2004

Walking distance

Siobhan Scarry

The University of Montana

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WALKING DISTANCE

by

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presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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STORIES
In Jersey City

When I was nine, I fell into my first real trouble. This was in Jersey City where I lived for a time with my uncle in a small apartment. Uncle Elbo worked for the New Jersey Transit Authority and ran the above-ground trolleys from the glassed-in operator box at the front of each train. Each evening, he returned home at six o’clock and cooked me elaborate meals which didn’t agree with my nine-year-old stomach and which we ate together in complete silence. After dinner, Uncle Elbo would sit for a long while and pick at his fingernails, his head bowed forward as if engaged in some kind of prayer, and the apartment would fill with the awful clicking sound of one nail scraping against another. I didn’t know if I should excuse myself or not, and wasn’t sure how to talk to this man who had agreed to take me in while my parents worked things out. So I sat there with him in that uncomfortable hush as bits of crescent-shaped dirt fell from his fingers onto the kitchen linoleum. Back home on Long Island, I was used to sprinting out the back screen door after dinner and playing kickball with the other boys on the block until I was scraped up and grass-stained and tired enough to come home.

There were no other children in my uncle’s building. I spent my time there lolling around on the couch, looking at the apartment from upside down, and waiting for my parents to call or come get me. My mother had told me that it wouldn’t take them long to decide who got the big house and who got the summer house and where I’d end up.
Sometimes I stared at the phone on its receiver and tried not to blink. I thought giving it attention might make it ring.

Each morning before my uncle left for work, he’d lay out one of the recipe books on the kitchen table with a yellow post-it marking that night’s meal. He didn’t make me do much around the apartment in the way of chores, but it was my job to pick up the groceries for dinner. I’d go through his cabinets, find out what we needed, and then fetch things from one of the markets nearby. This is how I met Cindy Lee.

Cindy Lee’s family owned the Chinese grocery on 3rd street. I’d see her when I went there to pick up wild rice or bourbon or plum paste for my uncle. She was too young to work the register like her older brother, but she’d be at the store sometimes, sitting on a stand of strange-looking vegetables and swinging her bare legs like she was about to jump. Her flat shoes hit the scraped wooden stand with a steady thump. Once she opened her mouth when I walked by, exposing a pink chalky mess of candy smothering her tongue. I often found myself walking around the store in the afternoons, picking up foods I didn’t know or understand, and circling the aisles in a kind of daze, hoping to spot her quick and bruised little legs.

About a month after I first saw Cindy Lee, I watched her do something that she thought she was doing alone, with no one looking. I was at the front of the store, browsing the stands by the window. I needed to find one medium eggplant for a recipe called Vegetable Stifado with Optional Cheese. It was late in the day and the sun was hitting the glass and bouncing back onto the faces of people outside. Even if she had looked up, I don’t think she would have seen me.
Cindy Lee was just on the other side of the window, leaning against a stand of
oranges that rose in a bright pyramid behind her head. She was staring down at her hands,
slitting the skin of green grapes with her thumbnail and laying them open on her palm.
After a while, she crouched down and stretched out her hand, which was full of the
shimmering wet halves of the fruit. I moved closer to the window. A large black rat
crawled out from under a stack of wooden crates. It came right up to her and sunk its
teeth into the flesh of a grape. The animal’s fur was slicked and wet-looking and its tail
was long and pale, round as a baby’s finger. Cindy Lee didn’t flinch. She held out her
hand until all the grapes were gone. Then she stood up and took an orange from the pile
and peeled it like nothing had happened at all. I walked home, forgetting all about the
eggplant, and my uncle had to make the dish with a squash instead. I had never met
anyone who wasn’t afraid of a rat.

One morning in August, Uncle Elbo sat down at the kitchen table while I was
eating my cereal. He leafed through a thick green recipe book, which had stains and
splatters on almost every page. Each time the rustle of paper stopped, I could feel him
watching me, as if he were trying to decipher something written and smudged on my
forehead and I squirmed under his scrutiny. He cleared his throat and brushed his hand
over the top of his head, smoothing the thin brown band of hair that traveled in an arc
from one ear to the other.

“I was thinking of making a cake,” he said. He slid the book across the table. The
page read Triple Chocolate Cream Cheese Torte.

“Ok,” I said. I was hoping it wasn’t his birthday or something I needed a gift for.
"A little celebration," he said. "We’ve been living as a family three months now. I thought we’d do something for the occasion." He stood up from the table and the chair legs stuttered against the linoleum.

I gave the phone in the living room a good long stare. My mother had called a few times in the past months but when I’d get on the phone and say hello, she’d start crying and then tell me that everything was fine and that everything was going to be fine and then she’d get off before I could ask her when someone was coming to take me back. I wondered what my parents would think of him calling the two of us family.

Uncle Elbo came to my side of the table and leaned over me, putting the yellow post-it on the page with the cake. "It’s hard to know when things are going to get ironed out. Will you pick us up some granulated sugar?"

A small section of his hair had escaped from its rightful place and was hanging long and limp beneath one of his ears. The sound of traffic floated up from the street below. Uncle Elbo cleared his throat a few times and then brushed his hair back into place and left for work.

At the market, I walked around for a while trying to decide if I should get the sugar or not. I didn’t want to celebrate anything with my uncle and I certainly didn’t want to eat a cake that had cream cheese inside. Eventually I found myself in the aisle with the grains and sugars and sweet pastes. There was one bag left of granulated sugar. When I leaned in to reach for it, I could see right through to the next aisle. Cindy Lee was sitting there on the shelf, her lone black braid falling quietly down her back. Elated at the opportunity, I reached through the metal shelving, thinking I’d pull off the twin translucent knobs that held her hair. When my hand got close though, I knew I would
need more than those plastic beads, so I pressed my palm to her lower back and gave a quick shove, sending her body off the shelf.

Cindy Lee picked herself up, whipped around, and surveyed me with her cold black eyes. “I hate you,” she hissed. Her face twisted up and I could see her plotting her next move.

Clutching my paper sack of sugar, I looked around me and took in all the things in my new life: the endless rows of food stacked on the shelves, the buzzing and uneven lights that illuminated the store, the purple veins running through the fleshy white cabbages; I smelled something old and spilt on the shelf between us and knew that Cindy Lee and I were beginning something mean and wonderful then. I undid the paper stitches at the top of the sack and grabbed a handful of the smooth white powder, shoving my arm forward through the metal opening.

“I dare you,” I said, and opened my filled palm just under her chin.

Cindy Lee lowered her head and stuck out her pink tongue to the sweetness, watching me the whole time like a horse that wasn’t sure if it wanted to be broke.

We roamed around the store together the rest of the afternoon, sucking on rice candy and rolling onions down the aisles to each other until Cindy’s father gave her the eye from the front register and pointed to the door.

She went out the back instead and I followed her through a room with metal sinks and refrigerators and crates of food and up a narrow set of stairs until we came to a door.

She slipped off her shoes and put them on a fibery mat and I took off my sneakers and tried to line them up next to hers.

“Be quiet or else,” she said.
I nodded and followed her in my bare feet across the living room and down the hall. The carpet was grey and compact and as hard as the floor in the grocery. Thin black tables lined the hallway. They gave off a shine that made me scared to touch them. I had never been alone in a girl’s house before and I felt strange with my shoes off. I looked at my toes and saw they were ugly—short and fat with untrimmed nails. Cindy put her finger to her mouth and opened a door. I peered inside with her and blinked at the darkness.

On a low bed lay a woman, asleep. Her black hair was streaked with grey and it fanned around her head as if she were underwater. A strip of black silk was draped over her eyes and the covers were pulled up to her chin. Her face was filled with a map of lines. Cindy put her foot on top of mine and pushed down until I let out a yelp. I covered my mouth as if I could put the sound back in. When the woman didn’t wake, Cindy shrugged and we went out on the balcony to eat Triscuits.

“Why’d you do that?” I said, rubbing my foot.

“She never wakes up,” said Cindy. “Only in the morning to shower and eat breakfast. Then she gets back in bed and stays there.”

“Is that your mom?”

Cindy threw a cracker over the railing and we watched as three pigeons fought over it in the alley below. “My father says she used to be different. She hates New Jersey.”

“I don’t have parents,” I said. “They died in a plane crash.”

Cindy’s eyes got wide and she scratched at a scab on her shin. I thought she was beautiful.
Her brother came home and marched us to the door and handed us our shoes. He said something to Cindy in their language and I looked away because I didn’t understand and it seemed all of a sudden that I shouldn’t be there. He shut the door and we were alone in the dark hallway.

We put our shoes back on and made our way down the narrow stairs. I followed Cindy out a set of swinging doors into the alley, where we passed the garbage cans and the pigeons, who were still searching for little lost bits.

“Where we going?” I said. Cindy was ahead of me and her long braid was swinging from side to side.

“My brother says we have to get a bunch of stuff for my mom.”

“Like what?” I said. It felt good to have something we were supposed to do, and I caught up to her. We walked away from the grocery down 3rd Street, past the diner and some apartments, and at the corner we came to the park with yellow slides where older guys hung out with their radios. A tall skinny man with no shirt on curled his fingers around the grey wire of the fence and leaned in. I took Cindy’s hand and we turned the corner. Her hand was damp and small, which was different than I expected. We walked for a long while like that without saying anything and then we came to the station.

It was the maintenance yard for the trolleys. A maze of tracks crisscrossed each other with wire lines overhead. Across the Hudson, New York’s jagged skyline shone. We walked up a little bank where yellowing grass and pieces of litter crunched under our feet and found a spot to sit between tracks where we could see the water and the city.

I let go of her hand and we threw rocks at the tracks and listened to the high hum they made when they hit just right. The rocks there were sharp and small and made our
hands black. We heard the rails hiss and looked down the tracks. A trolley was coming from a long way off. Cindy got up and ran across the last set of rails, and we climbed down the embankment on the other side.

The trolley came in and hit the rubber stoppers at the end of the line. A man’s hand reached out one of the windows and pulled on the metal arms, which bounced around in the air until they connected up again on a different path. Cindy grabbed a rock and threw it at the train but she missed. I thought about Uncle Elbo and pulled her away, her hand clutching rocks. We walked along a small road until we reached the water.

The pier looked like it would take us all the way to New York and we ran its length. The hard planks of wood made a satisfying and solid sound as we ran across them. At the end, the pier turned into broken boards and round wooden piles sticking up in the water with nothing above them. I sat down and looked at the city and it looked further away somehow than before.

“We’re going back to China unless my mom gets better,” said Cindy. She was sitting beside me now, dangling her legs over the side and banging her feet on part of the pier below. It made a hollow sound, echoing in the space between the water and wood.

I remembered our errand. “We’re supposed to get her something. Your brother said.” I pictured Cindy’s mother, beautiful and drowned-looking. Maybe we could help her. I wondered what their life was like before coming to Jersey City.

“Did your parents really die?” she said. She was leaning toward me and looking into my face like she knew.

“They had a fight and decided to go on a cruise instead of get a divorce. Their plane hit some mountain in Alaska that was full of ice. It was all over the news.”
Cindy leaned her face toward mine until her two eyes merged into a single lazy black marble. I could feel her breath on my skin. Then she did something that I will never forget because I had never been kissed by a girl before. She pulled my bottom lip into her mouth and gave it a fast bite with her small strong teeth.

My hand rushed up to the wetness of blood moving down my chin. She leaned in again and I flinched, but then she kissed me and I let her. We tasted the metallic taste of my blood together. I could feel that Cindy's leg was shaking. Behind her, a long flat boat was sliding through the water and I watched the little orange lights on its side bounce around in the river water below. I remembered that look on her face when she took the sugar with her tongue and I nudged my face onto her neck. I could smell the crushed-strawberry smell of her hair. When I felt the bone of her shoulder, I opened my mouth and bit her back as hard as I could. It felt good to get close to something that was inside of her. She let out a little cry and I put my hands up into her hair at the back of her neck where the braid was loose and would let my hands in. We stayed like that and matched our breathing.

When we pulled away, I saw that blood from my lip had gotten on her face and neck and shirt. My whole mouth was pulsing with its own heartbeat. I leaned down and wet my hand in the water and she did the same. We did our best to clean each other's faces and it was silent between us. Across the Hudson, lights were coming on in the buildings like constellations coming up. The black water shone with the reflections from the city. It was dark now and a little cold. Cindy kept her legs still and we listened to the pier creak and moan as it moved from side to side in the water. I looked for the boat I saw before but it had moved much further up the river.
We leaned against each other and that side of my body started to warm. After a while, Cindy lay down and I put my head on her stomach, which made growling noises, and we went to sleep.

Uncle Elbo found us the next morning lying like that on the pier. Our faces were still smeared with bits of dried blood and grime and my lip had swollen into a ripe bulge. He took each of our faces in one of his hands and turned us from side to side to see the damage. His hand, when he gripped my chin, smelled of green peppers and chocolate and I wondered if he'd made the cake by himself. One of his eyelids was twitching.

"Who did this to you?" he said and looked around at the water and the far-away buildings. There was a seagull underneath the pier, rising and falling with the way the water moved, and I watched it through the openings in the wood.

Uncle Elbo took us to the maintenance yard and we went into a green trailer where there was a coffee pot and some chairs and a heavy black phone sitting on a desk. Cindy banged her legs against her chair and sucked on the ends of a braid and wouldn't look at me. My uncle called Mr. Lee and the brother came to pick her up. I never saw her after that.

Uncle Elbo and I sat in the trailer for a while afterwards. He drank a cup of coffee in a small styrofoam cup, and afterwards he pressed his thumbnail around the top part, making little half-moon dents around the rim.

"Your mother's coming to get you around noon," he said.

I should have felt happy. It was what I'd been waiting for all summer. But after what happened with Cindy and my lip feeling the way it did and us sitting in a little
trailer that didn't seem to be anyone's and my uncle's eye twitching, it felt more like a
punishment for what I'd done.

My mom took me back to Long Island where we lived in our summer house on a
part of the island where almost no one lived year-round. I saw my father on weekends.

Every morning, I took a bus to my old school so I could be with my friends from
before, and my mother bought me lots of things for my new room. At first it felt like
home again, my mom always talking and kissing me and checking my homework and the
TV going at night.

In October, my mother got a boyfriend named Charles and he came to dinner once
with his daughter, Miranda. The table was set with candles and orange and white striped
gourds like it was Thanksgiving. My mother drank wine and laughed louder than usual
and when Charles stood up to reach for the salt, he caught part of the tablecloth and all
our plates moved over one space.

I slid my plate back in front of me and looked down at the mashed potatoes and
the wrinkly peas and the stringy hump of sweet potatoes with brown runny
marshmallows on top. I wondered what my uncle was cooking and who he was eating
with and I remembered the quiet smell of his kitchen.

Across the table was Miranda. She had long blond hair that was thin and let the
white round tops of her ears show through. I watched for a while as she hounded the peas
around her plate with a fork. Then I slid forward on my chair and gave her a good fast
kick under the table to see what she'd do. But she looked at me like she didn't understand,
and I never tried it again.
The Magician's Assistant

It's after midnight and I'm drinking my chocolate shake with my eyes shut. Larry honks the horn and there's his splotchy brown van in the parking lot, waiting. "Bye, Sharon," I say and the waitress with the red puffy hair waves good-bye.

The air outside is wet. Mosquitoes fly around in groups at the top of the lightposts.

"Larry, you're late," I say.

"Girl trouble," he says. Larry is wearing the hat he always wears, blue knit with a white 'N' stitched over the 'Y'. The Yankees are our favorite team.

"Where we going?" I say. Larry is turning the dial and looking for a song he likes.

"Where we going, Larry?"

"Shut up," he says. "You're starting to bug me already."

I pull out my cardboard number map from the pouch in my sweatshirt and start counting things. Mailboxes you can see from the road: 16. Out-of-state license plates: 8. I write down the numbers in a vertical row with the green felt marker that I borrowed from a girl at work. I like this one the best—the felt pushes in but doesn't bleed. The pattern so far is factors of 4. I look for patterns. If you pay attention to things that repeat, eventually you spot the pattern and can crack the code.

Larry drives down a ramp that leads to the Garden State Parkway. He throws a quarter and a dime into the little white basket. The light turns green and then we go.

Larry is a magician and I'm his assistant. Every Friday when my shift is over at Pathmark, I walk to Denny's and have a Grand Slam and a chocolate shake, and then
Larry picks me up around eleven. My job at Pathmark is to put all the stray carts into parallel rows. I line them up in front of the electric IN door.

When I started working there last year, no one talked to me much. Some of the check-out girls would say "Morning" or "How's it going, AJ?" but when I'd start to tell them how it was going, the door would swing open and they'd be going inside to start their shifts. Larry would always do his shopping toward closing, and afterwards he'd lean against the brick wall outside with a cigarette and watch me bringing in the carts.

"What's your name?" he asked once.

"AJ Johnson," I said. After that, he'd wave sometimes when he came to get ice cream or long matches or beer. A few months ago he called me over.

"AJ, how'd you like to work for me?" he said.

"I have a job at Pathmark," I said and tapped the red plastic band on the handle of the shopping cart in front of me. The handle has white loopy letters that say Thank You for Shopping Pathmark!

Larry explained the new job: Twenty dollars a week and I'd work on Friday nights. "You're going to help me make things disappear."

"Abracadabra," I said.

"Whatever," said Larry. "Meet me at Denny's on Friday, OK?"

This is what Larry and I do Friday nights. We drive to Franklin Lakes and Englewood Cliffs, places where the houses are big and have wet green lawns where the sprinklers turn on by themselves when you're not looking. From the front lawns you can sometimes see New York, gleaming like a million diamond earrings. We go to the sheds in the backyards where there are lawnmowers and snowblowers and kids' bikes trapped inside.

My job is to open the locks. I told Larry I'm good at hearing the ways that numbers talk to each other—the way 32 loves the distance between itself and 19, the way 11 gives itself up by pretending to be 12. Sometimes when I'm leaning in close to the
metal dial and the white painted numbers, I know the numbers feel me. This is hard to explain to people. Larry, for instance, thinks this is something he can learn. But you have to know numbers from the inside to really hear them. You have to know what they want.

Once when we got into a shed that had 4 lawnmowers and 2 red ten-speeds Larry told me I was his magic number, like when you're playing pool and there's that certain ball that always goes in easy.

Tonight Larry's going a long way on the parkway and I'm keeping count. These are the new things on my number map. Tollbooths: 9. Green highway signs: 32. Smokestacks: 4. Larry is itching the spot on his forehead where his cap covers. He gets rashes from wearing that hat so much. I've seen the skin all bumpy and raised. He turns down the music and puts his head to the side like he's listening for something.

"Hey, Larry," I say, "pick a number."

"Shit," he says.


"40?" Larry says.

"Now take away 6."

"34."

I tap the glove compartment with my index finger because I love this game.

"Divide it in half."


"You get 17. Now subtract the number you started with."

"What did I start with?" says Larry.

"10."

"So it's 7," he says.

"That's the thing, Larry. It's always 7. You can do this with any number and always get 7. Magic."
Larry itches his eye with the knuckles on his right hand.

"Larry?" I say. "What's that noise?" There's something knocking around in the back of the van.

"Trash, AJ." He puts both hands on the steering wheel and says real loud like he's speaking to a crowd, "A heap of filthy stinking Jersey garbage." Larry's neck when he's talking is thick and ropy.

"Don't yell, Larry," I say. He turns the dial and finds a song that I can feel thumping in my stomach. I lean my forehead against the cool glass of the window and watch the trees blur by. Where the branches and leaves open up, there are quick brick houses that face the highway, their windows shuttered shut. I used to live in a house like that, red brick and skinny and dark inside. When I turned 18 last year, my dad put an envelope on my plate at breakfast and said, "Here." There was a twenty-dollar bill inside and a firm white card that said in blue cursive letters, Congratulations! Your application has been accepted at the Paterson House for Independent Living. I ran my fingers over the blue letters, which dented the page.

"It's for boys like you," he said. "Be good to be with your own, get out in the world."

"No, Dad," I said. But he put my clothes in a duffel bag and then drove me there. We pulled up to a tall white house with a green grass lawn and I said, "No, Dad."

"You're eighteen now," he said. "Time to get your feet wet. You'll live here and they'll help you find the right kind of job. Maybe even find you a girl." He hit my thigh and smiled.

"Can I go home now?" I said.

"Listen, AJ," he said. He looked out the windshield like he still had to keep his eye on the road, even though the car wasn't moving. "When your mom was sick, I promised her I'd try as long as I could. It's been ten years now, AJ. Ten years. I need to have some kind of life again. Can you understand that?"
The side of my dad's face was lit up by a blue vein that only came out sometimes like those worms I used to find washed up on the sidewalk after it rained.

"Let's just see how this goes for a while," said my dad.

A lady in a green sweater tapped on the window and smiled at me. She opened my door and took the duffel bag from my lap.

"Don't forget this," said my dad and leaned across the seat to hand me the 20-dollar-bill I had left on the breakfast table.

Patricia in the green sweater led me up three flights of stairs. "This whole floor is for high-functioning folks like yourself. That means you can come and go as you please. You need to keep your room neat and come to activity once a week. Tomorrow we'll work on finding you a job, 'k?" She had brown hair and I wanted to pull it. Then she opened the door to my room and told me to settle in. My room at the Independence House looks like this: a low single bed with a round metal frame that looks like a pipe, a dresser with three drawers all the same size, and a washbasin with knobs like metal flowers. The floor is white and linoleum.

Activity is on Thursdays. Usually it's Be Flexible! with the girl in the ponytail who makes us bend over or lift our arms up to the sky. Sometimes, though, they take us bowling. I love bowling because I understand the ball. When it rumbles down the lane, I put my ear to the slick shiny floor and listen to it thinking. Sometimes it's thinking 3 or 7, but every now and then it's thinking 10! 10! and sure enough, I look up and all the pins are coming down like little men who weren't looking.

Ten is one of the prettiest numbers because the one and the zero are the whole reason why math works the way it does. But zero by itself is kind of lonely. It's always waiting for something to come in front of it. It always wants something.

Larry switches onto a different highway and soon we are driving into the yellow sky near the Wetlands. There are no trees now, just distant buildings that are lit at the edges with amber bulbs. Everything's too far away to count and this bothers me. The
lights on the smokestacks run in vertical paths up to the sky and where the cement columns end, white billowy clouds glow and move slowly upward like someone blew up the moon or lit it on fire and this is all that's left. We pass a truck that's idling on the shoulder and I try to count the string of red lights that run along its belly, but Larry's driving too fast. I don't know where we're going. This isn't the way to the houses with the sheds and the music is loud in my ears. My number map feels lonely for numbers.

"Where we going, Larry?" I say.

"Shut up, AJ. You're driving me nuts." He rubs the back of his neck where you can see the little straggling black hairs from his back that have escaped past the collar of his t-shirt.

I look at the clouds of smoke making their way into the sky in that slow-motion way. "Say something magic, Larry."

"Sure, pal," he says. "Abra-ca-fuckin-dabra." Larry laughs and I can see the fillings in the back of his mouth that his dentist probably put there when he was little.

"Larry, you have 7 cavities," I say. "Seven is prime."

"Fuck you and your numbers," says Larry.

I bite the sides of my tongue with my teeth and make the sound in my throat that erases what Larry just said. In the headlights, I can see the dim outlines of the cattails. The only other thing to see is the yellow glow from the distant factories. I close my eyes and picture this place in the daytime, the cattails stretching out into infinity. I know this because we used to drive this same road on the way to the baseball games, back when mom was still around and it was always the three of us. This road, if you keep going, leads through the Meadowlands to the Lincoln Tunnel, which is long and dark, and then on to Flushing Meadows, where Shea Stadium is.

Usually we'd drive there on Saturday mornings, and the cattails would make a friendly yellow path on our way to the Big Game. Geese would fly over the car and I
would lean my head out the window and lick the air with my tongue until it was dry like a pretzel.

"I want a soda, Dad," I'd say.

"When we get in our seats, I'll get you one," he'd say and my mom would turn to him with a wide smile that showed off her slim straight teeth.

"It's so nice to be going to see baseball with my two boys," she'd say and Dad would put his hand on mom's leg and squeeze. I'd tap the window with my index finger and wouldn't even keep count.

Baseball got Dad very excited. Sometimes on the way there, he'd try to teach me something. I remember him sweeping his arm over the cattails and saying, "Son, this is the heart of New Jersey. It's where the birds come year after year. It's the swampy garden of the state."

"Ok, Dad," I said, "heart of New Jersey," and he and my mom laughed.

Once, we were at a Yankees/Mets game at Shea and number 9 hit a home run. I watched the ball arcing its way through the sky, and I could feel the way the ball wanted to go, could feel it thinking the numbers, the math of speed, distance, and angle. I reached up my left hand quick and the ball landed with a smack into my palm. The sound was like a hand hitting a face. I closed my fingers around it as quickly as I could, and there it was, a perfect sphere, right in my palm. My father and mother stood up, astonished, and their mouths formed into perfect O's.

"AJ, you're a goddamn genius sometimes," laughed my father and he hit me on the back about a million times.

"We are so proud of you, honey, aren't we Don?" sang my mother. "We're going to take that ball home and put it in a frame for your bedroom. Would you like that?"

I nodded yes and blew on my hand where it was still buzzing from the ball.
"A perfect catch, just perfect," said my dad. He turned to the big guy behind us whose stomach hung over so far it almost touched the back of my seat. "That's my boy," he said and pointed to me.

Larry gets off the highway and onto a road that runs parallel but sits lower, closer to the ground. The cattails are loomy from this angle and look like they might reach out and hit the windows of the van with their brown fists. Larry turns onto some muddy tracks in the middle of the stalks, turns off the headlights and then we sit there a while. He rolls down his window and the hot wet summer air rushes in. I can hear frogs calling out to each other and the distant rumble of trucks from the other road. My tongue feels chalky and coated with sugar from the milkshake.

"Larry, I want a Dr. Pepper."

"Afterwards," he says and swats at his neck where a mosquito has landed.

"The bugs are going to swallow us up," I tell him.

He reaches across me and opens the glove compartment. The little box lights up like a hospital room where people bring you food.

"That thing's not real, right Larry?" The gun looks strict, not scared of itself. I chew on my fingers and taste the taste of my own skin.

"Time for some magic, AJ." He itches his forehead and smiles. "You ready?"

Larry gets out and goes to the back of the van. I open my door and the light from the car spills onto the ground. It's mucky here like the edge of a pond. My sneakers like the mud and want to stay there when I try to pick up my feet. I lift up my right foot and it makes a sucking sound like two people kissing. I laugh and try to pick up my left foot.

Larry comes back from the back of the van and hands me a shovel and a red flashlight. "Your job," he says, "is to dig a big hole." He points to the sea of cattails in front of us.

It's not easy to dig a hole here. There are roots that hold on tighter than you'd think, and the cattails are scratchy and break when they bend. The shovel goes down into
the mud just fine, but the stalks won't budge and then when they do, they hit me in the
face with their dry creepy selves. The mosquitoes are finding the spots where my grey
sweatshirt can't cover, even though I've put up the hood.

"AJ?"

"Over here, Larry. Here I am." I hold up the mucky curve of shovel like a flag so
he can find me. The mosquitoes are tricked and follow the shovel like it's a new head to
bite. Larry rustles through the cattails and I push my thumb against the white ridges on
the flashlight and point it in his direction.

"Who's that, Larry?" I say. Larry has a friend with him and he has his arm around
her. They make their way toward me and then I see her face. Her cheeks are bulging out
and there's a piece of silvery tape over where her lips should be. Her eyes are bright and
wide, like rabbit eyes. She is short and wearing a tight black dress with little straps made
of sparkly stones. Somehow she's lost her shoes and her feet are muddy and wet. I keep
the light on her. She has rabbit eyes and she has boobs. Her hair is brown and big and
ratty.

"Jesus, AJ, can't you do anything?" Larry is looking at the hole and I have to
admit it's not a very good one. "I knew I shouldn't have taken you with me for this one,"
he says and tucks his black gun into the waist of his jeans. "Gimme the shovel."

I hand it to him and he gives me the girl in the black dress. He tells me to hold
onto her while he finishes digging.

I do what he tells me and loop my arm around her. I can feel her skin and the hard
little stones on the strap of her dress. We walk together to a spot where we can sit down.
Larry has the flashlight in his mouth while he digs, and it lights up the little circle where
we all are. The girl and I sit in the slippery mud and scoot back a bit to avoid the glare. I
can still see her face, her hard black eyes and the silvery tape. "What's in your mouth?" I
whisper. The girl blinks back at me and I can hear Larry saying "fuck" and "mother
fucker," trying to lift all the muck from the swamp.
I try to figure what we're doing in the middle of the Meadowlands. The mosquitoes are buzzing in my ears and the girl's wrists are tied together with the fibery twine you put around packages. This is not the way to the sheds. I want to open something up, unlock the numbers like all the other Friday nights.

"You think you can just move on?" Larry says to the swamp. "The second high school is over you need some fucking bouncer from Dumont? I'll tell you where bouncers get you in Jersey, Danelle. The fucking dump. The fucking swampland dump, that's where." Larry says a bunch of other stuff but we can't hear him because he's hitting the cattails with the shovel.

I rock back and forth and bite the sides of my tongue and Danelle rocks with me. "Where's Larry going?" I say, even though I know she can't answer. The mud is wet and there are frogs. I hear them slipping into the water around us every now and then with a thwip. I count the number of shiny stones on each strap of her dress: Eleven and then eleven again.

"Eleven eleven," I say to her. "Prime." A small sound escapes from her throat and I look down at her hands, which are wiggling and fidgeting with the rope. I count the loops of rope on her wrists. Seven loops. Her rabbit eyes are glassy and wet. Eleven stones, eleven stones, seven loops around her wrists. The pattern is primes. I lean in to listen to what the numbers want. Her hair is scratchy and the wrong color, but it smells like my mom's used to, like strawberries after you wash them in the kitchen sink. I think about the masterlocks on those wet green lawns. 11, 11, 7. Open sesame. This is what the numbers want. I am rocking and Danelle is rocking with me. Then she squeezes my shoulder with a new free hand. She puts a finger up to the silvery band of her mouth and cuts through the cattails in her bare feet. I think I'm in trouble. I start singing to Larry, who is working hard.

"Seven, Eleven, One, Thirteen."

"Shut up," he hisses.
"Eleven, Eleven, Forty-one, Five."

Larry puts down the shovel and comes over with the flashlight. "If you don't shut up, AJ . . . Where the fuck's Danelle?" His eyes are racing around in the milky white part.

"She went home," I say. "Abracadabra."

Larry pulls back his left leg and kicks me in the stomach. I fold over and the mud smells like vitamins and the green marker is pushing into my belly like it wants to come inside my skin. Larry shines his flashlight into the cattails, then runs around in every direction. He comes back to where I am and stands around a while, looking into the hole he's made. He itches his forehead and then pulls off his Yankees hat and throws it down there. Larry has hat head. There are tufts of his hair that are standing straight up.

He takes the gun out from his jeans and points it at me. The end of the gun is a zero, a perfect circle.

"Get in the hole, retard," he says, and his voice is crumbly like bread.

"No, Larry," I say. "No."

"Get in," he says.

When I get to the edge and look in, all I can see is the glint of water in the bottom and Larry's Yankees hat. I get on my stomach and reach my hand down into the darkness to grab onto it. The zero is pressing into my back now, wanting nothing. It wants nothing. My hand goes down further and I can see Danelle, her arms free now to pump at her sides, running through the cattails and making it home. I can see that baseball too, curving through the summer sky, the one that's in the frame in my old bedroom. I counted the red stitches that held the ball together once, but I can't remember now. It was 108 or maybe it was 109. I can almost feel it, that perfect sphere in my palm again, my parents looking at me like they're seeing me for the first time. I think I can hear the crowd roar.
Acres

Harold made his way down the rutted path to the lake, his boots crunching on the stiff leaves that lay frozen in the mud. He watched his breath as he walked, the warmth from inside him joining the cold air in thin white clouds. He'd always liked the feel of a walk in the morning and it was only five minutes to the lake, which was small and nondescript, but it was theirs.

Today, the lake was rimmed with a small white collar of ice. He pressed his boot against the cloudy film until it crackled and gave, the water from underneath pushing upward in a warm-looking rush. Leafless trees formed a bare and rigid circle around the water. A bush rustled and two sparrows startled upwards, moving out across the water in that strange unison of birds, their small grey bodies more hopeful, more beautiful in flight.

The lights were on in the house when he returned. Patricia was moving about in the kitchen and he waved but she didn't see him. He took off his boots and came in. She was in her nightgown, a white fleecy dress that made her look younger. She got down his coffee cup.

"Lake's got some ice now," Harold said.

Patricia nodded and came to the table with his coffee. "Think it's small enough to freeze over?"
"Not sure." Harold reached across the table for her hand. His wife hadn't cut her hair in twenty years and he loved the way its silvery shine fell down around her.

"I didn't sleep," she said. "I kept on hearing a phone."

"She doesn't even know what state we're in," said Harold. He put his hands around hers and pressed lightly.

When they left Wilmburg last spring, Sheila only knew they were moving north. At the time, she was in and out of the Monmouth county homeless shelter, calling or showing up when she wanted food or money or a shower. For years Harold and Patricia had been at her mercy. She'd call five or six times a night, begging for money or the car. Sometimes she brought with her strange men, who laughed at odd moments and made them feel like hostages in their own home. Once Sheila had come to the house wanting her confirmation necklace, a slim gold cross they'd saved up for and given to her at breakfast before the service, wrapped in a blue box with a silver bow. Patricia told Sheila the cross wasn't hers anymore, that she wouldn't let her sell something sacred like that anyway. They were in the laundry room, and Harold was at the doorway, overseeing. Sheila threw her usual tantrum, calling them names, her face twisted up and splotched red with anger. Then she stopped and bit her lip and just stood there. There was the sound of something thumping in the dryer. Sheila leaned forward and told Patricia that she knew someone with a gun. They'd called the social worker that time, told her that things were getting out of hand. "She's over eighteen. You could file another report, but that's about it." Sometimes they filed the police reports but mostly they didn't. She was their daughter.

They didn't know what Sheila was doing now, and Harold ached sometimes to drive into town and call the social worker back in Jersey. She'd been the one to convince
them that a move was a good idea, that it might be their only way out. Now they had their A-frame in northern Vermont, and fifty acres to call their own. They had a new life and were trying to relax into it.

After breakfast, they drove into town to run errands. Harold offered to return Patricia's books to the library while she shopped for groceries. His wife always held on to the Audubon guides longer than she was allowed. It wasn't that the trees and birds in Vermont were all that different from what they'd seen in New Jersey and Connecticut, but the changes were enough that Patricia could distract herself with the things she didn't know. Every time they walked together to the lake in the summer, she'd stop along the way. What is that? she'd ask, pointing to a shrub or a tree that seemed unfamiliar. Do we even have those birds in Jersey? and she'd point to some bright colored thing winging through the sky. Harold noticed there were more robins about and found that it all felt familiar, even if he didn't know the names of things. He did miss the ocean, though – the expanse of sky, slow hulking boats at the edge of the horizon, field trips of children tromping along the shore in double rows, screaming at the small crabs that tunneled under the sand. He'd loved knowing that in a few years, some of those very same children would sign up for his Woodshop class and he'd help them build something solid and useful to take home to their parents, a birdhouse or a napkin holder or a cheeseboard with a nice rounded handle.

The library was housed in an old colonial, stone steps with scuffed white columns and a musty smell inside that got worse when it rained. Harold gave the librarian the field guides and paid the three-dollar fine, then went in through the wooden turnstile. It was deserted as usual. He walked along the metal shelving to the arts and crafts section, found
a guide to building a work shed, and quickly picked out a book for his wife. Along the back wall were the microfilm machines. He pulled out a chair and sat down in front of one, balling his hands into fists and running them along the tops of his thighs.

"Can I help you?" It was one of the stackers, a young girl with yellow hair and freckles he'd seen there before.

"I'd like the *New York Times* from July of 1988." His mouth was dry and he ran his tongue over his bottom lip so it wouldn't stick to his teeth.

"I think it's still in the sort pile," she said.

He nodded and the girl went away. It made him embarrassed that she knew. He didn't know why he did it. It just made things worse. He could hear the girl sifting through the little cardboard boxes on a metal cart. He fingered the keys in his jacket pocket and stood up. But then the girl came back with the box and Harold sat back down.

He loaded up the film on the two spools and turned on the machine, waiting a moment to make sure it was warmed up. He pressed the black button and the film whirred forward until he found his place, July 5th, front page of the Metro section.

"Parade-goers Enjoy the Sunshine at Sandy Hook" read the headline and underneath was the picture that a *Times* photographer had taken of Sheila. She was four years old and Harold and Patricia had bought her an American flag bathing suit for the parade. They'd all ridden together on the Wilmburg Middle School float and since the parade ended so close to the beach, most of the town climbed the dunes and spent the rest of the day letting the kids play in the ocean.

In the photo, Sheila was squinting and smiling, dark stars covering her belly, one arm reaching forward toward the camera with a bucket dotted with sand. Her hair was
curled up around her forehead in little blond ringlets and she looked pixie-like and joyful and like the world was a place she loved being in. Harold leaned forward and breathed slowly. He wanted to touch the screen but didn't. Under the photo was a smaller caption that belonged just to her. "Sheila Doheny of nearby Wilmburg thinks the 4th is buckets of fun." Harold stared at his daughter, her lanky body, all arms and legs. It was hard to believe that abandoning your own daughter at any age could be the right thing to do.

Patricia was standing with her coat on just inside the door, the bags loaded up in the metal grocery cart. She looked worn. The creases that ran from her nose to her mouth had grown deeper in the past few years, making her face look segmented and doll-like. He didn't like thinking of his wife this way, didn't like seeing what the years, what their life, had done to her.

"I thought you ran off with the librarian," she said. She smiled but it seemed to take effort.


Patricia nodded and pushed the metal cart toward their car. He wished he'd come for her earlier. He wondered how long she'd been waiting, how long he'd been staring at the picture in the library.

They drove the half hour back to their house, passing farmland and empty fields and forested areas that belonged to no one, then turned off onto the private road that was theirs. It was strange to own fifty acres. In Wilmburg, he and Patricia had owned a small home with a backyard that only fit a picnic table and a swingset and even those had to be pushed right up against the back fence. Harold looked out at the grey trees and the fields that were his property and tried to remember what the zoning laws were. Maybe they
could build another house and rent it to someone. That way they'd have neighbors and income at the same time.

"Strange to think this is all ours," said Harold.

Patricia nodded and looked out her window. "We're almost to Canada," she said.

"Thank God."

They rounded the last curve and their house came into sight. The owners before them had built up the second floor with two bedrooms that jutted off the main room like wings, making the A-frame look more like misshapen T. Even so, the house looked friendly on approach, all that wood and the wide windows. Harold boiled the remaining coffee on the stove, mixing in a little chocolate, and they settled into the living room with their new books.

"Where are you going to put the shed?" said Patricia.

Harold looked up from the manual. "Any thoughts?"

Patricia went to the front window, surveying the area in the front of their house. She leaned forward and squinted.

"You ok?" he said.

"I thought I saw a car."

Harold leaned forward and looked. "It's nothing," he said, but then he spotted it through the trees, a low green truck. "Someone's lost."

Patricia stayed at the window and Harold went to find the road map of Vermont in the junk drawer. There were matchbooks and a few skeins of yarn and a deck of cards but no map.
The truck rolled to a stop in front of their house. Harold put on his jacket and went outside. A man got out with a cigarette in his hand. He was tall and lean and wore his hair to his shoulders.

"You lost?" said Harold.

"You Mr. Doheny?" said the man.

Harold nodded and the man motioned to someone in the truck. The back door opened and a young woman with dirty brown hair came out. Then another girl crawled out from the backseat and it was Sheila.

"Dad," she said. He felt a surge of relief at seeing her, his daughter, right there in front of him, all in one piece. He'd forgotten how much she looked like Patricia, the high forehead and thin strong shoulders. She came toward him and the resemblance began to fade. She'd grown a tire around her middle and her face had set into that uneven and pulled-down look of people who are off. The last time they'd seen her was in May, about a week before they moved, when she came home for a shower. Patricia had put Sheila's clothes in the wash. Harold remembered watching his wife hold up the clothes to her face and breathe in, trying to know something of their daughter. Later, when they were driving north, Patricia told him the clothes had smelled of wet sand and salt and something ancient like sea grass or horseshoe crabs and that Sheila was probably sleeping on the beach at Sandy Hook. Patricia had always had that kind of intuition with their daughter, had always been able to suss things out from just a few details, the smell of a sweatshirt or things found in Sheila's pockets.

"Why didn't you invite me?" Sheila's eyes darted around, taking in the new house, the good solid deck, all those windows.
Patricia opened the door and Harold looked back at her. Her face twitched and she wrapped her arms around herself.

"What are you doing here?" she said. "You can't stay."

Harold felt panic start in his chest, a slow heaviness like being underwater. Patricia came outside, closing the door behind her. She linked her arm through Harold's and pushed her fingers down into the inside of his elbow like she wanted him to do something.

"Don't worry," said Sheila. "We're on our way to Toronto and just wanted to say hi. This is Tom." The man stuck out his hand and Harold found himself taking it.

"Aren't you wondering how we found your house?" said Sheila. She had that hurt smile on her face that could turn at any moment into anger. Harold knew that the best tactic was to feign indifference. He shrugged and looked up at the bare trees. He felt in a strange way as if he'd willed her to come, looking at that picture of her again and again.

"I used to take your woodshop class. Remember?" The girl with the dirty hair looked at Harold in a naked and hopeful way.

"I'm sorry," said Harold and he was because he didn't remember her at all.

"Jesse asked Mr. Vendara for your address so she could get a recommendation for college," said Sheila. She hung on the man's arm and laughed into his shirt.

"Are you going to college?" asked Harold. It was cold out and his fingers were beginning to go numb. He didn't want to invite them in, but it was so good to see Sheila, to be standing for just a moment with his wife and their only child.

"I might," said the girl and she looked back at the green truck like she forgot something there. Harold didn't think she'd ever been in his class. He never forgot a face.
and he didn't know hers. The administration at Wilmburg Middle School did have his new address, of course. She could have convinced the principal she needed to get in touch.

"Let's see your new place," said Sheila and she pushed passed them, walked up the wooden steps, and let herself inside. Harold felt like some kind of seal had broken and that things were spilling out in a way that he couldn't gather back up. Sheila plopped herself down on the middle of the couch and scanned the room.

"There are no pictures of me," she said. "Where's all our old stuff?"

They'd left most of their belongings from the old house in the Sandy Hook Storage Facility in an 11 X 20 space they'd paid for on a twenty-year lease. With the new furniture and knick-knacks their A-frame felt like a ski lodge or a cabin they'd rented for the season, but with Sheila sitting in the middle of this space, it seemed absurd, all of it.

"Where are you going in Canada?" Harold said. He wanted to give his daughter a hug but he knew if he did, she'd never leave.

"Tom and I are going to elope at Niagara Falls, and Jesse's never been to Canada."

Harold looked at his daughter, lying on the couch as if it were hers. He remembered the time she refused to go to kindergarten because he wouldn't let her wear her Halloween outfit to school. It was November, faintly snowing that day, and Sheila had stood outside in snow boots and her green goblin costume, to prove to him that she wouldn't be cold. It was one of those store-bought costumes, just a plastic green face and a cape that tied at the neck like a garbage bag. She was wearing a dance leotard underneath and that was it. Harold had watched from the kitchen window as her body quaked involuntarily, her lips going bruised and blue, until he couldn't stand it anymore.
and carried her cold and splotchy little body back inside. She was like a bird that was always migrating in the wrong direction. Who went to Canada in November to get married?

"I'm taking a shower," said Sheila. "Where's the bathroom?"

Patricia took Sheila's arm and led her upstairs. "You can get cleaned up and then you and your friends have to leave." His wife's voice had gone flat and nervous.

Harold watched his two girls go up the wide staircase and then he filled a pot with water and put it to boil. He could hear the shower turn on and Tom and Jesse in the next room, looking around at their things. Patricia joined him in the kitchen and they sat down at the table.

She put her fingers to her eyes and rubbed at them. "I can't do this again."

"I know," said Harold.

"You have a nice place here, Mr. and Mrs. Doheny." Harold looked up at his daughter's new boyfriend. They were all like this, polite but not nice.

"Can I help with dinner?" said the girl with the dirty hair.

Harold put her in charge of checking on the pasta. She picked up the lid with a potholder every few minutes and tested the pasta with a fork like she knew what she was doing. Somehow Sheila's friends were more functional than she was, some kind of survival mechanism.

They all ate together in the kitchen and the three kids joked about things that Harold and Patricia weren't sure they understood.

Sheila laughed with food in her mouth and it sounded like it got stuck somewhere in her nose.
"Ever asked the eight ball a magic question?" Tom said.

"You'll have to be more specific," said Harold, trying to join the conversation. Sheila laughed in a way that wasn't really laughing and he wished he hadn't said it.

"What are you going to give me for a wedding gift?" said Sheila. She looked around the room as if trying to find something she wanted.

Patricia got up and started doing the dishes and stacking them neatly in the dish drain. The window above the sink steamed up and made the room feel cozy, and for a moment Harold let himself pretend that everything was normal, a dinner with his daughter and his daughter's friends. He looked over at the girl with the dirty hair. Her eyes were vacant and blue but she had a nice smile.

Patricia turned around, wiping her hands on a dishtowel and leaned back against the counter. "You and your friends have to leave now."

Harold got up and found the phone book in a kitchen drawer. He found the names of a few hotels, wrote down the addresses, and folded the paper in half.

"Tom, why don't you take these girls into town? The Travelodge is next to a nice diner you can go to in the morning. We'll pay for one night's stay."

Sheila narrowed her eyes and pointed one finger at Patricia.

"Bang," she said. Patricia's hands tightened on the counter.

"You are so over the top," said Tom and grinned.

Sheila laughed and put her arms around him.

"You can't treat your mother like that," said Harold. The sentence felt familiar and sour in his mouth. He was saying something he'd said to her a million times. He felt scared of her and also numb.
"She was only kidding," said Jesse. "Can't you take a joke?"

Patricia was folding the dishtowel into small squares, her lips a thin line. Harold held out the slip of paper to Tom.

"Please, Sheila. Just go. You can send us a postcard from Canada, ok?"

Tom took the piece of paper and put it in his pocket.

"Mr. Doheny, it's dark and we wouldn't want to get lost or hit a deer."

Sheila got onto Tom's lap and started kissing his neck. A roll of fat fell over the top of her jeans and Harold wished for the little body she'd had as a child, compact and sway-backed and more hopeful somehow.

"We're seriously going to Canada tomorrow," said Sheila. She started working at Tom's neck again. He grinned up at them like a little boy, shy and happy for the attention. Patricia put the dishtowel on the counter in its small square, and it unfolded itself and fell onto the floor.

They put the girl on the couch in the den off the living room and Tom and Sheila got the spare room upstairs. Harold and Patricia got into bed with their clothes on and sat with the reading cushions propped up behind them.

"I don't remember that girl," said Harold.

Patricia was turning her rings around on her fingers. "We've moved all the way up here. We're not going to lay down and take this."

"Do you think she's taking her meds?"

"Harold, think about us for once."

"What do you want me to do? If you have an idea, Patricia." He put his hand on his wife's thigh. It was thin and strong and felt solid in his hand.
She shook her head. "I don't know if good ideas even matter. But we can't let her walk all over these last years."

"I know," he said. But Harold knew it was far from him, this knowledge his wife had, the way grief could turn into a kind of resolve.

Around midnight Harold woke to the sounds of the headboard in the next room hitting the wall. He looked over at Patricia but she was sleeping through it.

He got up and went downstairs, flipping the light switches as he made his way down the wide staircase, lighting up the first floor. In the kitchen he poured himself water from the filtered container in the fridge and sat at the table, staring at the glass, at the way the light moved through the liquid. The kitchen was clean and spare and everything was in its place.

The door to the den opened and Jesse came into the kitchen in her pajamas, plaid flannel bottoms and a tank top that said "baby" in sparkly iron-on letters.

"Great minds think alike," she said and poured herself water from the tap.

"There's filtered," said Harold and pointed to the fridge.

She shrugged and brought her glass to the table, sitting down across from him.

She rolled her eyes. "They're always at it."

"It's no kind of life," said Harold.

"Sex?" said Jesse.

"I meant everything," he said. The headboard changed to a slower rhythm and Harold could hear his daughter letting out a low growl like a cat trapped behind a couch.

He studied the glass of water again.
The girl took a sip of water and he did too. When she put her glass back down, Harold found himself trying to match her timing, have their glasses touch the table at the same time. He reached across and touched her arm.

"There's more," he said and then pulled away because her skin felt good and he hadn't meant it to.

"I don't do the hard stuff," she said. She was looking at him like this would impress him. Her eyes were so blue.

"What colleges do you have in mind?"

The girl laughed and wrapped her hands around the glass. Her hair fell in clumps around her face.

Harold cleared his throat.

"I think I remember you now." He wasn't sure, but there had been a girl years ago in his class that always had hair hanging over her face. Maybe it was her.

"You sawed off the handle of your cutting board by mistake."

Jesse's eyes widened and she looked away. Harold couldn't help but feel relief. It had been so long since he'd been able to reach Sheila or any of her friends. He was getting somewhere with this girl.

"I can help you," he said. "I can write that recommendation."

"Don't be stupid, Mr. Doheny." Jesse stretched her arms up above her head. It was cold in the kitchen and on either side of the word baby, he could see the girl's nipples pushing forward through the material. It was quiet upstairs now.

"You could try it for a semester, though. Or go part time."
Jesse shook her head. "Look, we were just trying to get your address, ok? I'm not going to college."

Harold looked at the girl, her open blue eyes, then looked down at her hands around the glass. Her knuckles looked dry and knobby, the skin in between thin and worn. They looked older, not like high school hands.

"I thought you were that girl," he said. Behind her the dishes were lined up in the dish drain, gleaming like soldiers. The window was black and he couldn't see outside. He thought about those high-powered halogen lights for the backyard. Maybe he'd run a line out there and mount it from a tree.

Jesse got up and lay her empty glass down sideways in the sink. She touched his shoulder as she walked back to the den.

"Goodnight," she said.

"Wait," said Harold. He reached out to grab her arm but he missed her. He didn't know what he was going to say but he wasn't ready to be alone. The door to the den closed and the house was quiet. He turned off the lights and slid his hand along the round banister as he climbed the stairs, the solid feel of wood taking him up.

In the upstairs hallway, Harold paused in front of the door where his daughter was staying. He remembered when she was small the way he'd go in to her room and check on her, just to make sure she was there, just to see the way her small body would be curled up, peaceful and still. He looked down at the gold oval of the doorknob, then leaned forward and rested his ear against the door until he could hear the two of them, breathing in sleep.
In the morning, Harold and Patricia could hear them downstairs, opening up cabinets and looking for food.

"They're not leaving," said Patricia.

It was a clear day and Harold could see the outline of the lake from their bedroom window. He looked in the clearings for deer. Sometimes they came near the house in the mornings, lifting their heads, their ears twitching. All of this was theirs, the land stretching out in every direction.

He turned and watched Patricia put on her blue turtleneck and pull her long silvery hair through the opening. He sat down on the bed beside her and kissed her hand.

"Vermont's ours. We won't let her take this."

Patricia nodded and leaned down to lace up her boots.

"Morning," said Sheila when they came downstairs. She and Jesse were making pancakes. The counter was littered with cooking utensils. One of their glass bowls was filled with lumpy yellow batter.

"Your mom and I have to go into town," he said.

"What for?" said Jesse. She was turning the pancakes over with a fork and Harold could see she'd scraped up their Teflon pan. She was still wearing the plaid pants and the shirt that said baby.

Harold went over to the coffeepot and put together a thermos for himself and Patricia.

"Doctor's appointment. We'll be back in an hour," said Patricia.
Sheila laughed. Her hair was curled up at the forehead like it always was in the morning. She had on a long black T-shirt with the name of a carwash on it. Her legs were bare and they made Harold sad.

Jesse found the kitchen radio and turned up the volume.

"Come here, Mr. Doheny. Dance with us." She held out her arms to him. Her eyes were closed to the music and Harold could smell one of the pancakes burning on the stove, could see the steam rising up behind her.

Patricia had her coat on at the door and was wrapping a wool scarf around her neck. Harold closed up the thermos, looked at his daughter. She had grabbed the other girl's hand and they were spinning around the kitchen together, as if nothing mattered. He found the keys in the ceramic duck on the hallway table and he and Patricia went outside.

"What are you doing?" said Harold.

Tom was underneath their car, his legs poking out from the front end.

"It's the least I could do for you, putting us up." He shimmied out from under the car. His hands were black with grease. "Your tires," he said. "Check it out. I'm swapping them."

Harold walked around to the other side. Both tires were off and there were jacks up in the tire wells.

"You forgot to rotate them. They're wearing uneven."

Harold remembered hearing Tom in the middle of the night. He wondered if he was really going to marry his daughter. He watched as Tom rolled a tire toward the back of the car, guiding it with his hands. It was true, the tread was worn thin on one side.
In the house, Sheila and her friend were laughing and dancing in his and Patricia's kitchen. The music was some kind of new country style with metal guitars. He looked at the road that led away from their home.

"Thanks very much, Tom," said Patricia. Her eyes were bright in the cold air of morning. "We'll be back in a bit."

Patricia started around the back of their house and Harold followed her onto the path that led back to the lake. Their breath moved upwards in thin white wisps and mingled together before disappearing in the clear air. It didn't feel too cold once they picked up their pace. The leaves crackled underneath them and Harold looked down, naming each leaf as they went. Maple, sycamore, beech. He was glad to know the names of things now.

When they got to the lake, Harold opened the thermos and they each took a few sips of coffee. The ice that rimmed the water looked the same size as yesterday, but was more clear and solid-looking now. There were a few blackbirds resting on the ice, shifting their weight from one foot to the other, trying to gain purchase on the slippery surface. Patricia put the lid back on the thermos and handed it to Harold. She put a hand to his face and it felt warm from the coffee.

"Let's keep going," she said.

Harold looked back toward the house. He could make out its outline, could see the lights burning on the first floor. The music from the kitchen reached them, but just barely now. Harold reached up to his own face and took his wife's hand.

When they bought the house, Harold and Patricia had leaned over the kitchen table with the former owner and gone over the property map. Most of the acreage was in
front of their home where the road cut through. Behind the house was the lake, and after that about fourteen acres or so that belonged to them. They'd never been to that part of their land. Harold remembered asking the man about the adjoining property and he had said it was a working farm. Patricia was moving ahead of him now on the uneven trail that led around the lake. If they kept walking, Harold knew they'd eventually come to a fence and then it would be farmland. He tried to keep pace with Patricia, who was walking fast now, her silver hair a strange light among the bare black branches of the trees. He didn't know the acreage of the farm next door, but Harold knew it would be open land and easier walking.
Sonora

The sun is just cracking open the sky above the mountains, but it's already hot like the middle of the day. That's how it is in the desert sometimes – the day starts before there's a morning. I put on the clothes I picked out last night: dark blue jeans, cowboy boots, and the sleeveless green shirt my dad got me, the one with the white stripe across. I look at myself in the bedroom mirror and then throw a work shirt over the first one. She might think I'm trying to impress her or something, which I'm not.

Dad and I live on the east side of town, where the flat city land slopes up and becomes the Rincon Mountains. This side of Tucson is mostly rich people. There's a golf course nearby and sometimes the old folks drive their carts on the regular streets and we get stuck behind them and have to drive slow. We live around here because Mr. Polsky has a house by the mountains and he lets us put our trailer out back on his land. If you stand on his back porch and look east toward the Rincons about half a mile, there's a bunch of twisty olive trees and that's where we are.

My dad drives around the white van that says Polsky's Plants & Flowers. People are always happy when they open their door and he's there on the steps holding a shaky-leaf ficus or a jumping cholla or a bunch of red roses. Even when he has to go to the fancy office buildings, he's never embarrassed about being the plant man. Once I saw him lean over a lady's desk and slide his business card right into the pocket of her blouse. I asked him why he never did stuff like that with Mom, back when we all lived together. Dad says now that it's just us boys, things are different. We're free, he says. We're following the sun.
Dad's still asleep in the other bed, so I close the door slow once I'm out in the hall. I go to the kitchen and pull out the orange juice. At nine o'clock Dad and I are driving to the pancake place on Pima and Alvernon. We're having breakfast with Cecilia Dupree. I told Dad that with a name like hers, Frank's Place might be too dumpy. The waitresses there call you "honey" and set down your coffee so hard it sloshes around and you have to watch your shirt. Dad said not to worry, that Cecilia goes to the university and probably isn't used to fancy places anyway.

Back when we lived in Florida, my mom used to flip through those thick university catalogues. We'd sit together on the couch and eat dinner, waiting for dad to get home from work. "Where should I go, Trevor?" she'd ask. And I'd look at the glossy pictures of brick buildings and falling leaves, trying to pick out the ones that looked good. "How about that one? What state is that one in?"

Last week she sent us a postcard from Alabama that I taped to the fridge. It's the first time we've heard from her since she left, but she probably couldn't find us until now, since Dad and I were driving around for a while and staying in different places. On the front of the card is a statue of a woman holding up a big bowl. The Boll Weevil Monument. The first statue in the United States erected in honor of an insect pest. Mom doesn't say so in the postcard, but I think she's at one of the colleges there, walking around in the clean-cut grass and sitting on benches reading books. Maybe when she finishes, she'll come find us.

The bed creaks in the other room, and I know dad's swinging his legs around the side and getting up. He comes in the kitchen and I pour him some juice.

"Morning," he says and leans against the counter, rubbing his hands through his hair to wake up.

"There are colleges in Alabama, right?"

"I guess so," he says.

"Maybe she'll come find us," I say. "Do you think?"
He looks at the fridge and takes a sip of juice. "I don't think so. I wouldn't count on it."

I study the woman in the postcard with her arms reaching up to the sky. "Well I think she's going to."

"Do you know what Mr. Polsky told me last week?" He lays his empty glass down sideways in the sink. "He says next summer, when you turn thirteen, he's going to pay you for the days you work."

"Pay me?"

"So you'd better start thinking about what you'll do with all that money." He pulls off his T-shirt and balls it up in his hands. "I'm going out to shower. Drink your juice."

I've been helping out this summer with the jobs at the university, since Dad and the other guys have a lot to do before the students come back. My job is to dig down through the dirt and hard layers of caliche to make room for the new plants. Usually we put in prickly pear and young mesquite for the new buildings, or just replace the plants that never took root. A few weeks ago we did a job that took ten guys besides me and my dad, replacing a bunch of saguaros by the astronomy building.

The first company the school hired didn't know anything about transplanting cactus and they all burned. The students had a big protest about it, since the tall ones with a lot of arms can be up to 200 years old. Even I know that when a saguaro faces the same direction for its whole life, you can't just pick it up and move it any way you want. The shady side doesn't have the same protective exterior and it sunburns real easy. Here's the other thing I've learned about cactus: You can't give it water until it's grown roots.

I don't much like the jobs at the university. There are rows of palm trees, which make me think of Florida. And the people there can't be bothered with the plant man, or with me. Dad says it's because everyone's still mad about the saguaros. College, he says, is a good place to go and get all mad about things. That's what it's there for, so you don't have to be angry about everything later on.
From the kitchen window I can see Dad washing up outside. His jeans are spread on a smooth rock, warming themselves like a lizard pressed flat between stone and sun. When we got here last year, Dad said it was time we had a real shower, since the one in the trailer is just a trickle of water. He rigged up some tubing that goes from the kitchen sink, out the window, and up over a tree branch. I like to shower at night because the frogs come out and hop around my feet in the wet mud, singing. I watch my dad soap the dark patches under his arms. He is pale at the shoulders and throat, but where his T-shirt doesn't cover -- face, hands, and arms -- his skin is the color of caked mud. He turns and dunks his head under the water and his dark hair slicks and lengthens down his neck.

I sneak into the bedroom, lean over his dresser and examine my own face. My nose and cheeks are burned from planting and the front of my hair has new blond streaks that shine under the light. I find my dad's aftershave and tip the green bottle onto my fingers, then wipe my hand across each side of my face. I put the last bit into the groove at the base of my neck. Cecilia Dupree. She sounds French.

Dad and I walk the path between our trailer and the main house. I stay a few steps behind, naming each plant as I pass: creosote, prickly pear, ocotillo, manzanita. I run my hand across the scaly bark of an alligator juniper as I go by, testing the calluses on my palm. We climb in the van and drive toward the low brown hills on the west side of town. The truck smells like fertilizer and potting soil, and in the back the tall plants rustle their leaves when Dad switches gears. I'm glad we're meeting Cecilia Dupree at the restaurant. There are only two seats in the plant truck and she'd have to sit in back with all that dirt.

On the way to Frank's Place we pass my school. You could miss it from the road if you didn't know it was there. The walls are the color of the desert floor and the whole building is round and smooth like a boulder. It's like that because some famous guy designed it, the one that built the airport with all those tents. In the courtyard there's a wall that rises up at a slow angle from the playground. Blue ropes hang down from bolts, and at lunch me and the other sixth graders pretend we're rock climbers. There's another
wall off to the side of the school that has special slits where the sun comes through at different times of day. Dad and I figured out the moon likes to come through the wall too. Sometimes after work we eat takeout on the swings and watch for the sliver of light on the sand.

Once we stayed out there until it got dark all the way. I was spinning on the swings, twisting the chains around each other and then lifting my feet off the sand to unwind. I leaned back and watched the sky for a while, and that's when a clear picture of her came. I remembered how she used to sit on the porch sometimes until late at night, looking up past the screen that kept the bugs out to where the first faint stars were coming through.

"Come out and help Momma look for stars," she'd say. And I'd sit down on the floor in front on her and lean back onto her legs. She'd press her knees to my shoulders and rock the two of us back and forth. Usually we stayed quiet, but some nights she'd pull up one foot and take out the tiny red bottle. I'd watch the bristles squish onto each nail and then leave a shiny red trail behind. "OK, Trev," she'd say. "Remember, like too-hot soup." And I'd blow lightly on her toes until the color dried on.

"Trevor," my father would call from inside the house. "It's the middle of the night. Time for bed."

"You coming?" I'd ask.

"No," she'd say. "I'm not quite ready. You go on ahead."

I think Dad is nervous to see Cecilia Dupree. He's still on his first cigarette and he's pushing in the lighter. I pull it out for him when it's done, the metal circles glowing red, then orange. I touch the coils to his new cigarette until it glows too. Cecilia, he says, studies plants at the university. I'm glad of that because Dad and I know plants.

"She's just a friend," he says.

"I know," I say, even though I bet she's probably more. Dad said the same thing about that lady in Hatch, New Mexico, and she was definitely more than a friend. That
was the time we stayed in a hotel and dad got me my own room. He brought me a bunch of movies to watch, but the two of them were next door so I kept the TV off. I could hear the bed hitting against the wall and the lady calling my dad "Steve" a bunch of times.

There's no room in the lot so we park the van in the street. Dad looks in the rearview mirror and pulls down his lower lip with a thumb to check his teeth. He catches me watching and messes my hair.

"You smell like me," he says.

"No I don't," I lie. In the parking lot I sneak a hand up to smooth my hair and we go inside.

Cecilia Dupree is sitting near the back at a big table. I know it's her because she waves at us. I walk behind dad but to the side so I can see her. She has curly brown hair that stops at the shoulders, blue eyes, and no make-up. Around her neck is a thin string of beads and she has on a tank top, which dips down in the middle. She leans forward to shake my hand and her breastbone disappears behind the curves of her breasts.

"You must be Trevor," she says and I tear my eyes away and look up. The coffee comes and we tell the lady what we want.

"Bacon and eggs please," I say and the waitress winks.

Cecilia says, "I think she likes you."

"Nuh-uh," I say, but I smile.

Cecilia and my dad make eyes at each other so I pretend I'm interested in the pictures on the walls. At Frank's there's a rule that when the regulars go on vacation they have to send a postcard from where they've been. You can hardly see the wood paneling behind the palm trees and skyscrapers and string bikinis. I squint up at a picture of a long sandy beach, but I still see my father's hand when it brushes Cecilia's cheek, then tucks one side of curls behind her ear.

In the picture, the beach is a thin jagged strip of land. I watch the shore until I see three people walking, the water coming up and cooling our feet. It's me, my dad, and
Cecilia. I try to picture my mom there too, but this time I can only get certain things to come in clear -- the smell of damp hair, her hands on my forehead, a pair of blue shoes. Cecilia in the picture is leaning over at the edge of the water, helping me look for shells.

When the food comes, she tells my dad she's got good news. "I got the grant for South America," she says.

"Cece, that's fantastic," my dad says and reaches across for one of her hands.

She tells us how she's studying plants that grow in Colombia, how there are leaves in the rainforest so big you can wrap yourself up in them like a blanket. "I hear you're becoming an expert on the plants here in the Sonoran desert," she says to me. "Maybe you can teach me about them."

I shrug my shoulders. "Sure," I say, and try to think what I'll tell her -- maybe about how desert plants can be medicine, like ocotillo flowers for exhaustion and those rattly black pods on the mesquite tree for chapped lips. I sneak a quick look at her tank top but she catches me and I have to examine her arm instead. The inside of her elbow is sweaty at the crease with a tiny row of liquid beads. I imagine laying my head on her chest, running my hand along the inside of her arm, and falling asleep.

Cecilia pours milk into her coffee and stirs. "So how about you guys coming down for a visit?" she says. "There's a highway right from Tucson that goes south to the rainforest."

"Well," says my dad, "when do you leave?"

"Next month," she says. "And I'll be down there for a year."

My dad runs a finger along a vein on the top of her hand. "I've always wanted to get that far south," he says. "And Trevor and I could use a vacation. Count us in."

I turn and find the postcard again but there is no one on the beach now. I see how long I can stare without blinking until my eyes sting from salt and my ears roar with the crash of the waves. Dad called it a vacation last time too, when we packed up what was left in the house and started driving west.
"I like the desert better," I say.

Cecilia smiles, and small lines draw a map from her eyes to where her hair begins.

"Tell me something about the desert," she says, "that I don't know."

"Do you know how the manzanita bush scatters its seeds?"

"Tell me," she says.

"Coyotes eat the berries and then crap out the seeds. If you poke at coyote turds with a stick you can see them."

Cecilia stirs a forkful of pancake around in the syrup and then pops it in her mouth. "Really," she says like she can't believe it, and then smiles.

"Well," I say, "I bet you didn't know that if you don't start your car for a whole month, pack rats come in and make nests in your engine. They get to be the size of small dogs and they gnaw through the wires until they disconnect everything."

Cecilia pushes her hair behind her ears and leans forward. "Did you know," she says, "that in Colombia there's a frog so poisonous it can kill a small human in a few seconds?"

My face flushes and I squint up at Cecilia until she is as small as a postcard, a rainforest monkey peering back at me from a leafy branch, taped to our fridge. "My mom's coming back," I say, "as soon as she finishes college."

My father's hand comes down on my shoulder. "Son," he says, and I lean away so he has to let go. Cecilia takes a slow sip of coffee and returns the cup to the table like it's turned to glass. My father reaches across for her thin fingers. "I'm sorry," he says to her. I think how in a few weeks I'll probably be helping Dad take the trailer off the cinder blocks, pulling it past the olive trees and Mr. Polsky's house, and back onto the highway. I picture those yellow dotted lines on the road, how they turn into a single endless thread in the rearview mirror. I pick apart my last strip of bacon and arrange it into a tiny red mound on the side of my plate.
We drive home quiet. The midday heat makes mirages in the road, puddles of water that disappear as soon as we come close. I keep hoping my dad will put his hand on my shoulder again, now that it's just the two of us. But he's looking ahead, his knuckles white from gripping the wheel. I hear the cigarette lighter click when it's done, but I let my dad get it for himself. I look out across the desert at the cactus trees, their arms curving and reaching to the sky. You can't see it, but just under the tough green skin is a secret reservoir of water. Right now I long for a small sip. A stretch of shade. My mother saying *shhhhh.*
Walking Distance

Sara Trigo could not convince her mother that she wasn't, now, allergic to the world. She had felt a change in this last year, knew she was less sensitive to the molds and dander and pollens in the air. She hadn't had an attack in months. Even her allergist seemed to agree she was growing out of it. On their last visit to Dr. Parks, the scratch test had come back negative for cats and melons, two of the things she'd had to avoid her entire life. Sara's mother refused to believe the tests might be true. Instead, pamphlets began showing up on the kitchen table of Airstream communities in Arizona, the most hypo-allergenic living environments, *should it ever come to that*. Their house in Elizabeth was already a model of allergen-free living: dehumidifiers in every room humming in their plastic shells, slip covers promising to keep out mites, and twice a day, Sara's mother pulling the long-bodied vacuum across the living room like a show pony, trying to suck up all the dust.

Ever since Sara had found out she was in the clear, she'd been dreaming of cantaloupes, their brainy looking skin and the sherbet colored fruit inside. The one time Sara had tried a piece, her mouth had itched with such ferociousness that she'd spent an entire afternoon at Liberty Park on a splintery bench watching tourist boats swarm the green hulking statue, and scraping at her own tongue with a plastic fork. What her mother didn't understand was this: that brief second when the fruit gave way to slick sugary juice was worth every moment afterwards.
"The stitchers all miss you. Why don't you come with?"

Sara's mother was twisting her hair up into a bun at the vanity, bobbypins sticking out from her mouth like fake fangs. She raised her eyebrows at Sara in the mirror.

Sara leaned against the doorframe and shrugged, fingering the wilted roll of bills in her pocket and hoping her mother didn't know. Sometimes she went with her mom to Stitch and Bitch, a weekly knitting group that was mostly women eating brownies and complaining about their kids. Her mother's total production after a year in the group was one lopsided looking scarf and the current project, a yellow baby blanket she'd been working on for months, even though they didn't know anyone who was expecting.

"You can't stay mad forever. I'm not buying a cantaloupe and gambling with your health." Her mother stopped at the doorway and took off her wedding ring. She held it in the air between them, the gold glinting. "We still need to be careful," she said.

Sara's mother never tired of the story, even now, thirteen years later, even when it was just the two of them. When Sara had been born, she'd been so small that her mother could fit the wedding band all the way up her arm, right to the shoulder. Sara was that small, her mother would say in a whisper when she told the story to someone who hadn't heard it before. It was probably the only reason she kept the ring now. Sara's father had left long ago.

Sara knew she had at least two hours. She'd already taken thirty dollars from under the bunched roll of pink fiberglass in the attic. She didn't know how much a cantaloupe cost, but it was better to be safe. It was dark and crisp outside, but not too cold for October. The dry leaves marked each of her steps with sound as she crossed the yard. At the back fence, she gave a silent wave to their dog Bacon, who was tied up to a stake,
watching her with boredom. Technically, he was her dog, but she'd never pet him with her bare hands and he'd never really taken to her. She didn't blame him for being wary of someone who'd never really touched him and who was entirely responsible for his being tied up outside.

She looked back at the house, and felt that it somehow knew — the closed-in porch where they sat in summer to play cards, the gouges in the back door where Bacon scratched when it got cold and he wanted to come in, and upstairs, her mother's bedroom window, dark except for the reflection of the moon in the glass, wavery and yellow, its shape broken up by the wooden crosspieces. She forced herself not to turn around as she went through the back gate and into the alley, but she could feel the house and the broken shining bits of moon watching her walk away.

The blue flickerings of TVs lit the alley as she made her way to the main street. She knew every house and how to get to the grocery, but it felt like someone else's neighborhood. When she did go out, it was usually in the car with her mom. On the main street, she stood against the side of a building, taking in the rush and push of traffic. The sidewalk was empty of people but lit up by signs — Custom Cabinets, RJ's Auto Paint, and a bright yellow square that read Dede's Hair and Nails, which had a creepy picture of a long pale hand tipped with red polish. Quickly, she walked the two blocks to the grocery.

As soon as she saw the wide plate-glass window, her mouth began to water. She could almost taste the wet orange of the cantaloupe, could picture a whole bin of them, round like basketballs, just waiting there silent and patient. In front of the store a boy was sitting on a green milk crate, his elbows resting on his knees. Sara put her feet onto the
black mat by the electric door. She could see the first stand of the produce section, little green plastic baskets filled with strawberries and a bin of yellow pointy-looking fruit that she didn't know the name of. She couldn't see beyond that, but knew the cantaloupes were toward the back wall. Sara pushed at the door, at the spot where it said IN. It moved an inch or so, making an airy sucking sound, but it didn't open.

"They closed an hour ago."

It was the boy on the milk crate. His jeans were baggy and fell around him like a skirt. He was eating a bag of Cheetos.

"It's only 7 though."

"Inventory night," he said. "Every third Tuesday. Clockwork." He itched at his neck and a string of tiny red bumps showed up below his ear. Sara wondered if he was allergic to yellow dye #5. It was in Cheetos for sure, and it could be nasty for rashes. He was older than she was, maybe in high school.

"Leonard," he said, wiping his hands on his jeans and then holding it out to her. Sara looked at his hand, the fingertips gunked with bright orange. She told him her name and itched at her eyebrow to avoid his hand. A topical reaction from that stuff was possible, and she wasn't about to touch someone she didn't know.

"I'm on break," he said and pointed to the building next to the grocery.

It was brick like all the others. There wasn't a sign on it, just an ashy square outline halfway up the building where a sign used to be. Sara looked up at the window. A woman in a blue hairnet was holding something up to a bright light.
"Pharmaceuticals. Quality control," said Leonard, and nodded up toward the woman. He stuck one of his gunky fingers into his mouth and scraped it along his bottom teeth to get the powder off.

Sara nodded and looked down at her shoes. She hadn't been alone with a boy since the last Environmental Sensitivity Network dance, and she'd mostly avoided those boys anyway. If her mother had let her go to school in town with the other kids, she'd know a lot more about these kinds of things. But her mom had insisted on home schooling, since Sara had spent her first five years sunken-faced and asthmatic, breathing into paper bags. Sometimes in the mornings, Sara snuck up to the attic to watch the kids walk to the bus stop. Once she banged her head on the attic window and a tall blond boy with scuffy looking loafers looked around to see where the noise had come from. The most she'd seen of the boys from Elizabeth in the past few years was the tops of their heads.

"Mostly antidepressants," he said, "in case you're interested."

"What?"

"Paxil, Zoloft. But we test other stuff too. Have you ever looked under a microscope?"

Behind him, in the open spaces between the buildings, Sara could just barely make out the brown lapping waters of the Arthur Kill and on the other side the hazy lights of Staten Island. She imagined all the microscopic things in that water, imagined seeing them blown up a million times.

"Are you a scientist?" Sara studied his face, which was long and slopey. His hair was gelled into little crisp tufts on the top of his head.
"Kind of," he said. "Mostly I wash beakers." He mashed up the empty Cheetos bag and stuck it in his pocket. A truck passed by, its sides shuddering like an animal. Leonard turned to the side and watched it go by and then turned back to her.

"Do you want to get a look at the microscope? I'm off break soon."

She thought about peering inside at all the swimming small things. What was inside a pill for depression? She pictured a blue round pill blown up a million times, getting bluer and bluer. Leonard was biting his lip like he wanted her to say yes. He was better to look at than the kids at those dances her mother made her go to in Newark, where the boys were runny-nosed and fat or mouth breathers spaced out on their antihistamines. Maybe it wasn't the season for cantaloupes anyway. She could look in the microscope and still be home before her mother got in.

Leonard smiled and stood up from the crate. He was much taller than she thought he'd be. She looked up at him and saw a tooth in his mouth that was grey and sick-looking.

"I'm actually supposed to get groceries for my mom," she said.

"I could walk with you."

"I thought your break was over." His jeans rode low on his waist and Sara could see his boxers – black with little red frogs – creeping out the top.

"They won't mind," he said. Sara looked up at the window. The lights were still on but the woman was gone.

Sara found herself shaking her head, saying no.

"Why are you being chicken?" He was still smiling, but it looked different now, frozen.
"It was nice to meet you," she said.

Leonard put his tongue over the discolored tooth, sucked at it, and then nodded his head.

"You'd be surprised is all, what you can see under the microscope."

"My mom really needs a cantaloupe," she said. She started walking away from him.

"The grocery store is the other way," Leonard said, and Sara kept walking, pretending not to hear him.

She went a few blocks, and then turned a corner. Her heart was racing. She thought he might be following her, but each time she turned around it was just someone putting money in a parking meter or carrying a shopping bag to a car. No one ever seemed to walk anywhere in Jersey, even though here in Elizabeth, everything you could possibly need was walking distance.

The street she was on was quieter now, and she could hear the slight squeak of her lungs when she exhaled. Temperature-induced asthma. She remembered the rhyme from her safety pamphlets: If you're in the cold and you start to wheeze, get yourself inside, please. Sara had the whole series of booklets at home. Nursery rhymes for allergy kids. The thing was, most of the advice worked. She looked around for a place to get warm. There was a church on the block and Sara remembered a movie she'd seen once where a woman who'd abandoned her baby in a parking lot runs crying into a chapel at night. Sara went up the wide stone steps and tried the door. It was open.
Inside the church it was dark and damp. Sara put out a hand to steady herself on the wall. She breathed in and then out and pictured her lungs filling up like a million balloons, like Dr. Parks had told her.

"Finally," said a woman's voice. "You're late."

Sara blinked, trying to adjust her eyes to the darkness. She could make out the shape of a large woman in a dress by the entrance to the sanctuary.

"Sorry," she said.

The woman came toward her and Sara could see she was a large black woman. It surprised her somehow and a lump grew in her throat until her eyes welled. She didn't know why it was making her cry that the lady was black.

"Honey, no one's mad at you. They're just getting started." The woman put her arm around Sara and gave her a good squeeze. Sara could feel the weight of one of her breasts against the top of her head.

They went down a set of carpeted stairs and into a bright room with nothing in it but a closet that had red accordion doors. There were pictures of Jesus looking up at his crown and a poster with a bunch of kids from all around the world holding hands. At the top it said, For He So Loved the Little Children.

"Let's try this on," said the woman. She was holding a blue shiny robe on its hanger. The closet was filled with robes lined up by color – blue, green, black, and gold. Sara put her arms into the robe the woman was holding open. It smelled like other people's sweat and it grabbed under the arms. The woman kneeled down to help zip it up, but the zipper got stuck and she had to keep trying to get it to take.
"I think there's been a mistake," said Sara. That other girl could show up and Sara didn't want to hurt this lady's feelings. She didn't know how to sing. She didn't belong here.

The woman looked up and laid her hand on Sara's arm.

"If your daddy's been shy about bringing you in 'cause you're white, I'll slap him myself. Tell your mother she's welcome here any Sunday. We've got two other white families here now. You tell them that. Now let's get you in there." The zipper caught and it droned its way up to her neck.

They went through a narrow kitchen that smelled like rice and old coffee and then through a big room with a paper banner on the wall saying Congratulations Reverend Mike in gold glitter glue. It was warm in the basement and Sara could take deeper breaths. They came to a thick wooden door at the end of the room, and the woman gave Sara a kiss on the head.

"You'll do great," she said, and then pushed her inside.

Behind the piano stood a woman holding a white baton. She was thin and had close-cropped hair.

"You must be Kina," she said. "Come on in."

Across from the piano were three risers filled with little black girls in green robes. They looked kindergarten age, maybe first grade. Five or six older kids in the blue robes stood behind a row of xylophones. One of them was a white girl with thin blond bangs. She was holding a mallet with a red round ball at the end. She looked like an alien.

"Let's give Kina our warm welcome," said the director.
"Jesus loves you, Kina," said the girls in unison. A fat girl in the middle row stuck out her tongue.

"Sweetie, let's start you off on the Orffs."

Sara shook her head. She didn't know what the woman meant. The girls on the risers were smiling and pursing their lips. The blond girl pointed with her red mallet to an empty xylophone with red wooden bars.

Choir practice lasted two hours. At first, Sara watched the clock and tried to figure out a way to leave somehow, so she could be home on time. But then she started figuring out the instrument in front of her and learned to hit the right notes for a song the kids were learning. It was about Jesus riding into some town where everyone didn't believe he was really Jesus.

*Little grey donkey, little grey donkey, little grey donkey ho.* (Hit the A bar.)

*Do you know just who it is you carry on your back?* (Nothing.)

*Tis no ordinary load, no mean nor common pack.* (A and E together, twice.)

When they were all dismissed, everyone hung up their robes in a mad rush and ran upstairs to meet their parents.

"Where do you live?" said one of the xylophone girls. She caught up to Sara on the stairs. She was around Sara's age and was wearing a Mickey Mouse sweatshirt. The top of her head was piled with tight braids and pink barrettes in the shape of bows.

"We just moved here. My mom's coming later."

"I only live three blocks. I'm allowed to walk if it's before nine."

"You're lucky," said Sara. "My mom never lets me go anywhere."
Upstairs the kids were filtering out the front door. There were peanut butter cookies in a big bowl and one girl had her mouth stuffed. Somehow she'd gotten crumbs on her forehead. The girl in the sweatshirt took Sara's hand and led her into the sanctuary. They sat down in one of the pews. Sara wondered if the girl was going to talk to her about God.

"We gotta wait till they're gone," she whispered.

Sara turned around. There were two mothers still fussing with their kids in the entryway.

"Give me the damn cookie," said one lady and grabbed it from her kid.

The sanctuary was dark except for the light coming in from the entryway behind them. There was a podium up front, a big table in the middle, and a metal cross growing up like a giant flower from a stand on the floor. One window off to the side was stained glass, a blue river snaking through green hills. The river in the window looked so clear and clean, the way her mind and body felt on the days her allergies didn't act up.

When everyone had gone, the girl got up from the pew and they walked down toward the front.

"I'm on the volleyball team," she said. She climbed up on the stage and reached out her hand to help Sara up.

"Are you good?"

The girl rolled up the sleeves of her sweatshirt. The insides of her arms were purply with bruises.

"I'm excellent," she said. She had braces on her bottom teeth that were the fancy plastic kind. She went over to the table and pulled up a giant jug of wine from underneath
the tablecloth. She got out two tiny glasses from underneath and poured one for each of
them.

"Dare me," she said.

"Ok, I dare you." Sara wondered if she did this every week.

The girl drank and then put the cup back into its wooden holder. Sara looked at
the liquid in her glass. There were sulfites in wine and those were bad for asthma.

"Won't they find out?"

"Forget it," said the girl. "I knew you'd wimp out."

"No, wait," said Sara. She stuck her tongue down into the glass and let it rest there
for a moment. It tasted sharp and made her mouth hum.

"You're still chicken. But you're cooler than the other white girl."

"She looks like a rat," said Sara. In the middle of the donkey song, the blond girl
had hit a wrong note and Sara had glanced over at her. Her eyelids were a creepy
translucent pink.

The girl took Sara's cup, drank it herself, and returned the glass.

"See you next week," she said. They got off the stage and started back toward the
door. "Do you want to come over?"

"Maybe next week," she said.

After the girl left, Sara sat down in one of the pews. It was after nine o'clock and
her mother would be coming home any minute. The thing was, she could imagine this
being her real life, being a girl named Kina who played the xylophone at church, had a
friend who played volleyball and snuck wine. Her other life, where she was the girl who
never went anywhere unless armed with her Epi-pen, whose only sleepover ended with a
rush to the hospital in the middle of the night, waiting for the ambulance with the raccoon circles deepening under her eyes and a strange rash starting up her neck, a pack of girls from town she barely knew standing around in their footy pajamas acting scared of her – it all felt like someone else's life.

Someone thumped up the stairs and Sara got down on the floor and lay on her stomach. The lights in the hallway went out and then the front door opened, then sealed shut with an airy sound. Sara lay there on her stomach a long time and listened to her own breathing. She could feel her ribcage expand against the wood floor and then flatten back down when she exhaled. She wasn't allergic to the wine. She was breathing fine.

She smiled and squirmed around on the floor like a fish. The wooden floor was slick like a gym's. She maneuvered her body so she was facing the front of the church. It was like another world under there, more silent somehow, and her body fit perfectly under the pews. She pushed off with her arms and slid on her stomach like a seal, swimming across the waxed wooden floor row by row. She wished the other girl were still with her so they could do this together, but it was also nice to be alone. She was free from her mother, from the shots and special pillow cases, from the endless sound of the vacuum cleaner. She was close to the front row now and her arms were tired. She lay still and listened to the even sound of her own breath. Up ahead of her on the wooden floor was a dustbunny the size of a fist. It was dark in the room but she could just make it out. It gave off a faint grey glow.

"I dare you," she said to no one. Sara reached forward, grabbed it, and mashed it into a tiny ball. She put it into her mouth and made herself swallow.

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Neither one of them had ever been outside New Jersey. Their rental car had a fake evergreen tree hanging from the rearview mirror that gave off a sharp forestry smell. Sara threw it out the window when they left the car lot. Her mother said it was littering and pursed her lips like she was mad, but they both watched the fake tree turn over and over in the rearview mirror like a small circus clown, and Sara caught her mother smiling. Before they drove down to the lake, they stopped at the Hoover Dam and stood together, peering down at the enormous bleached cliff of concrete and the cinched ribbon of water below. There were other kids standing at the guardrail with their parents. Sara caught eyes with a boy who wasn't that cute, but he wore baggy jeans and reminded her of Leonard. She smiled at him and sucked on the ends of her hair. Sara went back to the car to wait for her mother. She put her bare feet up on the warm dashboard. On the seat next to her was her mother's purse, a pharmacy of precaution – two types of nasal spray, an Epi-pen, and a full bottle of Claritin – but they hadn't had to use any of it yet. Her mother got back into the car and Sara felt something, a kind of lightness between them. It was days before she noticed that her mother wasn't wearing the wedding band anymore. There was a band of pale skin in its place, but no ring. Her mother had probably just put it into her purse, but Sara always told the story like this afterwards: that while she'd been in the car, her mother had thrown the ring over the guardrail at the Hoover Dam. The gold band glinted in the sunlight, then was lost in all that space, and eventually the water took it.
PROSE POEMS
Three Trees

For its red branches and because it grows here, on the banks of the Blackfoot and Swan. When I set it in the earth and removed the tag, I learned its name: Red-Osier Dogwood. The book now tells me its Latin name, Cornus Stolonifera. Meaning bearing stolons. The rooting of branch tips, which form new shoots when they touch the ground.

*  

And what we called helicopters, the green twirling pods raining from maples, our palms outstretched to catch the red sun, the rake of bones almost visible through our lit skin. The true name is paired forking long-winged keys. And further: one-seeded, red or yellow when immature, turning brown in autumn.

*  

The Eastern Dogwood grew here, one arm reaching sideways, handful of pink-rimmed bloom that held. Now a smooth stump of tree in the front yard, dark hole in the center, starburst splintering outwards. Here in this space the air feels empty. Lay your hand flat against it.
St. John's Parish, Bronx

We are far from that place now, the rattle of china in the rounded cabinet and two worn chairs with sunken shapes like your names. The pipes running up the walls of the apartment were hot to the touch, the whistle of heat coming through. The gathering and moments in between. I watched a team of crows work at a wasps' nest, the gray papery cone unraveling slowly, thin paper sheets outstretched in the wind. The nest never came open. The gift of a slow careful build.

*

Over the telephone a clearing of throats and the rumble of above-ground trains and I could hear fear laying out the days, a nervous circling of hands for the way neighborhoods change, the way the tenement courtyard is always empty except for thick arms reaching out of windows and pulling in the wash. The glass eye on the door magnified our bodies waiting there with the side-dish. And the storm milk makes when it hits the bottom of teacups.

*

Rosary beads are brought out from wooden boxes in the darkness and each bead touched. Your red hair let down and brushed a hundred strokes. I too remembered each tine of the dinner fork with the tip of my finger and running sticks along fences. The glass eye on the door clicks open when there is no one there and the saints on the wall sometimes fall, chalky, leaving scrapes on plaster from where they tried to hold on. When a bird flew into the apartment, a rush of hands pressed closed each open window and it was explained: the souls of the family were in danger of flying back out into the world. We were all in the same room once, the sodabread and tea, the two men in the family never speaking but the women kept the talk going and I never noticed. At night it was quiet except for the sound of that pearl-handled brush. And it was a fiery red until the end.
Excursion

Three rounded brass pedals and the thin bones of my mother's bare foot. Under the piano when she pushed down on the far right pedal Chopin and Czerny opened like weather, and I went inside. This was where slim brick houses, where curtains were always drawn, and when it rained in that part of New Jersey my mother's stockings would disintegrate on the line. I remember the heat, ice cream trickling its sugar juice down my wrists, when sleep would not come. A yellow swing and a root cellar with jars. Not everything had a language.

Still it calls me and the what if and the snow moving back beyond the garage. Did we always want this? The clippings sent to ourselves to grow in water and the shallow pools that uncurled the leaves, made something whole and then it was time to gather more. You were always in charge of the excursions. Tidepools, red swaying fingers from the sea that coiled from our touch. I trained the eye of the telescope to watch the sea grass whip in the wind, instead of the foam or birds or neighbors in their windbreakers. The knowing has come late this time and still it is not a clear path from the house. There is a dog next door that wails with the sirens and I've seen him lean his face against the fence when he calls. In each crunched footprint, a shallow pool of water is cupped, collecting small bits of winter sky. If I drag something heavy behind me the pools will gather in a steady stream, will carry a whole cloud through to the other side, and the silence waits for me to go back and find a key somehow to hear while it waits and takes me and brings us inside it to hear what is.
The ocean spits up slick green pods and arranges them in awkward rows on the beach. The white of waves: the foam: the ceiling of gulls: the dim winter light that allows more brightness in. This was at the old farm north of the city and there were icicles at dawn that broke like thin sticks. Green towels, jar lids tightened with rubber-gloved hands, the candlesticks polished with worn cloths dipped in pink. At breakfast a woman said she was here to celebrate the one-year anniversary. She and the woman on the other side of the cloth partition had matched their breathing, timed their contractions together. The babies came out at the same time, one screaming with life and the other silent. This, she said at the farmhouse table. It was quiet now in the room and I was twisting my napkin. This.

* 

By the river, clapboard covered in blackberry brambles, sharp smell of dormant vines, gray powder left in your hands. The guest journal, for some reason of place or lighting or perhaps the smooth quality of the paper, made visitors spill their lives onto the page. At least two people had lost their virginity in this bed, someone mapped out the breathless coordinates of sky, and a spider with a hard gold shell came through a knot in the wood and would not be moved. Other dreams, my clenched palms opening to these words: death is a clacking sound. And to explain I wrote, Like laying your ear on the factory floor all night, the sound of an endless stamping machine.

* 

The lake is filled with the bones of reindeer who missed the slight shift in horizon that would have told them lake. All here is white on white. The sound of thin ice breaking and the pewter-gray bodies sinking, branching antlers locking in slow grace, acoustics muted into hollow knockings. The fiddlehead ferns hold back the tips of their leaves with tight fists, and above, a raven inks his way across the sky, passing over again and again until the clear air takes the shape of his name.
**Pietà**

The dog slips under the convent gate and the nuns want to keep him. No matter the owner is pressing his finger to the buzzer all night. A full-grown retriever, golden, and he puts his paw softly against the sisters' knees when he wants to eat. How could they bear to turn away this unexpected affection? The Sister sneaks the dog to her room once everyone is sleeping, and lays out an old wool blanket on the floor. His paws reach over the edge onto the linoleum and she hears him all night, running in his dreams.

*

The smell of the belltower draws her back, even when it isn't time. Stone and old rope and something earthy like moss or dead vines, and she is remembering the cellar in her mother's house. Rows of old jars filled with preserves, the canned fruit floating like fish. His eyes in the darkness when he led her there after dances, down the cement steps, through the door with the old glass knob. In the coolness he asked quietly where everything was contained, sealed and safely waiting until winter. She made a deal with Saint Theresa whose ecstasy surely came from letting go.

*

They are tracing the path of earlier pilgrims but miss a few sites because they travel by train. She looks out as they shuttle through fields of lavender, bruised purple blooms swaying in unison, away from the tracks. She has seen pietas in marble and alabaster, rough stone and wood. In every shrine, stray dogs roam through pews in search of food. When she enters the grotto in St. Baume, the air cool, water dripping down stone, the sound — take, drink — becomes siren.
Guerrero Negro

What is left of water: maps drawn on the arms after sunlight, white run of roads intersecting, to be tasted at night when the body is tired from rowing, a full day past lighthouses and seals that keep watch from the waves, the sea giving back a taste of my own skin. The tent is pitched under trees, arm muscles twitching in half-sleep – chalky feel of it in the hair, or rising up from the body during sex to pass from skin to skin, and the shoreline in Baja carved up to let it form on the land, landscape a winter white – residue – and we grow thirsty driving so far south in summer, our legs sticking to the seats and the brass bands playing from the radio of our rented car. These are the long stretches of white. In the evaporating ponds water leaves in stages and the land is divided accordingly, with shallow pools for the collecting. To turn into vapor, or to draw moisture out, leaving only the dry solid portion. There is a cathedral south of Bogotá that was once a mine. A long walk into the earth and what is left is the taste of the walls. We are not the only ones who hold the remainder in our mouths like gold. On the high passes at night, the curved horns of goats are lowering to the roads where we have passed. When we find them with our headlights, they tuck their tongues back into their watering mouths, give back the light with their eyes.
Above ground, hundreds here, the earth too hard and dry for digging. Each grave is an oval of packed soil, crude boards for markers and no names. You can tell the women apart by their dishes, which lie at the crest of each mound, on display. I unscrew the lens cap and walk among them, the milk-colored pitchers and blue bowls, a shimmering iridescent vase. The soil is pocked from an earlier rain as if two young girls had dug their small fingers into the thirsty Alabama dirt. Shadows crawl long over the soil, bringing up something of the darkness below. The light now is perfect. I choose you for the shallow white bowl, because it is leaning slightly and sunlight is hitting the thin rim. Is there bread still rising on the sideboard? The light is already changing, changed. You follow me into the next frame and the next and into every photograph I take: thin blond hair pulled back at the neck, the white bowl resting on your hip, you are calling out from the porch to your girls, brushing the dirt from your one good dress.
Jubilate: Burden, Kansas

For grain dust is fine and slips through the fingers.
For grain becomes bread that we break in your memory.
For grain is transported by ships and trains and long flat boats.
For grain is stored in buildings that rise up from flat land.
For grain elevators are strangely the poetry of the American sky.
For they are built in various shapes according to landscape and function.
For the buildings are pure in their geometry.
For the circle is unity.
For the triangle is the trinity.
For square and rectangle are pleasing in their shapes.
For the hexagon is the geometry of the bee.
For bees, in their building of honeycombs, gave rise to the schematics of interlocking grain bins.
For hexagonal bin design does not waste space – there is no need for the strangely shaped interstitial bins.
For the longest elevator in the world uses hexagonal bin design – praise the grain elevator in Hutchinson, Kansas.
For elevators are made of many materials.
For we are woken to life by knowing decay.
For wood is decay.
For tile decays.
For steel bins do not insulate the grain.
For vermin get inside the bins and gorge themselves on the fine dust of harvest.
For life is decay.
For the abandoned silos are in decay.
For there is dust in our lungs.
For all creatures will come to dust.
For it is true – and I have seen it – that grain dust explodes.
For spontaneous combustion is proof of a Presence – Remember the thirty-three men who died at the Husted Mill in 1913.
For dust clings to elevators, even those converted to hotels and artists’ lofts.
For firstly, the grain is moved upward in the elevator by small buckets on conveyor belts.
For secondly, the grain is moved to the distributing floor, where it is weighed and chalkboards mark the weight and grade and destination.
For thirdly, the grain is moved along conveyor belts and lowered into the bins through small holes that the men try not to fall through.
For fourthly, the grain is stored for months or years or else it is moved quickly through chutes onto boats or railcars waiting below.
For the storage and transport of grain is a wholesome enterprise.
For it is pleasing to feel the slip of grain between the fingers and hear it crunch underneath boots on the cement workfloor – Be gracious to the elevator in Burden, Kansas.
For each handful of grain comes from a field of growing things – Be gracious to the cribbed wooden elevator in Attica, Kansas.
For fields from above are geometrically pleasing – Save the condemned silos of Minnesota.
For there is Presence in the swish and movement of grain particles colliding in the chutes.
For the storing of grain in large bins is the desire for tomorrow –
Bless the peeling letters of C and T and A on the silo in Lake City, South Dakota.
For the Dakotas are desolate and need their landmarks.
For those states have been spared with silos spaced evenly along
the railroad, every fifteen miles.
For people in Kansas are more needy – Bless the four-mile
intervals.
For there is something to be said for the even spacing of certain
kinds of structures.
For it is important to love the spaces in between – Remember the
interstitial bins with shapes that accommodate.
For flat-bottomed bins are useless for unloading but have pleasing
shapes.
For flat land must have shapes that rise up in praise. Bless Aldo Rossi.
For silos desire upward motion.
For the workfloor is the ground level – Praise the wood elevator of
Chokio, Minnesota.
For the storage bins are the body of the building – Give us this day
our daily bread.
For the distributing floor has many windows but workers keep
their eyes on the floor to avoid falling through – Praise the
buckling slats of the elevator in Lucas, Kansas.
For the headhouse sits on top of the building – Bless the small
dusty windows of elevator headhouses.
For any structure so solid is a monument to the everlasting – A
blessing on Danville, Kansas where the 18-bin silo dwarfs the
church (bless its steeple and the lonely slatted window).
For structures this large have SPIRIT inside them.
For SPIRIT is fullness.

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SPIRIT is round in its shape. For round structures have no end and converge with the sky in an understanding of infinity. For it is most common for grain bins to be round. For common shapes are pleasing to the gods. For storage is proof of thinking of tomorrow. For allow me to consider a single spark in Wichita, Kansas. For every spark does not ignite. For desire cannot be predicted. For sparks are in every careless cigarette lit on the workfloor. For sparks fly from the steel rails of nearby train tracks. For fire is the particular fear of grain elevator workers. For fire CONSUMES. For CONSUME is a word that feeds on itself, desires more than itself. For the word keeps circling in the mouth when you are done saying it. For a spark with the desire to CONSUME felled the DeBruce grain elevator four miles southeast of Wichita, Kansas. For due to management negligence, on June 8th, 1998, a concentrator roller bearing seized from no lubrication and locked the roller into a static position as the conveyor belt continued to roll over it. For this is called the "razor stop" effect – Imagine machinery at 260 degrees Celsius. For these are the conditions that join fire with dust. For seven men died that day for America's bread – Rest the souls of Jose Luis Duarte (41 years), Howard Goin (64 years), Lanny Owen (43 years), Victor Manuel Castaneda (26 years), Raymundo Diaz-Vela (23 years), Jose Prajedes Ortiz (24 years), and Noel Najera (25 years).
For even in its hell-bent desire, the spark could not reach all the bins.

For steel is strength.

For concrete is strength.

For the metal clasps on the lunch boxes are strength.

For the flat land is filled with structures that are still standing.

For when traveling in certain states, one elevator passes from view just as another appears on the horizon.

For elevators carry the eye upward to sky.

For elevators reach.
Poem with a Line from Montale

Don't be done with this landscape: stubborn ditchflower bloom, trees threading the grooved culverts upwards – stay here, on this threshold of one part land to three parts sky, and the mind at least can return to these low slung hills, velvet skin of summer turning to scorched grasses, goldening – and the bright white limning of animal trails, scratched like scars into these winter hills, these calibrations of, which you carry carved in you as your sentence.
The Orpheus House

No, there is one small word printed in the center, paper unfolded three times, deep creases for markings on the empty page – read it over and over until there is no translation and it enters the body. Under floorboards we found things left and forgotten. Newspaper clippings, pens run out of ink, a small ceramic plate where stylized ideas of a boy and girl are not playing tennis. The boy is reaching out with flowers and the girl, kneesocks sagging, her racket tucked like a forgotten doll under her arm, stares out from the plate. There are no words on the maps anymore. Someone has pulled out the blue roads into long straight lines and the dots of cities have fallen to the bottom, given the string its weighted swing.

*

We sistered the joists under the kitchen so the floor wouldn't sag or slope, and it's true the inspector didn't have to use the level, the fear of three air bubbles listing in the liquid, pulling past center. Architecture has been practiced and perfected in your dreams, the building of something solid for the mutable world. We will have to adjust to familiar landmarks laughing from off-center. What remains fixed are the windows, the doors, the solid feel of the staircase on the way up.