own?”

He looked at a page in his comic book but I could tell he wasn't reading it. Then he slammed it shut and said, "It makes me nauseous to think about it."

Eventually his wings got so heavy he couldn't leave his bed and his mother had to sponge-bathe them to keep the skin from rotting. I brought him comic books every Sunday. We didn't talk about the wings anymore. We did our best to pretend they didn't exist.

*

Klaus gave me a sealed envelope, something he'd asked me to put at Rodrigo's grave, but I didn't know where the graveyard was so I climbed to the top of the paper warehouse where he had died. My body felt unbearably heavy and by the fifth floor, I regretted the whole thing but I couldn't turn around. How had Rodrigo managed to fit inside this stairwell? I hadn't learned to fold my wings up small. Hadn't learned how to connect the instructions in my brain to the tendons in my back. Or to control the things they wanted. Avocados. Street hot dogs. Cilantro. Their feathers scraped the brick walls, no way to go back. This was claustrophobia. This was a panic attack.

From the roof, I could see the Brooklyn Bridge straddling the river. The waves tossed the afternoon light. It was November. I felt the cold on the raised skin of my back, the place where my mother had cut slits in my shirts and sweaters to fit the wings. She'd cried when I showed them to her and said, "My beautiful baby."

There was a heaviness that came with being whole. No one let on about that. No one said that maybe the gods were right to take our other arms, our other legs. That maybe wholeness wasn't something that should come from inside. That maybe fallen angels weren't meant to rise again, but only to fall and fall. That maybe falling was not such a bad thing. Mr. ten Holder had stopped coming to school. People said he was getting divorced, was sick, was dead, had moved to Africa,

had moved to Russia, had cut his wings off with a kitchen knife and nearly bled to death on the linoleum floor. If anyone knew the truth, it wasn't us.

I leaned out over the railing. It looked just like the infomercial. I could barely make out the people down on the sidewalk; only feathers and feathers and feathers. I held the envelope up to the light and traced Rodrigo's name with my finger. Then I pulled my arm back and threw the thing as far into the sky as I could.

It wove back and forth on currents of air, eventually disappearing, eventually landing. Picked up by some stranger. Read. And I stood there in my sneakers watching it fall. No windbreaker. The alien parts of me yearning to try it, just this once, to be free and whole, and why not? There was the air and the sun so very far away, the light on the windows, the river glistening on the horizon.

A Boy Named Tutankhamun

The new boy's name was Tutankhamun. On the first day of school, he raised his hand and said that he was having a heart attack but when he pointed to the place that hurt, Mrs. Izzo said that is not where the heart is. The heart is on the left side.

“What if you're upside down?” he said. “What if you're backwards?”

Everyone laughed. We knew our lefts and rights. We were learning to add Skittles and write in cursive. We taped copies of the Lord's Prayer to our desks and we knew the words by heart. We wore plaid skirts and navy blue pants. Our shoes were made of leather and our laces were curled like slinkies. But the new boy wore shoes with soles made of rope. They might have been colorful once, but now the color was empty and old.

Tutankhamun sat in the seat next to me. He arranged the pencil on his desk over and over again. He didn't write anything down. All day I looked at him and willed him to look at me. I knew what it was like to have a heart attack. Every night my heart pumped wildly and I said to my father, help me, I'm having a heart attack. He said, heart attacks don't happen to kids. I would lie with my face turned to my alarm clock and see how slow a minute was. He'll regret it in the morning, I thought. He'll scream and lock himself in the bathroom with my body, like the morning we woke up and my mother wasn't breathing and no one really understood how it happened because she had been so healthy, so whole.

Tutankhamun's head was bald, smooth, with a knob of bone at the back where his brain attached to the spine. His temple was mapped with veins. They stood out like blue tree roots, like the back of an old woman's hand, and when he clenched his jaw, I could see the blood moving. His skin was dry. I wanted to touch it. I thought that if I did, it would come off like salt on my fingertips. It was the color of something roasted. A marshmallow. I wanted to press my fingers to

his temple and feel the blood running under the surface. His eyes were set deep into his skull. It was hard to see where they were looking.

At recess, I found him in the playhouse eating dirt. I picked up a half worm, writhing and wet on the floor. There was no other half.

“Don’t eat these,” I said. “Haven’t you heard of an intestinal worm?” I hated going into the playhouse. It was dank and dark and spider webs hung from the ceiling like ghost confetti. I was sure that something in there could kill me.

“What’s intestinal?”

Tutankhamun followed me out of the miniature house and shielded his eyes against the sun. I dusted the dirt from my knees and smoothed out my skirt. I rubbed my hand across my nose to distract myself from the smell of him—something feral and rotten, like the underbelly of an old log.

“Your intestine is here,” I said. I touched him with my finger. “It digests your food.”

“Oh.” He must have been hungry. His shoulders came to points like teepees.

“If you eat worms, they grow to the size of a boa constrictor and eat you from the inside out.” My mother said that to me once, about the worms, and once she said that if you swallow something sharp it would cut your heart open. Those were the things I remembered.

At lunchtime, we always made the sign of the cross and prayed together. Tutankhamun looked around the room and narrowed his eyes. He twirled his small fist in front of his face and moved his lips like a nursing baby. He didn’t know the words. He didn’t know the sign of the cross. When we started to eat, he stayed at his desk. He handled his sandwich delicately and took small bites.

I pulled my desk together with Annika Fielding and Joe Sambo. Joe’s mother always cut his hair and the bangs went across his forehead in a violent diagonal sweep. He had freckles on his nose and his lips. I’d never seen anyone else with freckles on their lips. Once he’d said to me, stop

staring at my lips! So now I always looked somewhere else. Annika's mother cut her hair too, but Annika didn't have bangs. Her hair was long. She wore it in frenzied braids, the ends curling in every direction. During silent reading hour, Annika always read out loud to herself in the back row. She whispered, but everyone could hear it. I was embarrassed for her.

"It's hard to eat when it smells," Joe said. He nodded in Tutankhamun's direction.

"It's not so bad," I said. "He smells like yellow."

"It's a sin to be unclean," Annika said. "It's in the Bible."

"He doesn't know the Bible. He doesn't even know where his heart is," Joe said.

At the end of the day, Mrs. Izzo asked me if I would be Tutankhamun's tour guide. She said it was hard coming to a new school, especially a school like ours. Our town was nestled in a small valley, hugged in the crook of an elbow and all around us mountains rose like steam. The ocean was only two hundred miles away, but it was something foreign. In school, we drew waves on the chalkboard. We pretended we were great explorers. Mrs. Izzo read us stories about men diving into the Marianas Trench or trying to reach the Arctic Circle in a giant cloth balloon. Everyone wanted to be somewhere else. But I knew that the man who tried to float to the Arctic Circle had died. They found his body frozen. His toenails were cracked like old broken wood. And in the ocean, there were sharks and poisonous sea urchins and drowning.

We were all together at the door, Joe and Annika and I. When Mrs. Izzo walked away, Joe wrinkled his nostrils and said, "Gross." Annika said, "Serves you right," which I thought was unfair. I always did my homework and I prayed every single night, but it was Annika who knew the Bible. It was Annika who got to school fifteen minutes early and brought Mrs. Izzo a caramel apple that very morning. And last year, when we went on a field trip, it was Annika who sprinkled holy water on our heads before we got on the bus.

I smiled at Tutankhamun but inside, I felt my little heart beating everywhere, my whole body like an echo chamber. I wanted to call Mrs. Izzo back, tell her that I couldn't be a tour guide because my heart was just about to explode in a bad way, but Joe Sambo was still looking at me and Annika was standing there with her backpack on, waiting to walk home.

At the time, I was convinced that my spit was poisonous and I refused to swallow it. I would spit into bushes or the grass. If I was inside, I would let the mucus collect until my mouth wasn't big enough and my cheeks grew bulbous, and then I would run to the bathroom and spit it all in the sink. By the end of church, my cheeks were always so full they almost squeezed spit out of my eyeballs and then I would run down the granite steps and around the corner ahead of my father and spit into a bush and breathe deeply. No one had ever told me that I would die if I swallowed my spit, but I knew it instinctively, the same way I knew the difference between the sound of my father's footsteps on the stairs and the sound of a ghost.

On that first day of school, I went to the bathroom seven times. Joe said, "You pee a lot." I imagined my mouth as Streganona's pot of spaghetti, the thin strands of mucus slithering out of the pores along my gum line until they drowned me. I always felt like I was drowning.

The next day, Tutankhamun wore a uniform but still he didn't look like us. His socks were bunched around his ankles and ours were folded. His fingernails were long, the whites of them ridged and splintered. We only raised our hands when we knew the answers, but Tutankhamun raised his hand all the time.

"Have you ever seen a bird who flew into a window?"

"What is glass?"

"Is the ocean the same as the sky?"

“What are light bulbs?”

“Once I hit my toenail with a hammer and it fell off.”

“Once I stared at the ceiling without blinking for a whole day. And then I did it again.”

It was embarrassing to listen to Tutankhamun, in the same way it was embarrassing to listen to Annika read aloud. I wished that no one else could hear him. It was like his thoughts were naked and we should close our eyes to him. But he barely noticed us.

I didn't speak to Tutankhamun at recess or at lunch. After we prayed, he asked me what I was doing with my hands. I pretended not to hear him. I slid my chair back and ran to the bathroom. My cheeks were aching. After I spit, I began to shake. I held the sink and bowed my head. My mouth felt thick and gummy.

After school, Tutankhamun asked me again. We were in the stairwell and everyone else was already outside. I took his hand in mine. I curled his fingers towards his palm, leaving the pointer finger and the middle finger straight in a blessing.

“This is how you do it,” I said. I brought his fingers to his forehead, his belly button, and his chest.

“It's the cross of Jesus. From when he died for our sins.”

“I like that name,” he said. “Jesus.”

We traced the cross again and again until he could do it faster than I could.

But then Joe and Annika opened the door, the sunlight pouring in behind them. They asked why I was standing with the new boy. I said I wasn't, and I told Tutankhamun to stay away from me. His blessing hand fell by his hip and he said, “Oh.”

He walked outside and over to the swing set. He watched Sally Lane pump her legs back and forth. The ropes bent in her fists as she rose higher. He climbed onto the swing beside her and began to pump his legs. He wriggled on the swing like a caught fish. And then he got it. He went

higher than Sally Lane. He went so high I thought he might go all the way around the top pole. And then at the highest point, just before he began to swing forward again, he threw up. Sally Lane shrieked. She leapt off her swing and ran towards the school building. Everyone followed. Tutankhamun stopped pumping. For a moment I thought he might be crying. I stood at the edge of the woodchips, waiting for him to come down. I had been a disappointing tour guide.

I wrung my hands together. "Tutankhamun," I said. "Do you have the stomach flu?"

"This feels like a ship," he said. "The rocking. Why was that girl doing it?"

"Because it's fun."

"I don't like it," he said.

"You just need to get used to it," I said. But really I was remembering the time that Elizabeth Freeman fell. She broke her forearm and her bone ripped the skin and there was blood pouring out everywhere. Our kindergarten teacher fainted and the teacher's aide had to call an ambulance and everyone was screaming. Even her best friend ran away. Elizabeth crouched in the woodchips and held her own hand so that it didn't fall off.

"You've never been on a ship," he said. "I have."

Tutankhamun's mother picked him up from school. She was late and my dad was late too. Most of the kids were already gone and the teachers were sitting in the lobby. We sat outside on the stone pathway with the other stragglers. We didn't say very much to each other. His eyes were tired and his body looked limp, like something melted.

His mom had blonde hair and brown glasses. She tucked her shirt into her pants and wore a belt with turquoise beads on the buckle. Her face was impatient, but still she bent down and folded Tutankhamun's socks. She licked her thumb and rubbed a smear of dirt from his collarbone. She said, "How was your day?"

"I made a friend," he said. "Her name is Clara."

I blushed. No one else was close enough to hear, so I said, “Hi. It’s nice to meet you.”

At night, my father told me again that my mother was a mermaid. She had scales brighter than new pennies and the only words she knew, she’d learned from a sailor. Sand. Sea. Moon. Goodbye. My father had hauled her up from the water’s edge and chopped her tail in two and taught her how to walk.

“Do you know how much a mermaid weighs?” he said. “Those fins are not light.”

“There’s no such thing as mermaids,” I said. “It’s just a fairytale.”

“If you say so,” he said.

We took the pillows from the couch and piled them next to my bed. We made walls of stuffed animals at my feet. When my dad kissed me goodnight, he had to lean over the pillows to reach me.

Tutankhamun became my shadow. It got hard to spit without him noticing. He would ask me questions when my mouth was full and I would run away. Joe Sambo said I was starting to smell like him. Annika said, that boy walks funny. And he did walk funny. His ankle shifted to the outside of his body, so that his foot curled in and he walked on its edge. He demanded that I teach him hopscotch, but when I did he fell. He grasped his hip in his hands as if it might split open, as if he was kneading the skin back together. But he liked the chalk. The chalk, he said, was dusty and cool. He wrote his name in shaky block letters and the k looked like a lopsided flower. He wrote my name too and then he drew bugs all around it. This is a beetle, he said proudly. And this is a locust.

“Do you ever think there are bugs crawling under your skin?” I said. “You know, cause of the itchiness.”

“When you have bugs under your skin, it doesn’t feel like itching,” he said.

One afternoon, Mrs. Izzo asked us if we would recognize Jesus if we saw him in the street. She made us take out a piece of paper and answer the question in writing. We had ten minutes. I thought I should go to the bathroom first, but instead I wrote. I said that Jesus would be wearing a toga and shining like a beacon. At the end, I looked over my shoulder at Tutankhamun’s paper and he’d written, “Jesus has the head of a bird and the eye of the moon. Sometimes it is an eye like a bitten nail and sometimes it’s a full circle eye. If Jesus is God and I am God, are we the same?” I wanted to tear the paper apart before anyone could see it, but Mrs. Izzo was walking towards us and she said, “Clara, will you read us your answer please?”

My mouth was full of spit. The class was looking at me, every eye on my face and my rounded cheeks. Joe Sambo was chewing on his fingernails, which he did when he was bored. All I could think of was the spit seeping out of my gums. Tutankhamun nodded at me and pointed at his throat. He gulped his own spit and I could see it working its way down the notches of his larynx. There were veins in his throat and they moved when he swallowed, shifting cords of blue. Annika was frowning. Sally Lane was biting on her pencil. Mrs. Izzo leaned over my desk. She said, “Clara, you wrote such a lovely thought. Why don’t you share it with us?”

I started crying and suddenly it was too much. I spit all over the notebook and the spit was thick with tiny, dense bubbles. It was on my hands too, webbed between my fingers. Mrs. Izzo’s mouth was open and I could see her mismatched teeth. Tutankhamun patted my arm and said, “I can read it for her.” To which Joe Sambo said, “The paper’s too wet now, you zombie.”

Mrs. Izzo took me outside and I looked at the floor as I followed her, but I could hear Joe laughing and I could hear Annika say, “what’s a zombie?” and the other kids repeating the word, “zombie, zombie, zombie” and Joe saying, “someone should take that notebook and burn it.” In

the hallway, Mrs. Izzo touched my damp turtleneck. I'd been pushing my tongue into it all morning, releasing little batches of spit.

She said, "Are you feeling sick?"

She took me to the nurse and called my dad, but he was at work and work was an hour away. I lay on my side and watched the clock. I counted my heartbeats and every minute I got a different number.

At home I had to explain to my father about the poisonous spit. We were eating macaroni and cheese from a box and oranges from a bag my grandmother had sent us. We didn't have a TV.

He said, "I swallow my spit and I'm still alive."

And I said, "But you don't swallow *my* spit."

"I can if you want me to," he said. "And what about when you're eating? Doesn't the spit go down with your food? You've been eating this whole time and you're still here."

I went to the bathroom and spit a mouthful of macaroni into the toilet. I imagined my insides were aching and then they were. After my dad put me to bed, I pressed my tongue into a pillow. I liked it best when my mouth was dry.

The next day, Joe Samba called me the spit girl. Tutankhamun put a dead beetle on my desk and I said, "No, thank you" even though it was quite beautiful with its green shell. That was the only thing I said all morning except for the Lord's Prayer.

I went into the playhouse by myself at recess. I said to Tutankhamun that I did not want to talk to him, that he didn't need a tour guide any longer. I was tired of his questions and his strange breath, the way it smelled old and sandy. I was tired of the way that Elizabeth and Annika and Joe Sambo and the other kids avoided me because I was with him.

He stood near the playhouse window. "I know how it is to be sick."

“Go away,” I said. I checked the corners of the house for spiders and stepped on them all. Then I closed the shutters and sat with my hood pulled over my head.

I was tracing my fingerprints when Joe Sambo opened the door to the playhouse. The shadows were so deep with the light coming through behind him that I couldn't see his freckles. He said, “I thought you hated it in here. Don't you hate dirty things?”

“I like dirt just as much as anyone else,” I said.

“Oh, right, you love dirty things now.” He walked in, closed the door behind him and it was dark again. He said, “Do you want to play husband and wife? You do the dishes.”

“There aren't any dishes in here,” I said. “There's not even water.”

“Can't you use your spit?” he said. He walked towards me, bending his head to fit inside. “Or is there something wrong with your spit?”

“Don't touch me,” I said.

“Are you scared of me? Do you think I'm stronger than you?”

“No,” I said. “I think I could scratch your eyes out of your head.”

Joe Sambo and I used to carpool to kindergarten. He would put his fingers in the window of the car and roll the window up. At the last minute he'd take his fingers out but not before I screamed. After school one day, he told me what it meant to knock someone out and then he punched himself in the face and fell onto the floor. When we were even littler, there were times he sat on my back and pulled my hair.

He pushed me against the boards of the house and said, “You're a freak, you know that?”

“Stop it!”

“You can't go crying to your mommy anymore, you little baby,” he said. “She's not a mermaid, she's just plain old dead and your daddy is crazy. My dad said so. He said your daddy's lost it.”

“My dad is a scientist,” I said. I swiped at his face, lashed my nails across his cheek.

He tangled his fingers in my hair and pulled. I screamed, but he clamped his hand over my mouth and I could feel strands of my own hair on my lips. He said, “Don’t even try it.”

Tutankhamun opened the door and saw Joe Sambo. His shadow stretched out in front of him on the dirt. He pulled his shoulders back and thrust out his chest, raised his skinny neck towards the sky. He said, “I command you to let go of her.”

“You can’t command me to do anything,” Joe said. He looked at Tutankhamun and when he did, I brought my knee up between his legs. He fell to the ground and writhed like a snake. He said he would tell but I knew he wouldn’t. When he left, his hair was matted with dirt and he said to Tutankhamun, “You’re going to regret this.”

And then I was crying only a little. Tutankhamun opened the shutters and sat in the patch of sunlight across from me. He said, “Here, sit in the sun.”

“About the spit,” he said. “You don’t have to worry so much. You’ll know when you’re dying. If you’re poisoned, you know it. You feel it in your gut like a great worm with razor sharp teeth. If you hit your head hard enough, you feel your brain pulsing and growing too big for your skull. It won’t be a surprise.”

He killed a spider on the windowsill and dragged his finger through its web.

“*You* thought you were having a heart attack,” I said. “*You* were afraid too.”

He leaned against the door. He took his shoes off and then his socks. He dug his toes into the dirt.

“I’ve never had a heart attack before,” he said. “It’s hard to know what the new ones are going to feel like.”

“Everyone laughs at me because of you,” I said. “They hate me. They say I’m starting to smell like you.”

“I saved you,” he said.

“But it was your fault! Everything is bad because of you.”

He drew a locust in the dirt with his finger. He took the finger and ran it along my cheekbone. It sounded like gravel and crumbs. He held the finger up to me and the top of it, the part above the knuckle, the part that had touched me, was disintegrating. He’d caught it in the palm of his other hand, a small pile of dust. He said, “This is how it goes when you start to disappear. It hurts. You’ll know.”

“That’s impossible,” I said.

And then I said, “I’m sorry. I lied. Nothing is bad because of you.”

He put his fingers into my hair and I heard them going, the sound of sand falling apart. He closed his jaw tight and his temple throbbed under the skin. He ground his fingers further into my head, until I knew the fingers were gone. His palms were two disks nestled into my scalp. I held his wrists and pulled his hands away from me. My father had shown me how to read palms. He’d said, “This is the lifeline, this is the love line, this is the line for happiness.” Tutankhamun’s lines were halved. His hands were disappearing.

The next day Tutankhamun wore mittens and a thick white hat, even though it was only September and flowers still littered the lawn in front of the school building. When we prayed in the morning, he made the sign of the cross with his whole mittened hand and then he clasped his mittens together in bulky symmetry. During math, he raised his hand and the loose sleeve of his shirt fell down around his elbow. His wrist was bone thin with the mitten growing out the top like a boxer’s glove. He went to the board to write the number twelve and the chalk slipped from his

hand. It broke on the tile floor and nobody said anything. When we practiced cursive, he sat at his desk and watched me. He didn't even try to write.

"Here," I said. "Take this copy and I'll make two."

"That's okay," he said. "It doesn't really matter."

"What if Mrs. Izzo calls on you? Please, just take it." I pushed my paper over at him, three minutes worth of p's looping across the page. Cursive letters are supposed to be connected, but we hadn't learned how to connect them yet.

Later, I said to him, "Isn't there something I can do?"

He said, "Hold my mitten for a minute."

So we sat on the swings and I held his mitten and he closed his eyes, pointed his face to the sun. He said, "It's only temporary. Remember the story of Jesus Christ?"

"That's just a story," I said.

"You don't believe in it?"

I could see that he wanted me to, so I said maybe. But my mother hadn't believed in anything and I didn't know what to believe either. My parents never went to church. In my house, they used to hold hands and hug each other and sometimes they would kiss. We used to measure the sky with our arms and say, "I love you this much."

Tutankhamun stopped wearing shorts. He stopped coming outside during recess. Stopped following me around and eventually stopped talking to me at all. He said his prayers with his massive mittens. His eyes would close and his lips would move as he whispered the words to himself. Mrs. Izzo didn't bother him about anything. She would said, "How are you feeling today, Tut?" And he would shrug. She never touched him. Maybe she felt, like I did, that if she were to touch him he would drift away.

At home I told my dad that my friend was disappearing. He tugged the covers up around my neck and said that people don't disappear. He explained to me about physics, that the world is made of atoms and what atoms are and how they bounce around and come together, and how they come apart. I asked if my mother came apart, but he said, "No, she just grew wings and flew away."

After he left the room, I realized I hadn't spit in days. I'd forgotten about the poison and I was still alive.

When Tutankhamun died, we wrote cards for his mother. We drew stick figures of him standing in different versions of Heaven. We drew the Marianas Trench and air balloons and golden pyramids reflecting the sun. In mine, I drew the ocean with mermaids and Tutankhamun lying in the bottom of a deep-chested ship, with the waves around him rocking gently, turning him upside down. After we sent the pictures to his mom, I remembered how he hated when the swings went too high and how he'd probably hate the ocean. I drew another picture with my winged mother sitting on a cloud. It looked nothing like her, so I ripped it up and threw the pieces away.

Sometimes, I liked to stare at the ceiling and imagine how it was to be Tutankhamun. I was sad when he died—I thought my heart was broken—but the truth is, I didn't know the first thing about him.

The Diamond Girl

In your version of the story, the girl is a junkie. She is seventeen, standing on the side of the road with a garbage bag at her feet and in the bag, she has a teddy bear and a box of Girl Scout cookies that she stole from her niece. Her arm is outstretched, palm facing the sky. She's hitchhiking but not with her thumb. It looks like she's asking the sky for rain.

When a car pulls alongside her, it's the mother's boyfriend and he says, hey sugar. She begins to run. The wheatgrass is scratching her calves and the dryness of it sears her. She is aware of every blade. There is a feeling, spreading from the place just beneath her ribs, that she's having a heart attack. It's sharp and contained, blooming. It will eat her. She watches her feet as she runs. She wills them to fly. The veins between her toes look like they came from the soil.

He lies on top of her in the grass. He tangles his hands in her black hair and pulls.

*

In another version, the girl wants it. She has a gap between her front teeth, but people say it's striking. When her mother's in the bathroom, she bites the man's ear. Crawls under the table and kisses him. If he doesn't want her back, her heart will break. She can feel it breaking even then, with her head in his lap and his hands in her hair. And later, when he kisses her mother, he's watching her over the mother's shoulder. He has one green eye and one blue eye.

When the mother finds them in the shower, he calls the girl a witch and she tries to become one. She locks herself in the bedroom and wills the house to catch fire. The mother and boyfriend leave. They take the couch cushions and the pans. They take the shampoo and the toothpaste and the toilet paper. He's closing the door behind them when the mother says wait. She takes the girl's fish from his tank and puts him in the microwave. He pops like a balloon.

*

The mother's boyfriend drives the first girl to a motel. She doesn't know where she is, only that the carpet feels like soggy cereal below her feet and the face in the mirror is not familiar to her. The overhead light is strange. Her cheeks are hollowed out and she looks old. The mother's boyfriend locks the door. He puts a gun down by the television and turns the television on to block out the sounds that the girl makes. Crying sounds. Breathing sounds.

At first the diamonds look like chicken pox. Small red pustules erupting on the girl's belly. She's lying on the bed and the man is watching the sores grow. He touches them carefully. He kisses them. They make constellations on her skin and he traces them with his finger. Orion's Belt. Andromeda. Virgo. His hand is cold and her eyes try to open, but the lids are too heavy. He takes the needle from the pillow by her head and places it on the bedside table. Lays down next to her and says they're going to be okay.

*

The gap-toothed girl is lying in the bathtub at home. The house is empty. It smells like burnt fish. The diamonds are so sharp that all she needs to do is touch the skin and it breaks. She collects the stones in a soap dish. The bath water is pink with tiny cataclysms of blood.

Her body says there are a thousand ways to be crushed without dying. She thinks about putting clothes on for the first time in a month. She thinks about going down to the jewelers. She thinks that if her mother had known she could grow diamonds under her skin, she would have never left.

*

But in my story, the girl is only nine. Her name is Little Mina and her older sister's name is Kate.

*

Kate picks up every worm on the road and throws it back into the wet grass. When the pond overflows, she collects the frogs and puts them in a box at the foot of her bed. Kate brushes her strawberry blonde hair every morning. Powders the freckles on her nose when a traveler stops for dinner. But Little Mina's hair grows in mousy patches. It looks like it was glued on by a drunk. Their mother, who owns an inn, doesn't like it when Little Mina interacts with the customers.

Little Mina tells Kate that she's killing the worms, that the worms leave the grass because they'll drown there. Kate laughs and calls her a know-it-all. She says that it must be hard for Little Mina, not knowing who her father is and she means it. Kate's father comes to see her every few weeks. He wears fur on his collar and his sword has a hilt that was dipped in gold.

He brings Kate chocolate. He gives the mother flour and wine and sugar. When he hunts, he brings them an entire deer.

He does not know about Little Mina. When he comes to the inn, the mother locks her in the cellar and tells her to hush. Little Mina draws faces on the walls. She draws maps and swans and a man with a single wing.

But after he leaves, Kate shares her chocolate with Little Mina. They take it to the river and watch fish jump from the water. They overturn rocks and look for salamanders. When Kate finds a turquoise one, she lets Little Mina name it. She wants Little Mina to have something of her own. One day, when she sees Little Mina with the hand mirror, pulling at her strange hair, Kate cuts some of her own hair and says, look, now we're like twins.

When Kate dies—let's call it scarlet fever—everyone wishes it had been Little Mina. They build a statue for Kate by the duck pond. At the ceremony, a little boy talks about the time that Kate defended him from bullies. Another boy says that Kate was his soul mate, a hero, a lady. Little Mina wears a thin black cape tied around her neck. She does not talk. The mother does not stand with her. Nobody sees her. Black is an absence.

From the edge of the woods, the witch watches her cry.

*

When your girl wakes up, her skin sticks to the motel's bedspread. She is naked and bleeding and she thinks he might have killed her, but the cuts aren't deep. Too bad. There is an open cigarette pack on the bedside table, and small, rough stones are spilling out the top. She holds one to her eye. A sliver of light sneaks through the closed blinds and splinters in the center of the stone. The face of it is an entire landscape. Blood curls in the canyons. She takes one and fits it into the empty sore between her breasts. My baby, she says. Her mouth is dry. Her swollen tongue sticks to the roof of it.

If only they were bigger. Long and sharp as a knife. The mother's boyfriend is in the bathroom. She can hear the shower running. She can see steam coming from the open door. She wills her body to grow a diamond strong enough to kill him. She rolls onto her side and the sores hurt. Her right wrist is handcuffed to the bedpost. It wasn't like that when she went to sleep.

She reaches for the man's bag. There must be something left. Pills. Powder. Something sharp.

*

The statue of Kate is covered with snow. Snowdrifts grow from her shoulders. Little Mina rushes across the square without looking at it, she can't look at it. She borrows a horse from one of her mother's guests and rides to the witch's house. The witch lives at the base of the mountain, where the forest starts in earnest. Her walls are made of living trees. The gaps between the branches are full of birds. The roof is a piece of sky she cut down and hammered onto the topmost branches. It took months to climb high enough and then she had to wait for a sunny day. She used her scalpel, and once she was finished, she folded it into a square small enough to fit in her purse.

In your story the witch doesn't have a roof made of sky. In your story, the witch is the woman at the gas station who sees the girl in the front seat, the girl too young to be so thin, too young to have her hair falling out, to have bruises on her neck, to be a junkie. Your witch pays and drives away. She nods at the mother's boyfriend.

I'm being consumed by sores, Little Mina says. My mother won't call the doctor because there is no money to pay him.

Your mother still owes me, the witch says.

The witch had been called in for Kate too, but by then Kate was already dead. The mother shrieked and pulled her hair. Bring her back, she said. You're the witch. Bring her back. But the witch said no one can bring back a dead girl.

I don't want to die, Little Mina says.

She thinks of the way her sister's room smelled at the end. The way Kate didn't see any of them. Didn't feel Little Mina's hand in hers. Little Mina loved Kate. Kate was everything, and then she stopped breathing and she was alone.

We'll figure something out, the witch says. Come in out of the cold.

*

Underneath the chilly blue sky roof, the witch takes her scalpel from the drawer and lays it next to the tweezers. Little Mina climbs onto the kitchen table and lays naked with her belly, her palms, to the sky. A few sprigs of dried lavender hang above her. The mother doesn't know where Mina is. She doesn't care. She is angry at Little Mina for wanting to live.

You're younger than I expected, Little Mina said.

The witch warms her hands in the fireplace. Her skin is smooth and her hair is rich. Long looping braids wrap around her head like a dark and heavy halo. She is even more beautiful than Kate was.

Not every part of me is young, the witch says. She holds up her hands. Raised and ropey veins under mottled, elephantine skin. Short and swollen nail beds. And then she touches the sore on Little Mina's hip. She presses gently and spreads the skin. She takes her scalpel and cuts. Takes her tweezers and pries. The harder she pulls, the harder the flesh holds onto the diamond. The diamond is precious to the flesh. It will not let go.

The first one's the hardest, the witch says. She drops the diamond into a ceramic bowl by Mina's feet. She presses her hands over the open skin and it heals. It is luminescent, like someone's draped a piece of moon over it.

*

The gap-toothed girl takes the microwave and throws it into the dumpster. She buys a new microwave and a new fish with the money the jeweler gave her. Rough diamonds aren't as valuable as cut diamonds, he said. Think of all the work I'll have to put in. Do you know how hard it is to cut a diamond? But still, there's a bit of money. Enough to buy a match and burn down the house. Enough to buy a truck and throw the microwave onto the floor of the passenger seat. Enough to get to New York City.

She changes her name so that her mother won't find her. She calls herself Chloe. Sickle-shaped scars are littered across her skin, but she wears long sleeves and no one knows. She is giddy with the value of her body. She looks into the mirror in her new apartment and says, you are the most valuable girl in the entire fucking world.

*

The witch takes five diamonds as her fee. One is so small, it resembles a piece of fairy dust. She places it in a locket made of stellar ash, which she wears around her neck. She keeps other things in there too, she says. A piece of hair from Joan of Arc. A fingernail from Merga Bien. An ear canal from a snake.

Who's Merga Bien? Little Mina says.

The witch dabs lavender honey on the scars.

An old friend, she says.

The witch wraps a cheesecloth around a clear blue diamond with two stars inside. She places the diamond and the cheesecloth in a basket and gives them to her garden gnome. The gnome glares at Little Mina. He mutters to himself, calls Mina the daughter of the devil.

I can give you a better life, the witch says. If you trust me.

And that sounds okay to Little Mina because she has wanted a better life for nine years. She wants to be loved. She wants a father. She wants a mother. She wants someone to be proud of her. She wants to be somebody like Kate.

Nothing in her says stop. Nothing in her says, this woman might want something from you in return.

So the witch sends her garden gnome to the castle with a letter and a basket. Standing at the window, they watch him walk into the woods, his footsteps small and deep in the snow.

*

When the prince arrives at the inn, Little Mina's mother lays her only tablecloth on his table. She feeds him pancakes with blueberry butter and lemon zest and she asks if he is lost. The prince is handsome in the traditional way of princes. His hair makes an S across his forehead. He has thick eyebrows, the measure of a strong person, and a nose that's already been broken by the hilt of a sword. He is engaged to marry a princess from the north, but he doesn't much care for northerners and the king has said that whichever prince—and there are twelve—finds a solution to the kingdom's debt will be the next king. I'm not saying that his intentions are impure. It is noble to save an unloved diamond girl from a life of sadness and it is noble to save a kingdom from bankruptcy.

If only Kate were still alive, the mother thinks. She was so beautiful! She could woo a prince.

Does Little Mina live here? the prince says.

The mother stares at him.

What do you want with her?

I want to marry her, he says.

But she's only nine. She's an ugly little child. She hasn't even a last name.

I'll wait. In five years she'll be fourteen. But in the meantime I'll bring her back to the castle. Let her stay with me and in time we'll know each other.

The mother continues to stare.

I'm only sixteen, the prince says.

The mother goes to fetch her in a daze. She doesn't know about the diamonds. Not yet. By the time Little Mina comes downstairs, there are two more princes in the dining room. One has a mustache with flecks of silver in it. He refuses to sit with his brothers. He paces in front of the fireplace. The band across his chest is decorated with twenty-seven engraved buttons. As the eldest, he shouldn't have to fight for the crown. It should simply be his.

Little Mina underestimated the stature of princes. She stands in the doorway, holding onto the wall. She has brushed her mousy hair and pinched her cheeks. Her dress is made of milkweeds that the witch plucked and sewed together for just this occasion. It is so light. She thinks it might blow away if someone opens the door. It feels like wearing clouds.

You don't have to choose now, the eldest says.

Of course not, says the first. You'll want to pick well. No need to rush.

But do come with us, the youngest says. We've always wanted a sister.

He smiles shyly at her. A boy of eight. If he weren't wearing a crown, he could be a baker's son. Round, pleasant cheeks. Soft brown eyes.

On the way to the castle, Little Mina shows the youngest boy her scars. The diamonds rattle in a basket at her feet.

Is there such a thing faster than this carriage? she says. She is feverish with happiness. She's never moved so fast in her life. She's never left her village, except to wander the woods by the witch's house. Through the window she sees a river laden with white water, beautiful brick houses on either side. Someone in a fishing boat waves to them and she waves back.

Of course! he says. There's such a thing as a galloping horse! There's such a thing as a cheetah!

The other princes ride their own horses outside of the carriage. They don't talk to Little Mina for the whole trip. But the youngest one won't stop talking. He's been waiting his whole life for someone who will listen to him. He tells her about the time he put red food coloring into the moat and everyone thought it was blood. She tells him about the time she put honey into her mother's clogs.

As they're entering the capital, she gives him a yellow diamond to keep.

*

Chloe sells her diamonds on 47th Street. For fun, she works as a waitress. She is pretty and her memory is good. The chef flirts with her. One night he tells her a secret. He says that he was born with webbed arms, but that the webs were cut right away. He says that he still has webbed toes. He slips off his shoe and runs the webs along her Achilles tendon.

I have a secret too, she says. She pulls back her sleeve and shows him the half moon scars on her forearm. Shows him the scars on her lower back. Shows him the new sores forming on her

thigh. Chloe is consistent. Her diamonds don't fail. They don't refuse to grow. Because in this version of the story, science doesn't matter. In this version, there is no such thing as truth.

How often does this happen? he says.

Regularly, she says. Whenever I see a homeless person sleeping on a grate. Whenever I see a girl crying on the subway. I take their sadness and I make it my own.

What about you? he says.

Ha! I grow diamonds! I bought my own apartment! I don't have sadness.

*

In that version it might be true. In that version gap-toothed Chloe might fuck the chef and steal his heartbreak—the chef had been divorced, the chef had lost his father. She might use him to wash away the stench of the mother's boyfriend. She might become the international CEO of a company. Be on the cover of Vogue. Be celebrated by the entire country for her mutation. She might buy a brownstone and a white tiger and only wear spider silk. And one day, in a windowless hotel room in Reno, her mother will see her on TV and say to the boyfriend, don't you wish you picked her.

*

The king treats Little Mina like a princess. She has everything she could want. To look at her, you'd never know the kingdom is nearly bankrupt. You'd never know two men lost their lives to bring her the baby unicorn. You'd never know how little the gardener is paid to bring her fresh flowers every morning. And it's not necessarily the *things* that make Little Mina happy. Everyday people want to see her. When she walks onto her balcony, the townspeople wave and shout, Good afternoon, Diamond Girl! The princes ask what her favorite dessert is and then they make the chefs prepare it. At first, she doesn't know how to respond. She says syrup and they laugh. Syrup is not a dessert. Chocolate soufflé is a dessert. Crème Brule is a dessert. Lemon meringues are a dessert.

The mother comes to live in the capital and they treat her like an aunt. They support her, because she's the mother of the diamond maker. She visits Little Mina everyday. Dotes on her. She says, you are the most valuable little girl in the entire world. She brushes Little Mina's hair like she used to brush Kate's.

Months go by and Little Mina learns how to order white truffle cheesecake and blood orange fondue. The princes travel for weeks to get the truffles. There are trolls who guard the truffle fields and the princes pay them in gold. They order blood oranges from the other side of the world. Little Mina smiles to think of how much they love her. How they will do anything for her. They don't complain. They say she is the best thing that's ever happened to them.

For her twelfth birthday, she's given a mirror made of silver and in it she looks beautiful. But as she carries it from the feast, everyone watches her go and they are all thinking the same thing: it's been over two years and she hasn't produced a single diamond.

The king turns the diamond ring on his finger. It came from her collarbone, years ago. It is the diamond that the witch sent.

Do you know how diamonds are made? he says to his wife.

They come from the earth, she says. She is not a stupid woman.

Bury coal deep within the earth. Heat it until it's its own small sun. Squeeze it until there's not a single breath left and then freeze it, he says.

The youngest son is listening. He has sewn the rough yellow stone that Mina gave him into the collar of his shirt. He touches the fabric and thinks of how she's changed. Her skin is smoother now. Her jawline plumper. Just last night she asked him for a dress made of the sea. He shook his head sadly and said that it was impossible.

*

In your version, the girl is dying. The man carries her over the threshold of their new house. He bought the house with money from her diamonds. He says he bought it for her, so that they can build a life together, but she can barely walk and the house is situated on a cliff overlooking the ocean. The driveway winds back and forth. She pushes against his chest. Her wrists are willow thin. She feels his arms around her like vines. They are choking her. She imagines herself in the jungle, wrapped in the arms of a tree, with a boa constrictor watching, waiting for her to wake up.

He goes out and comes back. He wakes her up at night, or he doesn't. There are the twin pricks of the needle in her arms, her toes, the veins behind her knees, and of him pushing himself into her, breaking her sparrow hips. She feels them both like lightning. She stares at the cracks on the ceiling. Makes maps out of them. Finds a crack that leads all the way to the wall and follows it to the Arctic Circle, to anywhere she can be free. And everyday he's prying the stones from her skin, leaving her empty. She's trapped inside her body and there's no one there to tell. She tries to move her lips and the language that comes out isn't hers.

She puts her hand in his hair and tries to pull back his head. He thinks it's affectionate. He kisses the diamond below her belly button before he cuts. Outside, the sea makes sounds like a baby. In it, she hears someone drowning.

*

It doesn't take long to realize that the diamonds have dried up, the same way ice cubes melt in warm water.

They move Little Mina to a cave above the sea—much like the house in your story. They call for the witch and her scalpel, so that she can cut the diamonds when they grow. They lock her away with Little Mina for the time being. Perhaps, years ago, the witch did something horrible. Perhaps the witch accidentally killed the princes' baby sister when an experiment went wrong. When a single candle exploded with the life force of an army and blew apart the west wing of the

castle, the wing where the nursery was. Perhaps that's why she lived in a sky-roof house in the middle of nowhere with only a garden gnome for company when she could have been living in luxury. What I'm saying is, the witch had it coming.

They send the mother too, because why should they continue to pay her rent? And what use is the mother without the daughter? The girl is young. She needs a mother. They're kind enough, at least, to know that.

There are two windows through which Little Mina can hear the swollen water and smell the salt. On the first day, Little Mina stands at the window and watches the water move. It puts her in mind of something haunted, as if the sea were a great basin containing everything that was already dead and everything still living. She is wearing silk the color of lilacs and an ermine shawl. It is softer, even, than the milkweed dress. If you'd ever worn a dress that soft, you would miss it too. You would think about it every night.

The princes promised that they would bring desserts. The youngest one said that he would visit. He said he was sorry and embarrassed that things turned out the way that they did. He said he would try to find her a dress made of the sea.

They think it's something to do with sadness, the mother says. So be sad. Think of your sister. Think of that orphanage that was burnt to the ground last week. There are so many things to be sad about. Why can't you be sad in a palace? Why can't you be sad when you are loved? You are a selfish little girl.

A diamond needs desperation to grow, the witch says. It needs to suffocate. In the castle, she could walk the grounds whenever she wanted. She had her choice of playmates. What more does a child need?

She would be more grieved without me, the mother says. If they want more diamonds, they should let me return to my business.

Your only business was being mother to the diamond maker.

The mother throws a stone from the floor of the cave into the water below. The splash is too small to see.

Little Mina turns to the witch. Why did you do it? Did you know it would turn out this way?

The witch rolls her eyes. People always think I know what will happen. You're the diamond maker. I'm just the one with the scalpel.

*

When your girl dies—an overdose, a heart attack, a wish coming true—the man is beside himself. He pulls every diamond from the drawers and counts them. There are four hundred and seventy six. But what will he do when the money runs out? What will he do now, with no one in the world to call his own? He is sweating, shaking, pacing the room from open window to open window. He can smell her there on the bed. He can smell the sea and it smells like she does. Like the belly of a ship. He takes her shoulders and shakes her. Throws her head down on the pillows. He scratches her skin with his fingernails but nothing comes out.

At night, he mutters to himself. He opens the kitchen drawer and fits the blade into the electric knife. He will get the diamonds. He cuts into her thigh, but the only thing he finds is blood and damp tissue. He looks everywhere. Blood leaks as he draws the blade through her shoulder. Pieces of bone fly and at first, he sees the white and thinks diamonds! But no. They're only the dry, sad underthings of a human.

*

I believe you when you say that's the way it happened. But in my story, no one has an electric knife. No one could look at another body and butcher it.

*

It only takes three weeks for the sores to come back. The mother and the witch are bickering everyday, and the door to the cave locks from the outside. No one can leave. Well, the witch can leave. She can unbutton her skin and slither through the crack in the wall, but when she does she looks bald and burnt, bare muscle and fat without skin to contain it. The skin puddles sadly on the floor of the cave until she comes back. Its eyes watch the mother.

The mother is going insane. She resents the other two. She can barely look at Little Mina. Tells Little Mina again and again that it should have been Kate who lived.

By the time Mina is fifteen, she's a regular diamond mine. The youngest prince sends books, but he does not visit. Mina reads. She draws on the walls. She pretends to be Kate and that makes the mother happy. Most of the time, the mother believes her.

I had a daughter once, the witch says. I took branches from the ash near my house, a handful of snowberries, a calla lily—a couple of small things from around the living room, a clam shell, this old leather drum, a piece of rotten bread. A piece of coal. I buried the coal where her heart would be. And then I had a daughter.

What's coal? the mother says.

It is something like a diamond, but black.

What happened to her? Little Mina says.

I put her in a basket and fed her to some wolves. But I meant well.

One night when the witch is wandering along the beach below them, the mother steals her skin. She pulls it on over one foot and then the other. She buttons it up from her left heel to the nape of her neck. She wraps the braids around her head. She tries to become the witch. She wants to disappear. When the witch gets back, the mother refuses to return it.

I don't want to kill you, the witch says. But I will.

You don't need it, the mother wails. It's beautiful and young and you don't need it.

Little Mina wishes that her mother would keep the skin on. She wishes her mother would turn into the witch. But in the end the mother gives the skin back. No one is happy but everyone is alive.

*

In one version of my story, the youngest prince is engaged to a beautiful girl from the east. On the night before the wedding, he clasps a diamond necklace around her neck—a thin chain of diamonds with the big yellow diamond cut and polished at its center. They stand together in front of the silver mirror. She touches the diamond and sighs. He watches her eyelids flutter, the veins in them hungry and frail.

The next morning he packs a bag. He pays the guard beside his door to keep quiet and then he flees. He takes a key with him and he rides all day until he reaches the sea. He climbs the long staircase, running two steps at a time. When he flings the door open, he sees Little Mina lying on her back with her breasts to the ceiling. She is naked and bleeding. The witch leans over her with a scalpel in her right hand. In her left, she holds tweezers. The girl is crying silently. In the corner, the mother babbles to herself. She says isn't this always the way with children, they want and they want and when they get what they want, they're bored. When they get the life they want, it's just a façade. Because didn't Little Mina want the diamonds? Didn't she keep them a secret from the mother for all those months before the prince came? Didn't she want them and hoard them and love them?

I don't have the dress made of water, the prince says.

Little Mina draws a sheet over herself. She's horrified to be caught like this, so vulnerable, so liminal. Half the diamonds have already been removed. Half are still in their pockets of skin. It's been so long since anyone has seen her as a girl. Has seen the skin as anything other than hard-packed earth and now it's on display and not only the skin, but the blood beneath it.

Even now, even with the kingdom rolling in diamonds, no one ever visits.

But everyone will know you stole me, Little Mina says.

He looks at the mother and at the witch. The witch shrugs. Do what you want, she says. Just leave the door open so I'm not stuck here with that woman.

There are places we could go, the prince says. I can make you happy. We'll make a life together and you'll never grow another diamond again.

And Little Mina wants to believe him, so she says yes. He cuts the rest of the diamonds out himself. The sores heal immediately under the soft print of his fingers. She feels desire like a dragon in her belly. No one has ever touched her so softly. The witch looks away. She is ashamed of the hardness of her own hands. She is ashamed, maybe, of what she did to the girl.

In this version, the girl and the prince live happily ever after in a faraway place. Little Mina has a daughter and when the daughter cries, her tears hit the floor and become frogs. They hop all over the house. The prince laughs when a frog jumps into a bowl of soup. Little Mina laughs the hardest. She tells her daughter that she's lucky and the daughter laughs too because the frogs are funny. No one will ever want a girl who cries frogs. Not for the frogs, at least. That's not the way the world works.

*

Your endings are lonely. The thing about Chloe is that her skin never stops making diamonds. Her skin never stops being sharp. So when she curls her body into the crook of a man, she cuts him. Even a good man. Even a man who she loves. The thing about the other girl, the dead girl, is that she died. Heaven is the loneliest place on earth, you say. Your stories are cruel. They exploit. They isolate. They make it impossible to be human.

You think I'm childish. You think I don't understand them.

But I do.

*

Let's say the prince marries the other girl. She is more beautiful than Little Mina. Her hair grows thick and blonde. She comes with an entire kingdom and three chests of gold. Let's say the prince isn't who we want him to be. He isn't as strong as we want him to be.

But then, neither is Little Mina. No one is fighting hard enough.

One night when the mother is asleep, the witch takes Little Mina into her arms and rocks her. She apologizes. She says she wanted so badly to give her a good life, but she didn't know how. She says that if she could remove the mother's skin and step into that mortal body, she would. But a mortal body won't survive if you skin it, and the skin won't survive either. There's a way for the mother to become the witch, but not for the witch to become the mother.

It's confusing, she says, but that's just the way the world works.

Maybe what she means is that she is the mother already, and Little Mina is the girl in the basket.

It's too bad, Little Mina says, no one would miss my mother.

I can give you freedom, the witch says. I can, at least, give you that.

The girl is laden with heavy sores. She is fit to burst, so valuable in that exact moment that she could sink to the bottom of the sea and not be found until her ribs float to the surface. She squeezes one of the sores on her elbow. It's almost ready.

If freedom is dying, she says, I don't want it.

It isn't dying, the witch says.

The witch digs into her purse and brings out the folded piece of sky that was her roof. It is a sunny day, the sky a frosted blue. It lights up the interior of the cave even though there is no sun and outside, it is night. Little Mina runs her fingers along the edge of it.

Take it, the witch says. Wrap it around yourself.

And then what? Little Mina says. She is sick with the weight of the diamonds. She is like an old dog that has had too many litters. She is like a mine whose sides are worn with too many pick-axes. There are canaries inside of her, and they all say to run.

You'll be too big for this room, the witch says. You'll break the walls down and the sky will take you back into itself. I have a long ladder. I will visit you.

Little Mina drapes the sky over her shoulders. She wraps it around her naked waist and pulls it tight. Coolness descends over every inch of her. She feels like a child again. She feels like she did before her sister died, before she realized that her hair would never be pretty and her skin was scarred and that nobody loved her in the whole wide world. She is her father and her mother and her sister. She is the witch. She is you and she is me.

Little Mina says goodbye to the witch, and thank you. Then she tugs the sky over her head and bursts from the cave. She flies to the edge of the earth and pins herself back into place along the horizon, her body an absence, with stars in every imaginable color blinking roughly against the black night.

Another Cinderella Story

“Darla,” said Nellie, “Let’s go dancing.”

Nellie was sitting sidesaddle on the bathroom counter. She was putting on mascara with her face close to the mirror. “It’s been so long since I went dancing,” she said. She picked up a safety pin and began splitting the tiny hairs.

Darla, on the sofa, swirled the wine around in her glass. “I’m wearing pajamas.”

“So?” Nellie walked into the living room and put her hand on Darla’s head.

Darla sighed. She had the feeling that she was just where she wanted to be. It was a feeling she thought Nellie never had. She was in pajamas and the room smelled like cookies and there was something bright on TV. She had a book she wouldn’t mind reading.

Nellie ran her fingers through her hair. Nellie hated hairbrushes. “You’re just being spiteful,” she said. “You don’t want to dance because you’re afraid I’ll be a better dancer now.”

“Which foot would you wear?” Darla said, pouring wine from the bottle. “What would I wear?” Darla worked as a hostess. She had plenty of clothes for dancing.

“We’ll go line dancing,” said Nellie, “it will be fun.”

Nellie was Darla’s older sister. They hadn’t gone dancing in three years, ever since Nellie lost her foot. Nellie did all the normal things: she sat at a desk and wrote memos for lawyers, she went to physical therapy, now she was learning to run again. To run again she wore a curved blade, like an archery bow made of fiber. The doctor said she would be just as fast as she was before the accident and then he asked her out. But Nellie said she didn’t go for guys who knew she was a cripple. Most of the time, when she wore pants and regular shoes, nobody knew, and that’s why

Darla and Nellie lived in a cold place. Sure, she had a limp but so did most people. Most people were lopsided.

Darla began unbraiding her hair. It was fine, blonde hair with wisps that flared around her face in downy fireworks. She barely felt it in her fingers.

“What’s the musician doing tonight?” Nellie said.

“He has work,” Darla said. Nellie sat down on the floor and began stretching her stump leg. Her fingers curled around the plastic toes. Nellie had painted the toenails hot pink, as if anyone was going to see them, besides Darla.

“A wedding? On a Wednesday?” Nellie said. She touched her tibia with her forehead.

“This Italian couple. Anyways, they wanted someone who could play the accordion,” Darla said. She didn’t even know if she believed it. Nobody gets married on a Wednesday. Darla might have been over the musician. If he was a musician. She’d never seen it.

“Luckily, you have previous plans,” Nellie said. “To go dancing.”

Nellie grasped Darla around the ankles and moved her feet up and down like a marionette. “Look, your feet want to.”

Darla pulled her feet up onto the couch, out of Nellie’s reach. It was a game they played when they were little. The floor was on fire and if you touched it, you’d die.

“I’ll go,” Darla said. “But I’ll need to be drunk.” It was hard to go anywhere in winter. Her body was always hovering on the knife-edge of cold. Cold on either side. Like her skin knew it was only a matter of time until she would be cold again.

“Maybe I should wear the blade,” Nellie said. “It’s so smooth and black.”

“It looks slippery,” Darla said. Darla was always the safe one, the tidy one. Every year, it was Darla who reminded Nellie about their mother’s birthday. “You’re not used to it yet.”

“I ran two miles on the treadmill yesterday,” Nellie said. She curtsied. “Thank you very much.”

“It’s your body,” Darla said.

Darla watched her sister walk into the bedroom. Nellie’s shoulders were uneven, but her hair, dark and inky, went straight down the valley of her back. If Nellie were a protractor, Darla sometimes thought, her hair would be at ninety. Darla pulled herself up from the couch. She went into the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror. Her eyelashes were too pale. She put on Nellie’s mascara. Her eyes looked different with the mascara. Sticky. Like they belonged to a cartoon.

“Gorgeous!” Nellie said. “You’re so striking when you wear makeup.”

Darla pressed powder onto her cheekbones. Her nose was red, perpetually, from the cold and there was nothing to be done. “Almost ready,” Darla said.

*

Leopold is in the backseat. He feels like he’s eavesdropping on his parents’ silence. His mother adjusts the heating knob and puts her hands against the vents. Outside, the sky is grey with low clouds flattening the landscape like smeared butter. Grey butter for ghosts. The town is restless because it’s November and nobody leaves their houses in November. Leopold’s thumb is ticking against his thigh like a metronome. Almost home, he tells himself. Almost home.

“Leopold, this heater isn’t working,” his mother says. “We left you Skittle because we trusted you to maintain her.”

“A mouse had babies in there this summer,” Leopold says. “They ate through some things.”

His father clears his throat and glances at Leopold in the rearview mirror. He makes eye contact with Leopold in the glass and immediately snatches his eyes away. He looks at the road and drives the car. Leopold gets the sense that his father’s embarrassed about the mice.

“Did you not drive poor Skittle all summer?” his mother said.

“I rode my bike,” Leopold said.

He would have needed the car to drive to the prison to see his parents. But visiting the prison depressed Leopold. The scratched plexi-glass surrounding the visitor’s room. The way his mother looked in orange. The size of the guards. One of those guards could split his skull in half with a spoon. He’d been dutiful for years and this summer he just had other things going on. The mice, for one thing. He couldn’t kill the mice.

Leopold’s parents went to prison a few years ago. Breaking and entering. Stealing. Threatening good people with phony guns. It happened more than once. They used to go on vacation and leave Leopold home to defend their collections—embroidered couch cushions, jewelry boxes, antique dolls, tea sets, no stick pans, silver picture frames with pictures of strangers, Christmas stockings, paintings, a set of candlesticks, books, computers, spatulas, a fake Honus Wagner card, a fake Maltese falcon. Leopold knew they were fakes because his parents made him send pictures to an auction house and the auction house said, “No, see how thick the cardstock is.” The auction house said, “The falcon’s value lies in its provenance. It has to be *the* falcon.” Falcon with a capital F. Anyways, they would come home from vacation with a van full of stuff and then Leopold would set about organizing it all. Tea sets on the north wall of the basement. Paintings in the attic, alphabetized by artist’s last name, and, failing an artist, by subject. Lawn mowers in the garage. It was an addiction, this gathering of things.

They pull into the driveway and Leopold waits for his mother to say, “Lovely job with the leaves.” But she doesn’t say anything. Before he collected his parents from the prison that morning, he raked every leaf and put it into the plastic bag at the corner of the yard. He’d had to buy a rake because the rake he’d grown up with was not technically theirs. The police had taken it and returned it to the Cusicks at 231 Kimball Avenue. But Leopold knows how his mother likes organization.

“The house looks so skinny,” his mother says. “Where did the potted plants go? Where are the curtains?”

“They went back,” Leopold says. “Most everything went back.”

Leopold has been sleeping in his childhood bed. A thin mattress tucked inside of a rocket ship frame. He sleeps on his side with his knees curled in. He imagines someone looking down at his lonely body and it doesn't look lonely. It looks like a lightning bolt.

“They let me keep the cat,” he says.

“That cat adopted *us*,” his father says. “We were victims.”

“Poor Tigger,” his mother says.

Leopold likes being alone. He doesn't want to share the house again and how will they fill it? The boards in the floor are long and hollow. They ring when he walks to the bathroom at night. They have no money to buy carpets. His parents are going to steal his bed. He knows it, just like he knows that they're going to try to steal his job and his bank account and his girlfriend, who is at this moment just an email that says, “No, I don't want to get coffee with you. Please stop contacting me.” Leopold thinks she's probably less pretty than her photos and so she'll eventually say yes to coffee and then she'll see that he's a nice guy. People don't react well to him at first but that's just bad luck.

And now more bad luck. No one wants to date a grown man who lives with his parents.

“Tigger, you sweet, sweet thing,” his mother says. She is sitting in front of the empty fireplace with Tigger on her lap and she's looking at the empty corners of the room. In this corner there was a lamp with long gold tassels. In this corner there was a coffee table with assorted glass figurines, a shepherd and a shepherdess, a porcelain canary in a porcelain cage. Now there aren't even dust bunnies, because Leopold swept and mopped last night.

“There was more furniture in prison,” his father says.

“I can take you back,” Leopold says. “If you want.”

“We’ll manage,” his father says. “I’m sure we can dig up a few things.” His father doesn’t look at him. He’s still embarrassed about the mice.

The light comes in through the front window, the perfectly clean glass, and hits every naked surface. Something in the way his mother sits like a girl on the bare floorboards, something in the way his father sits on the window seat watching her, says that they’re newlyweds shopping for their first home. The furniture’s gone because it’s never been there. The house is sparkling because it’s new. Leopold has disappeared because he hasn’t yet been born.

His father stole his mother’s wedding ring from a Turkish man staying in a hotel. It was a small diamond but the light burst from it like an exploding star.

Upstairs, Leopold calls the bank and has them change his address to a secret PO Box he bought downtown. He would move into that PO Box if he could. Buy a tiny bed made of postage stamps and a nightstand made of a thimble. He had the sense that he owed his parents something, but now, seeing them there in the great emptiness of the living room, their thin necks and the sagging skin of their wrists, he can’t figure out what.

*

Darla felt blood beating in her fingertips and in the space behind her knees. She danced and the club’s colored lights dove around her the way seagulls dive into a whale carcass. Flash. Splash. Sun on a wing. In a beady eye. She closed her eyes and the lights were brighter. Darla kept her hands down by her sides. No one knew the song because it had no words. Nellie liked that kind of thing. Her hands made braids in the air above her head. She had some rhythm but it was maybe not the right rhythm; she didn’t seem to care.

A man put his hands on Nellie’s hips, held onto her with his big star hands from behind. Her eyebrows cinched and she looked right at Darla. What the fuck, she said with her silent mouth.

The man was tall with an unbuttoned white shirt. He was the kind of man who shaved his chest. Nellie peeled his fingers away and turned to face him. But then she slipped on her fiber foot and went crashing down.

The man caught her under the arms where the skin is soft. He stood her up like a doll. She smiled and pointed at her foot and shrugged. “It’s new,” she said. The smile was a phony one. Everyone else was backing away because Nellie had fallen so generously, body exploding, limbs gravitating in every direction. The man let go and she fell again. He leant down in front of her and picked her up. He carried her to a table by the door. Darla followed. She couldn’t hear anything. The music was white noise. Darla thought, now we’re free.

“Thank you,” Nellie was saying to the man. “My fiancé will be so grateful. He’s in Texas for a big oil deal. No—Alaska.”

“Yeah, well,” the man said. He had an aggressive forehead. “Have a good one.”

At home, Nellie put on a sports bra and one sock. “I’m going for a run,” she said.

“You’re not,” Darla said. She opened the freezer and took out the bowl of cookie dough. She sawed at the lump with a serrated knife until a chunk broke off. Two cookie’s worth, more or less. She’d made the dough for the musician but the musician hadn’t called since the other day when he had *not* picked her up from work.

“I already have this foot on,” Nellie said. “I have too much energy to sleep. And I like running at night. It’s not a crime.”

“I hate to be a downer, but you already fell twice tonight.”

“No pun intended.”

“God, you’re irritating. Don’t you have work tomorrow?”

“Work’s more fun when I’m tired,” Nellie said. “Otherwise there’s no challenge.”

“Isn’t it enough of a challenge to walk?” Darla said. She dug the knife into the block of dough and chipped off another piece. “Want some?”

“Screw you,” Nellie said. “I’m leaving.” She pulled a baklava over her pale face. She opened the door and lowered the baklava and said, “Love you.” But the way she said it was angry. The door slammed behind her.

Darla brought the knife and the bowl to the couch. She sat heavily. She curled herself around the bowl like a sea creature in a conch shell. The floor was on fire. Darla had played her cards and there was nothing to do but wait. Sometimes, in these guilty moments, she rewound it all in her head. The neon-white smell of the hospital room and their hysterical mother. Nellie’s bruised torso, tattooed in blood. How easily it could have been Darla who got herself tangled on the freeway! And how fair! Darla was a terrible driver. Darla wasn’t a runner. Darla didn’t need her body in the way that Nellie needed her body.

“This is permanent,” Nellie had said. “Five seconds of drowsy driving and now I’m forever fucked up. Fuck you, foot.”

The hospital sent the foot home in a Styrofoam cooler. “I hate Styrofoam,” their mother had said. She wedged it on the floor behind the driver’s seat and it squeaked every time they came to a red light.

“Why don’t you just throw it away?” Nellie had said. She wouldn’t look at the foot.

“What? A piece of my baby? Absolutely not,” their mother had said. It wasn’t surprising. She’d kept all of their baby teeth in a silver jewelry box on her dresser. Tiny white teeth and tiny yellow teeth, the latter belonging to the dog, which had died of gum disease. Their mother was nostalgic.

Nellie came home ten minutes later.

“It’s cold,” she said. And then she sat on the couch and unscrewed her bow foot. She massaged the indented skin where the strap kept it tight around her calf.

“Here,” Darla said, “I can do that.”

*

I’m in a motel with my boss. It might be morning but the sky is raining and it’s hard to say how high the sun is. Plus, the shades are drawn. I’m wearing red lipstick because I know he likes that; I woke up and went into the bathroom and brushed my teeth and put on the lipstick. I ran cold water over my fingers and pressed the cold into the skin under my eyes. And now I’m straddling him and he’s yawning. He says, what’s wrong. And I say, I’m waking you up.

We don’t fuck because he says he’s not a morning person. I am. I ask him why he does the weekday morning news and he says he’s still young. Relative to what, I say. His eyebrows are salty and long. They stick out over the rims of his glasses. His face is narrower than mine, which neither of us likes. He’s never said as much, but some things you just know. It’s why they keep me off camera. Camera adds ten pounds, says Carol who does the evening news. Carol has two hundred different outfits. She wears false eyelashes that look like caterpillars crawling on her face. Once upon a time my boss used to date her but then they broke up and Carol got married to an investment banker named Carl and my boss got married to a woman named Pauline who, on their first date, said she didn’t like olives *either* and what she hated the absolute most was when people dressed them up as penguins. What a fucking sucker, excuse my French. Anyways, Carol’s a feminist and she says it’s bullshit that my boss wears the same outfit everyday and I agree with that. Plus I agree with her when she says I could do better than to fuck a married man.

The room smells like stale vodka and morning breath, which if you’ve never smelt it smells like you’ve been sucked into a chemical vortex. I ignore it because I’d rather have sex than

complain, but when he wiggles out from between my legs—and at first I think maybe he’s come around, when his head is just under me and I can feel for a second his breath on my skin, like maybe he’s considering it—I say, fuck you, and walk into the bathroom. I should maybe be nervous about job security, but I think Carol’s got my back. And if I had to go home to New York, so be it. Better than this hellhole. Local news was probably not worth the move, as resume builders go. Or anything else.

My boss comes into the bathroom and pulls back the shower curtain. He sits naked on the edge of the tub, near the back where the water won’t melt him.

He says, “Kristina, I’m sorry. This is just the week from hell. Pauline’s morning sickness has been keeping me up all night. I can’t stop thinking that it’s God punishing me about us and I don’t know what to do.”

“Well for Christ’s sake don’t tell her,” I say.

He watches me shower and touches himself. It’s raining outside. It’s raining in the tub. I take the showerhead into the palm of my hand and I look at myself in the metallic surface. *I* could be a fucking news anchor. I could bash his head in, kill him right here in the tub, step from my good body into his and be a local celebrity. Leave my body there, perfect and white and dead with tiny, pocketed dimples in the skin and red lipstick on the cracked lips and everyone would think he’d done it because Carol would say, on the evening news, the fucking morning news anchor was fucking the new girl.

Admittedly, it’s a flawed plan. I would then be in his body living in jail for the rest of my life, his life, our lives. I would never be a news anchor. Or a fifty one year old with a twenty three year old mistress.

I’m half way through the conditioning process when my boss says he’s awake now. Says that check-out is in half an hour. So we, wet, go to the bed. The bedcover feels like plastic. It squeaks

under my back and water droplets roll along the quilted grooves. He's slipping into me, far away. I forgive him because this is what we do when we're bored.

*

Leopold is spending more time at work. There's a girl there, a hostess, with a blonde braid and thick, unnatural ankles. The ankles don't look good with loafers and skirts, but she wears them anyway and everyone pretends not to notice. She perches behind the hostess stand most of the time, so maybe they *don't* notice. But Leopold does and he thinks that maybe she'll go out with him because she's imperfect too. Her voice catches the air like a barbed dandelion seed, dancing, dancing, and gone. When he hears a hint of it, he stops washing dishes to listen. When she comes back to the kitchen to flirt with Billy, he watches her ankles on the tiled floor and then he runs to the bathroom because his apron is tented up in the middle. He always washes his hands.

Leopold is drying his hands on his apron when his mother walks out of the storage room in the back of the kitchen. She's holding three pans and a lobster pot. Something is rattling around inside the pot. She looks homeless.

"What are you doing here?" Leopold says. "Someone's going to see you."

Billy glances up from the béchamel. He nods.

Leopold pulls his mother into the hallway. The tendons around her elbow are stringy; he imagines them like seaweed under the skin. The truth, he knows, is that his mother changed in prison. She's foreign now; her hair is light and dry; her eyes are blue and liquid. His father changed too. Now he is more of himself. Harder, colder. The way he used to be hard and cold.

"You can't take the pans," Leopold says.

"But this place has so many," she says.

"This place cooks food for a lot of people," he says.

“I’m tired of the microwave.”

“Me too.”

He pulls her fingers from the pans one by one. She closes her eyes and a tear snakes down her cheek. She turns to leave and Leopold feels a little more heartbroken than he was an hour ago. She’s wearing a pair of Leopold’s jeans and they pool in dark blue puddles around her feet. The puddles scuff along the tiles.

“Just one,” he says. He hands her the smallest pan. Something for an egg.

Leopold gets home at 1:00 am after another unsuccessful attempt to talk to the girl. It went like this: she was standing in front of the restaurant waiting for a ride and he went over there and stood next to her. Neither said anything and then she looked at her watch and walked away.

At home, his mother has locked herself into his bedroom. His father is sitting on the floor with his legs stretched across the hall. His feet are tapping on the wood door and he’s reading a book called “The Dangerous World of Butterflies.”

“Password, please,” his father says.

“Not funny,” Leopold says. “What’s she doing?”

“She trying to get back out there,” he says. “I found her in the neighbor’s garage holding a canoe paddle. She’s *stealing* again, Leopold.”

“I can’t live like this,” his mother says from the other side of the door. “I need things.”

“Can’t afford things,” his father says. He doesn’t look up from the book.

“Dad,” Leopold says, “you have to be able to do something. Can you get a job, maybe? Or start gambling?”

“The only work he knows is stealing. I married an idiot,” his mother says. He imagines her with her back against the doorframe and her knees pulled up into her chin. It’s how she must have

sat in prison. Just this way with baggy men's pants and her socks so thick. Maybe she has his Spiderman blanket wrapped around her legs. Something the police didn't want. Not worth it.

"Look who's talking," his father says. He traces the wing of a butterfly on the page and then holds the book up close to his face, like he's breathing the butterfly in.

"Leopold, don't listen to him. He got me into this life," she says.

"And now she's addicted."

"I am! It's true I am. I don't know how to be without my things. Is that so wrong? To want little pieces of people to populate my life. I took them fair and square; is it my fault if people are negligent? Leopold, remember that bear pelt I took from the place in Vermont? It belonged to an old man and he treated it like a daughter. He stroked it and oiled it and slept with it on the trunk at the base of his bed. When he went away for the winter, he left the heat on to keep it warm. I watched him, Leopold. For years. And then he died and his real daughter just boarded up the house and forgot about the damn bear. You think I was going to watch mice make a home in someone else's treasure? No, sir. You must have gotten that from your father. And then where did we put that pelt? How many times did you wake up in the night to see it there on your wall, comforting you in the dark? Protecting you? It was the old man protecting you, Leopold. Because you protected the bear. Things have a soul, Leopold."

Leopold remembers the bear pelt. It followed him like a shadow; tormented him. Light glinting off the oiled hair in the pitch dark; a luminescent black hole on the wall.

He should get some things for his mother. The house is bare and empty. The floorboards creak. They can't afford carpets.

"Your mother has lost it." His father stands up. "I'm going to make spaghetti."

"I'm sick of spaghetti," his mother screams.

*

Frank is a 911 operator and he's a dirty son-of-a-bitch. I won't get into it here, but when he comes home from work he can't stand to be alone and he can't stand to read or watch TV or talk even. All he can stand to do is slam me up against a wall and fuck me until he can barely breathe. The other thing he can stand to do is drink. It's like his brain can't be inside of itself after work. He hates it in there. He says if his brain were a landscape, it would be a forest on fire. No, not even a forest, he says. But a building with people in it.

He says my brain is like a jungle gym for grown-ups.

I'm not usually into guys like Frank. Too sensitive. He has a very short beard and the way his skin looks underneath it is luminous. He's single, for one, and sometimes he gets this look in his eyes like if he had to die with anyone, it would be me. I'll tell you who doesn't look at me like that. The fucking morning news anchor.

"You need to learn to compartmentalize," I tell him. "Don't bring your work home with you."

I'm sitting on the couch in his boxers and I've got some kind of video game remote control in my hands. Sonic the hedgehog on the TV. Something I haven't seen since fourth grade. There's a bottle of Jack Daniels on the coffee table. We're not bothering with cups or with clothes, really. The heat's on high and I'm topless. I'm wearing Frank's socks and his boxers and a knit blue hat. If I hadn't just fucked him, I'd think I was turning into a boy.

"That's rich," he says, "coming from you."

"I'm not sleeping with my boss anymore, if that's what you mean," I say.

Which isn't necessarily true. I haven't slept with my boss in four days.

"I don't find out what happens to the people who call," he says. "Like this one couple. It was a typical heart attack, a really old guy, but the wife kept saying it was her fault because she'd

yelled at him for forgetting to pick up the fucking Yule log. Imagine that. She said, you have to save him. This is the love of my life.”

“No one says that,” I say.

“Well, she cried a lot,” he says.

He keeps telling these stories and I’m watching his mouth move and wondering what’s going on inside there. I’m watching the way bubbles catch in the crevices between his teeth and I’m thinking, a forest fire? What does the hell does that kind of a brain feel like? What the hell does a jungle gym feel like?

“If my bones were all spread like a jungle gym, I’d want acrobats in lingerie to climb me,” I say.

His shoulders sag and he leans back into the couch.

“You’re not even listening,” he says.

“I am,” I say, “I’m just thinking at the same time.”

“Today,” he says, “a guy called in with a foot.”

“So a guy with a foot walks into a bar,” I say.

“No, really, he had a foot.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“There was this storage unit that nobody paid off for a few years so they auctioned everything inside it and this guy bought a smoker. Inside the smoker was a human foot.”

“So a guy with a smoker walks into a bar,” I say.

“Kristina, it could be a murder or something and this guy called *me*—I helped him—and I’ll never fucking know what happens because my life is one big tease.”

“I’m not a tease,” I say. I pick his hand up off the couch and put it on my breast.

“You’re a girlfriend tease,” he says. “Not a regular tease.”

“Well, if I was your girlfriend you wouldn’t let me fuck my boss.”

Not a regular tease. I guess that’s something to be proud of.

He has a couple pulls from the whiskey and I have a couple pulls and all he wants is to lie down on the couch and stroke my hair. I flip the channels until I find something worthwhile, which just happens to be “The Shining,” and eventually he falls asleep. There is a small bead of drool near my temple but I don’t wake him up over it. Maybe I’m too tired or too lazy or maybe I feel bad for him. So I keep lying there and I fucking hate myself because I have to be awake at four am for work and Frank doesn’t start work until noon. In the office it will probably go like this. I’ll say, “Hey boss, you tiny little prick, I heard that a guy found a foot inside a grill. A human foot. Maybe it was murder—so my sources tell me. I put lipstick on today. Mascara, blush, an aquamarine scarf that brings out the white of my eyes or whatever it is Carol’s always talking about with the aquamarine. And basically, I’m ready for the fucking camera.” These are the kind of stories that make local news here. Man finds foot.

*

There’s only one other bidder and he’s a big guy with a mustache. Mustache is carrying his money in a green fanny pack draped across his chest. He glares at Leopold in a friendly way, like a husky dog glares at a stick. Underneath the fanny pack he’s wearing a leather jacket that’s grey on the shoulders and black everywhere else. It’s an accidental grey, just worn down like a slow rain has been falling. Mustache is a regular at the storage unit. The owner of the facility says to him, “How’d the last batch do? The wife pretty happy about that painted armoire?”

Mustache tells Leopold about the thrift store he runs downtown. He and the old lady buy out abandoned storage units. Storage units packed to the brim with things. Things of every color, size, texture, weight, and breakability. It’s supposed to be an auction but no one in this town

participates so it ends up being a permanent deal between Mustache and the owner. “You never know what’s inside ‘em,” he says. “That’s what makes it fun.”

“You do know how this works?” the owner says.

Leopold touches the money in his pocket. “I’ve seen *Storage Wars*,” he says. “I just look into the room and then I bid against this mustachioed fellow.”

“It’s gambling. It’s an addiction.” Mustache laughs a great barrel laugh. “Bet I’ll be seeing you here next month, bucko.”

The hallway’s lit by patches of circular light. Every door looks the same except for the lamented number pinned to it. The walls are porous cement. If Leopold were religious, he’d start thinking about the road to Calgary or something like that; all the money in his pocket nearly everything he has in the world. Catacombs, pyramids, secret spaces and secret hallways packed with things. As it is, he’s thinking of prison. His mother in prison with her loose pants and her swelling gums, despairing of ever seeing her collections again, despairing of her son, who did not visit because of the mice in the car. And now, Leopold’s mother is still despairing. Just this morning, she took a two-hour tub. There was shampoo and conditioner and soap, but no candles, no back scratch loofa, no speakers to play contemporary piano classics. Halfway through, the water was lukewarm and Leopold was outside the door dancing around in an attempt not to wet himself. His mother told him he could go for all she cared; she wouldn’t look.

He didn’t tell his mother about the storage unit auction. There was always the chance he wouldn’t win and besides, people like surprises better than they like plans. It would be like Christmas and Leopold would be Santa, the good guy.

Leopold buys the first room and Mustache lets him have it cheap. “Bet you’re the kind of kid that cums before you can even get your pants off,” Mustache says. Leopold beams. He licks his finger and counts his cash in twenties.

Later that afternoon, he puts a blindfold over his mother's eyes and leads her out to Skittle. She tears at the blindfold with her long nails and says, "You don't know what it's like to feel threatened. You don't know what it's like not to see."

"You can trust me, mother," Leopold says. It's not his mother speaking. It's the prison. He holds the blindfold out helpfully. His mother gets into the car without it.

"You can't trust anyone," she says.

It's impossible to get the new things home quickly enough, so he's taking his mother to the storage unit instead. Leopold has the key now. Everything in that room, a pile built six feet high from wall to wall, belongs to him. There's a thrill to ownership. He's giddy and sick with it already. "Hurry up," he says to his mother. And inside of himself, he's thinking that maybe he could clean that room up, get a little mattress and a light for reading. Inside, silently, he's wondering if he could get away with it. Living in a storage unit, I mean.

His mother starts crying when she sees the crockpot. She sighs over a coffee table made of corks. She uncovers a stuffed reindeer with bells around its neck. She wraps her long white arms around a smoker and says, "Barbeque chicken! Shrimp skewers! Steak!" They're salivating, because neither of them has had steak in years. And soon Leopold is dragging the thing to the door and tying it to the top of Skittle with a long dry piece of twine he found somewhere near the reindeer. He drives fast on the highway but no one pulls him over. Because Leopold is invincible, that's why.

*

Nellie hadn't left the house all day. She was tired and her mouth tasted like mothballs no matter how many times she brushed her teeth. The empty wine bottles on the counter, light coming through the green glass, made her feel sad and lost. Darla was at work. The lunch shift. Nellie was not at work. Her sports bra was on the coffee table.

Darla came home at 4:00. She put on her slippers and pajamas. She sat on the couch next to Nellie and said, “Guess there’s no more wine, huh?”

“That’s disgusting,” Nellie said. “Don’t you worry about yourself?”

“Relax,” Darla said. “I’m kidding.”

“What’s the musician doing tonight? It’s Friday,” Nellie said.

“I told him I don’t want to see him again if you must know,” Darla said.

Nellie stared at her. “He was so good looking.”

Darla shrugged. She pulled the blankets up around her chin. Her hair was in braids again.

It made Nellie angry when Darla wore pajamas in the middle of the day. She felt like Darla was always content with just being, just sitting, just staring, just waiting. Darla never wanted a different life.

“Why?” Nellie said.

Darla put a pillow on top of her head. She pulled it around her ears like a bonnet. “I can’t even listen to myself talk about it,” she said.

“Why?”

“Nothing. The asshole said he’d pick me up from work and he didn’t. Fuck that.”

There was something bright on TV: bright grass, bright sky; a young woman in a yellow shirt. She stood in front of a grey, run down house. She was plump in a soft, pleasant way with soft, red lips and dimpled cheeks. The house was narrow without shrubs or curtains. The windows looked like blank eyes and the lawn looked fake—no leaves in November. Nothing to show that anyone lived there. It reminded Nellie of their grandparents’ place and the thought made her nauseous. The woman walked around to the back of the house and the cameraman followed her. She was talking aggressively to the camera, like someone might talk to a deaf person.

In the back, a man stood next to a yawning garage door. He was thin with a naked head and big bald eyes.

“Can’t we put on a cartoon?” Nellie said.

“Wait,” Darla said. She turned up the volume. “I recognize that guy.”

“Consider it a missed connection,” the heavyset woman was saying. “The smoker was housed in a storage unit and the owners, apparently, didn’t pay the storage costs. Tell us a little more about this foot.”

She pointed the microphone at the thin man. The thin man tapped it with his finger. He put his mouth close to the mesh. It’s not a smoker, Darla thought. It’s a goddamn grill.

He scratched the back of his neck. His eyes flickered between the camera and the woman on screen with him. She clearly made him nervous.

“Tell us about the foot,” she said again. There was something carnivorous about the woman.

“Well I opened the thing up to cook a steak and there was a foot wrapped in wire and mesh. It smelled like—well, you don’t want to know.”

“Forensic scientists have determined that the foot was medically amputated,” the woman said, in a put on kind of way. The camera panned into the smoker. The foot had been removed. Panned out to the woman’s face. It could have been any smoker, really. The whole thing was an accident.

“Anything else we should know about the foot?”

“It’s a woman’s foot. The nail polish is chipping but you can tell it’s pink. There’s a freckle on the little toe. The second toe is bigger than the big toe by, oh, a centimeter or so.”

“You looked at this foot pretty closely.”

“It’s a beautiful foot,” he said.

“Do you have a message for the owner?”

The man looked into the camera. His eyes were enormous. Nellie had the sense that the plump woman made him do it. There was something she wanted, that woman. She was hungry. Nellie felt a shallow, embattled nausea coating her insides. *A piece of my baby. I can't throw away a piece of my baby.* Goddamn crazy woman.

“I'd be curious to meet her. This little thing—the foot—it has a story and a soul. I don't know. I just feel a connection there. The way you feel a connection with things.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“Keep it for now. I can't throw it away, you know?”

“There you have it, folks. If you're the body that goes with this foot, call us at the station. Ask for Kristina with a K.”

Darla rolled over on the couch. She grabbed Nellie around the wrists and shook her. They used to play a game, cops and robbers, and this was how they made handcuffs, thumb and forefinger almost closing. Nellie was strong. She could have gotten out but where would she go? She'd left her faux foot under the coffee table. She couldn't walk. Her cane was off somewhere. *Darla* had never cared about the handcuffs. Darla would sit in the handcuffs all day long. Steady Darla was always happy to be contained.

“The freckle? The painted nails?” Darla said. “It's yours!”

“Typical mom,” Nellie said. “Couldn't throw it away but wasn't quite responsible enough to keep it. I guess moving to Florida loosened a few bolts in her brain.”

Darla picked up Nellie's cell phone. “Call the station,” she said. Her yellow white hair was scattered around her forehead so earnestly, like a dandelion. If my sister were a wish, Nellie thought, I'd tear her apart with wishing.

That night, Nellie couldn't sleep. She sat at the window and watched shadows go in and out of the streetlamp light five stories below. She watched a squirrel on the fire escape. She cradled her phone in the valley of her thighs and watched the dark screen catch the moon. She saved the number, but didn't call. What would she do with a foot like that? It wouldn't fix anything. It was severed, dead, lost. Let someone else have it, she thought. She had enough feet to last a lifetime.

*

My boss gets horny when he's pissed. We're in the bathroom at work and I keep saying, this bathroom has a thin door and everyone can hear you begging. I'm leaning over the sink with my ass puckered towards him and this lipstick that I'm twirling around, in and out of the lipstick sheath. He's sitting on the toilet in his khakis with his head in his pink wrinkled hands. He was probably crying this morning, judging by the popped blood vessels under his eye sockets. The main problem is that his wife had a miscarriage over the weekend and now he's torn because there's no baby and that means he's free if he wants to be, or some bullshit like that, but he feels guilty and he kind of loves her.

"Pauline's the best thing you've got," I say. I don't approve of today's divorce rates.

"I've got you," he says.

"Like hell you do." Frank and I went to dinner last night and it was almost like dating instead of fucking. Except we also fucked afterwards.

"Carol put you up to this."

"No," I say. "I'm a serious person now."

Maybe that's true because when I get back to my desk, which is a triangular piece of wood shoved into a corner with no access to natural light, there's a note saying to call Leopold, "the foot guy." My lips are tingling because I'm using this new minty lipstick—I still wear red to break my boss's heart—and sometimes it feels contagious, like my whole body is tingling. It's been three days

since the story ran and so far I've heard nothing. No damsel in distress trying to reclaim her lost part. I hate to admit that I'm disappointed about that. Sometimes you just want to believe in things.

One ring and he picks up and already he sounds sullen. "I know who she is."

"So when's the wedding?" I say. Nothing is ever going to work out for Leopold. I got that sense as soon as I arrived on the scene. Me in the stolen van with the stolen camera guys. Well, Carol approved it but she's not really in charge of the morning shift. Obviously. She said screw it and gave me the keys, which was pretty damn close to disastrous. The van is not a worthy steed. When we got to the house, Leopold was standing there in a bow tie—an actual red bow tie cresting the top of his fleece jacket—next to the smoker. He had his hands behind his back in a frantic kind of way. A man, his father, was trying to hook a sprinkler up to the hose in the front yard. He said that if the water froze overnight, the grass would be protected from the cold by the ice. These are the things you learn when you work in small town news. I said good luck.

"This girl I work with—a hostess—it's her sister's foot," Leopold says. "What are the odds?"

"A quick series of calculations tells me about one in nine hundred and seventy eight," I say. I like numbers. They rarely make sense. "It's too bad we can't do like a bachelor episode. Is she pretty?"

"Probably. Her sister's pretty," he says glumly. "She doesn't want the foot back though. Her sister told me she has zero interest in it."

"Well, doesn't she want to meet you? The finder of the foot?"

"No. She wants me to throw it away."

My boss comes over and stands at the corner of my desk, pulling a loose string at the top of my chair. He isn't a subtle person. I pretend to take notes on my conversation and even after Leopold hangs up I nod and periodically say, "Hm, interesting." I don't ask if he will in fact keep

the foot. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter to me. But I understand where this girl's coming from. I wouldn't want some piece of dead little me floating around for the highest bidder, some creepy man from a family of hoarders or a fifty year old waxen faced news anchor with a dead baby and bloodshot eyes. People have their delusions. This man on the south side of town has fallen in love with a foot. Good for him. In France, there's a woman who claims that her soul mate is the Eiffel Tower. Fuck. Kids everywhere believe in Santa. I can feel my boss's hand on my shoulder now. I tap the eraser of my pencil against the note pad. "Yes," I say into the empty phone line. "I couldn't agree more."

Moral:

You must be mad to oppose the stars.

Another Moral:

I'm saying perhaps true sexuality demands the destruction of the ego.

Still Life, With Mummies

I have steady hands. They are thin with deeply buried veins and smooth, pale skin. The fingers are long and the nail beds are long and the middle finger on both hands is bent at the top joint, as if a magnet were pulling them laterally. My mother says it's because I began writing at such a young age, but I know plenty of academics with unbent fingers. Once, when I used to bite my nails, my mother said, no one's going to put a ring on a finger that looks like that. I don't paint my nails because the nail polish might damage something. Back when I worked in books, this woman scuffed the margins of an inscribed Arthur Rackham illustration and we couldn't get the damn red mark out.

The new girl has black nail polish. She's about 4' 9," and the base of her skull is bashed in. The embalmers filled it out with papyrus and glue. The linens are loose and peeling from her fingers. She doesn't have a cartonnage. The fingers are black and plump, but the nails are blacker. It's not a natural black, but Helen won't let me work on her so I might never know the chemical makeup of her nail polish.

'I can do the report,' I tell Helen. Helen has been working in the lab for seventeen years. She wears a headlamp and glasses with tiny microscopes set onto the lenses. She doesn't take them off when she talks to people.

'I don't think this is the year,' Helen says. 'We have a lot of ongoing projects. Look at poor Willis.'

Poor Willis is a pre-dynastic mummy. He lies in a bed of hardened dirt, curled into himself like a pill bug. His torso is mostly hollow, sucked dry by the air or eaten by something. He's been in the lab for the past three years. No one knows what to do with him. He has a little cap on his head made of animal skin. Sometimes, when it's just me and Willis in the lab, I sing the Davy Crockett

song. Coon skin cap and all that. Willis isn't wrapped in anything. He was mummified by the planet earth, so there's nothing much to be done to him, conservation-wise.

'Willis isn't active,' I say. 'And isn't this girl more interesting? She has her nails painted! She was murdered.'

'She'll still be interesting next year,' Helen says. 'And Rebecca, try not to be so rampant with your conclusions. We haven't even done a CT scan. Why don't you focus on the stone amulets?'

'I have the time,' I say. 'I can do both. I'll stay late.'

'I'd really rather we work on her together,' Helen says. 'Oh, and keep things clean if you can. Dr. Peterson's flying over from London this week and he'll undoubtedly be by.'

She doesn't look at me. Her eyes dart around, but it's hard to tell where they settle because of the microscope glasses.

I shuffle over to my workstation. We have a rule in the lab. Helen works on the mummies and the more fragile cartonnages and the papyrus. I work on stone and sometimes wood. Sometimes, I help Helen with the papyrus. That means she watches me clean my tweezers and cut mat board to rehouse papyrus fragments and then she lifts the papyrus onto the window that *I've* created and sometimes she says thank you, but more often than not she says, 'I could kill that Milford Lane,' who was the museum's first conservator back in the late 19th century and did a shit job with pretty much everything, not because he was shit but because the general techniques of conservation were, at the time, not conducive to actual conservation. Our current rules are written mainly by Helen. Sometimes I feel like I had more responsibility in graduate school than I do now.

The first thing I steal is an amulet in the shape of a hand. It looks like a cactus, narrow with long unbent fingers. The only thing distinguishing it is the thumb. The hand is made of alabaster but it isn't white. It's the color of sand, some parts browning.

Helen is at lunch. Everyday Helen goes to Lenny's for a fresh salad. She never eats preservatives. She says that modern bodies don't deteriorate the way they used to. So she goes to Lenny's and reads *Archeology Today* and when you try to sit with her or say hello, she says, 'this is my me time.' She does it to everybody. I've seen her politely dismiss the curator of European Archeology, but to him she said, 'I'm actually running to a meeting. That traveling exhibition is *such* a time suck!'

The amulets are in an archival box at my workplace. I dust them off with a brush made of sable bristles. There are four scarabs in the box. One is made of amethyst and seems to carry its own light. Another looks like a Vietnam-era army helmet. There is one elephant; one foot made of carnelian; one crocodile. The gods are kept elsewhere. They tend to be more elaborate. A jade Anubis is on display in the mummy room. His skirt is engraved with thin vertical strips. His ears look like narrow sails. Isis has a narrow waist and a deep belly button. Her feet are flat. Her fingers are spidery.

The hand fits perfectly in mine, cold and strong and permanent. Holding it is gratifying in a physical way. I didn't expect that.

There are sacrifices I make to be here. I don't eat acidic foods because I might breathe on the papyrus. I don't wear rings on my fingers and I don't put on lotion and I don't touch my face during the day. When I get home, I have to shower because my boyfriend thinks that mummies are contagious. Don't get me wrong, he loves my work. He comes with me to events and I give him gallery tours and he asks questions. Last month, he nearly got himself kicked out of a reception for photographing a Han dynasty bonshanlu. When Helen saw the security guard with his hand on Bryce's bicep, she explained that Bryce is an internationally renowned artist etc., etc.

'Just looking for inspiration,' she'd said, and winked at us.

Jesus Christ. Sometimes, I hate Helen. Sometimes I wonder if the sacrifices are worth it. The first time I held an amulet I nearly fainted. My heart was painful in my chest it beat so hard. It was beautiful and ancient. Now amulets are meant as an insult. They're representative of some kind of power struggle and I'm losing. I shift my magnifying glass and breath slowly over my box of stones.

Amulets are meant to confer protection on their wearers. I'm not an Egyptologist, so I can't tell you what a hand means but I like the thin compactness of it. If I were to walk past one of the scarabs on a hike, I'd think it was just a rock. If I were to walk by this hand, I would think it was a fossilized splinter of wood. It shares an accession number with Isis and Isis is the real heavy hitter of that pair. The hand has never been displayed. It's been in storage since 1892. I look up everything on my computer before I take it. I'm not a negligent thief. Once upon a time, someone cared about this hand. Once upon a time, *I* would have cared about this hand. It wasn't made to sit in an archival box in a storeroom. It was made to keep someone safe.

Stealing is easy. I slip the amulet into my pants pocket. It sits tight against my ass, underneath a long shirt and my long white jacket. It's only me in the lab and outside, the sun is shining.

No one notices. Helen hasn't worked with the amulets and the curators aren't planning to exhibit them. When Helen gets back, she puts her headlamp on, and her glasses with the tiny microscopes set into the lenses. She hovers over Willis with a soft bristle brush. She isn't using the brush, but occasionally she puts it down to make a note in her notebook. Helen spends a lot of time thinking. She sits and thinks and gazes at something old. It puts her in the right mindset, she says. You need to be able to compartmentalize to be a conservationist. You can't be distracted by your personal life, by your boyfriend, for instance. You need to *understand* the artifact. *Live* the artifact. The way she says it makes it sound like there's a spiritual connection but really she's only a chemist.

She doesn't care about possessing artifacts, holding them and breathing them. She doesn't care about why the girl died.

At home, Bryce is sitting on the floor staring at a white canvas with a red circle painted in the middle of it. He asks me what I think of when I think of a circle. When I answer him—the sun, the moon, a snowman, eyeballs, red blood cells, white blood cells, meatballs, sea anemones, a pregnant belly—he says, 'no, no, no, dammit.'

I say, 'Safety. Wholeness. A gesture of protection.' And he turns back to the painting.

I go into our bedroom and wrap the amulet in archival paper. I lay it in a jewelry box. I put the jewelry box in my underwear drawer. I don't tell Bryce about it. It's his apartment and almost all of the drawers are his.

I come back out and sit on the arm of the couch. 'So, we have this new mummy at work. A girl with a cracked skull,' I say. 'She still has hair.'

Bryce kicks a hole into the middle of the canvas.

'There,' he says. 'It's finished.'

'Very Lucio Fontana,' I say.

'Are you saying it's derivative?' he says. 'Cut me some slack. It's a completely different theory.'

'Isn't all art in conversation with the art that came before it?'

'Please don't speak in quotes.'

'Okay.'

'You know you're my muse,' he says. 'A gesture of protection. That's brilliant.'

'It's *your* painting,' I say.

Bryce is handsome in a morose kind of way. He has downward sloping eyes and high, narrow cheekbones. He has a scar along the left side of his nose from a bike accident. When he was little kids made fun of him and said it looked like his nose was sewn on by a string. He's always been sensitive about it. When we first met, he told me that I had a beautiful nose. He told me he wished he had a nose like mine and when we first slept together—two, three days later—he stroked it and said he loved it for its crookedness, the way the left nostril is higher than the right. 'You have the smallest pores,' he said.

He runs his fingers along the back of my neck and says, 'You have the soul of an artist.' He kisses my forehead and my nose and my lips and he doesn't let my lips go. It's hard to breath. I remember somewhere that I'm hungry, that I wanted certain things out of my night—to eat, to read, to research hands—but he's celebrating and so I'm celebrating and the way he celebrates is with sex and I like sex so I am quietly kissable and pliable and supportive.

The basement is cold and dry. Everything is grey. Textiles are kept in enormous grey drawers lined with archival tissue. Chinese textiles and Egyptian textiles and textiles from Iran. There are thirteen mummies down here: Petra, buried without her heart; George, a third-dynasty mummy with seven amulets in his linens; Debbie Harry, the white haired witch; Sarah; Elizabeth; Rowan; Frank; etc.

I need a stool to reach the shelf where the amulets are kept. I slide them back into place. No one will look at this box again for sixty years. By the time someone notices the hand is missing, I'll be dead. Maybe I'll even return it before I die.

Helen's upstairs meeting with that old colleague from the British Museum. They're talking shop. I think he came for advice on the funerary mask of Amenhotep. Helen is somewhat of a celebrity in the conservation world. She flew to China to help with a textile unearthed fifteen years

ago and she isn't even a textile specialist. When she goes to the Middle East, they give her a security detail. She's a chemist the way that Einstein was a physicist. It isn't about the physics. It's about God or something. The scientific rules of the universe. Curators respect that.

I open a drawer labeled *fragments*. Foam mounts support a piece of wood and on the wood, there's a painted eye. It's faded. The eye is triangular and the taper extends far beyond a physical eye. It's Egyptian in the typical way. No eyelashes, just thick kohl lining the lid and a black iris with the top just shy, just cut off so that it looks devious or drunk or both. It's nearly the size of my palm. The paint is dusty, but not so fragile it will chip. I write down the accession number and close the drawer. As I walk back to the stairs, I brush my fingers along the belly of a stone pharaoh. It's hard and tight and smooth, the belly button a subtle dip, a cold notch.

Helen doesn't introduce me to Dr. Peterson, but I know who he is. I recognize his face from the Discovery Channel's three-hour movie on the real life and times of Moses. I'm not even kidding.

'Sure the wig looks blue,' Dr. Peterson says, 'but nothing comes up under the infrared. It has to be a 19th century repair. So the question is do we strip the layer of paint? What kind of damage would it do to the gilt? Alfred says strip it but he's kind of a radical.'

'A radical conservationist,' I say. 'That's funny.'

Dr. Peterson looks at me and then looks back at the photographs on Helen's desk. The funerary mask, which looks to be in relatively good shape. He's right though. Even to the naked eye, even in a picture, the blue looks off. It's too blue, too modern. Helen says, 'Alfred's hardly a radical. Is that the biggest problem you've got with this thing?'

I turn my computer screen towards the northern wall of the lab and settle in. The database is a piece of shit and it takes about seventeen minutes to load. Accession number 1917.3.222549 was acquired on a 1917 trip to Egypt and donated by Frederick Rittenhouse (no relation to *the*

Rittenhouses). There's a black and white photograph of the eye fragment and nowhere does it say that it came from such and such a face.

Helen and Dr. Peterson leave early to wander the galleries. She leans into him and he puts his hand on the small of her back. She says, 'Rebecca, do you mind locking up?' And I say, 'No Helen, of course not.' When they're gone, I take archival paper down to the storeroom and I wrap the eye and place it in my jacket pocket. I'm giddy, knowing it's mine.

Everyone's stolen something. My brother got caught in second grade stealing a piece of gum from his best friend's desk. My friend Nancy stole an entire meal from a fancy restaurant. The owner of the gum survived. The restaurant is still in business. It isn't the end of the world. Museums do good work, but it's hard to love a thing that's institutionalized. A thing behind glass or locked in a drawer. It's hard to remember what it's about when you're making cotton swabs and cutting mat board and everything you touch feels dead.

Last year, a man named Arnold Schwartz copied one of Bryce's paintings, signed Bryce's name and donated the painting to a benefit auction supporting the 'rewilding' movement. Bryce sued him and then they struck up a friendship because imitation is the most generous form of flattery and because Bryce also supports the rewilding of North America, which he explained to me is about biogenetically resurrecting extinct species like the woolly mammoth and saber-toothed tiger.

'That's—interesting,' I said. 'And a little bit delusional?'

'We're so close, babe,' he said.

'Who's this we?'

'The Russians have already dedicated a huge tract of land to the whole thing,' he said.

'Pleistocene Park. Want to go?'

We never went. Thank God. I admire Bryce's enthusiasms, but Siberia isn't on my list.

Anyways, Arnold is at the apartment when I get home. They're looking at the new canvas and Arnold is talking breathlessly about black holes and absence and energy. He doesn't look up when I come in. He says, 'Originally, to understand the heavens meant to understand what it means to be divine.'

Arnold is an accountant.

'Hey,' I say. The eye is burning a hole in my pocket. I'm thinking about where to put it in relation to the hand.

'You look like you had a good day,' Bryce says.

'Not particularly,' I say. 'Helen's still a bitch. She still won't let me work on that mummy.'

'Bummer,' he says. 'But she'll be dead next year, right?'

'Helen?' I say. 'God willing.'

He says, 'Hey, Arnold and I are going to a documentary tonight. Do you mind? I don't think you'd like it, but you can come if you want.'

'Thanks for the invite,' I say. 'I thought we were watching a movie tonight.'

'Yeah but then Arnold swung by and—you don't mind do you?'

I walk into the bedroom and put my purse down on the bed. I want a night to myself. It should feel good to have a night to myself.

Bryce comes in behind me and closes the door. He puts his arms around my waist and nudges my nose with his. 'Hey, are you mad?'

'No,' I say. 'It will be good to have my own space.'

'Okay,' he says. He kisses me. He puts his hands into my jacket pocket to pull me towards him, but his left hand catches on the eye fragment. He frowns. He touches the archival paper.

'Get your paws out of my pockets.' I grab his wrist.

‘What do you have in there?’

‘Maybe it’s a gift.’

‘Give it to me now then,’ he says. He pulls the flat piece from my pocket. Luckily, I taped it up before I brought it home. He shrugs and says, ‘Well, fine.’

When he’s gone, I lay a pillowcase in the drawer. I wrap the amulet and the eye in its folds. I research hands and eyes. In 2012, sixteen severed hands were found buried in the city of Avaris. Hands confer creative power. To take away a hand is to deny wholeness in the afterlife. A hand cannot be replaced.

The moon, I read, is an eye. Seth stole the left eye of Horus. Isis replaced it. The moon grows, shrinks, disappears. Rises from the dead, reborn. Bryce gets home at 4:30 am. He smells like cigarettes and when he crawls into bed, he doesn’t touch me. We face our separate walls. I trace the shape of the eye on my palm. If he were listening, he would know I wasn’t asleep. He would hear my breathing and know. I watch the numbers on the alarm clock and hate myself for losing sleep because of him.

Helen continues to preoccupy herself with Dr. Peterson. She smiles at me on Wednesday, and on Thursday, she plays classical music from her computer speakers. Dr. Peterson works with one of the curators and everyday he takes Helen out for lunch. They go to Vini Vino, an Italian place down the street with heavy velvet drapes. Helen orders veal saltimbocca and linguini with shrimp and asparagus. She says it’s delicious. She takes walks after lunch. One day, she forgets to wash her hands. Poor Willis continues to be dead, skin stretched taut across his empty organ cavity. He looks anorexic. His eyes are closed and the sockets are hollow.

On Thursday, Helen tells me that I can do a condition report on the girl mummy with the broken skull. ‘Nothing elaborate,’ she says. ‘No CT scans.’

I sit with the mummy for hours and I try to commune with her. Colorless hair lies sullenly over her shoulders. Her head is unwrapped, just a skull painted with dry skin. Her nose is small, the bridge still there, smooth and childish. Her lips are peeled back in a sneer. The teeth are long. I can see well past where the gums should be. I squat down next to her and look at the crushed skull.

‘Do you think someone did it on purpose? Do you think it hurt?’

‘Don’t start asking those kinds of questions,’ Helen says. ‘You can never receive an adequate answer. People think that Tutankhamun was deformed from childbirth or died in a chariot accident or was murdered by an advisor and he has one of the most studied bodies of ancient times. One guys thinks it was a rampaging hippo. I mean, it never ends.’

‘What do you think?’

‘Rampaging hippo,’ she says. ‘Definitely.’

When I was an undergrad, Helen came to my Intro to Archeology class as a guest lecturer. She walked us through the process of conserving animal mummies—ibises, falcons, cats. She made jokes and wore a light yellow sweater with jeans. Her hair was short and white, tapering narrowly at the nape of her neck. She seemed too young to have white hair and it looked beautiful. I wanted to stay after class to ask her questions. I wanted to know how to become a conservationist, but I was too nervous. I went home and did the research online instead.

‘Listen,’ she says. ‘I’m not trying to hold you back. It’s a liability thing. If something happens to her—to the mummy—we don’t get another shot. We need time and focus.’

‘Helen, I’m good at this,’ I say. ‘That’s why you hired me. I can make time. I can focus.’

‘Let’s see what the report says.’ She turns back to the photographs of Amenhotep’s funeral mask and makes a few notes.

I start volunteering to go to the basement everyday. Helen thinks it’s helpful. She asks me to check on George or do a humidity reading. She asks me to bring a tray of papyrus back

downstairs. She smiles as she says it, as if we are friends now, as if I'm an intern and I'm thrilled to even be holding the tray. I'm not. I open the plexiglass covering, pry apart the mat board and take a sliver of papyrus—something so small I have to handle it with blunt-edged tweezers. When I get home, I put it in a glass ampule to keep from losing it. I wrap the ampule around my neck and tuck it underneath my blouse. It feels warm and alive on my chest. At work, I feel light and happy. I name the girl mummy Luna. I write it on a notecard and place the notecard just above her shoulder. When Helen sees it, she doesn't say anything. I don't care. I take an empty canopic jar. I take a necklace of glass beads. I take a ring and a child's sandal and an Osiris figurine made of jade. My underwear drawer becomes a tiny, secret shrine.

On Friday, Helen and Dr. Peterson inform me that they are going New York to see the Edwin Smith surgical papyrus. Dr. Peterson is an Egyptologist. He says that he worships the work that Helen did for him in London.

He knows my name now and he says, 'Rebecca, listen to this. It's the first mention of the brain in human history. Listen to how beautiful it is: *If you treat a man for a gaping wound in his head, which has penetrated to the bone, fractured his skull, and exposed the brain of his skull, you have to probe the wound. Should you find that fracture that is in his skull like those ripples that happen in copper through smelting, with a thing in it that throbs and flutters under your fingers like the weak spot of the crown of a boy before it becomes whole for him – that throbbing and fluttering happens under your fingers since the brain of his skull has become exposed – while he bleeds from his nostrils and suffers stiffness in his neck: an ailment for which nothing is done.*'

'It's science,' he says. 'There's no magic or prayer. It's modern medicine in hieratic.'

Helen is nearly in tears. 'That's so beautiful,' she says. 'With a thing in it that throbs and flutters under your fingers.'

‘Does that mean the doctor just gives up?’ I say. ‘He just watches the thing flutter and stop moving?’

‘It means he recognizes when a case is hopeless,’ Dr. Peterson says.

‘I’m not a doctor,’ I say. ‘But that doesn’t sound right.’

‘The treatise was probably written for wartime doctors. Battlefield wounds.’ He nods to the girl mummy. ‘Nothing like your Luna.’

‘Huh,’ I say. I rub the eraser of my pencil against my temple. ‘I’d still hate to be the mother of that patient. It just seems like you should fight for things, I guess. It just seems complacent.’

‘I think the Egyptians recognized that sometimes you just need to trust nature. Let nature take its course. Give over the reins and all that.’

‘Fuck nature,’ I say. ‘Nature doesn’t care one way or another. To nature, one little girl is just as arbitrary as the next little girl and if someone wants to bash her skull in, well that’s just fine and if she falls from a building and bashes her skull in, well that’s just fine too and it’s unlucky and it’s just nature. No one says nature is a murderer. Everyone just says, how sad.’

Helen bites the side of her lip. She looks girlish, like a child.

‘I guess you could look at it like that,’ Dr. Peterson says. ‘But that doesn’t change the fact that sometimes things are hopeless and you just have to accept that. You just need to walk away.’

Helen says, ‘Acknowledging defeat is different than complacency.’

Dr. Peterson pulls at a loose thread on the cuff of his jacket. ‘It *is* a fascinating document. The script is quite beautiful.’

‘I think you would like it, Rebecca,’ Helen says. But she doesn’t invite me to come along. She pulls a light jacket on over her sweater. Helen loves sweaters. She’s always cold. She drinks tea. But I hate sweaters. They’re itchy and hot. When I wear them to work I feel lightheaded. I feel like the strands of wool will loosen and shed on the floor of the lab. I wear t-shirts, at work and at

home. Bryce is always turning up the heat. He calls me reptilian. ‘Your sensory perceptions are off,’ he says. He says, ‘It’s my house. I pay the electric bill.’ But Helen can’t say that because the lab has very earnest restrictions regarding temperature and humidity.

‘I’d like to get Luna back downstairs soon,’ Helen says. ‘The lab is a bit crowded right now. Maybe you could finish the report by early next week and bring her down? We’ll be back maybe on Tuesday or Wednesday.’

Once Helen’s gone, I take measurements of Luna’s hands. I cut pieces of bobbinet and soak them in acrylic toner to match the color of her skin. The linens are fraying like weeds from her fingers and I need to contain them, to make them look whole and undamaged. I call my friend Lou. Lou works in the hospital. He tells me that he cannot put the mummy into the CT scanner today and that if I really want to do this, I need to schedule a scan months in advance.

‘How will you pay for it?’ he says. ‘Mummies don’t have health insurance.’

‘Very funny. We pay for things with POs.’

‘You can’t *secretly* pay for something with a PO, Rebecca,’ he says. ‘When we scanned Mary Beth, half the board came in to watch. It was a big deal. It’s a big deal to scan a mummy.’

Mary Beth is our most celebrated mummy. Her sarcophagus is the first thing you see when you walk into the mummy gallery. Her real name is Heterphenebty and she’s this wrinkled old lady with three cartonnages and two sarcophagi. We’ve never opened her up and still we know everything about her. We know that she died naturally, that her joints were weak, that she had narrow hips and broke her tibia when she was a child. Mary Beth has a good afterlife. She will never be forgotten. She will never be just an accession number on a shelf or a nameless headstone in a cemetery. People know her. She has her own space.

‘Lou, Luna was murdered!’ I say.

‘And that’s totally cool,’ he says. ‘But I don’t want to get fired and I don’t want you to get fired.’

‘Oh, please,’ I say.

The board would be happy. They like big projects. They like mummies. They like knowing that their employees really care.

I take the bobbinet out of the toner and spread it out to dry. Helen calls in at 3:00 pm to see how things are going and I tell her they are just fine. ‘Luna is taking a nap,’ I say. And it looks like she is. A dry, sunken, dreary nap.

There is a mummy head at Helen’s desk. It doesn’t have a matching body. It doesn’t have a name. It doesn’t have the kind of afterlife someone would wish for, I think. Bodiless. Sitting on a clean white desk, like a surgical table, with no one seeing it. I push some things around in my purse, wonder if a head would fit comfortably inside. There is a shelf of heads downstairs. Three of them. No one would notice if one went missing, but I’d have to bring a bigger bag. A bag with a zipper at the top. I can wait. I pry a fragment of linen from Luna’s perfect fingers. A centimeter, maybe less. I rub it between my fingers, softly. I imagine being wrapped. I ease the fragment into the ampule with the papyrus. They are snug together, safe within the glass.

Bryce sells his destroyed circle painting for \$25,000. When I get home, he’s wearing a suit and he says, ‘Alright little lady, we’re going to dinner.’

‘I’m kind of tired,’ I say. ‘Can’t we just watch a movie?’

I have a sinking feeling in my stomach, like maybe he isn’t the one. ‘It isn’t you,’ I would say, ‘it’s me. It’s the way I feel invisible. I don’t know how to define myself. Please don’t touch me.’ But instead I say nothing because wasn’t it just last night that he told me how soft and steady and beautiful my fingers were, how he liked the way his apartment smelled with me in it.

He opens a bottle of champagne, pours us each a glass, and tells me to wear the silver heels he bought me for Valentine's Day. I close the bedroom door and lean on my bureau. I can hear him singing to himself outside. He always does this when he sells a painting. Big fancy dinner at his favorite restaurant, maybe a bracelet or some kind of gift, something to apologize for being vaguely depressive and narcissistic most of the time (my words, not his). I open my drawer of artifacts and pick them up one at a time. My little hand. My little eye. My little canopic jar. It might have held a liver once. Something small. A spleen.

I wear the heels that Bryce gave me and a bracelet that he gave me. I wear the ampule necklace and a tight black dress with a low back. I throw a jacket on and zip the amulet into the pocket. It makes me feel better to look good, to wear things that are mine, old things with history and meaning. It makes me feel like I'm in control.

'I've never seen that necklace,' Bryce says. 'It looks—vampiric.'

'I got it in high school,' I say.

And that's true. Only the ampule was empty in high school and now it contains papyrus and mummy linens.

The restaurant is dark with exposed brick walls. The waiters walk around with giant wheels of pecorino cheese and they serve pasta right out of the wheels. We're sitting next to the wine rack. I can see dust lining the older bottles of red. Bryce says that you can tell it's the best Italian in the city because the real Italians eat here. There's a private room in the back and supposedly there's blood on the wall from the time a mafia guy was shot through the head during a birthday party in the 1940s. I asked about it once but the waiter laughed and said, 'Oh signorita, what a funny story.'

'So who bought the painting?' I say.

'That Chinese couple,' he says. 'I think they're giving it to their daughter for a wedding present.'

‘That’s nice,’ I say.

‘Yeah, I think it’s good. Five paintings sold this year and it’s only April. I wish I could go back and tell my twenty-two year old self, hey buddy don’t worry about things. You’re gonna make it. You’re going to be on the cover of *Art News* and you’re going to be dating a beautiful woman and she’s going to be a weirdo but that’s okay.’

He picks up my hand and presses it to his chest. Bryce is always doing this. He’s always having a manic episode when I’m feeling down. I look at him and he’s so far away, over the moon far away, and I realize that despite two years together now, we’re entirely different people and we’re completely alone.

‘Do you ever feel like a spoiled brat?’

‘Jesus Christ, Rebecca.’

‘Seriously, isn’t it some kind of god complex? This obsession with creating something new? With getting part of yourself onto a canvas for other people to admire and worship and buy?’

‘Where is this coming from?’ he says.

I order more champagne because my hands are shaking.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say. ‘You know I respect your work. I’m sorry.’

‘Okay, than what is it?’

‘Everything is working out for you,’ I say. ‘I’m happy for you.’

‘That’s good for you too, babe,’ he says.

‘Your success isn’t my success,’ I say.

We have a bottle of cabernet sauvignon. It’s Bryce’s favorite. Bryce orders caccio e pepe and I order chicken saltimbocca because Helen’s been raving about saltimbocca all week. It’s saltier than I imagined. I drink more.

Eventually I'm hammered and I feel completely trapped within myself. It feels like the only space that I have. Bryce is holding court across the table, swirling the wine around and I hold the ampule but it doesn't make me feel better. It isn't a blessing or a curse. It's nothing but a bit of blank papyrus and linen.

'Would you be mad at me if I moved out?' I say.

Silence.

'Do you ever think of how it would be if we weren't together?' I say.

'I would die,' he says. 'I would die if we weren't together.'

'Please don't be so dramatic.' The ampule is warm against my chest, but my skin feels cold.

'Listen,' he says. 'I know you have secrets. I see you in the bedroom with your little drawer, checking on your things. I don't have secrets from you. I share every part of myself with you and I want you to share yourself with me and you don't. You just don't.'

'Did you look in my drawer?' I'm holding the handle of a butter knife. It's blunt and stubby. I squeeze it like a long, narrow stress ball.

'Of course not,' he says.

But when we get home, I open the drawer and I see that Osiris has moved. He had been next to the child's sandal, the necklace encircling them both, the hand amulet just behind them. Now Osiris is standing. His head holds the pillowcase up like a tent.

It's the not the first time Bryce has threatened me. Once, he said, 'You think you're going to find someone better than me? You're not.'

In the morning, I put my artifacts into my purse. I can't leave them in the apartment. I go to work even though it's a Saturday. I wrap the bobbinet around Luna's fingers and sew it to itself. My hands are steady with the needle. I sit with her all day. I commune. I wonder how someone

would steal a mummy. It's not a new thought. Hundreds of mummies have been stolen over the last three thousand years. They've been made into medicine and potions for strength. Willis has cheeks like a stretched hide. Bryce and I watch a movie at night. We say we love each other and we mean it. I feel sad. My artifacts are still in my purse next to our bed. My purse is heavy. On Sunday, I take Luna down to the museum's basement and park her next to Debbie Harry. Luna looks dark and un-possessed. Her hair looks like spider webs. The basement is dry and cold; she will be safe there and last forever but no one will see her. We all make compromises to be happy.

Helen gets back on Monday afternoon. Dr. Peterson is not with her and she doesn't say anything about it. She puts her microscope glasses on and starts reading my report, in which I speculate quite a bit about what happened to Luna. There are many scientific observations as well. It's carefully done. I too can compartmentalize.

'Murder is a strong word,' she says. 'You don't know anything about this girl, Rebecca.'

'Maybe,' I say. 'But people like stories. No one wants to read a report about a *thing*. They want to read about a person.'

'A mummy is a thing,' she says. 'There is no person anymore. Look at Willis.'

'People speculate about Tutankhamun,' I say.

I clean the sable brushes first and then the soft bristle brushes. I lay them out to dry on the central countertop. Helen does something with an animal mummy at her desk.

At two o'clock, a group of school children come in for a tour of the lab. They stand in the hallway and we open the observation windows and Helen brings the animal to the counter in front of the window and she holds it up and describes the thing to the children. They are not allowed in the actual lab. I usually work in the background. Sometimes I help. Helen says that visitors'

passion reminds her of her own passion for conservation, even the menial tasks like piecing together a board of wood with no paint or hieroglyphs or anything. She loves tours.

Helen introduces herself and says that she's working on a mummified cat, but as it turns out there is no actual cat inside. It's just a straw and mud mold covered in strips of linen. I say I'm between projects but that I was working on some stone amulets. 'Amulets were made for protection,' I say. 'Consider them like a bulletproof vest.'

One of the teachers, a massive man with a shock of curly hair, shifts his weight and I see Bryce standing behind him. There are eleven sixth graders standing around them both, like weeds standing around a couple garden gnomes. Another teacher, or a parent, stands on the edge of the group. They are all watching Helen as she points to the cat's ears. She says that cats are sacred and a little boy says, 'What does sacred mean?'

Bryce is watching me.

'Rebecca,' he says.

The kids turn to look at Bryce. They turn back to Helen. A little girl puts her hands on the windowsill and says, 'Why isn't there a real cat?' She has big sweeping eyes that look beyond Helen and settle on poor Willis. Her eyebrows come together and her bottom lip puckers.

'Gross,' she says. 'What's that?'

'Have you ever heard of a mummy?' Helen says.

'I think I forgot my phone in your purse,' Bryce says. He waves to Helen and Helen smiles warmly, the first time she's smiled all day. She has bags under her eyes. Tiny popped blood vessels.

My purse is under my desk. Nothing has been returned. Since the fight, since I found out about Bryce's duplicity, I've kept the artifacts near me. They are my moving home, my little treasure trove. I've thought about returning them, but I have not. I've thought about getting a storage unit, but I have not. I've thought about living in my parents' basement, or downgrading to a shit hole

apartment, but I have not. Bryce is still my boyfriend and one day he'll be my husband and maybe we'll have children and that, at least, will be something good, something mine.

Helen has things under control, so I open another window and lean out into the hallway. Bryce walks over and leans next to me, and then we're both leaning but in opposite directions like two sides of a barn falling into each other.

'Let me call it,' I say. I take my phone from my pocket and it begins to call.

'Rebecca,' he says. 'I have my phone.'

'Well then, to what do I owe this visit?'

'Can we go for a walk?'

'I can't leave Helen,' I say. I glance back at her and she's holding up a piece of bobbinet. She explains how we soak it in acrylic toner to match the color of the linen or the blackened skin etc. etc. She lets the little girl rub it between her fingers.

'You don't want me to say what I have to say here,' he says. My hands on the counter's edge are trembling. The flesh on my forearms is goose-pimpled and rough. My limbs are cold, as if all the blood in my body has settled into my stomach. I wish I had a sweater.

We walk to the end of the hallway. I can see the little girl raising her hand.

'You can't take things from a museum, Rebecca,' he says. 'If you wanted money you should have asked me. The black market is never the answer.'

'The black market!' I say. 'Jesus Christ, is that what you think of me?'

'I don't know what the hell to think,' he says. 'I'm praying that you have them, or can get them back. I don't want to have to tell Helen. I don't want you to go to jail. Listen, I opened your drawer today and they were gone. I know, Rebecca.'

'You're so fucking self-righteous,' I say. We're whispering. 'Can you just relax? Helen asked me to do some work on them at home and I did and now they're back. So fuck you.'

He pulls at the buttons on his shirt. Unbuttons and rebuttons them. He says, 'I don't believe you.'

'Your best friend is like a black market superstar,' I say. 'So I don't know why you're accusing me.'

'Arnold?' he says. 'Arnold's an impersonator. He steals ideas, Rebecca.'

'I don't need to deal with this shit,' I say. I'm not shouting, but I'm not whispering either and the children have stopped listening to Helen. The large teacher man is frowning and the little girl is standing on her tiptoes to look over her classmates' heads to where Bryce and I are talking. Helen says, 'Here, let me show you the embalmed head! It's an embalmed human head and it belonged to a girl named Amytis!'

She has gloves on and she's proffering the head like a cake.

'Just find a way to return everything and we'll forget it happened,' he says. 'I don't want this to define our relationship.'

'Of course you don't,' I say. 'You hate it when I'm the one defining the relationship.'

When Bryce leaves, he says to the kids, 'You guys should pay attention to Helen, she's the best in the biz,' and Helen blushes. I wonder if it would kill me to not kiss him again. I walk back into the lab and brush my fingers along the edge of Willis' table. Willis, the epitome of resilience. And then I hear Helen saying, 'He's just a thing.' Bryce is wearing a chambray shirt. His shoulders are curling inwards and from behind, all I can see is the thick curve of his back, his thin neck bending along the vertebrae. I can't see if he is sad or if he knows anything at all. The children and Helen and I watch him push open the door at the end of the hallway. Outside, there is a sidewalk. There is a woman with a purple umbrella passing by and a tree with dripping leaves.

Helen is having trouble getting the children to refocus. She pushes the microscope glasses up her nose with the back of one wrist. 'The reason they would bury only a head—,' she is saying.

I walk back over to Helen and say, ‘Yes, what is the reason?’

And then, because no one is listening, because the little girl is picking at a hole in her jeans and the parent chaperone is on her phone and the tall man is looking at the blinking exit sign near the bathroom, I say, ‘Hey did you guys know that Tutankhamun’s penis was stuck through with a straw to keep it erect even after death?’

That afternoon Helen and I have an impromptu meeting with HR. Helen feels I have challenged her authority in front of museum guests and spoken inappropriately in front of children. She says that *personal friends* are not allowed behind the staff only door. The HR man is fat with round plastic cheeks. He nods compassionately, frowns when Helen looks at him. He slides me a piece of paper with the header, ‘Client Development: How to Interact with Clients.’ He explains that every visitor is a potential donor and that the wealthiest people are often in ripped jeans and sweatshirts. He doesn’t explain that the wealthiest donors can also be sixth graders. He doesn’t need to.

‘Erect penises are probably not a good thing to talk about with children,’ he says.

‘But Helen taught me that fun fact,’ I say. ‘I was trying to help.’

‘What have I said about compartmentalizing?’

Helen sighs a lot during the meeting. She says, ‘The parent chaperone was upset. I arranged this meeting to protect you, Rebecca. I’m trying to be proactive.’

Afterwards, in the lab, Helen pats down the excess linen on the mummified faux-cat. The purse is at my feet and I nudge it a little. I pick up a sable bristled brush and blow on the bristles, watch them bend lightly.

I say, ‘I’m falling apart here, Helen. It would be helpful if you could give me something.’

And Helen says, ‘I’m falling apart, too.’

‘Everyone’s falling apart,’ I say. ‘Except for Willis.’

‘It’s true,’ she says. ‘Willis is very compact.’

‘He was mummified by the planet earth,’ I say.

Helen turns her headlamp on as she lowers the bobbinet onto the cat’s back.

I say, ‘Helen, let’s go on a road trip. You and me and Willis. Let’s just get out of here.’

‘A traveling exhibition,’ she says. ‘The art of conserving a mummy. That might be nice.’

But that’s not what I meant at all. I take the sable brush and walk over to Willis. I stand above his dark body, a skeleton, really, draped in skin, and I run the bristles along his cheekbones and down his neck and along his reedy collarbone. I trace his unbent fingers and his thick black toenails. There are organs under the skin, but I can’t see them. A spleen tight and shriveled, a heart closed in on itself like a baby’s fist.