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Mammals of the Pleistocene

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Mammals of the Pleistocene

A thesis presented to
The Graduate Faculty of
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In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Abbie Lahmers
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Mammals of the Pleistocene: Stories

by Abbie Lahmers

ARMADILLO

Demetrius's shoes by the front door, placed neatly apart, suggested a boy still in them. I blinked away sleep, trying to conjure him in those shoes with the force of my opening eyes. New shoes: red and blue, streaked with a lightning bolt. It was difficult to tell if I was in the astral plane or disoriented after waking from an ordinary nap, the two feelings almost too similar. Everything was blurry. I couldn't remember what time it was, didn't know how long I had slept, but the sunlight blanketing two thirds of the couch told me it was past three. I knew this time intimately, the time I waited for the bus to stop at our driveway, like I had requested, and let Demetrius out.

Rising above my grogginess, I scoured the house in search of my son. "Metrius? Tree?" I called, went into his bedroom and reached for the *Big Book of Bugs* opened to the page on fire ants. Instinct told me he was missing, shoeless somewhere in the wilderness, having wandered beyond the backyard, maybe searching for fire ants where he would maybe fall into a ditch or walk out in front of a car. I doubted his ability to get unlost, to be not maimed.

But I couldn't just call the hospital to see if he'd turned up there. First, because they knew me there. They would say, "What'll it be this time, V?" like they were mixing drinks. They thought I was hypochondriac, which wasn't true because I only ever claimed one symptom: it just happened to be multi-dimensional, a consequence of getting trapped in the astral plane for extended periods of time. It confused them. They sent for counselors who said things like: "You jumped into parenthood so young. It's normal," they said, "to wish for the options you had back then."

Second, I had mentioned to them before that my symptom might be Demetrius's fault, a chronic post-pregnancy ailment, but not post-partum depression, which they saw all the time. It started with sleep paralysis—dreams I couldn't wake up from where I'd find myself hovering three feet above my sleeping body—then evolved into full out of body experiences. I could drift around wherever I wanted, all over the house. When I fell asleep, I never knew whether I'd wake up in the physical world, or floating above it in the astral plane.

The "astral plane" may not be the correct terminology. Those were just words I found for it, but they were misleading—there were no celestial bodies setting outside my window, no blue tendrils of light creeping into my cerebrum, jolting me with enlightenment. There were no angels. It was a more domestic thing than that, not a small thing, but transcendent, like waking at night from a dream where you're being devoured by squealing foxes and going to the window to see a dog tied to a post, yapping, like those two things could be the same thing, almost incomprehensibly.

In the yard I yelled his name a few times, squeezing damp blades of grass between my toes, an affirmation of reality, that I was awake and not a fly on the wall. I felt solid, but sometimes there was trickery even in that. The school hadn't called to tell me he was missing, but maybe they hadn't noticed. Or, in a display of independence, Demetrius hadn't woken his sleeping mother on the couch to say hello, had ditched his shoes and went straight outside. People liked me better asleep—it made their lives easier. I trekked further into the backyard, still shoeless, in honor of my son. I closed my eyes tight and started thinking his name as hard as I could. "Demetrius," I accidentally whispered—silly because of course he couldn't hear me. He wasn't close enough, but if I thought his name over and over, maybe we would form a psychic connection, like I'd always imagined we would. He would come to me.

Ever since *The Big Book of Bugs*, Demetrius always wandered off, following a trail of pill bugs up a tree or moths flapping toward the light. “Look but don’t touch,” I would tell him when he set his sights on a bee or something with pinchers—all equally unique individuals to him, strangers he was eager to meet. I wondered if he valued them more than people or if he was still just discovering what it meant to be alive around other living creatures. Who to choose to love? He was still learning. He was only nine.

There was a marsh further back behind the house. If I knew my Demetrius, he’d be looking for new friends in the soggy undergrowth, mucking around in his light-up Keds.

Or, he was with Luke, whose truck wasn’t in the driveway. Sometimes Luke didn’t tell me his plans. Really, which alternative was worse? At least alone and outside, he could be figuring out the world for himself without Luke crowding him, telling him he was special or “exceptionally gifted,”—phrases that felt dangerous in my gut spoken while Demetrius was listening.

“He’s nothing,” I would whisper to Luke. “Just let him be nothing.” I didn’t want Demetrius growing up thinking he had to live up to anything he couldn’t live up to.

I didn’t try to think about all the places Luke could be. Instead I gripped the smaller more tangible possibility before me—that Demetrius was beyond the marsh, that he had made a life for himself already amongst a pack of foxes, that he had forgotten his name. I imagined that Luke was right, that he *was* special but not in an exceptionally brilliant way—instead in the way that made him not human. My son was a fox! The other parents would never believe me.

Luke would be less than thrilled to find this out. He’d probably blame me for it. “Well, at least we tried to raise a human,” he would say.

Marsh water seeped in between my toes. I squished around in the mud, thinking: *What if I could be Demetrius?*

I looked at the water skimmers, the stark fronds jutting into the soupy sky. There was a pile of feathers, dead looking, wedged in the crook of a tree. It reminded me of Demetrius in a way I couldn't understand. Seeing it, I understood all at once—I was not in my physical body after all—the astral plane still had me. A part of me must have known all along. The clump of feathers was different from the other swamp things—it had a crispness, a light to it, like a halo. Other people with OBEs described this halo in their visions. Knowing this was its own small sadness—I could never find Demetrius in the astral plane. Being outside my body was like a fever. I would have to wait it out.

*

I went back inside, and sure enough there was my body napping on the couch. How could I have missed her before? Peasant skirt hanging like mauve drapery, white blouse unbuttoned at the bottom and tied into a knot at her waist, one sandal falling off her foot, the other discarded on the floor. *My* waist, *my* foot. Those parts of my being occupying the physical world without me. I tried to curl up inside her but could only float an inch above, the astral plane refusing to give me up, like there was still something I had to find.

When I first started exiting my body (unwillingly, accidentally), I thought there was something medically wrong with me. When it got bad, I considered seeing a medium or a healer, but Luke's insurance wouldn't cover that, so I went to the hospital, telling the attendants I was in danger of splitting myself in two. They jumped to conclusions, put words in my mouth and told me how I was feeling, about motherhood, about being young and raising a toddler, about my relationship with Luke. They showed me diagrams of organs and glands. A nurse even

recommended a parenting website off of some silly pamphlet. I kept thinking eventually someone will treat me whose seen it before, and they'll know what to do. They'll tell me it's normal.

But it wasn't a condition—it was a religious experience. It had a divineness to it, even without any angels—I could look at my body as an outsider, see it as a stranger and interrogate her: “How could you steal that pastry off the counter at Panera?” “Why did you threaten to burn your son's bug book?” “Calling Maxine a bitch in front of her girls?” It was easier than owning those things myself when I had my own separate body to cast the blame on. I didn't want to sound self-righteous, to declare that my pregnancy and its product were special, evolutionary somehow to the concept of motherhood, but it did feel that way. I was only cast into the astral plane when there was something I had to figure out or fix. Through trial and error, I was on my way to becoming a perfect mother, an idol.

Hovering above the couch, I held my arms straight out like wings and tried to sink down from the astral plane. I imagined Demetrius as a fox again, in the yard. It was not the first time I had imagined Demetrius as an animal. Each time I imagined a different scenario, I couldn't wait to break the news to Luke, to watch as he slowly disassociated from us, ashamed of his hooved or winged son. It was most common when I was pregnant with him—wishful thinking, maybe, that he would pop out with fur and a snout, something obviously not Luke. It didn't matter if he didn't look like me; he came from me, so he could look like anything at all for all I cared. “A miracle baby!” I would say at the end of those dreams. Luke wasn't by my bedside for the grand reveal anyway, not in the dream or in the hospital room when it actually happened. I would have had to play it out, dramatize it for the nurses.

Luke didn't take any interest until Demetrius's first birthday party when he noticed his son had two different colored eyes. He thought it was a trick of the light, the tiny candle flames dancing in his ambiguous irises. After the candles went out, Luke tapped my shoulder and said, "Whoa, V. That's wild. Have his eyes always been like that?" I didn't know how it took so long for him to notice. "What does it mean? What's underneath there?" he kept asking me, infusing a landscape of possibilities inside those wet eyes.

Soon after, mostly out of convenience, Luke moved in with us.

Of course, when I met Luke, being with him felt like anything but "convenience." We were teenagers, and he'd lift me out of my window (only a few feet off the ground) extricating me in a nelson hold out over a ledge. From the bushes under the window, I'd trip over my own feet to get to the backseat of his car. We would drive to the barn behind his uncle's shabby estate where I'd unwrap the condoms I had carefully poked holes into with Maxine's sewing kit, wanting to trick him into creating a life with me. But Demetrius was not conceived in a barn. No, Luke and I got back together later, when we were nineteen. By then he was too reckless to even ask about condoms.

But I had loved him. Tightly, snugly, like pulling a drawstring bag shut and holding something frightening inside. He was pure, or the impression of pure, and I wanted every part of him to be mine. It began as a wave of romance, small and feathered in the palm of my hand, ready to leap, but I squeezed it close to my chest to feel it strongly—unfiltered and aromatic. It took a long time to settle for convenience, but we did.

Usually, when I got stuck in the astral plane, I thought about things to reground myself: shoes, heavy furniture, scuffs on the floor of the mudroom, bath mats—mostly just things concerning the ground. But I couldn't focus. The digital clock on the DVD player was blurry and

warped, time becoming an unfathomable, imaginary thing in the astral plane, so it was possible Demetrius was still at school. Or, it was lottery ticket night, and Luke had taken Demetrius to the gas station to pick the numbers. I could picture Luke whispering in Demetrius's ear, "C'mon, buddy, what's your gut telling you?" Demetrius would prod his skull with his fingers and say the numbers real slow as they came to him, pretending he knew, maybe half believing it.

Ignoring my body on the couch, I looked out the window to see if Luke's truck was rounding the corner. Instead, I spotted the Asian lady beetles congregated on the sill, their pale orange spotted shells lifting and folding, contemplating flight. I called them ladybugs until Demetrius informed me otherwise, and I felt betrayed by the imposters. He had been infatuated by bugs since he was six when we had an ant problem in the dishwasher, a colony he wished to foster rather than decimate. Once all the worker ants took the poison I set out back to the queen, I told him they resettled elsewhere, that they were happier outside.

The lady beetles were peaceful, but when I looked at them, I felt empty. "Who are you?" I asked them. "Why are you here?" They seemed so useless. I hated that Demetrius vied for their affection, that he coveted them like miniature housemates—the novelty of these insects living in abundance right inside with him, like the ants all over again. He cupped them in his hands, brought them so close to his face I was afraid they would crawl into his mouth or eyes.

The beetles had nothing for me, so I went to Demetrius's room to find the book still open on his bed. He had been a toddler when I had first started my ascents into the astral plane. Sometimes I could see him when I was outside my body; sometimes I couldn't, like a trick of the lighting. I thought I saw a flash of him by the window, his form hazy in motion, maybe doing jumping jacks or sticking his face outside, but then I saw it was just the curtain blowing under the vent.

Maybe he really was missing. When I was sixteen, Maxine said kids were resilient. She told me because I had to watch the other girls, my foster sisters, in her care every Wednesday night, but she withdrew the comment when she found out that at sixteen, I already wanted to have children.

“Easy?” she said. “When did I ever tell you having kids was easy?”

Of course I never thought it would be, but deep inside I felt a part of me waking up. In school they gave us pamphlets about abstinence. I folded it over to the center panel with the anxious girl holding a wailing baby, a spit up rag slung over her shoulder, her arms stiff and tender at once and hung it under my desk lamp. Her struggle looked so meaningful, so pure, the way her whole body pulsed with the needs of a newborn, even if she was acting, even if the baby belonged to someone else in real life. I had to push a child into the world in order to become who I was supposed to be. I knew, even then, that pregnancy would be transformative, like going on a retreat.

I searched Demetrius’s room for other things, stuffed animals, furry or feathered toys, something like the thing I had seen in the marsh. What had it been? A bird, or just something a bird had created? The idea kept dinging in the back of my head, flashing up the picture, saying, here, remember this? I pictured things Demetrius brought in from outdoors, things he could pet if he got lonely or pose questions to. He asked questions to a lot of things. When nothing turned up, I felt relieved.

I was aware that I was floating, that even when I sat on Demetrius’s bed, I hovered. The astral plane had a tint, a partial darkness that infected everything. I could see air, atmosphere—it held a wave, a texture, like heat rising from a pot, that warped when you walked through it or when the wind picked up. It was so subtle that it was never the first thing I noticed, and even in

the physical world, sometimes I imagined it was there. The transitions between planes used to be wrenching—I would wade through what felt like hours of sleep paralysis, dreaming of people knocking on the door and shaking me before I'd burst forth in another plane, but anymore, it was so subtle like falling asleep riding in a car on the interstate and not knowing the distance the sleep carried you. It only came with disorientation.

Waiting on his bed, I expected Demetrius's form to flicker in beside me, his face bluish from the astral plane's tint, reading silently, not seeing me. The Asian lady beetles crept around his windowsill. Nothing could be done about them. They would be dead soon, all on their own, and I knew I would miss the sounds of their gentle landings, the occasional taps on the wall. Unlike my son, they were not invisible to me—they could even plunk in and out of the astral plane. If I pushed against their hard orange shells, I could feel their substance slightly pressing back in a phenomenon I would maybe never understand—how an insect could be more tangible than a boy.

The week before, I had myself baptized. People on the OBE forums said pursuing spirituality was a good way to get the most out of the experiences—like a dietary supplement. I had gone to bed with my hair still damp with baptismal water. Luke asked me why I did it. “I did it for myself,” I told him. “To feel empowered.” I'd meant for it to be an initiation into organized religion, but then it just felt good to be able to emerge from a pool of water, undrowned, clean.

“That isn't how it works, V.” Then he rolled over and fell asleep. I went to see if Demetrius was still awake, pushing lightly on his barely closed door.

“Metrius? Tree? Are you still up, sweetie?” For years, I had been trying to find nicknames that stuck, but nothing felt right. I was afraid his friends would get to him first, assign him some new name that I had no control over. I loved “Demetrius,” the weight of it, the

meatiness of a four syllable name that I hoped would make him confident one day. I would hate for him to just be called “D” or change it legally when he turned eighteen.

“Mom, *what?*”

“Did you say your prayers before bed?”

I heard his comforter rustle. “I don’t have any tonight.”

I sat at the foot of his bed and pressed on his foot underneath. “Think of some.”

“Dung beetle, inch worm, mayfly, Asian lady beetle, aphid.”

“No, Tree, prayers—to Jesus.”

“Praying mantis,” he finished.

“Ask him for things. Tell him about your day. You know—like we used to do?” Meaning before he started remembering things, when I was still trying to learn how to work the breast pump—before I switched to formula.

“Dear Jesus, help my mom find her way back into her own bedroom. Amen.”

“Okay,” I said. “Okay. Good night.” I wondered if he was an atheist. Maybe it wouldn’t be a problem. I hadn’t felt any different since my baptism. The astral plane was a sacred place, but it was my own, a personal thing.

If I really wanted to find him in the astral plane, I was still convinced I could will it to happen, that I could just open my eyes and force myself to see. There had to be that chance. But instead I stayed by the window with the beetles, their solidness.

*

And then it happened, the way it often did—knelt before my sleeping, physical body, I examined my eyelid, the small wrinkles, looked closer than I ever did in a mirror at the fine hairs above my lip. Soon, I was so close that my earthly body took me back in.

I woke up groggy in a wrinkled shirt I wouldn't bother to change. I kicked my sandal off to join the other one already on the floor. I couldn't understand the ringing at first, thinking it was a residual sound from the astral plane, but those sounds were softer, more inviting. The phone went to voice mail, and Luke's voice filtered in, as if on cue. "Honey, we're at the store. No need to call and check up, okay? Then we're going—" Static. Some other words, useless. He hung up. Going home? Going skiing? Going to the west coast and never coming back?

At the front door, Demetrius's new shoes were still on the mat, not the holey ones he was likely wearing, which he refused to stop wearing. Luke wouldn't have minded taking him out in holey shoes, but if they fell apart at the store, he wouldn't know what to do about it, either. All I could do was wait for them to return. If I tried to call, his phone would be off—he'd explain later that the battery died, or his pay-as-you-go plan expired. He'd never been easy to reach. He honed in on things when he was determined, shutting off all other distractions to focus on one thing, and lately that was Demetrius.

I filed my nails while I waited. I thought about painting them. It seemed like the perfect thing to do when expecting something to happen because I was always drawn somewhere else before the first coat could dry, evidenced in the streaks of red and pink etched into the walls, the cabinets. They'd interrupt, and I would say, "There's my boys!"—smudging a streak of orange on Demetrius's coat.

I was shaking a bottle of polish, admiring the crispness of the color, not muddied by the astral plane's tint, when the phone rang again. I answered immediately, but it was only Maxine.

"I'm busy, Maxi," I said into the receiver, using the nickname she loathed.

"I need you to take the girls to the mall."

"I don't care." I cradled the phone on my shoulder, dipping the brush in polish.

“Bring Demetrius. Buy him those Dip n Dots things. He’ll like that.”

“Demetrius isn’t here. He’s at Mathletes.” Demetrius was not in Mathletes, but only because Luke kept taking him out of it early, and the teacher finally said he couldn’t compete with so many absences.

“Then you’ve got nothing going on. Be here in ten.” She hung up.

I capped the polish. Going to the mall would at least be less tedious than waiting.

*

Mostly I hated the girls, what they stood for and everything they were, which was everything I used to be. Teenaged, mother-less, animal-print-wearing for no occasion. They painted their eyes unflattering colors and tried to water marble their nails but wound up staining their cuticles. They crisped their hair with flat-irons and hairspray. I wished Maxine would return them for new ones, but she never made returns. She kept me, after all.

I wanted the girls to see me for who I really was, a success story, the way I flourished as a mother, the way I could bury my problems instead of displaying them in the form of cheap tattoos and mopey, big-lipped selfies. Instead they treated me like a burn-out. They should have looked to me for guidance in navigating this big bad world, but they had trouble identifying role models at that age—so said the parenting books I read when I was pregnant.

Maxine’s lungs were crafted by God with the strength to yell over the sound of six or seven wayward girls screaming at once, only breaking slightly from her smoker’s rasp. The screen door slapping batted Maxine’s last words as the girls exited one by one with Erin—her koala backpack stuck on the door handle—bringing up the rear.

I stood by the car, not wanting to see Maxine, hearing her muffled yells. “Always with the drama,” I said, feeling better than all of them, a graduate of the house they were still stuck in.

“You letting me drive or what?” Keya said. Of all the girls, I had the highest expectations for her. She got along the best with Demetrius. I once messaged her a link to my OBE forums to see if she might be interested. She typed back a quick, “Weird stuff, cuz.” I let it go.

“Don’t let that crazy bitch behind the wheel!” Sasha screamed from the back seat, her voice breaking on “bitch,” incensed with delirium.

“Just get in the car already?”

I made small talk with them, pointed out pretty houses and stupid bumper stickers. I turned the music up and hummed along, plugged every space where they might interject more drama—contrary to parenting book’s suggestions to make “safe spaces” for teenagers “to talk about their feelings.” They weren’t my teenagers. What did I care?

“Did you see *that*?” I reached across Keya and pointed out her window at the gray thing scurrying into the grass. “An armadillo! A live one!”

“Nuh-uh, V. That was a squirrel.”

Before the bugs, Demetrius loved armadillos because of a stuffed toy I gave him that we named Dilly Bar. I would hide Dilly Bar all over the house, and Demetrius would cackle every time he found him. He wanted so badly to see a live one roll up into a ball like on the nature channels, but none of the parks we went to had armadillos patient enough to withstand my son. Now was my chance to get a picture.

“It’ll only take a second,” I said, pulling off the road.

“Oh, come on, V! He’s nine,” Sasha said, “I’ll find him a picture on the Internet. He won’t know the difference!”

“What a waste of my time.” Erin pressed her forehead to the window, prodding at a scabbed-over zit.

“None of you understand adult responsibilities.” I wanted to believe that Demetrius had an intimate sense of trust in me that other moms couldn’t or hadn’t instilled in their sons. Although he didn’t now, if I could bring him into the astral plane with me, he would see who I was, would absorb this other plane into his whole sense of knowing. I was convinced that this was my next step, the thing the OBEs were trying to direct me to—finding and bringing Demetrius over. Maybe we would even learn to communicate with a sort of telepathy, through the astral plane we shared. But until that happened, all I had were his beloved tangible creatures to give him, to show him my investment in his world.

“Stay in the car if you don’t like it,” I told the girls.

Only Keya came with me. She’d never seen an armadillo either.

“Did you see where it went? Can they climb trees?”

She shook her head. The grass moved, but from wind or armadillo? Whatever was in there would want to hide or trick me like things in life were prone to do.

“You keep your eyes peeled, Keya.”

I sat down on a rock to unlace my boots and wished the passing cars would slow down—the whoosh of them picked up pieces of garbage and whipped gray exhaust-damaged leaves into a dance in front of my face. How far could armadillos run? I ditched my boots by the side of the road and crept towards the rolling grass sock-footed.

“What are you doing with your shoes off?” Keya asked softly, carefully, like she was speaking to a child.

“When you’re a mother, you’ll understand,” I hissed and knelt inside the grass where she couldn’t see me. I made sure the yellow highway grass, thick with vegetation and Demetrius’s

many-legged kin, surrounded me before I bowed my head and lifted up out of my body. Sometimes it was so easy to leave my body, when I was focused.

I knew I couldn't take a picture if I was floating around outside my physical self. Obviously. There were things I couldn't do outside the tangible world, limitations to being me and to being outside of me. No one else could understand these things because they just had the one vessel, their physical presence. As ignorant as Luke and Maxine and the girls were, they couldn't possibly understand what it meant to be anything else in this world.

But I imagined armadillos to be of the same substance as Asian lady beetles, transferrable. I could hoard one away under my skirt, bring it back into the physical world. The girls could hold onto it in the backseat so it wouldn't get away.

The dingy yellow grass was muted by the tint of the astral plane. Everything shook ever so slightly, as if there were a disturbance, or the way it sometimes did when I forced myself into that plane. Every rock beneath me could have been a trembling armadillo for Demetrius to lie down next to, stroking his beloved creatures. I hoped they were docile. Keya had her arms crossed by the road. She shouted something to the car full of girls, pointing her hip, agitated.

I floated, searching.

I thought about Luke and Demetrius, probably already home, but I'd stall just a little longer, drive the girls to the mall to ensure the timing was right. They had to come home first, so that when I entered through the front door, armadillo stuffed under my arm like a football, I could reveal my selfless act of love, could behold Dilly Bar.

I hungered for my son. The more I thought his name and tried to conjure him there in the wilderness I conceived for him, the heavier I felt, the spiritual tendrils that tethered my astral body to the physical one yanking, ever so sweetly saying *come down now, girl, before you get*

hurt. There was never enough time when I needed it, unlike other times when it would drag on, holding onto me. I hadn't seen a single real armadillo that wasn't just my imagination giving me what I wanted and friskily pulling it away. "Is this a game to you?" I asked, voiceless, to the void.

All that came into fruition was the dank feathered thing, haloed and glowing, resting in a shallow ditch, and it wasn't ready yet, whatever it was, its purpose undetermined—astral junk. Keya grew restless, her static-y form reaching into the grass for me. No time. I had to go back. I let the tendrils pull me out of it.

I pulled up a handful of grass to be certain I was back. It was dry and left a thin cut behind. "C'mon, V, we gotta' go. Rednecks are leering at us from that gas station over there, and Erin's about to go talk to them."

"Sure, sure," I said as she pulled on my collar, a physical affirmation that I had returned.

"You find your 'dillo?" Keya stooped over to look. "What's in there, anyway?"

"No. We let him get away." She peeked over my shoulder one last time to see, shrugged, and led the way back to the car.

The cut on my hand suggested a longer line, the way it broke in places like the dotted blue lines on Demetrius's homework sheets that bisected the space between two solid lines. It bled only sparingly, but enough to prove it was real and not just something I borrowed from the astral world. "Hey, V, I just sent you an armadillo picture. There's more on Facebook. I'm sending you the link."

"Sure, sure."

*

The problem with being a mother who occupied separate planes was the part where I missed my son. The way the astral tendrils pulled me around, the fact that they grew stronger and more insistent over time, meant I was away when I shouldn't have been. All he saw was his mother napping, or he didn't see me at all, closed up in my bedroom if, in the morning, I woke up in the wrong plane. It used to be that I could see him through the astral plane's filmy lens, but still, at least I could see him even when I was gone. But then he started to disappear. I could know exactly where he was: in his bedroom reading or laying on the grass outside. I could stand by the window in my body looking at him. I could wave. "Hello, Tree." And then I would depart from my body, peer out the window just to see an empty juice box, no son. I would get stuck in that place without him even while all the rest of the world—his father, the insects—could be near him.

He was unlike the beetles, the armadillo (presumably). How could his being transfer through planes if there wasn't even a window to pull him through?

I left the girls at the mall. At first I circled the department stores looking for and texting them, but what was the point? It was all one of Maxine's charades, setting me up for failure, letting the girls bear witness so they could see how not to grow up like. Someone else would pick them up. Sasha's boyfriend, maybe, who'd drop the other two off at the house before knocking Sasha up in the backseat. Her birth mother being Catholic, she would have the baby. Then she'd half understand what it was like to be me and wouldn't blame me for the way I turned out.

When I got home it was already getting dark. I saw the shadow of Luke's car in the driveway, the outline faintly glowing by the porch light. They must have gotten home moments before. I didn't know for sure, but I guessed.

Demetrius was sprawled on the floor in front of the TV, one arm wedged under his torso and one leg bent so his foot sprang upward, completely absorbed in cartoons. I wondered if that was hazardous—the amount of TV we let him consume at such awkward angles. Luke wasn't in the room—probably, he was in his office, which was really the unfinished garage where he played online poker and watched fishing tournaments on a crappy TV.

“Hi, Tree,” I said. “Where’s dinner?”

He kicked a socked foot in the direction of the kitchen. “Spinning,” he said.

Something popped and sputtered in the microwave. *The Big Book of Bugs* made a tent on the kitchen chair. What if I lurked through all his most important years, floating? Would it be fair to want him to float with me? I tried to bring the book to him but stopped, caught up in the image of my son, the TV glare flickering in his entranced eyes, pupils yellow as bees in the dark living room.

The microwave timer beeped. Demetrius breezed through me in the threshold, my solid boy, coming in for pizza, his hips and arms brushing against me, the soft swish of his clothes. I wanted to take him in my arms, wrap him up in so many blankets, to see the shape of him underneath and know he was there. The microwave clock said 7:35, crisp red numbers.

I hoped my son was not special.

AFTER BIRDS

After scarce and uncertain sightings of him in the past two weeks, rumors traveled that my groom had left me. Only “me” is too selfish, inadequate—he left the commune, us, disbanding a collective “we.” It happens sometimes. I had not seen him at all in that time, had not been consulted, and still I am not surprised when Avery emerges outside the mess hall with a slick coat of dirt rubbed into his face the morning we are supposed to get married. The mud makes him look younger, the skin underneath thinner. I put both hands out to touch his face, but he backs away, so I don't. When he and I met, we were both still birds—house sparrows carving out spaces for ourselves in the “e” of the Target, snatching up French fries in the parking lot. Now we have bulk again. We are lumbering and sentimental creatures, the kind of animal that recites marriage vows, goes to church, and carves faces into gourds. We are heavy. We are flightless.

I put a hand out for him to take, but he only stares at it.

“You,” he says, an observation, but a lengthy one coming from someone who speaks only sparingly. I wait for more words, but none come.

“Me, wife,” I say, an unfunny joke. “I guess you’re just in time.” I let my hand fall. “Do you want to eat? Remember back when we were birds, when we tried to eat a dryer sheet?”

Avery doesn't smile, shakes his head “no.”

“That's okay.” It is hard sometimes to locate a common ground, a foundation to support our future marriage. The last two weeks with him not around have given me cold feet, but also it has warmed me to him, sparked something like possession in me, to have and to hold the one

familiar thing from before and not let him go. Even though we never seem to remember the same things from our avian pasts—I wonder if he remembers the three slippery pink children, the yellow Os of their mouths, their eyes that never opened. Our nest in the underpass—maybe it was all the exhaust fumes from the cars that did them in. We didn't think so logically. We thought it was a mystery, their extinguished lives, or I did—come to think of it, Avery wasn't around for most of that, lurking only in my peripherals at that time, scouting the corners of our territory and shrieking at crows who ambled in when he should have just been silent.

Avery is difficult to find, in the real physical world, yes, but also in his interior world. We all agree that he is still transitioning, still growing out of that murky animal world and learning to be human again, so I forgive his silence now, welcome it. I do not push him.

Aside from the twig in his hair, the dirt giving one eyebrow an inflection (confusion or anger?), the patchiness of his hair (I want to say feathers, a truer description, the softness), Avery looks so ordinary, so un-fatherly. I wonder what he looked like before, as a human teenager. You don't get to pick when you'll turn into a bird. You don't get to see it coming. I was in college when it happened to me, a budding journalist, willing the feathers back into my pours, crying over my wings taking shape. But it happens very fast, a day or two.

Avery rubs his face in the crook of his arm, wiping away some of the dirt in measured movements. I reach instinctively, trying to harness my groom, seeing flight in his eyes, but he is already squirming away. I catch the back of his shirt, scratch his elbow with my fingernails, feeling the skin split when he tears away. Off towards the pair of white silos wedged in the crook of two hills just within the commune limits. He wraps around the row of tents, and I can't see him anymore.

I could have tried harder to catch him.

For our bodies belong not to us but to the Mother, the Earth, and she will receive them in Her clay hearth in a procession: fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals; and the last shall summon the rapture. To wed is to belong, isn't it? If we are following the prescribed scripture of the commune, "wedding" should not be allowed. We should only "wed" the Mother and only when the time is right, when all else has entered the clay hearth, which is why Emma, my bridesmaid, and I have told no one about the wedding except the slightly blasphemous. I'm still a beginner when it comes to interpreting the scripture. I still think of trilobites as gross insects encased in rocks and stumble over "gorgonopsian reptiles" when we recite our prayers of mourning for the species lost in the Great Extinction of Late Permian every Sunday night.

The service isn't until evening, after chores, so there's still time for him to come back and time for me to practice the way I will smile at the altar—a little bit playfully, a smirk to take the edge off but also serious and near tears. There's a fine line between sad crying and happy crying that I will need to master. Emma made me a dress out of a bleached flannel shirt and a taffeta bodice rummaged from thrift store clothes from the community box. It makes me look angular, like a drafty building.

I go into the mess hall without my groom. I can worry about finding him later. The fact that he has reemerged at all is a good sign, a confirmation from the universe that this will work out. Emma spots me right away, waves me over. She has already piled a tray high with vegan non-GMO organic slop for me along with a tall glass of orange juice. She puts a hand on my face when she sees that Avery isn't with me, squeezing lightly, trying to milk emotion out of my cheeks or else checking for fever.

"You must be so worried, Judy," she says, and I nod, putting on a face of worry, a hard tense face, which I do well. I'm not worried, though, because I will re-find him and pull a button-

up shirt over his arms, stick a clip-on tie to his collar, scrape away some of the dirt, and squeeze his hands tightly, closing the distance between us when I say, “Don’t forget to show them how happy we are.” Because I believe that deep down inside, he knows he owes me this. Here is how I imagine the wedding: a party, a small rebellious thing, gorging ourselves on vegan cakes and dancing to the radio I smuggled in from the drug store, the one hidden under my bed that I turn on in small intervals at night, dredging up static-y voices from the outside world selling car insurance and engaging in sleepy banter. The voices of strangers thrill me.

“Read me your vows. Have you practiced them?” she asks.

I shrug, stab a wad of soy protein with my fork. “I don’t want to spoil it.” Across from me, Emma splits pieces of rice apart, dropping some onto the tray and feeding the rest directly to her teeth, chewing with efficiency.

“Did you consider...I mean, what if Avery didn’t write anything for you?” She has a smear of yellow dye across one eyebrow that looks almost intentional, a line of concern. She left our tent early this morning to finish staining the benches circling my wedding altar—she wanted them to be bright, festive. This afternoon she will pull together bouquets and stitch flower headbands for me and my bridesmaids, saving that job for last so they don’t wilt.

“Language is different with him,” I tell her, cover her hand in mine to let her know I will not be disappointed when he, instead of speaking, pulls a leaf out of my hair or brushes an eyelash away.

Which isn’t to say I haven’t noticed Avery’s repulsion for human me, my quickness to reject our lives as birds incompatible with his desire to be bird again, bird forever. It could be more personal than that too—my gummy smile and monotone laugh or the way I touch people’s shoulders too often. But the something he saw in me then can’t have gone away completely.

“When should we call it—if, you know...”

“I’ll find him,” I tell her.

I had done it before.

*

I go to Avery’s tent after breakfast. I have visited every night since he disappeared, pulling back the flap while saying his name but going no further than sitting on the edge of his cot, waiting like an expectant wife. Now, I look around for clues that could explain his absence. There are no signs of life or signs that he has been thinking about me—no journals lying open proclaiming in squiggly script, “I □ Judy” or cornhusks twisted into the shape of me. I pry open a wooden chest at the foot of his bed. We all have chests like these, to store our crafts—tokens and “art” we made after transitioning back to humans, symbolic representations of our lives as birds. We aren’t supposed to look in other people’s chests. It’s supposed to be between you and the Mother. I open it anyway.

Avery’s crafts remind me of when I first arrived, back when the commune felt exotic and at the same time childish. I pretended I was at summer camp, drawing from memories that resurfaced slowly from the first two decades of my life when I was still human. We were instructed to paint timelines, like family trees but drafting only singular lives, tracing our intimacy with nature. Winding lines and crude illustrations map out the moment I was born (hominid) and then grow jagged to represent what I thought was a period of stress—the aches and pains, the feeling of not belonging in my own skin; the feathers, though, were unprecedented—but was actually the transformation (avian) and at the last the moment when I was returned to my original form (hominid). This is the general pattern for us. Our avian years are given to us by the Mother, according to the commune scripture, which is a work in progress,

the original drafters still alive and smoking different things around a campfire nightly to help them access memories from their bird lives, more material for the scripture. Our avian years made up a period of reverence or restitution, or one of those “r” words. I forget. I don’t think we’re supposed to understand. We’re supposed to feel humbled.

Avery’s timeline resembles a black smudge—I only recognize it because of the dotted flight pattern lines bridging out of the smudge, filtering off into a pair of wings. There is nothing to mark his return passage to humanity, as if he has not recognized his final transformation, has not recognized mine, either. When he looks at me sometimes, I think he sees a stranger.

During the idle crafting period, I was the only one who made cornhusk dolls in my human likeness, but they encouraged me to remember and embrace who I used to be, so I fluffed out their arms into wings, made their legs stubby and taloned. Their bodies evolved like ours had done in our first transformations into birds—ducks and quails, songbirds and kestrels. The reality was that most of us were dirty house sparrows, pests, but still, we weren’t supposed to forget. Forgetting was on the list of forbidden activities: *For the mammals born of the Pleistocene will forget their origins, breaking their spiritual connectivity to Earth, and their ignorance will bring destruction to all.* I once pointed this excerpt out to Calamus, who writes anecdotes here and there for the scripture and pens copies for the especially devout commune members. “What does ‘destruction to all’ in the Mammals chapter refer to?” I asked while he sucked down a drag of salvia smoke from his pipe.

“It’s interior,” he said, slowly, “within you. An unwinding, en mass.”

Forgetting is unwinding, a loss, but no one who writes or reads scripture says there’s anything wrong with forgetting the humans we used to be.

The rest of Avery's chest is filled with pieces of grain and straw, bits of non-perishable food, some shiny pieces of cellophane. I shut it and move on, wondering where I would go if I were him, wanting to stall a marriage. It wasn't his idea. It was mine, an idea he wasn't even the first to be consulted about. Emma knew first. It began as hushed words in the lamplight of our tent, remembering how we used to paint our nails and color our hair before the transformations. "We could use some natural dyes, a little bit of oil to keep the cuticles from drying out," she suggested, always trying to find new ways to do old things, to wedge pieces of her past into the tight parameters of how we could be now even if all we could manage were the superficial things.

"Let's have a wedding," I told her, propelled by the energy of the moment. "I'll marry Avery. You'll be my bridesmaid. Do what you want to my cuticles."

"Yeah, and the officiator will read avian scripture. We'll throw birdseed instead of rice," Emma said, laughing. We joked until we fell asleep, but in the morning the words to propose to Avery, the words to say for my vows, all the words I would need existed fully-formed, ready to use. The wedding held form and substance in the beginning.

*

Calamus finds me on the floor of Avery's tent. I freeze with all of Avery's crafts around my feet, caught in the act of snooping. He is ready to ask, but I am quicker with a lie.

"In case he is dead," I say.

"What?" Calamus asks.

"Avery has been missing for weeks. If he's dead or not coming back, we should hold a service." Maybe that's what we'll do if he doesn't show for the wedding, recycle the cheery

wedding decorations into funeral flowers, tear down the archway and burn the sticks for a fire where we'll cremate Avery's crafts as if they're his remains.

"You can't do that," he says.

"Why? Is it in the scripture? I can set the precedence for this one—I'll even ghostwrite the chapter on how Saint Judy teaches the commune how to honor the dead."

Anyone else would think I was being cruel, turning the possibility of Avery's death into a joke, but I have already mourned Avery before—or the closest feeling you can get to grief as a bird, which is panic. My bird body sitting on a clutch of addled eggs, not knowing then that they were not viable anyway, still trying to press life out of my body the way instinct called us to do. He wouldn't come back to me in a thunderstorm, wouldn't come back after the downpour, after the sun came out, after it was morning again and again (I couldn't keep track of how many mornings), after those eggs became cold anyway, but when you're a mother (bird, or maybe any mother), you are willing to emaciate yourself over a cold clutch of eggs. I thought he would bring food back for me or us. He showed up later, too late. A series of staccato chirps is not enough language to answer the question of why. So I never learned.

Calamus snorts. "No, because I just saw him in the community garden digging up radishes. I think there's still life in him, yet."

"Oh." Even though it's private and not my place to advertise Avery's personal artifacts like this, I hold up the piece of paper with the smudge on it, his timeline. "You tell me, then—does this look like art that comes from someone who's living? Really living, I mean, in the here and now?"

Calamus takes the paper and folds it without looking, sets it behind me in Avery's chest.

“You can’t judge people for wanting their avian lives back,” he says. “Someday you’ll want it back too.”

*

Emma and I looked to tabloids and magazines for inspiration. We remembered weddings from before. We could have pulled something together without tabloids showing us how. We knew the gown should be white. We knew the wedding party should be uniformly dressed to appear united. The photographs should show the party staged and orderly. A menu should be predetermined, a buffet with two options: poultry or fish.

But we did not want a traditional wedding, so maybe we just wanted to look at the pictures. Of other brides, of not-brides, of women eating meat, of women drinking champagne in tall flutes. My wedding, instead, would need to reflect that part of me that was bird—something chaotic and joyful, the way our bird bodies used to flock in patches of dry earth flapping our wings in the dust to keep our feathers oiled. My wedding would be more like a small windstorm than a black tie affair.

Emma and I spent an afternoon outside the commune in a drug store, kneeling by the magazine display, fluorescent lights showing us the halos of dirt on each other’s faces, the oily roots of our hair, flecked with white. Sometimes we forgot about ugliness, or ugliness was not the same as we remembered. We hunched over the full-color spreads of celebrities with eyelashes that looked like feathers you have run a thumb across, separating each barb. We couldn’t decide if we hated or loved these eyelashes.

“This girl is all angles,” Emma said, laughing, pointing to a bride with her lips parted slightly, her cheeks drawn and narrow. “She looks like a corpse, or not-human.”

I held my hands up, wrists limp, pouting and looking forlorn. “Like this?”

“No, deader. Like this.” Emma pretended to faint across the magazine rack, rolling her eyes back into her head. Her foot slipped out from underneath her, kicking a stand over, releasing a dozen packs of gum that tumbled down onto our spread of magazines. We peeled one open and each tried a piece to remember what chewing gum was like. The cinnamon burned our mouths but we chewed and chewed until we found the magazines we wanted to take. People looked at us, peered over from around the aisles, but no one came over to bother us.

We rarely leave the commune. It isn't a prison. Low chain link fences, sometimes channeling into austere, unpainted picket fences, line the perimeter of commune land with orange posted signs nailed to trees inside to keep hunters out. The fences are a suggestion of separation, not to keep us in but to remind us that there's nothing out there for us. And yes, the world is understanding, can be gentle, has soft edges, but I remember changing—that last transformation like this: climbing down from a church attic, which we had entered through a slim hole at the base of the steeple where we had roosted as birds, sensing the end of our avian days and wanting to be inside. We made our way down while the parishioners were at mass, the sound of our new feet, massive and bare, covered up by the organ music. Avery couldn't help but trace his fingers through the holy water. Outside, in our new fleshy bodies, which were not new but felt like it, we relearned public parks where once we ate bits of soft pretzels and hotdog meat that felt heavy in our bloated gizzards, only now we had hands and could hear language. Avery crouched in the fountain picking up coins while I tried to see my reflection in the ripples he made. An old woman touched the small of my back and asked me if I was looking for someone, if I needed help. We wore stolen coats from the church to keep warm—I saw in the watery reflection that my eyes had irises again but looked animal anyway, vacant. The woman, seeing

our not-quite-rightness, seeing bugs under our nails, our grime, seeing our displacement, asked again: “Do you need help?”

We live in the commune because how else do you begin again?

*

I don’t find him in the community gardens. I have shoved the scrap of paper with his timeline into my pocket—to press him about it later? To confront him? Because if I’m marrying him, doesn’t it concern me too? Yes, we were birds then (when we chose each other) like the off-shoots of flight patterns coming out of the smudge of humanity he illustrated, but the before and after are reserved for our humanness. Him wanting to be something other than human is the same as him rejecting me in the here and now, in the after.

Instead of Avery, I find root vegetables in the garden, growing from my six-by-ten plot. Everyone is given a plot and a tent when they move into the commune. People will give you seeds if you ask nicely. When I was first assigned a plot, I stole a pepper from someone else’s garden, squeezed my nails through it’s shiny skin and scattered the seeds from the rind all over my unturned dirt, eating the rest raw, taking large greedy bites. Nothing grew past green sprouts that later dried up in the sun. The older woman three plots down from me with long tangled hair that covered more of her skin than her tank top watched me everyday I came back to water the seeds, cackling softly from behind her prosperous corn stalks.

“What’s funny?” I shot back at her one day. “Other than the mites on your corn?”

Of course, there were no mites. Her corn was flawless, the corn most often chosen to steam for mess hall dinners.

“Don’t be a little shit,” she said, which reminded me of the woman from the park, that first woman—“*Don’t be a little shit*” the same as asking if I needed help.

I did. She pulled a handful of seeds out of her apron, tucked them under the dirt of my plot like they were children being put to bed. “Don’t water so recklessly, so sporadically. They need routine,” she said. She covered them with a thin mesh blanket.

Last week, I invited her to my wedding. She only laughed, the same cackling laugh, like I was just making another mistake.

The seeds she gave me turned out to be carrots. I have since introduced wild onions and potatoes, stew vegetables. Only things that grow underground—I like the waiting, the surprise of pulling them up fully-formed so I won’t be tempted to pluck anything from a vine when it’s still small or unripe. Root vegetables require patience, faith. When we were birds we wanted everything, right away, but now we have time and the ability to reflect, ponder rather than constantly consuming. I can sit at my plot with a sunhat for hours and do nothing but plan for a wedding, deciding arbitrary things like “should I put lilies in little glass bowls of water for table center pieces?”

Avery’s plot is ravaged. I mostly plant things for him lately, tending to his garden in his absence. Avery does not follow routines—he eats when he’s hungry, not at seven a.m. and five-thirty p.m. for mess hall scheduled meals, raw veggies at noon for a small lunch. He eats when he’s hungry, when food is readily available, any food. He must be off to another place now, having stockpiled all the radishes he can hold in his pockets, stealing bites of tomatoes from other plots before he went. The hulls are scattered around the path.

When we were birds, he used to leave scraps of things behind—I remember, now, seeing the hulls. One of those small details of our lives that I wouldn’t have taken inventory of at the time, but now it stands out to me. He wouldn’t eat the crusts of bread or the crispy, burned fries,

shaking around the undesirable bits with his beak before tossing them away. I ate indiscriminately. Eating was survival.

If Avery is stock-piling, that means he is planning a longer trip, one he maybe won't come back from, or at least won't come back in time.

And what then? Sometimes I worry that he'll be forgotten, that he'll slip away from us or change into a creature we can't reach, a trilobite or some sort of tetrapod, which has never happened before—devolving into something extinct. We won't be able to find him. He'll wander the tides of an old era all alone without his wife, without his bird life-mate, the one he chose to lay bad eggs, the one he could have left then and there but always came back to.

He *always* comes back.

*

So I wander through the woods, as far as I can without stopping, skipping all of my chores for the day—the brick-making and laying for a new community center, the ethical insect relocation from the compost bins—thinking instead about Avery's "yes." His unspoken confirmation when I asked him to marry me. It went like this.

Me: "You remember who I was to you then?"

Me: "Don't you think we should honor our bird lives in a meaningful way?"

Me: "I think we both still feel the way we did then or else we wouldn't both still be here now, right?"

Me: "I think we should get married."

Avery, in the dim lighting of his tent, gave me his hand when I reached for it, held mine back with even pressure, not too much, not a squeeze, but a solidness.

I didn't, at the time, feel his answer was coerced. I asked if I could hug him, and he leaned into it. I told him I would take care of the rest.

In truth, I didn't think he fully understood. I thought he lacked language, the way, in the beginning, I had to swallow each individual word someone delivered to me in order to understand. It came back to me slowly. As a bird, no language filtered through. We understood nothing but each other, in the same way I can't pick up on the nuances of bird-speak anymore—when I hear a call, I have trained myself to know which bird it came from, to know if that bird is signaling alarm, but I cannot pinpoint the specific origin of its fear like I once could.

But now I think I was wrong. He knows the words and chooses not to use them, chooses his silence to communicate. It is not oblivion, not ignorance.

I scared him away.

The trees all start looking the same: deciduous, leaves that remind me of raccoon hands, Virginia creeper hugging trunks like veils covering blushing brides. I notice the way the trees touch each other making dozens of stoic unions. Everything makes me think of marriage, of connection. There is too much ground to cover and only one flightless me. The only way I will be able to find Avery now is spiritually, the same way I make the root vegetables grow, by trusting that the universe will let them and by watching anxiously, waiting. I sit down under the unions, who are swaying now in a heavy breeze.

In the Mammals chapter of the scripture, near the premonitions of destruction, the list of do's and do not's to preserve and honor the earth or face grave consequences, there is a small tenant about ritual prayer, about the repetition of phrases to project them into the world. I think it's only there to make us feel less helpless. It cites some examples of things to say: *Mother, let my roots grow deep today; Mother, help me ponder, today, the mosquito whose life is not small,*

only fragile. Emma and I sometimes make up our own at night. “Mother, please keep us safe from the compost heaps on asparagus day.” “Oh Mother, please give us strength to eat tofu tacos another day.” The first to get to ten repetitions without laughing wins.

I gather kindling for a small fire to make my prayer now seem more authentic, from a true spiritual place. To be even more authentic, I should rub sticks together to make the flame, but there’s no time, and I’ve always been bad at starting fires. I have drugstore matches in my pocket. I strike one against a stone and drop it in the pile of sticks.

Closing my eyes, I think of some serious-sounding words to solicit the Mother’s attention if she’s real, if the earth really is a thinking, intelligent entity.

Mother of Earth, I stand before your womb.

I cross my legs, inhale, exhale.

Mother of Earth who has borne all life, show me the way to your son, my fiancé. Burn the map into my feet so I might go to him.

I breathe slowly, deliberately, putting more thought into it than I ever have before. Am I breathing steadily enough? Does breath have anything to do with it? Should I stick my feet on the fire? Should my feet tingle? I am thinking too much about these things and not enough about Avery and my will to find him. Probably, it will not work.

But my feet do tingle, I think. Just barely. I take my shoes off to examine the bottoms of my feet, looking for a map. Nothing. Maybe it is down to intuition. I know without knowing. I will go where I’m moved to go, and he’ll be there at the end of my quest.

Where I want to go is to the altar.

Where I want to go is to the human wedding I never got to have.

The one that Avery maybe never did want.

*

Emma took me to the wedding altar last week to show me what she had done. She built my (I admit, I sometimes forgot the “we,” the part of this that involved Avery) wedding arch out of two live saplings growing a short distance apart. She pulled the branches inward, twisting them into each other and wrapped vines and flowers around the structure. It made the shape of a candle flame, the venerable point directed to the sky blossoming out into wide curves where Avery and I would stand beneath it, where I would deliver my vows to Avery, who would catch them tentatively in his soft hands and say nothing back. I would ask if I could kiss him, and he would lean in.

Or, he wouldn't. I considered this, seeing the arch, considered his reluctance. I would counter: “Friends, then?” to lighten the mood. Everyone would laugh.

“It's beautiful,” I said to Emma, “It's everything I wanted it to be.” I practiced walking in and out of the arch. Emma clapped her hands, took my arm and walked me through, trilling a soft, *duh duh da-dum, duh duh da-dum*.

“Let's have the congregation form a circle for the ceremony instead of assembling in stuffy rows. So it's not too formal?” I suggested.

Emma snorted. “What congregation? It's going to be us and like, three other people.”

“I thought we asked everyone in our gardening block?” I said.

“I asked, but you know how these hippies are.” Emma let go of my arm, fixed the flower in my hair. This was meant to be the dress rehearsal. I had given Avery the memo—weeks ago, even. I had consulted him about wedding bouquets, asking if baby's breath was too overdone, jabbing him in the ribs when he acted like he didn't understand the question. “Hey, this is just for fun, okay? Just humor me. Be a little happy. We're getting married—it's what we always

wanted, right? You would have married bird me.” He’d usually smile a little, nod his head, but offer no opinion.

“Don’t worry about them,” Emma said. “Show me your wedding march—for real. You need to practice your marital poise.”

I smiled, straightened my posture and walked, exaggerating my footfalls. I slowed more and pretended to carry the train of my dress, dropping imaginary flowers with the other hand and sticking my nose in the air.

Emma kicked my heels. “Not like that.”

“Then how? Should I flap? Caw a few times for good measure?”

“Blasphemous Judy.” Emma giggled. “People say that behind your back.”

“Good. I like that.”

The altar was on a hill. I had chosen the location. Back-dropping the saplings was a row of pine trees that bled reddish sap. Had I chosen the location subconsciously for the symbolism: red sap for blood, for fertility? What if someday, when he returned to the speaking, human world more fully, I had Avery’s children? Human children seemed weightier than small dead feathered babies. We had already done that. We had already failed at it. I couldn’t have chosen Avery for his potential as a father back then, only for his readiness, his vitality. He must have puffed his chest out the biggest.

I have to pay homage to our lives as birds now. I have to remember. *For you will find your pure true Self in silent meditation on that other life, that non-mammalian, non-human life.* From the Avian chapter, the most essential one to us, the words Calamus recited to me when I asked him to officiate the wedding, his way of saying “no.” Maybe someday there will be a

chapter about me, not Saint Judy, but martyr? Or bride? First Wife? Before, I was good at being a human, at least above average. I failed at mothering a flock. Avery failed at being there.

He found me a nesting box with a hole that was too small. He must have sat chirping on the perch for days, puffing his chest and scaring away the smaller songbirds in a way my bird sensibilities found remarkable. So we paired, and he was mine; we were each other's resources for reproduction. It was only that. And then I couldn't squeeze into the box, and all the other house sparrows, good at what they did, had already claimed their spots. We made a shabby nest in the underpass where no one else would nest except for the resilient swallows with their spit-clay fortresses. I sat on those eggs, and sat on them, and sat on them, and crammed food into their little gullets when the hatchlings poked their way out. Here's the thing: when those ones didn't make it, we kept trying in the same underpass—a second and third time, maybe more. The incubations blend together, indiscernible from each other. Only one baby lived, and I don't think about that one because I don't know what happened to it over the winter, if it even made it that long. Why did we do that? Why did we behave so illogically?

Those are the questions I want to ask Avery. Those are the questions I can't ask.

Or at least, I couldn't then, not without precise language, the same precise language that Avery now rejects. I couldn't bare to say these words, to ask him, "What happened? What went wrong?" and for him to respond with silence.

*

Even though it's evening now, the sky purpling and a chill settling, there are no wedding guests circling around the altar the way I would have choreographed them. I'm not wearing my wedding dress either, and the vows I wrote feel like heavy useless words. Emma is probably waiting for me in the tent, making a veil out of garden netting, the dress draped over my cot.

Calamus is probably at the evening meal, reciting some lines of scripture before chowing down on cauliflower rice. The women from our gardening block, the ones who were invited—now, they are probably grinding herbs with a mortar and pestle, to smoke later in a pipe they could have shared with me, to help me get over my nerves. No one is here to care whether or not I have cold feet. No one is following me around with a camera, catching me smiling and blushing.

I lay down under the wedding arch. The saplings Emma joined to create the illusion of an organic union are strained and taut. I think I can hear them creaking, but they shouldn't complain so much. There are trees, after all, that grow on the edges of cliffs, pushing out and up to reach the sunlight, their roots hanging on for dear life. There are trees that break through cement sidewalks, opening their leaves in the light. If bent this way forever, these saplings could get used to growing into each other.

Avery, I think, has been here the whole time, hiding in a bush or something, but he only approaches once I've closed my eyes. His feet give him away, the soft crunch of leaves under bare feet, the way he pauses when he accidentally makes a sound.

"I used to want a church wedding," I say, opening my eyes. "Or a barn wedding, rustic chic. When I was a kid, I never even looked at birds. I kicked pigeons away if they got too close. Is this retribution?" All of these things feel related—the things I wanted, the things I did.

Avery sits next to me in the grass and says with a gentleness, "no."

No to what, I want to ask, to my question or to me? Instead I reach into my pocket for his drawing. "What was so great about it?" I hand the timeline to him. "What's so bad about being us, here?"

He takes the scrap of paper, puzzles over it for a second like he can't remember making it. With the grime already on his hands, he blots out the flight lines, extinguishing each one.

“Most birds die without knowing what it means,” I say, “without expectation. The way ours died.” Here I am projecting, infusing meaning into Avery’s silences like I am used to doing. He won’t say if I’m right or not. For me, there is only before birds and after birds, the bird years themselves irretrievable in their murkiness. For Avery, it is only the wedge of time in the middle, the bird part of his life the only accessible part.

I take his hand, compelled to feel a connection and find the feathers he’s been hiding there. At first, it looks like he is holding them, a small pile, but then I am not sure if they are his or not, not certain that they aren’t growing out of him still after all this time. Or new feathers, just sprouting.

In the distance, there is singing. Scripture put to music. Emma’s voice leads. I tell Avery to lay down flat with me, so they won’t find us right away, so when they do, it will be a surprise.

Here’s how the congregation finds us: Avery growing soft downy feathers out of his pours, me silent for once even as I feel his body shrinking away, devolving.

Here’s how the congregation finds us: laying slightly apart on the ground, heads barely touching, growing into each other.

WINGS IN THE KITCHEN

The moth appeared to me in the kitchenette, slow-flapping, just like in mom's little book of myths, in the story with the picture of the woman pulling a burned apple pie out of the oven, her hair coming out of a bun. In the background, you could see blouses and pantyhose slipping off the line outside, and around her shocked, pretty head, a moth flitting around. A single inscription on the page: *wings in the kitchen, shed all ambition*. Mom would say, "You know, this one is true—you can't escape this one." I believed her.

It was evening. I could have closed my eyes and ignored the moth if I weren't a superstitious person. I kept a single lamp lit in the camper because I liked the ambience, but the shadows played tricks on my eyes, so it took a long time to corner the moth, the thin wings brushing the green counter, lingering on a coffee stain. I crawled up onto the counter top, the crumbs and grease from dinner sticking to the bottoms of my feet, crouching, hands a small dog's width apart.

There: *Lymantria dispar*. Black, soulless eyes. Legs like bent Q-tips. Soft brown wings cloaked its body like a fur coat—some pomp, an arrogance to it. Once, I would have thought it was cute, those bunny-ear antennas, perfect enough to be miniature combs. Mom had the same moth but whiter. This one had patches like brown zigzags.

I slapped the counter with my palm, but my moth was too fast for me, and in the force of my momentum I fell, swinging wide to take a lamp down with me.

My dog, Chicken, did not stir.

I lay on my back on the kitchen floor. I had lost my job that morning—the call center fired me for getting too personal with the customers. There were too many reports of people saying I made them “uncomfortable.” I was having a hard time filling out applications, crawling back to bed after four questions or deciding for myself that I wasn’t a good fit anyway, so the moth didn’t feel like a coincidence, my future coming out of the oven a burnt apple pie. In truth, I hadn’t tried that hard, but an apple pie wasn’t a hard thing. I did feel defeated, enough to not get up for a long time, to unloop the oven mitt from its fixture on the pantry door and stuff it under my ear like a pillow to make laying there more comfortable.

The following night, holding a tray of frozen ground beef against my shins where I bruised them falling off the counter, I saw the moth again. It could be no ordinary moth but an apparition forecasting my descent into mediocrity. It happened to a lot of people. It happened to my mom when she was thirty when the moth circling her hydrangeas finally forced its way inside. She accepted it peacefully, resigning from the PTA and tapering her volunteer work at the food pantry, giving time to herself instead, soaking for long hours in the claw-foot tub, reading romance novels. My mother the Puritan indulging in smutty paperbacks. It happened to other people too and to almost every woman in my family. A buried tenant in her book, an old legend that we couldn’t help but prescribe to, most of us ending up no-ones. You found them if you weren’t paying attention, if you looked away from your life for a second and everything shifted off track.

I hoped the warmth of my shins would help thaw the meat for dinner, but it did not, so I went outside with my phone to scour my contacts list for someone to call. I remembered Rob, my former tall man—not formerly tall, of course, but formerly mine. I used to do a childish thing where I’d stand on his shoed feet and stare directly up at his face, all the way up his nose and

laugh until he told me to stop. I felt like I needed someone tall in that moment. But also, a few weeks ago I got a spam email from Rob that must have gone out to his whole contact list about a new business venture he was starting up. Back then it seemed like a bad idea, but knowing there wasn't much left for me in this life, I returned to it.

Rob's phone rang until the very last second before his voice finally broke through.

"Yeah?" he said.

At first I forgot why I was calling. But it was purely financial, I told myself, not anything else.

"Rob? It's me," I said, even though we hadn't been on "it's me" terms in a few years, and I had gotten a new phone number since we had last talked. Maybe he would still know, or he would think my voice belonged to someone he wanted to hear from.

"Yes," he said. I thought he sounded more mature, starting with him answering the phone at all. The Rob I knew tended to disappear, would drift off the grid for spiritual healing and return a little bit tanner wearing brewery T-shirts or boat shoes.

"You know that business opportunity you told me about?"

"You mean the mindfulness seminars? We're still recruiting."

"I'm on board," I said.

He told me the details, how to get to his house—"It's a temporary base, until we can afford office space, which is pretty soon." It was an address in West Virginia. I scrawled it down on the palm of my hand, clenching the phone to my ear with my shoulder.

"Can I take down your name and number?" he asked.

"Oh," I said. I shifted the phone to my hand to hold it steady, smudging the ink. "It's me. Paige. Remember?"

“Paige. Your voice changed. I didn’t—”

What a thing, to be a twenty-something and have your voice changing, a second puberty.

“No, you wouldn’t have—I mean, I changed my number,” I said, softening my voice, trying to revert it back to what he maybe remembered, a carefree lilt.

“That’s it. I didn’t recognize.”

“I’ll be around the day after tomorrow,” I said.

We hung up. To not think about Rob and his not needing me, I thought about packing, went around back of the camper to collect my bungies, all ready to secure my mobile home for a long trip. I told myself over and over: moths happen to a lot of people. It was only embarrassing if anyone saw, if Rob saw, but he wouldn’t. I would not cook for him, would not invite him into my kitchenette for a nightcap—these were easy things to avoid with a whole car ride ahead of me to invent excuses. While I packed, the moth crept around my counter, toeing the metal trim. It prodded at half a saltine with its antennae.

I tried not to dwell. Some people spent decades of their lives with moths without even recognizing them, living blissfully unaware, but not my family, the moth legend woven intimately into the threads of our being. It happened to too many of us to ignore—the moths appearing like tiny fragile divinities, bestowing our fates. They lingered, surely, longer than any real moth would. My aunt spent years obsessively trying to identify the last great thing she had done, interviewing people in her life who she may have impacted, dredging up details of her pre-moth existence, mining for an incident where her presence was indispensable, where she had made a difference. My mom conferred with me once, a quiet aside, “You know, at least no one expects anything of me now.” She and her moth had been cohabiting for nearly a decade at that

point and no one had spoken of it. We had trained our eyes away from the soft flapping, the clatter of it getting stuck in the blinds.

A few months ago, I moved out of my apartment and sold my truck to help pay for the camper, paying off the rest of it with pithy wages from the call center, saving money eating Ramen and stolen vegetables from other campers' window gardens. I did these things with such excitement, a feeling of freshness, of starting anew. I thought I would go places with the camper, untethered by a permanent address.

I found my binder of renovation plans to convert the camper into an efficient and mobile tiny home wedged in a storage compartment under the couch cushions. Maybe that wouldn't have counted as a "great" accomplishment anyway, but in the back of my mind I clung to the thought of carrying out an artistic, bohemian lifestyle, of finding a message to preach and then traveling, beatnik style (only solo—people didn't like me; they thought I was too passive and a little bit crass, but not in an excusable way since I was so hard to know) across the country to spread my message, lugging my camper and my small dog behind me. I would "find" myself in a desert or in the middle of a road, watching a freight train stretch across the horizon, or in some uncarved piece of wilderness that no one knew about but me. I could have been magnificent.

I wasn't. I had a moth.

I wouldn't have opted to do any of those things with Rob if I was being honest. I had seen Rob twice since the years I spent trying not to drop out of college. The first time was so he didn't have to go to his spiritual awakening retreat in the middle of the woods on his own—I had felt so honored that he would ask me, believing I had been his first and only choice. The second was to dispel any confusion that we might be meant for each other by means of a back-packing trip. "You're too close to me," he had explained when we took a break at an overlook—me, peeling

the sock off my foot to examine a pestering blister; him, standing, facing the gorge, hands clasped behind his back, the Wanderer in that Friedrich painting my former art history professor kept as his desktop background. “I’m worried if we were together, there wouldn’t be anymore surprises,” he said. And he was right, which is what I liked, the way he could leave sometimes and still always come back Rob, his cyclical consistency, the moon phases of his passions, which wore different shirts but always seemed genuine, from the casual wiccan alters to the wilderness survival streak. He was a positive force, with enough passion for the both of us when I stopped caring about things, when I withdrew. Just being near him would be enough—it would be the jolt I needed.

I dug out old road maps and unfolded them all over the kitchenette, tracing the way to get to Rob’s. I could do it on one tank of gas if I was careful.

*

I set out for Rob’s in the middle of the night. I left him a few voice messages once I was on the road, hoping he’d want to talk, but each time a girl’s voice said, “You’ve reached Rob and Nicki, Mind Over Matter sales associates...” followed by a spiel about being busy with other clients. When I got tired and desperate enough, I imagined how the recording would sound with my name squeezed onto the end, asserting my own small importance in this. I imagined this Nicki person who probably had a marketing degree, or a yoga studio, or both. She probably wore glasses fashionably and was simple enough for Rob to love.

The moth rested in the camper while I drove. It felt like I was carrying a small passenger, precious cargo—the moth, my tiny divinity. Goddess of Nothing Much. Saint It’s Over, You’re Out of Time.

Rolling into a rest stop as the sky lightened, I called my mom. It rang two times before I got frustrated and hung up, growing antsy imagining her swathed in fluffy comforters, half-emptied glass of wine at her bedside, making grumbling noises in her sleep but not quite rising to the task of answering her daughter's call. I hated the thought of my voice playing on her answering machine, nasally and childish sounding, an eternal whine like the cries of protest I wailed at fifteen when she scrubbed my hands in the kitchen sink after I Sharpied a boy's name on my knuckles. TONY. Lots of squiggly hearts. Mom worried about ink poisoning.

I ate breakfast at a picnic table, draped in a dog blanket from my backseat. With my loose change, I rummaged together a meal of two Twinkies, beef jerky, and a bag of Skittles. Just about every food group. I was brushing my teeth in the rest area when my mom called back.

"I'm moving to the Rocky Mountains," I told her.

"Where at?" she asked, not quite hearing.

"Never mind. The Appalachians. I get them mixed up."

"In the mountains?"

"In Rob's cabin."

"Is he trustworthy?"

"If I'm lucky."

"Just come home, baby."

At first I thought, *that's nice*, but I knew that "baby." That "baby" was only for her husband and characters on TV. I wasn't her baby.

"Say it like you mean it," I told her.

Her breath rattled through the receiver. I had annoyed her. "I know you'll do what you do," she said.

“I have a job lined up,” I said.

“Of course you do.”

I let her get back to her morning. I didn’t know if she remembered Rob or not.

When she met him, it had been by mistake but the kind of mistake we should have been more prepared for, me still living under my mom’s roof and Rob just discovering what moths meant to our family. I had shown him the page in the book, read the caption out loud. “Wings in the kitchen...”

“No, I’ve heard the saying before,” he said. “I just thought it was gibberish, a children’s rhyme.”

I shook my head, took him into the breakfast nook where mom drank her coffee and sometimes dried her hair, reclining in the small booth with the window open, flinging her wet locks outside to bronze in the sun. She had been out that evening. I pointed to the moth crawling up the pane. “It’s been alive forever,” I told him.

It took a while to convince him, that it was real, or not real, but he became obsessed. One night, we ushered it into my room somehow. It flew between us like it was ours instead of hers and he flung a blanket over us both to trap it. We sat under the blanket, our heads forming two camel humps. He tried to clap his hands around it, hungry for it, but couldn’t. I tried to stare into his eyes, silent and waiting, wondering why we weren’t having sex. There was a lot I didn’t understand about us. Mom broke the charm, whipping the door open, groceries falling out of her arms, like she knew. Rob later said his hand had passed right through the moth, like it wasn’t even there.

Finding a patch of data in the pavilion, I Googled Nicki, from the voice message. I had to find Rob first on Facebook—we were still “friends,” but I had stopped following him. I scrolled

through his friends, his pictures—there were other women but none named Nicki. I Googled Nicki and the name of the company, from that procured a last name: “Wells.” No bio or picture. I Googled Nicki Wells but found only Nicks. If she had a marketing degree, she wasn’t using it very well.

Chicken paced in small circles in the grass, whimpered for warmth. I ushered him back into the passenger seat, pulled out, and waved out of politeness at the large sign that said “West Virginia Welcomes You.”

*

The siding of Rob’s mountain cabin was a rich blue, not what I expected, not even a cabin. I hadn’t done my research. Normally when I go somewhere new, I scroll around on Google maps, imagine myself walking down the street and just happening to stumble across the house I’m going to—I’ll notice a rubber ball roll into the road, almost straight over my sandaled toes and track its path, beholding 607 Crest Boulevard for the first time. In this imagined sequence, I am holding gardening sheers because I am middle aged and just about to meet the romantic interest I will pursue for the next forty years of my life before I die, or until the next interest comes along because maybe, even though I won’t accomplish anything great, I’ll at least still be rocking it at eighty. And by eighty I’ll have learned to be a likeable person, someone who’s ready to settle down.

I didn’t do that with Rob’s house. I wanted it to be spontaneous.

So I wasn’t prepared for the fluorescent lights. The “OPEN” sign blared in the front window of the otherwise ordinary suburban home. I felt like I was six and going to a sleepover I didn’t want to go to, but that was close-minded of me. Rob and I were old friends. I folded up the

maps and stowed them neatly away in the glove compartment, let Chicken out to pee in the yard. As I shut the car door, Rob appeared at the front door, waving.

“Paige!” he called out.

I trudged up the front step and leaned in for a hug that only made contact at the shoulders. “I don’t go by that anymore,” I said.

“Who are you if not Paige?”

“Parker. It’s just what people call me.” I shrugged.

“What people?” Rob led me inside, peeled the thin flannel off my shoulders thinking it was a jacket, I guess. He didn’t actually have a coat rack and held it up awkwardly for a moment, a divider between us, before slinging it over the couch. He looked the same—brown hair tangled in a just-out-of-bed arrangement, his most approachable trademark. That and cotton, warm-colored T-shirts. He wore a coral-orange faded shirt with a charming little bleach stain on the shoulder. A pair of Dockers on his feet. He had always looked safe.

“Just some people. No one you know. It’s been a while, Rob.” I looked over his shoulder, moved deeper in the house, expecting a tour, expecting to be introduced to Nicki. I had readied myself for this moment, was prepared, even, to give away my blessing when Rob announced that Nicki was his fiancé.

Rob made no move to show me around, lingering by the door. “Yeah, the only way I can get you over here is to lure you with the promise of money,” he said. But it wasn’t true. It was the first time I had come to him on my own volition. Maybe he wasn’t used to that, was used to doing the summoning.

The room buzzed with electricity. Fluorescent tubing in all colors spelled out things like “Ladies Night” and “Budweiser.” Instead of table lamps, he had “\$ Cash Back Fast \$.” The Rob I knew had never been a collector—he was always more of a nomad. Less is more.

“What’s with all this?” I asked.

“Don’t be like that.”

“Like what?”

“You know how you’re being. Typical Paige.” He ruffled my hair like he was joking, like I was in on the joke. Rob was like a distant relative, the kind who marries your favorite cousin and then leaves her at the altar but lingers around the family, showing up at reunions and funerals like nothing happened. Only I met Rob online when I was nineteen, during a vulnerable time in my life when I was dating men (a few at a time) whom I’d met in chat forums about conspiracy theories and unsolved mysteries. I private messaged guys who seemed interesting or unhinged, telling them that their stories gave me the creeps and asking for more. One told me about how he dug up graves looking for tamper marks from alien experimentation. Some of them wired me money to fly out and meet them. Rob was different. He wasn’t a freak—a lurker like me with a sick fascination in the uncanny. He would drive five hours to come see me, sporadically, every month or so, usually staying a few nights in a Motel 6 after my mom stopped letting him spend the night. Then he would go away and we would forget about each other.

Seeing Rob in person, face glowing purple in the flickering fluorescents, was remembering. I wanted to pinch him, to test the buoyancy of his skin, to make sure it was what I knew. I wanted to ask him what was next. I wanted him to be the cure to my moth, for him to wipe it away like a sin.

*

There were no spare rooms in the house available for me to sleep in, or so I was told. I backed my camper into the yard where it couldn't be seen—"For privacy," he said, but I got a deeper sense that he was trying to hide me. Rob stood off to the side, gesturing with one hand, signs for "closer" and "slow," so subtle I could have mixed them up, as I eased the camper behind the house.

Once it was parked, I climbed out of my car. Rob jogged towards me.

"Hold on a sec," he said, reaching over to touch my hair. I was all ready to say "I love you, too," thinking it was romantic—a knee jerk reaction, the love. Not the real kind. It would have made things easier, more convenient, to be together.

But then I saw something moving in my hair, six slender legs, moth-like. I tried to swat Rob's hand away, but he got to it before me, pinching the bug lightly. He held it out for me to see. "No harm, just a beetle," he said.

"Oh," I said, taking it from him. I stooped down to let it crawl away in the cold grass. "Do you want to come inside?"

It began to snow just a bit—the first wet snow. I could feel my future budding—a revised, less outstanding future with Rob. I would be his right-hand man, not his lover, but his comrade. He would develop a smile or a crick in his neck from nodding at me a certain way when I said something witty or smart, a feature he would carry with him into old age.

"Give me the grand tour?" he said. "Fill me in on the life of Parker-not-Paige?"

"Sure," I said.

Inside, I cleared off the empty microwave popcorn bags from my counter, rumped dirty clothes into a ball in the corner. He slid into the kitchenette booth, folded his hands on the table and absorbed everything. I could tell he was processing it, gauging how I had ended up, the state

of my desperation. I dropped a handful of wrappers on the floor, surrendering to the mess, and slid in across from him.

“Never pictured you as the rustic type,” he said.

“Rustic. That’s a nice euphemism,” I said.

“Stop. You always do that. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

I wondered if we would catch up then, fill each other in on all the gaps. But the gaps had always been our sacred grounds, where the other wouldn’t tread. The time we spent away from each other was our own. We ended up where we ended up.

Sly as ever, Rob pulled a business pamphlet out of his back pocket, flipped it open.

“This,” he said, “is everything you need to know. It’s simple, really, but your role is integral.”

I scanned the brochure. Admittedly, the organization seemed a lot like a pyramid scheme. Underneath the smiling pony-tailed model in a blouse, the caption: “Mind Over Matter is all about facilitating transformative visual and mental experiences.” It was for self-starters, entrepreneurs who had trouble getting their businesses going. They gave seminars on their tenants of mindfulness. The back panel featured a clip-art man dressed in business-casual slacks with spirals in his eyes, like a hypnotist.

“It’s like meditation, if you’ve ever tried that. Like yoga? I do stretches every morning,” he explained.

“I don’t meditate. I can’t hold my breath,” I said.

“You won’t be under water, Paige.” He smiled, put a hand on my knee. I felt better.

He told me I wouldn’t have to recruit. I would be his mindfulness sales associate, selling things like “mindfulness wrist cuffs” (dollar store bracelets) and “centering stones” (smooth rocks that fit nicely in the palm of your hand) to get people to sign up. Rereading lines in the

pamphlet, I did try very hard to believe in it, or to believe in the placebo effect, that even if a stone was just an ordinary stone, to someone else it was more.

“I want to be your second-in-command,” I said.

Rob shook his head a bit, ready to object, but then leaned in as if experiencing a change of heart, his face glowing orange from the house lights coming through the windows, light lodging in the shallow valleys between his eyes, angelic. Rob, aware of atmospheric conditions and the insecurities of others, had a way of manipulating moments like these to make himself more appealing. But the spell was broken when he reached for my hands, loosely, in a way that other girls may have interpreted as shyness, holding them like dead fish, barely pressing my knuckles with his thumb. I pulled my hands away. “Just tell me yes,” I said.

Rob crossed his arms. “No. It doesn’t work like that. And anyway, you’ll need to prove yourself.”

“Fine,” I said.

“Look, would you even want to be a recruiter? I need someone creative, Paige. Someone who can make art. I need you.” He smiled, but the charm had already worn off. I had never made art in my life. “I’ll hook you up with Nicki, my creative director, tomorrow. You’ll love her.”

Without warning, my moth awoke, bursting out from behind a curtain. It looked even bigger than before, its brown and white streaks more defined. We both watched it ascend on a lamp, its movement obscuring the shape in a flurry of panic before disappearing, a shadow outlasted by shade. Rob avoided eye contact and stood, ready to leave, but I knew he remembered my mom’s moth, the one he tried to trap.

“Well—” he started.

“What about it? It’s just an insect. It doesn’t mean anything!”

“I didn’t see...I don't know what you’re talking about. It’s getting late. Get some sleep, kiddo.” He patted my shoulder and left.

I laid back in the kitchenette bench and closed my eyes, wishing for something warm to drink. Without an electrical outlet, I couldn’t heat anything up. I remembered how Mom used to take me to tea parties hosted by the YMCA at this swanky little yoga studio/cafe across the street from the center. She hand-washed white gloves and unfurled my fingers one by one to stuff my hands inside the satin interior. When I was eight a tornado rampaged the tea parlor, crushing the little china cups and turning the spoons and infusers into wind chimes. We all huddled in the cellar with our heads to our knees. Mom’s bony fingers made a tourniquet around my wrist. When it was over, a woman made a remark about the tornado being a proverbial cock, a warning from the universe, and my mom, face damp with sweat and the rain that still soaked our coats—a single wet curl inclined towards her cheek—arched her back and said, “There are *children* present” with as much outrage as she could muster. Laughter bubbled to the surface slowly until all the women in the cellar were roaring. I laughed too, not knowing what was funny. Mom let go of my wrist, her mouth forming a straight line through the whole thing, eyes darting.

I couldn’t stop thinking about the woman’s mouth, forming around the word “cock,” her crooked teeth and my mother’s religion, which waxed and waned with the cycles of the moon, her love of soap operas and Johnny Cash—all those conflicting things at once.

My moth swarmed, a floater in my eye. I didn’t know until later that the YMCA tea party group was for women who discovered moths in their homes prematurely, they felt, and they were trying to, at once, cling tightly to their old superstitions, while also willing themselves to find small semblances of greatness despite the myth. They wanted both a security blanket and an empowerment cloak and struggled to negotiate these things. I wanted to call my mom and tell

her about the moth, but it felt too private, and predetermined, like not enough of a thing to even share with her because she must have known it would find me prematurely too. She must have seen it every time she heard my voice on the phone.

The moth crept over my shoulder, and I knew I could have looked into its tiny face if I turned around, but I didn't. I closed my eyes, willing to hold it there, feeling the spot through my shirt like the soft scratch of a fingernail, prodding for my attention.

*

I woke up thinking I would enter Rob's house to find out it was all a scam, that the whole operation was just feeding into his spur-of-the-moment decision to make an independent film. I would walk into the middle of Rob shooting a scene in the living room, all the fluorescent sign lights glaring. He would yell, "Surprise! You're the star!" Then his "creative director," Nicki, would walk in from the kitchen wearing only a very long cardigan with a few buttons done up, laughing, and I would know the whole thing was a cruel joke against me, even though they would tell me, "Relax, no harm done." I had dreamt the night before that Rob bought two very large chairs for the set after persuading me to give him my life savings. "They're fundamental to the film's success," he said in the dream.

So I went inside without knocking, already fuming. "Hello?" I called.

No response. Instead, a handwritten note from Rob on the kitchen table: "Talk to Nicki. She'll set you up with our merch." Underneath, he had copied her address.

Nicki Wells, Creative Director. Her tinny little voice from the phone message repeated in my head every time I thought of her name—I had tried to stretch it into other words, after she hung up from making the message, joking with Rob who was in the room with her. How many times did she record the message before believing it sounded right? Was she meticulous or

apathetic? Maybe she was even the mastermind behind the whole enterprise. It was Nicki I would need to usurp, Nicki I would battle to claim a shred of mediocre success, our petty rivalry stretching into our forties, and, savvy businesswomen by then, we would call it a truce and sip gin and tonic at our timeshare in Hilton Head. Rob would become just an accessory, carnage in our war. We would fight over who would record a new message, for a new company, a sweet kind of fighting between two old broads.

*

Leaves fell in heavy clumps, slogged with water, hurriedly catching up with winter, which was butting its head in too early. Nicki lived in a woodsy cabin with a long dirt driveway, more like what I had expected Rob to live in. I parked next to a Jeep in her driveway (I couldn't fathom it belonging to the savvy career gal I built up Nicki to be in my head) and extracted Chicken. He was moody and despondent, turning his head deliberately away when he saw me. "C'mon! Walkies!" I said, rooting around for his leash, relishing his fleeting joy.

A leaky-faucet sort of rain soaked my jacket. From the inside, Nicki called for me to let myself in when I knocked.

I looked around inside, didn't see her immediately. My boots were soaked. "What should I do with my wellies?" I called in, "Leave them here, or...?" Chicken darted in ahead of me, uncharacteristic of him, usually so mellow, but I had been neglecting him since my descent into mediocrity.

From the kitchen: "You brought your fucking dog?"

I ditched the wellies, hurried in after Chicken. "Sorry! I'll hold him, or put him in the trailer..."

Nicki waved like she had already lost interest. She pulled a heavy paper bag out of the cabinet. She had crows-feet, some premature lines in her forehead, and rough eyeliner that looked slept on. She had biceps like firm oranges. Bottle burgundy hair in a loose ponytail, puffy Columbia vest. She looked like me, just a little. I wished I had a cigarette to light, to show her I wasn't the type of person to ask before smoking in someone's house. It seemed like an appropriate power play, to regain my footing.

"So, creative director, huh?" I said.

She rolled her eyes. "Let's save the small talk, okay?"

I couldn't help but admire her.

She dumped a bag of smooth stones onto the table. How did a Nicki end up with a Rob? In her middle-of-the-nowhere cabin, alone, possibly pumping her own water out of a well and relying on dial-up Internet, how could she have come to need him? It made it easier to trace back the origins of this other woman who knew Rob and find her, in the end, to be not so different from myself—young and naïve once, financially insecure later, vulnerable. In a different universe, one where Rob didn't matter, we could have been friends, true champions for one another.

"Just go around and sell this junk," she said, touching the rocks. "Go to outlet malls. Skating rinks are great too. Roller and ice. Flea markets. Highway rest stops. People don't know what the centering stones do. They won't believe you unless you show them."

I picked one up, squeezed it. "What *do* they do?"

"Nothing. Everything. Rob said you were creative. Come up with something," she said.

Chicken barked from my lap, agitated.

"How do you know Rob?" I asked.

Nicki rolled her eyes, reciting an answer in a cool monotone, but I didn't hear what she said, distracted by a soft flapping coming from the hallway. The moth shot around the corner, its wings wide and green. It circled around the kitchen, wanting to be seen, sifting through pieces of Nicki's hair, lifting her ponytail in soft wooshes from the oversized wings, revealing the soft wisps of hair that fell out. Nicki continued talking—"...friend of my second cousin, I gave him a chance..."—but stopped when I couldn't mask my reaction to her moth.

"Oh, fuck 'im," she said, grabbing a mason jar from the drying rack. The moth landed between us on the counter, flapping once, twice, before Nicki slammed the jar over it. It panicked behind the glass for a moment before settling down.

"You can do that?" I asked. I always thought kitchen moths were apparitions, ghost bugs—not entirely solid. I didn't know they could be trapped, controlled.

"Oh yeah," she said.

"It's so big."

"Tell me about it. Still growing, I think. They do grow."

"I didn't know that."

"You'll get used to it."

I tapped on the glass jar. It didn't make me feel uncomfortable like I thought it would. It was a Luna moth, gentle and rare, worthy of appearing in a stained glass window, exuding light and beauty on its beholders. I wanted to know more about Nicki, to stay with her in her cabin for days, observing. I wondered if or how many times Nicki had slept with Rob, and whether or not it counted as sex if you only ever sent pictures and typed messages in chat rooms. I truly felt like I didn't know, like sex could be anything. Maybe between Nicki and Rob, sex was the act of thieving, a series of hesitated motions and secrecy, like selling centering stones.

“They go for \$10 a pop. You can try going higher if you want,” Nicki said, pushing the rocks across the table to me.

“Mine is a gypsy moth, lie-man-tria despare,” I said, sounding out the Latin. I always said *dispar* like despair even though I knew it probably meant something else. “Do you want to see it?”

Nicki looked ready to decline, to escape to some chore that required her attention. I wouldn’t have minded if she had made up a chore or even if she had told me “no” flat out without an excuse. Her moth, a source of inspiration, must have attracted other sad no-ones to her doorstep, begging to be seen.

But then she shrugged. “Yeah, fine.”

I let her climb into my trailer first and closed the door behind us—the moth felt the most comfortable in an enclosed space. It took a moment for it to come around, and I realized how small it was, how unexciting, the way it perched on my counter unruffled by company, enticed by a pistachio shell. There was even the possibility that it was just a pest drawn to the mess of my life—only a few days old, I had no evidence of its immortality yet. If anyone could diagnose it, it would be Nicki. We stood looking at it for a long time.

“It’s still young,” she said finally, like it could still turn into something else.

*

I carried the rocks around all day, slung over my shoulders in a backpack. They had little inscriptions and symbols that looked like they were carved with a nail, a chalky unfinished look. I tried to believe in the rocks, in the good they could do for people, a goodness isolated from Rob, something that Nicki had maybe seen when she agreed to speak for him in the voicemail message.

I went to a rest stop first and set up the sign Nicki gave me on a picnic table, anchoring it with rocks that I arranged in cascading pillars coming out of the poster like beams of light. I rocked on my heels, trying to stay warm while I recited the slogans to people pulling babies out of their cars: “You’re just a four-week trial period away from being the smartest *you* you can be,” stumbling over the double “you” every time. I murmured it under my breath as people walked away: “you-you, you-you, you-you.”

I wanted to know how many of them had moths yet. I wanted to take their hands and guide them to my table, sit them down in front of the poster, pile rocks into their purses so they got used to the weight. Probably, a lot were still in denial, calling exterminators and waiting for one who would tell them they could fix it. People who didn’t have moths always denied the existence of other peoples’ moths, telling them they still had their whole lives ahead of them. But what did they know about fuck-ups like us?

I wanted the rocks to be beautiful, but they looked like the small unimpressive fossils behind cases in museums that always disappointed me on school field trips. “That’s it?” I always wanted to say, “Just some crappy tools and something that’s maybe a hairbrush?” Maybe that was my problem, that too many things disappointed me. I pulled the poster off the table, ripping it by accident and then letting it go also by accident and feeling bad only slightly about littering. I pushed all the rocks over the edge before climbing up onto the table, wanting to yell something like “I am interesting! I matter! I am worth something, even infinitesimally small, to society!” But I got nervous, my throat filling with phlegm. I choked a little. It must have sounded like a sneeze. Someone walking by said “Bless you.”

Even though my moth could not be outside with me, confined to my camper, I felt it with me spiritually then, in a sense of being the moth—small and easily picked up by the wind, a

nuisance when spotted but mostly invisible. Real meaty snowflakes coated my hair and skin. It felt good, like the tingly feeling you get from someone cutting the hairs on the back of your neck. I closed my eyes so I wouldn't have to see the people around me, and I imagined my moth growing big and solid like Nicki's, and even though it wouldn't mean anything or become anything great, I could start drawing portraits of the moth to fill my camper with, or I could take up graffiti and draw chicken-dog crossbreeds that no one would understand or really like. I could start parking my camper in Nicki's driveway even if she didn't want me there, until she half-liked me. I could call my mom to tell her it's happened but not to worry because it's not that bad and tell her that I never got ink poisoning from drawing on my knuckles and tell her that I'm only going to work for Rob for a little while, and if I get caught up in a pyramid scheme, tell her I'll learn from my mistakes next time.

I squeezed the centering stone in my palm until it hurt, a good small pain.

NAIAD MEMOIRS

Sometimes, when we are writing to each other like this, like two strangers at computers writing about our lives—to each other instead of into the LiveJournal void where I am not popular enough to get all the comments I want/deserve because I can write six long paragraphs about a single day where I did close to nothing, but they are not good paragraphs—I have wanted to tell you about Jesus. I have also wanted to say something about how I used to sing “Sanctuary” over and over again like a mantra, but that’s not a song you would know.

But because I am a bad missionary, I have taken the role of the cameraman on one of those nature documentaries, where you have sea turtles crawling out of punctured egg shells through the sand to the ocean while gulls and pelicans pick them off one-by-one, jostling them in their gullets. The cameraman does not save a single turtle. Every turtle gets there on their own, or it doesn't. A bad missionary, I have maybe let one or two of God’s children slip away from the path to salvation.

Now, you are asking me how missionary was last week, which I think is the same as saying, “I’m ready. Convert me.” Because you are “not religious,” which I think is just a way of being an atheist without the commitment. I get it. You’re curious. The way I was curious about you when I first saw the pictures on your LiveJournal post about swimming the great lakes, how you dipped for feet in each lake, how you tasted water from each one. The picture of you in a bathing cap and black suit, beetle-green goggles, doing something like a butterfly stroke, how even though no one but Olympic swimmers can look pretty this way, you looked at least like you

didn't care. And then the second picture: voila, you're pretty after all. Not conventionally. But I won't dwell on this—I messaged you because I thought how can someone swim in such a large body of water and not be swallowed? How had depths not taken you? I won't say killed—I'll say transported. I messaged you that first time because I am afraid of deep water.

Now, you are asking me how missionary went, and maybe you are only inquiring about the terrain, about the Smoky Mountains and the Oconaluftee in Cherokee, North Carolina, because you have never been. Because nature is your religion or some baloney (a joke—you know I'm joking, of course!).

But what do I say? I'm a bad missionary or maybe not a missionary at all. I didn't know that going into it. Maybe in some of the lakes, there were things in there too that you didn't know about before going in. Maybe you will relate.

*

There were only three beds in our barracks, four missionaries: one adult leader and us three youths—me, Melissa, and Sandra. I know the other girls well only by youth group standards, which are low because as children of the Lord, we all love each other, and we would never tell another girl if she snored (Melissa) or if her obsession with pugs got out of hand (Sandra). We drink coffee and steal second donuts during the early service, sit in the back pews and pass notes during the eleven o'clock one. We are members of The Master's Puppets and never “flip our lids,” tossing a puppet's yarn head back too far while enunciating. We play MASH, and sometimes I don't recognize the names of the crushes they fill in for the husband category. I do not go to their houses for birthdays or sleepovers.

Melissa and Sandra posed the plastic Gumby against the screen window of our cabin. Our missionary motto: Semper Gumby, forever flexible. I slung my bag onto the top bunk with

practiced nonchalance, ready to respond later with, “Oh, this bed? Of course, anyone can have it...I just put my stuff wherever.” But no one would ask. Instead, they would crawl up to my bunk later when it was dark, mission folders tucked under their arms, blankets pulled over shoulders even though it was warm, a rain-like mist breezing in through the open screen window at the foot of the bed. We would scan with a finger gliding across the schedule, planning our introduction songs and crafts for VBS the next day.

Of course, a missionary girl is meant to be nice and gentle. And I am, I can be. I can be—a revision of I am. I was not yet. I crawled up onto my bunk bed, opened a scribbled testimony I drafted on the bus that had decayed into bad drawings.

“I’m feeling dehydrated,” I said. I was not.

Melissa and Sandra stopped joke-fighting over which way the fitted bed sheet should go.

“Don’t pass out, Be-Be! Drink something!” Melissa said.

Sandra jumped off the bed. “There’s a case of water somewhere.”

What I really wanted was to get out of unloading the rest of the van, to get out of whatever scheduled event was next. The events—mostly prayer circles, kitchen duty, and childcare. Couldn’t there be more straightforward chores, unemotional tasks, ones that were less overtly filled with God? Like roofing and laying floors. Men’s chores. Men weren’t asked to sing except softly around fires and at services. I can’t sing. Can’t—not able, never able, progress not pending.

“I’m fine. I have water. I’m just going to lay down, I think,” I said.

Melissa came up to my bunk, peered into my face, her whole canoe of a nose almost touching mine, her long but beautiful face intense and charged. “You sure, Phoebe?”

I nodded. They finished the sheet, tucking corners without any slipping off, and filed out of the cabin for more bags. I breathed the way I do when I am trying to be conscious of my breaths—unevenly, unable to slow down.

I'm just trying to say it accurately. I convinced myself after a while that I *was* dehydrated, that I was even very sick for a short time, drained, empty, unwhole. But I invented those symptoms. It's something I do when I don't know how I should feel. I fill in with bad things, with disease. I make myself sick.

I sat with my testimony in the bed. It read, still reads:

When I opened my heart to Jesus,

When I opened my heart to Jesus,

When I opened my heart to Jesus,

It had seemed like a good place to start, with a weighty, vulnerable line. But then I started drawing nymphs bodies—watery, lythe. I drew their hair, exaggerated pieces. I drew it like seaweed. But you already know what they look like from the pictures I've scanned for you. At first I focused on the Dyads, the tree nymphs, but last week when you told me to do some water ones, I got hooked on the Naiads and Oceanids. I only do nymphs because they are minor Pagan goddesses, the kind that can die. They preside over small, manageable domains. Anything more would be too ambitious.

I can summon Arethusa by closing my eyes very tightly, similar to the way I would summon God before sleeping at night—I have only to close my eyes and think very hard about God to feel His presence, which comes on quicker with exhaustion, God existing at the very edges of sleep. But so do other presences, like boys I like on the cross country team, and boys I watch get on the school bus in the morning, boys I don't know but could know, whose pictures I

find in old yearbooks, boys whom I wait for, for them to drop into my life unexpectedly and love me, me giving them no reason to. No reason not to, either. And others—women too, mythical or fictional, savior women, women who pulled me out of a shell—a physical lifting, who saw something in me even when I was nothing. All these presences summoned similarly, with deep wanting, one no more soothing than the other.

I tried to write a testimony about that, about these appearances, how they were maybe all reincarnations of God, all separate but equal comforts, but in there lies murkiness, I knew, even without seeking a church leader's reading.

I went outside to try to help and be chipper, but everyone was gone. I could hear voices from down the hill in the pavilion. No one had come in to try to pull me away with them to the meeting. No one had come to lift me out.

So I walked around. I tried to find some greenery, a grove of trees where the sun blossomed out of the leaves at the right hour and right angle where I would be moved to sing "Sanctuary" to myself, reverently, but I found no such place. I sat at a stone picnic table to inhale and exhale slowly, blinking my eyes in slow deliberate measures like a blinking cat, trying to find God in those slivers of darkness. A boy wandered over wearing an orange missionary shirt but didn't get too close. He waved. I waved back.

That night, in my bunk bed with me and Melissa and Sandra all huddled in together, schedule set aside, our faces pressed, instead, to the mist coming through the window, we saw more boys. Three or four tossing a football under the harsh light of the bathroom stalls screen. I think we all hoped to be seen back.

*

This is what I wrote in the missionary journal:

Well I guess this is it! I'm writing this on the last day of missionary, Saturday, June 19th 2010. I just got to the cabin after mopping the bathroom floors and doing the floor mop dance with Melissa. I saw one of the brothers from the Georgian family on my way back and we played Frisbee until it was too dark to see each other, and I went in before he could throw it back. We met a lot of really great people this week. I wouldn't say I really met God, but wait, wait—before you say anything, what I mean is that God is everywhere, especially in nature, and that ~~he~~ He's in the mountains, and here the landscapes aren't like in PA because everything is vaster and smokier. You never know what's under the smoke, right? So God could be there. Or in any other number of things. Like this week I saw a hibiscus flower the size of my face, so now I know anything's possible.

~~Like, we're so small, we don't even know, right? You don't know, I don't know.~~

So what I mean is not that I didn't meet God this week, but that I already know him.

*

The first morning we stood outside the daycare center in the cloudy almost-rain for a long time. I didn't know why. Us girls sat on the bumper of the van, waiting, while the adults sorted things out. Maybe the center wasn't ready for us, or someone hadn't been informed, or we had miscommunicated the times—something trivial that would be easy to fix. A lot of times during the trip, I didn't know what was going on or why we were standing and doing nothing. I felt shepherded often, herded, but it's my natural position, to be a sheep.

Sandra murmur-sang loaves and fishes under her breath while we waited.

Melissa asked us: "If you could have any exotic pet in the world, what would it be?"

Sandra hardly thought about it before choosing a blue tang fish. I said something like llama or pygmy goat even though they weren't exotic, just not acquirable to me.

Melissa thought this was hilarious. “You would!” she said.

Once inside and all set up, the children all accounted for and ourselves, strangers, labeled with foam nametags we quickly threw together (with images of monkeys, fish, and hooved livestock), Melissa whooped in introduction. Someone flicked the boombox on, and she led the first sing-along. I moved my lips and did the hand motions for fishes, waves, and loaves of bread while Melissa sang the call and repeat verses. I kneeled amongst the littler ones, exaggerating the hand motions to help them understand what to do, but they were as confused as any, to be thrown into this.

We split off into stations. I took crafts, as was planned. I showed a group of three boys how to string beads onto necklaces that held foam nametags. “Like this: red, yellow, purple,” I said, “or whatever you want to do. Or it doesn’t have to be a pattern at all. Or that’s fine too—it doesn’t need beads.” They walked off with the strings, which were elastic so they could squeeze them over their hands but also fling them at each other. I kept beading, blinked heavily a few times, retreating into myself. When I failed to be maternally disciplinary, one of the aids swooped in to keep the boys from slapping red welts on each other’s arms and faces with the thick strings.

After crafts, all the groups came together for more songs and snacks—animal crackers and red juice. I couldn’t tell if the kids wanted us there or not or if they liked us or if it mattered. The littler ones liked Melissa because she could carry two of them at once in her long arms like a slender goddess of fertility, kids rolling around at her feet, making her bracelets out of pipe cleaners for offerings and proposals of marriage. She was in her element.

Melissa’s arms are like yours, swimmer’s arms—untethered and strong. Melissa hugs often. She brings her face close to other’s faces, familiar with everyone. She is a year younger

than me, but the way she lives in the world, openly, makes her seem older. She, like other people, has told me to speak louder and more, has told me to smile. When she asks, I do. Willingly. She makes it seem easier, like something I had stupidly forgotten about.

She told me to smile during snacks, dancing next to me, bumping her hips against mine to the music. “C’mon, Pheeb, get into the spirit!” she said.

I tried. I sang a little louder, but the children made me nervous. They were more perceptive than me. Two boys circled the room finding God in everything like it was a game—in plastic cubbies, in shoes, in jars of beads, behind stacked tables. They roped me into their game, pointing to God in crumpled paper towel. “Yes, of course! There’s God” I said but didn’t see anything or anyone when I looked inside. “He’s in the food we eat. That’s what you meant, right?” I asked. The boys nodded. They were on the early track to salvation, I could tell. At their age, I found God in nothing.

But I told them all the places where I saw God too so that they would not find out the truth, that I held onto my doubt and cradled it like something worthy of being entertained, of being allowed to grow. Kids noticed things like that. There was a selfishness in me that couldn’t be exorcised or extracted by any means, a fixation: me, me, me. Even if my doubt hurt other people, which I knew it could, I wanted to see what it would eventually turn into. Most people just want to see the good in everyone but not kids. Finding the best in people is something you grow into.

*

The email I sent you before Missionary, that I look at now, trying to find evidence of transformation, of spiritual change:

And then the other day I went shopping at this hand-me-down kind of store for long shorts because all I have are short shorts and I'm going on this mission trip thing with my church to a Cherokee reservation and apparently short shorts and tank tops aren't allowed. So I might die because it's in North Carolina in August and I'm sure you're used to the heat, but this PA kid prefers winter so... not fun. But they're plaid shorts, sporty fashionable, which makes it better.

The whole concept of "mission trip" on the other hand is a different story. I'm not really into the whole spreading religion thing. The helping thing sounds cool but it's not even so much helping because they don't really need a lot of help, not from us. At least I'll get to meet a lot of interesting people there.

*

There's no one else in the house. It's just us, but you're time zones away, probably not thinking about me or anticipating reading anything from me soon, are you? I do not think that me sending you these weekly emails about my life means as much to you as your emails mean to me. A part of me is waiting, sitting on this correspondence, sending nothing even though it is my turn, to see if you will inquire later—if, after enough silence, you will wonder if I am still alive or if I have become a permanent missionary. Sometimes I imagine meeting you—we are at an Ikea in your hometown, filling our vast blue tote bags, we bump into each other, you lower your sunglasses and say something like, "Phoebe? Is that you?" I beam, express my surprise and delight: "Oh my god!" We go out afterwards and can still bare to look at each other, even knowing all of each other's secrets.

I did try to reach you sooner.

I found the only computer on the campground the second night I was there, in the camp office trailer, at a desk buried under stacks of paper: release forms, sermons, other documents I

wasn't interested in. Dream catchers hung from the windows. A coffee stained mug had a picture of two middle-aged hikers, clearly in love, in rain ponchos and sunglasses, prepared for all the elements. I imagined the woman in the picture was dead, and the desk in front of me belonged to the man, who was coping but still had nightmares of her hurtling over the edge of a steep incline on the path that had “Caution” signs at the trail head, but they didn't listen. I understood marginally, having had a series of nightmares about falling down muddy hills also.

It was perfectly logical, his pain. I assumed most people found Jesus because they were sad, and the man with the mug must have hoped that directing missionaries would fill that hole. I had found Jesus in sixth grade after my best friend died in a car accident, returning from the Macy's Parade where her sister tossed a baton or played the clarinet—something with marching band. I couldn't remember. I couldn't see her on the TV screen on Thanksgiving. But my love affair with Jesus was messy and obsessive. My love came out in steady repetitions, bursts of longing until it became scary to stop breathing the words “I pray...,” in case they really did carry weight, the same way I would die in a freak accident if I stopped anticipating each possibility, the same way I would forget what her face looked like if I stopped having dreams about her. Simple cause and effect.

I couldn't imagine a happy person finding or even looking for Jesus.

The man's computer didn't have any security settings, so I logged into my email first. I only found a message from a friend asking why I wasn't at cross country practice yesterday morning, which felt reassuring, to know that someone noticed when my real, physical presence went missing from a place where it belonged. I often thought people wouldn't recognize me if I did something drastically different to my appearance, wore an uncharacteristic shirt, or waved to

them in a place they weren't used to seeing me in. I cut my hair often to keep from disappearing. I didn't think of myself as a person who anyone would miss.

I wondered if the guy I liked had noticed when I didn't show up to practice. Jason. He had a long nose and small, prune-ish lips, but in an attractive way. He was the fastest runner on the team. In my head (and also reflected in my fanfiction, with the *Dashboard Confessional* epigraphs, which is never completely canon and often disguised memoirs), I lived in a world where he *did* like me. We ran into each other in the school library, naturally, where we kissed behind stacks of books and he told me about his mother's chickens, reciting their names: Sadie, Oregano, Colonel Sanders, Salt... "And Pepper, how could I forget Pepper?"

*

A chapter of *Naiad Memoirs*, my newest fanfiction WIP:

Arethusa sat on a rock slick with her own fountain tears, thinking about her misfortunes. It wasn't raining except for inside her. It was hard to be young and a nymph, when even her form felt tenuous, slippery. If she wanted badly enough to disappear, to run away, she could simply become a cloud, but what about all the times she couldn't decide what she wanted and in that limbo of not knowing, of not wanting, her skin prickled anyway, her insides chilled and dissolved and all at once: cloud.

Further she dissolved into rain, into stream, and how can someone who's water know who they are?

The River heard her inner thoughts as she sat on the rock, her toes soaking in a puddle that channeled water from the larger body.

"You lack convictions, Arethusa," the River said, and she startled, all of the precipitation building, already, in a cloud around her face immediately absorbed back inside of her.

The River was the last person she wanted to talk to.

He took human form now, sidling up next to her on the rock, scooping up some of her stray hairs with a long finger. “Channel your power,” he said. “You are water. Water floods. It doesn’t have to trickle. Toughen up, kid. That’s all I’m saying.”

Arethusa wanted to lean into his words, wanted to heed them, but even being young and a nymph, she knew his words were simple—there was more to it than that. Tough was not a cure for tender. Tender didn’t always need a cure.

But then he wrapped his arm around her waist like he had done before and she remembered the way they could melt into each other, remembered the sweet parts of being with him, of being part river.

*

By the second day I already had one-hundred pictures on my camera. Mostly candid. A lot of tree pictures: individual trees, close-ups of branches, a single veiny leaf in focus, clumps of many trees, people under trees after painting a wall, the close-up of a paint splatter on a tree. I was still trying to figure out whether or not I was an artist. In my room at home I always took lots of pictures of my face, turning the camera around and clicking over and over, not knowing what I would get. I took grainy close-ups of my eyes. I didn't let people see them because they felt too personal.

I took pictures of Melissa playing basketball with the boys from our church, Brady and Jackson, but the low-quality photos couldn't capture the essence of their lean beautiful bodies sweating all over the concrete. They were practically having sex, all three of them, but only I noticed, sitting on the concrete, legs spread apart with my camera on the ground, angled upward, snapping shots. The Georgian boys sat next to me in the grass drinking Cokes. We only ever

referred to them as “the brothers” or the “Georgian boys” because they came in a set. The younger was a year or two younger than us, the older one our age. They looked similar, had the same shaped faces and no-teeth smiles, the same sandy hair. Sometimes they could be spotted in the bed of a pickup truck cruising around the missionary camp, sometimes with other littler siblings in tow. We knew they were the same boys who stole glances at us through our cabin window at night, who lingered around the latrines catty-cornering our cabin when we played loud music.

Scrolling through the pictures on the camera screen revealed mostly feet on concrete, the sun cutting through to wash out everything else. It was not a good shot but mysterious in a way I liked. I like abstract shots. I like pictures of the skin people don’t think about—ankles and heels, the indent under the knee. Pictures you couldn’t identify the person by, or, do these parts of the skin become recognizable if you are loved by someone enough, and your behind-the-knee-skin has lines as distinguishable as your face or fingers?

“You see that?” the older brother asked, pointing to an overgrown flower bed. “Lizard.”

“Where?” I jumped up, camera in hand, jamming my finger down on the zoom button.

“You’ll scare it away,” the younger brother said.

“Where?” I said again.

The older brother got up, sleuthed around the flower bed with cupped hands, ready to get it for me. The brothers were like that, always ready and waiting to bring us things, like when I forgot to get a fork in the mess hall for my fry bread taco, complained off-handedly before bringing the whole plate to my face and eating off of it like some sort of animal—then suddenly there’s one of the brothers, tapping my shoulder, clean fork raised in his hand, saving me from my faux-pas.

The older brother came up with a hand full of dirt as the lizard's body wriggled away. I sat back down, pretending I wasn't interested anyway.

“If I got a tattoo, it would be of a lizard,” I said.

“Why?”

I shrugged. I didn't need a reason other than that the earth was beautiful and lizards were of the earth.

“But if you got a tattoo, you would be going against the Bible,” the younger brother said. “Your body is God's temple.”

The older brother sipped his Coke in agreement. Melissa and Jackson started fighting, a small rift forming in their voices and then booming into something out of their control. I would scan the pictures later, to see if I could find where the fight originated, if it could be found in their sun-bathed feet.

“I'll just get a small one, then. Behind my ear, under my hair, where God won't see.”

*

Sometimes we talk about how you are in love and I live vicariously in that feeling.

Sometimes, when I live a thing, I think after how I will write it down later in an email, and before I can stop myself, I have gone too far and invented something that didn't happen.

Sometimes I wonder if other people do this, if the stories they tell me aren't true, if this gives me the license to tell untrue stories too. I have done this before, have told stories about encountering God that are not true, that I only convinced myself of afterwards. It is like at Jesus horse camp, when every year we sit outside in the dark in a circle with dripping candles propped to our chins, and we are not to blow the candle out and leave until we feel the spirit within us. And blowing the candle out is a consent to having the holy spirit inside of us, but what other

choice is there? Not leaving? Bearing, instead, the hot wax? So maybe I have lied, or maybe it is only now that I'm mistrusting the memory of God's presence. I'm flip-flopping, over-questioning.

The third afternoon of missionary, we rested—prematurely, you're probably thinking, on a Wednesday. The third day of creation when God gathered and arranged the waters, we plunged and splashed. We went tubing and fed ducks in drenched T-shirts that covered our two-piece bathing suits. One of the Georgian boys scolded me for getting too close to the ducks, me kneeling froglike in the dirt to touch one, while the littler kids hadn't yet gotten a turn. My ungraciousness came out in small ways, in crumbs for ducks, the way I kept reaching anyway, willing my fingers to be bitten. No white waters, the river delivered us safely from one dock to another. No one drowned. I didn't think anyone would. At one point we all linked hands together to form a pod of tubes, reaching and straining for each other, an urgency in not letting go. The water would push us close together before pulling us apart. Push, pull, push, pull.

After, we washed the Oconaluftee River out of our hair. I took the middle shower stall between Sandra and Melissa.

“What's going on between you and Jackson?” Sandra asked Melissa in a shy, sing-songy voice. Somehow, youth group relationships felt forbidden, taboo. If you were dating someone, you did it secretly. You didn't let the youth directors know.

Melissa's “Shhh!” sounded like a low breeze cutting through the shower spray. “We're not even *dating*.”

We didn't say anything.

“But I *would* date him...if he took things a little more seriously. Like it's always joking with him, you know?”

We knew.

Sandra told us she had forgotten her shampoo. We could hear her fumbling with the zipper of her shower caddy, emptying everything out on the floor recklessly. Melissa and I both reached out of our respective shower curtains and slid soapy bottles across the floor to her, our competing generousities. It was a competition, wasn't it? Who could be the most giving, the most self-denying? Sandra grabbed my travel-sized bottle of Pert, and Melissa didn't ask for her bottle back.

"Let me practice my testimony of faith on you guys..." Melissa said.

Sandra and I groaned, or maybe it was just me—the shower spray made things echo, made me hear things that weren't real, a fact I was familiar with. Sometimes I went to the showers obscenely early so no one else would be there, to close my eyes and try to hear things, searching, I guess, for faith affirmations, believing I would hear voices in the water. I did not, usually.

"Here we go again..." I said, thinking I was being funny because hadn't this become a joke by now, the number of times Melissa revised and recited her statement?

"Um, what?"

"I mean, because you say it all the time?" I felt defensive. Because everyone should have laughed, or if not, Melissa should have felt appropriately belittled and moved on, the way I would have. Was this new to her, the belittling? She had to know her statement was good already, that it was perfect.

"Sorry for wasting your time, I guess," she said. "You could have said it you didn't want to hear it..."

I didn't know how to say sorry back or didn't want to. "I mean, it's fine."

But of course, I had destroyed the sanctity of the shower ritual. I did pretend it was fine for a while, that I had handled everything the way I should have, even though Melissa stopped her shower and crept away, Sandra following after her, silently. Even though later, we didn't talk at dinner, and even though time can overcome silences, it doesn't reverse them.

Standing in the shower by myself, I did not think about:

My own shell of a testimony, an unwritten, unformed thing.

The thin reed of my own faith, changing over into something else.

The part of the day, in our tubes, when we all let go of each other's hands.

*

Arethusa, for a while, moved away from the River. It felt like the healthy thing to do. She walked for a long time, and for some parts of her journey, she was cloud, sightless and untethered, and for other parts she was a cold murky puddle, stagnant but grounded. Even though Arethusa did spend time making herself very small and going through the photosynthesis cycle with different blades of grass to get over the River, and even though this clarified and sharpened her worldview—seeing small things as a small thing herself, the green buoyant cells within translucent blades, pinpricks of dirt ballooned into succulent beads of life, the wonder of ants and their moving parts—she still went back to the River, later, eventually. A different river, though, one who promised her other things.

She realized there was a flow to her life, a cycle—leave, return, leave, return. Wanting to break the cycle, believing the River would have seen it as a weakness that she could not reign in her temperament, him being so constant and steady, she went to live at a bathhouse. She remembered a human life from before, a life of flesh when she believed in and prayed to gods and goddesses, before she was a minor deity herself and realized it wasn't that great, that deities

didn't, after all, have more fun. Knowing all the answers made the world smaller and less interesting.

At first she tried to feign humanity again, to let them think she was one of them, careful not to perspire into a ball of steam. She pretended to be humbled by the short and arbitrary length of string unspooled for her to inevitably be snipped by the Fates. She pretended to have filth she needed to be absolved of. But in the end, it turned out she had all of those things anyway, even flesh, which could still be rubbed raw. In the end, she tried to renounce herself of perfection to realize she had never been perfect.

But neither were the other nymphs, eternally young and easy to love. Neither was the River. So she stayed in the bathhouse, a place of middles and contradictions, of not-this-but-this, and this-but-also-this. A place where dirt from the day was rinsed, where people converged and came apart. She assumed fountain-form to cleanse in small, temporary ways—the backs and feet, the extrusions and crevices, of the mortals, but also to listen, absorb.

*

Later, I was sick with mosquito bites. Our youth group had kitchen clean up duty, dishes and sweeping. I wore plaid shorts, a white T-shirt, and a green baseball cap splattered with paint that didn't make it onto the fence we touched up earlier. Melissa, Sandra, and I wore matching splattered hats with white fern- and hand-prints stamped onto the visors. Once we were home, we wouldn't wear these hats. We wouldn't wear the jeans we had painted each other's names on. We wouldn't go see movies together or ever drink underage in dorms together, but at the mission camp, we acted like we were all best friends, that we would be in each other's weddings and at all the pivotal moments of growing up.

Of course we won't be, realistically.

This is what I thought about during the silence.

Anyway, I didn't finish sweeping, the look of the swollen red blotches all over my shins and knees making me woozy. I couldn't stop touching them, couldn't swat new mosquitos away fast enough, even inside the mess hall underneath a ceiling fan, my limbs slick with Deet. I wanted to complain to someone, letting bouts of resentment come over me in a pained glare, in sweaty pieces of escaped hair from my ponytail I refused to fix. I developed a small martyrly limp, the soles of my Rocket Dogs making a scraping sound against the concrete, but no one would look at me. Sandra and Melissa were having fun somewhere, doing dishes, blowing soap bubbles, probably, and laughing.

I spent the rest of the night slathering cortisone and aloe all over the welts, covering the bigger ones in band-aids. I hid them under the picnic tables in the pavilions while we sang contemporary hymns late into the night.

*

My testimony of faith:

When I opened my heart to Jesus,

When I opened my heart,

When I

*

I didn't write one when I needed one. I won't write one now, to you. On the fourth day we traveled by van up into the hills of Cherokee carrying pamphlets crammed with tight paragraphs baring witness to miracles. You know, success stories. There is lots of dialogue in these stories to keep people interested, lots of scarring and healing, lots of allusions to some proverbial light slicing a confounding darkness.

As luck would have it, we found another Christian right away, making our jobs easier. We sat in the Christian stranger's living room with the TV at half volume, a pot boiling on the stove that he let simmer, the smell of rice and a piney aftershave. We sat on a couch the texture of rough blankets, pillows on the floor. Light came in from the small kitchen window, but the living room windows were draped in blackout curtains. He sat across from us in jeans and bare feet. The adults talked about salvation, the level and volume of their conversation sounding almost idle. I remember being very still, repeating a small selfish prayer like a mantra: *Please God I pray that they don't ask me a question.* The way I would repeat *Please God don't let me get struck by lightning* every time I showered for a year in sixth grade, back when I had convinced myself that death by lightning would happen, back when I could suspend all bad things in a timeless space of non-action if I stayed very still long enough, if I repeated my requests without giving pause for doubt.

Sandra and Melissa sat on a loveseat, at the ready, their knees touching, their whole torsos arched forward, waiting to be called on.

And then we were asked. Someone, a youth leader, said: "Let's hear from the girls."

They looked at me first.

"Pass," I said and then laughed like it was a joke, but it did not sound like a laugh.

The Christian stranger rubbed his chin. The youth leaders frowned.

I hoped then that someone would see the mosquito welts, my soaked forehead, a sprained finger, spots of leprosy coming over my cheeks, some ailments I hadn't taken stock of that could explain away my behavior. I hoped someone would come over and escort me outside and then all the way back to Pennsylvania where I would not have to tell anyone what happened. I would

lapse into a Pagan faith, building alters casually for Arethusa or whoever I wanted. It would just be the two of us, playing some sort of a game, not real religion.

I couldn't hear the conversation that followed, did not hear how Melissa or Sandra or the stranger saved me from speaking. At night, I went to sleep without praying, certain I didn't know how to anymore and anyway would not be heard.

The reason I think about you in all of this, you swimming, is because I don't believe in heaven, but instead in another place, and when you surface, in that picture, it looks like you're coming back from that other place. That you have been there, you have seen something good but you haven't been taken by it yet. I think about the girl who was my friend who died. In dying, was she transported? Will water carry her? For a long time back then I saw her face in the clouds, the wet smudge of a face. I do not anymore.

*

On the fifth night, I played frisbee with the younger brother. We had taken up the habit of tossing it around to each other most evenings, of begrudging each other a bad toss or missed catch. I was trying to demonstrate my athletic prowess, being a fast runner and good jumper—this was the way I proved myself in the world, through physical feats rather than spiritual. Melissa said he was flirting with me, but us still not talking, she did not say it like it was anything exciting. I had never been flirted with, so I couldn't be sure. I just wanted to be seen.

“Of course, there can't be one true God,” I said to him, testing the waters, “when there are so many different faiths, different religions claiming the same thing, right?” I was always adding “right?” to the ends of sentences, seeking confirmation everywhere.

“Our God is the only God. Why would you say that?” he said and backed away from me, a literal step back, the easy toothless smile shrinking away.

“Whatever, just kidding,” I said and held up the frisbee. He ran to catch it.

It felt like we tossed the frisbee for a long time, only time was marked by distance: from one tree to the next, from the pavilion to the basketball court. We were far enough apart to make it challenging. It took me a while to understand that we weren't playing, that he was running away. He kept getting smaller, and after a while the frisbee stopped coming back, reminding me that my doubt was something dirty, forbidden, which is an idea I keep coming back to, the way it sticks like a thick caramel hard candy I'm too embarrassed to spit out, the way I chew on my doubt, holding it inside, the way it still grows.

CURSED RING

I think back now on how I was cursed all along, how when I found the ring in the marsh, nestled in the wedge of two tree limbs three months ago, that was when it happened. You can find all sorts of things in the marsh: owl pellets with little intact vole skeletons, license plates, plastic doll legs, whole blue eggs—just floating, very old pennies. The ring shouldn't have been there, but I took it and wore it on my index finger. Sometimes it's warm. It is either the ring constricting or my finger swelling that keeps it secure. Other times, I can take it off, but then I miss the weight, feel off-balanced or light-headed without it on.

Mom noticed it on my hand last week. She said: "Why are you wearing your dad's class ring?"

I told her no I'm not, duh. The duh for emphasis on how wrong she was, mixing up a swamp ring for one of dad's rings, dad being the wild-man that he is now, which is what we call him, a thing that Mom started, but I think we have different meanings of the word "wild-man," or it has evolved into something else. It started with dad in the kitchen peeling a potato one time with a clunky, too-dull butcher knife because nothing else was clean—he just hacked away at it, the finished potatoes coming out square and boxy—and Mom came in smiling, ribbing him—"You *wild* man, you!" she said, singing the words a little bit, and took the potato off his hands, cleaned the peeler that was in the half-empty dishwasher by hand and did it for him, better, correcting him. The thing is, I don't remember what dad said—maybe he said nothing, maybe he slinked away and she didn't see that he was bitter, that he didn't find the whole thing funny.

Then she started saying it again, after he left, like this: “We’re not enough excitement for a wild man like your father.” I think she means it like he’s off doing other things, like going to parties or bars or brushes with danger, these big vague possibilities, things she doesn’t want to or can’t quite name. Dad has been a little bit shrouded in mystery since he left.

But I don’t say wild man like that—I say wild-man like of the wilderness, something animal. There was a way that dad could fixate on nothing, in a dark room, the way his eyes glowed a little bit to let you know he was there at all. I would come out into the living room at night and flick a light on to see, and there would be dad hovering by the window in total darkness, looking out. There and not there. You could turn the light out and go right back to thinking you were alone in the room. Outside, in tents or under the stars in the bed of a truck, pissing on trees, growing out a thick mane of brillo-pad hair, a stick or blade of grass between his lips, his eyes shaded in like men in comic books when recalling a dark past—outside, dad becomes not a dad, but a wild-man, ill-equipped to father, eating potatoes whole with the skins still on.

So when Mom told me, “Yeah-huh, that’s your dad’s ring,” I didn’t believe her. Dad didn’t seem like the type to have rings or to leave them, and how would it have gotten in the marsh? I told her I would show her the crook in the tree where I found it, but she wasn’t interested, didn’t need proof, didn’t think it was that odd at all.

“Maybe he put it there,” she said. “Maybe it got there on its own. Stranger things have happened.”

I keep wearing it because it’s mostly stuck. The ring is bulky with tarnished metal tendrils setting the stone, carved with some freaky inscriptions I can’t read—maybe it is someone’s name, or something that dad tried to scrawl. The blue stone reminds me of an eye,

how vibrant it is—lapis lazuli with streaks that make it look like an iris. The symptoms of being cursed came on slow—gory nightmares, the feeling that a big dog was sitting on my chest when I was laying down, light bulbs going out near me (two in one day!). I have tried to chuck it into a creek (it washed up next to my feet a half mile away) and crush it underneath a pile of textbooks, but it hasn't taken so much as a scratch.

I have yet to tell mom about my condition. She would think I was lying. To be safe, she usually assumes I'm lying anytime I say anything—like when I told her, no, I don't sneak out and walk around the marsh at night (only once), and no, the TV isn't on the loudest setting, it's not even that loud, honestly, I have to use subtitles to even follow what's happening.

But also, I have not told mom about the curse because she might believe me. The last time I had strep throat, I was grounded for a month, held in isolation in my bedroom even after I stopped coughing to keep from contracting more germs. She peered down my throat everyday with a little flashlight, prodding at my tongue with craft sticks, and each time remarked on the swollenness, saying, "Tell me if you ever can't breathe. Wave your hands around so I know." I don't know what she would do to treat a curse—probably, she would go to her "spiritual place," which is just what she calls her bedroom when she stays there for days, where she would look for a cure deep within herself. She would stay there for a long time but because I already know a curse can't be undone without tremendous sacrifice, I know she wouldn't come back with an answer that made her feel better about the situation. My cursedness might even be enough to keep her from ever coming back.

So I won't tell her. Part of being cursed anyway is having to carry the burden of a dark secret, a sort of slogging, like crossing the marsh in waterlogged waders.

Mom is trying to bring me to the Coven for dinner tonight. I have already told her no.

“Coven,” a term fitting of Ms. Skinner’s possible immortality and the rotation of foster girls under her care. They also burn a lot of candles, stout little ones in glass jars that smell like breezes and linen, things that can’t possibly have smells in the wild. Ms. Skinner, the high priestess, posts chore charts under the kitchen sink, and to anyone who refuses or forgets, she’ll remind them with a quick jab: “You’re not my daughter” or “You’re no daughter of mine,” slightly different phrases—the first stinging just with its truth, recalling some past of abandonment, the second isolating that girl from the other girls, implying that the other girls are daughters but not this one. Ms. Skinner always knows which jab to deliver. They have songs that they sing all together. They hula hoop in the living room, sometimes in unison, their concentration rivaling a sort of occultism.

Mom has said before, in reprimanding me for being “too harsh” or “mean” to the girls (when all I ever do is hide in the coat closet and grab their ankles or sometimes criticize their theatrics, which I judge as shrill and unproductive displays), that it takes a little bit of magic (or love, words she uses equally to describe the same thing) to look out for that many unhinged girls. She says it like she was never one of them even though she was, as if she isn’t still attached. Mom shadows the house, reenters their world as often as she can as a role model. Since she has no daughters and I “have too much angst, too much bad energy,” these girls are the best receptacles for mom’s specific set of knowledge, which is mostly dating advice, I think.

In my room, I stay very quiet with my eyes closed, tensing and untensing different muscle groups, trying to channel some energy from the curse to make mom forget I’m here.

But mom is resistant. “Are you getting ready to go? You should wear your dad’s old suit jacket,” she yells up the stairs. This is typical behavior, mom wanting me simultaneously to be

like dad, a fill in dad, and also acting blasé when dad is mentioned, telling me to act less like him. I don't answer.

“You'd look so nice if you tried!” she calls up.

Which I hear as: “Try being less ugly.” Which is good advice because I *am* ugly. Or a lot of people think that, which I can tell because just last week a stranger, a woman who played in a bluegrass band, who actually sang really well—like, you wouldn't have expected it to look at her because she had a square face and heavy eyebrows, but when she opened her mouth a sweetness came out of her that was syrupy and smooth, not grating or overly twangy like a lot of singers—but anyway, she dropped her harmonica by accident while the band tuned up for the show. I reached onto the stage to pick it up for her. She slid a piece of hair across her eyes to look at me and thank me, I guess, but then started coughing instead, almost wheezing. She couldn't stop. She had to step away from me or else she probably would have died from staring at me, at the slope of my forehead, my eyes which give off a creepy vibe, one clear blue and the other swamp gas green (one each, actually, from mom and dad, like I am split down the middle by each of their DNA contributions), the colors even more defined, I've noticed, since the curse, accentuating my serial killer cheekbones. If I had touched her by accident, the curse probably would have been enough to ruin her voice.

I guess I deserved it. I was only at the blue grass concert to stalk Belle, a Coven girl, the only one who didn't completely hate me growing up, who actually may have even liked me, in the way two kids in the first colony on Mars would have to like each other, being the only two kids on Mars.

“It's in the wash!” I yell back to Mom. A lie.

“Wear something collared, anyway,” she yells back. I’m wearing an outer-space T-shirt, the one that prominently features Andromeda. People always think it’s the Milky Way, which I think is a brand of egotism, or ethnocentrism but to an intergalactic proportion.

I’m not going to dinner. I don’t want to see Belle.

I open my bedroom window, and even though it’s on the second floor, I can jump down onto the AC unit without too much bodily damage. Sometimes Mom is so spaced out she doesn’t notice when I leave the house. Other times, she’s on high alert. “I was always losing you when you were a toddler,” she admitted to me once, whispering so dad, in the other room, couldn’t hear, like she was keeping her bad mothering from him. “You would crawl into the dryer, wedge yourself into bookshelves, wander into the neighbor’s shed. Always sitting in these places so stoically, very still.” I remember the inside of the dryer, the gray scuffs, the roundness, like sitting in a tube—like, nowhere else do you ever get to sit in a tube. I guess that was the appeal. Whenever dad caught me in there, he would threaten to shut the door.

Looking out the window, the AC unit seems farther away than usual. It kicks on right before I’m about to jump, rattling my window frame and sending a whirl of cool air in through the vent. I wedge myself into the frame, straddling it, one leg swinging out. I can see the stick fort I made out of a tree I chopped down when dad was still around to steal a hatchet from. The fort is almond shaped, almost too small for me anymore. The inside is furnished with dead ferns Belle collected when we were kids.

Belle and I used to look for stuff in the Coven backyard. We used to be convinced there were bones in the dirt and that some of them were human, having been murdered by a stranger and dumped in the Coven yard in the stealth of night, the perfect place to dump a body because 1) the house was always so loud no one would hear the shovel scraping the earth and 2) it would

have taken a lot of time to interview each girl as a suspect, which would have given the murderer lots of time to flee. We thought the victim would come back and haunt us or curse us, in a similar way that dad's class ring is now cursed. Curses, we thought, were forged in rage or regret, powerful emotions or old grudges. We thought the curse would let loose an ancient rage upon the Coven from disturbing the bones. But all we ever found was a small cat fibula, which Belle carved a hole into so she could wear it around her neck on a string.

That was only a few years ago, but Belle acts like it was a century. Recently, she has transformed into a different girl—I wonder if she is becoming a version of the mom or dad who didn't raise her but whose genes lay dormant in her for the first decade or so of her life, and now they're bursting out like a sickness. Like there are these other people inside her telling her to demur, to walk in a straight line. She wears a lot more makeup now and uses a curling iron on her hair. At school, she travels with a herd of other girls who all mostly look the same and who are all generally mindless. She doesn't wear the cat fibula necklace anymore, since entering high school.

I glance down at my knuckles, at the bulky ring there. I could toss it down into the AC unit, listen to the fans grind, only to find it whole again by the vent or propping up a wobbly chair. The only thing I haven't tried yet is giving the ring away, but maybe that's the only way to break the curse, to trick someone else into taking it, like one of the younger Coven girls who would be stupid enough to want it, who congregate around anything shiny and novel like ravens. But then what if the recipient has to be stronger than me? What if I have to be cunning?

If that's the case, the ring will have to go to Belle. There's no other way.

I climb back into my room, shut the window. I can't find a comb so I flatten my hair with the palms of my hands before going downstairs.

*

If you look up symptoms of curses online, you won't find anything conclusive. *The Lord of the Rings* wiki isn't exactly the most useful source if you don't live in Middle Earth. Some websites even say lapis lazuli is a healing crystal?! I call BS. Before I found dad's ring, I was a mind-your-own-business kind of guy. I wouldn't say I had any enemies. I wore my sweatshirt hood up over my head a lot, the drawstrings pulled tightly around my face so I could only see out a small hole until teachers told me to knock it off. Belle thought it was funny.

But now I can't stop antagonizing, the same way dad used to act toward the Jehovah's Witnesses who knocked on the door, putting a hand on their shoulder the way he would a good friend, being really friendly and a little bit menacing, leaning in and whispering something that would always make them back away and scurry to their vans. I used to admire that, almost. I always wanted to know what he had said.

At the grocery store last week, some kid I used to hang out with who's still in middle school said hi to me. I barked at him, heaving rabid barks. I thought it was hilarious. Sometimes I fall asleep in class because of the weird dreams I keep having that wake me up in the middle of the night—graphic beheadings, guillotine style, Reign of Terror era. When a teacher asks a question, I do whatever I can to think of an answer that relates to Marie Antoinette so I can describe the way she was beheaded. For instance, the functions of photosynthesis: trees use photosynthesis, the higher the tree, the more sunlight it gets, high trees, high treason, Marie Antoinette was beheaded for high treason.

Belle mostly pretends she doesn't know me now that we're in high school and I'm cursed.

Mom is wrapped up in an Italian shawl standing by the front door. The way she holds it around herself makes it look like she's in a beach towel, recovering from the rush of a water slide. The fabric is taut around her bony shoulders.

"Ready?" she asks.

"So *not*."

She gives me a disappointed look, tightening her thin lips around her teeth. "You're wearing the space shirt," she says. She ponders this only for a second, maybe weighing the pros and cons: be late to dinner or show up with an embarrassment of a son? She must accept me as her embarrassment because she looks at her watch under the excessive folds of her shawl and tells me to move it.

I think about Belle in the car, smoothing over the lapis lazuli stone in my thumb and finger. It was last year that we started jokingly calling the foster home the "Coven," back when I wasn't cursed and Belle didn't mind being seen hanging out with me.

"It seems almost like an injustice that we aren't witches," she had said.

"What, you and me, or...?" I asked.

"No, stupid—the house, us girls. Ms. Skinner. We should at least be able to cast spells."

"You can learn Wiccan..."

"No, I don't believe in that," she said.

But we indulged the idea anyway, Belle especially who started making voodoo dolls of her foster sisters and Ms. Skinner. She made one of me and showed it to me to remind me that I wasn't safe or that my safety was only conditional, which wasn't anything alarming because I knew my status in the Coven: I had permission to be there, but if I said or did anything stupid,

they had permission to throw me out and rip up my Magic cards. I was not a real foster sibling—unlike all of them I had a mom, a bedroom to myself, a house to go back to.

Belle lined up the voodoo dolls of the younger girls in a neat row underneath the TV while we babysat them. She kept a sharp pin in the collar of her shirt and dangled it over the heads of the dolls when she had to restore order. Every now and then a girl screamed, claiming to have been pricked, but as far as I knew Belle never pierced any of the dolls. I sometimes pretended to mutter spells, rolling my eyes back into my head and garbling words in a dry rasp. I Sharpied stars and triangles and shit onto pieces of paper, chalked symbols onto the wall while the girls were playing. No one had as much influence as Belle, though.

She isn't into all of that stuff anymore. Before, she could always be found, usually in the basement, painting her nails in the poor lighting, reading vampire novels on her tablet. The underneath of her hair used to be dyed bright white, which was kind of thrilling under a black light. I don't resent her for bleaching the whole thing blonde, but it looks so ordinary now, so boring. Maybe I do resent her a little.

Both of us being the same age, Belle and me never babysat each other, never had to yell at each other to keep off the stove or to wash our hands after touching a dead bird. Isn't there something to be said for that, or at least for us being the ones to instill order and discipline in the foster home? Wasn't that something we did together?

Mom has her face almost against the windshield, peering out as she drives. She can only process one or two things at a time, I have discovered through careful observation of Mom engaging in daily tasks. Like in the morning while she's pouring milk in the cereal and a hair falls out into the bowl, it's all she'll be able to concentrate on. She won't even fish it out—she just stares at it for a long time, defeated. When driving, she crosses over slightly into the

shoulder whenever there's opposing traffic. She's very safe but almost to the point of being not safe. She could be run off the road at the slightest provocation.

"What's going on in school with you, anyway?" she asks.

"I'm still attending."

"But what's *happening* there?"

I try to think of something really good, something funnier than the crap I usually make up about being suspended or using drugs. "They finally let me out of forced isolation so I can see sunlight again during my five minute lunch break," I say, "and then it's back to work in the factory. My lung disease is only festering in its early stages. I probably have ten years before I die young if I don't get crushed by heavy machinery. You should really be calling your state senator about child labor laws, Mom."

"Stop. You don't even know real suffering," Mom says.

"I don't know who gave Mrs. Saxon a leather strap, but she's become a tyrant of a guidance counselor. I'll show you the bruises at dinner." I can hardly keep from laughing, snorting and wheezing between words.

"You're not funny at all."

"You haven't laughed in two centuries."

Mom gives a small sort of "hmp" that doesn't come out of her mouth but her nose, jolting her body with it. I wipe my eyes, teary from laughing, with the back of my hand. Neither of us says anything for the rest of the drive.

When we pull up, Ms. Skinner's house is bathed in the glow of icicle lights lining the roof even though it hasn't been Christmas for eight months. It's a two-story ranch, a box of a house, white siding covering the top half, dirty brick on the bottom, with symmetrical windows

in two rows. The window on the top far right has blinds pulled half closed so that it's almost winking but in a sick or half-deranged way with pink light oozing out in the bottom.

There are play kitchens and garages outside and on the driveway, so we can't pull in all the way. Mom pushes her door open and knocks over a scooter, straightens it. Passing the plastic kitchen toy, she taps on it and says, "I bought them this one. Brand new." I don't know if it's true or even whether or not she thinks it's true—sometimes she remembers things that aren't real but that align with the story of herself she has in her head, which is that of a sort of Godsend, a helper in times of crisis.

Ms. Skinner pulls us inside, shouldering a hug from Mom unenthusiastically. "Don't let them skeeters in," she says.

I've always been afraid of Ms. Skinner, her eyes sunken into doughy pink folds, hair short and thick enough that if it were on someone else, like one of her foster girls, I wouldn't think twice about pulling it. She's always wearing pink cotton tanks, wide shorts, things that don't go together and have never looked good on their own, but she can't be mistaken for someone who gives a shit about appearance.

She frowns at me in the doorway, and I wonder if she knows I'm cursed, if she can smell it on me. I have a theory that the magic of the curse is antithetical to the Coven magic. I think the ring constricts a little. A snarl builds inside me, and I have to break eye contact with Ms. Skinner to keep it from coming out. When dad was around, he would never come to these kinds of gatherings—"pack of crazy bitches," he once said in earshot of Mom who knelt on the floor of the living room organizing the CD rack after not being able to find the one she was looking for. The Guns n' Roses one was in her hands. She snapped it without looking up. Then Metallica. Then Slipknot. Then she went to her room and shut the door.

Or worse, Ms. Skinner found out about what happened on Thursday, when I stalked Belle at the blue grass concert.

Mom starts singing in the other room, unprovoked, something almost like an opera but much worse. I've heard her sing it around the house before—I think it's the theme song of something she watches on TV but a very loose interpretation of the melody. It distracts Ms. Skinner from her assessment of me before she can detect the curse. I am safe for now.

I find a spot in the den amongst the younger girls, in the middle of the sofa where the cushions are so warped my tailbone rubs against the frame. Mom's voice echoes from the kitchen, a trilling sort of nuisance that Ms. Skinner mutters and coughs over. Mom laughs loudly at something Ms. Skinner says, and I think it's to prove to me that she can laugh, that my accusations in the car were baseless. The girls in the den hide and retrieve Styrofoam packing peanuts around the room from a spilled-over box, so engaged they don't notice me. They are more carefree since Belle has retired the voodoo dolls. Belle is probably upstairs in her room, the one with the pink window and half-raised blinds.

The change came over Belle gradually, its own sort of curse. She stopped wearing the cat fibula necklace mid-summer. When I told her not to park her bike outside on a full moon, she told me to stop being superstitious. But who were we if we weren't superstitious? We made things up like that, acting like we believed or actual literal believing. Sometimes superstitions are just inside jokes, but other times, you don't want to mess with it. Her real mom made contact late summer, started calling every other week, even on a Friday the thirteenth, which I told her would be bad luck, but she told me to go home. Her mom sent her a box of glitter hand lotions and body balms. So now she doesn't even smell like Belle.

Now, she wears leather boots with pointed toes and talks about riding horses, spouting vocabulary like “stirrups” and “girth” when she’s with her new friends so they know she’s one of them. I’ve seen them by their lockers in school. Horse girls are the worst kind of girls—they are easily stirred, insist that horses are better than men, rely on their parents’ bank accounts, and are willing to dig muck out of a stomping horse’s foot but eating a pickle that only touched the ground for a second is “gross.” Belle is an imposter in their world. She forged the identity out of nothing, showing up the first day of high school exclaiming she was new, unbuttoning the top button of her pink embroidered shirt and lamenting her days of horse ownership, a lie. They loved her at once—she was simple and easy going, unlike the complex, rigid girl she was in middle school, a girl they didn’t notice and couldn’t have remembered.

I think transferring the ring to her will level out our energies, will ground her in her old Belle self and strip away some of dad’s wildness from me. It’s like the old tradition of giving a girl a class ring because you like her, but very different, ensconced in ritual instead. Maybe she will want to have a ceremony once she understands this curse I have come across.

I liked her better when she was an outlier. I liked her gloominess. I keep trying to find it again, which is why last Thursday I followed her to the bluegrass show.

I don’t like to think about what I did on Thursday. I blame my acting out on the curse, which triggered my rage. I followed Belle and her friends to the concert. It wasn’t far from the school, at an outdoor amphitheater, a small stage down the hill from the playground where we all watched Midnight Movies as kids and tried to hide from our parents in the wooden boat when they came to pick us up. The boat was still there, looking moldy. Before the concert, everyone sat or stood on the lawn with blankets and lawn chairs forming little clumps of people that everyone belonged to except for me. It was mostly kids in my grade but some upperclassmen too

knocking back beers and crushing the cans against their knees, squatting by the stage and talking up the singers. Belle's clump was near the center, their faces shaded in tilted cowgirl hats or wide-rimmed sunhats, white and beige trim, fake-rustic; removed from their cowboy hat origins, these hats had never seen dirt and were so flimsy and neat like grocery store birthday cakes, I wondered if the girls placed them in round hat boxes when they got home or if they just bought new ones periodically.

I stood in the front by the stage and sometimes waved at people I didn't know to give the impression that I belonged. I bought three cans of Coke to make it seem like I had people to give them to, but once the music started, I planted myself off to the side where I could get a good view of Belle and her friends, going through each Coke myself and crushing them into tight cylinders, stomping each one with my foot. Belle's dancing was shy and uninspired. The other girls held hands in the air for the slow songs, sometimes all of them holding hands in a chain, raised above their heads in a cult-like performance, summoning the Creator to take them home to the Great Stable in the sky where sweet baby Jesus sang country music ballads. They kicked their feet for the fast songs. At one point Belle climbed up onto another girl's shoulders and I couldn't help but laugh, a fake-retching kind of laugh I had perfected. Who did she think she was, a cheerleader?

I noticed my fingers swelling like they were infected, redness coming over my index finger where I wore the ring. My veins looked different, like they belonged to someone else. Disassociating from your own body could also be a symptom of being cursed—I didn't know, but it sounded logical. I crushed the last Coke can and tossed it at Belle's back but missed and hit the girl carrying her in the face. At first it was supposed to seem like a joke: I thought she would look over her shoulder and say, "Oh, haha, there's my old friend Silas being an idiot." She used

to never mind that I was an idiot or that I believed in things like curses. The friend cried out and staggered, almost dropping Belle, who clutched her cowgirl hat to keep it from falling and getting trampled.

Some people had seen me do it, but I didn't want to run away because all I could think of was Belle with the icy silver streaks under her black hair and the time in middle school when she put vodka in a boy's can of Mountain Dew so he would let loose and dance with her, and then how he still didn't so she danced by herself in a corner, near invisible but for the gyrating glow stick necklaces. I hadn't felt betrayed then, even though it was another guy's Mountain Dew she spiked, but I did feel betrayed at the concert, seeing the horse girl incarnation of Belle. And weren't there other options for her—if she had to change—that could have included me even a little? Couldn't she have become the quiet nice girl that drew pencil portraits really well or the moderately-smart-at-science girl who everyone wanted in their group projects? Couldn't she have been liked by others while keeping me in her peripherals? If it weren't for Belle's rejection, maybe I would have been with her instead of in the marsh that day I found dad's ring.

“She's a fake!” I threw another can. “A phony!”

The friend yelled in a shrill voice, loud enough for the singer to falter. Belle had fallen off her shoulders—I thought I could see her lying on the ground, but I didn't let up.

“Belle isn't even her name—it's Bellatrix Bamboozle!” Not true, but I felt at the time it brought my point home, to reveal her as an intruder, a weirdo. I threw another can.

I thought she just needed a push, a reminder of who she used to be and that she would snap out of it, not all at once, but over time. I stood on my toes, straining to see where she was, if she had found me yet. We hadn't spoken in months at that point. But she was gone, having disappeared from the crowd like Coven girls had the tendency of doing, like Mom did when she

went too far inside herself and couldn't be found for hours or days. Belle wasn't anywhere at the concert. After taking a barrage of cans to my own skull and a kid calling me queer for wearing a ring, I snuck around the park as it was getting dark, watching her group of friends who seemed to have forgotten about her, dancing with one less link in their chain. I searched the moldy boat on the playground, climbing the tall metal slide to get an aerial view. No Belle.

Even though I don't like horse-loving, girlish hat-wearing Belle, I still think there's another person in there, zipped up tight under her skin. It will take a careful unraveling to get her out.

I unwedge myself from the couch to go upstairs. Mom sings for me to help in the kitchen, but I pretend I can't hear her, having already told her before that I won't take commands that are sung.

Belle used to be one of the girls mom fixated on, administering some intense mentoring her way. Mom would go over to the house without me for lunch bringing honey, lavender, and spices—"to improve the state of mind." Belle never told me about what they did, but I remember mom once saying that Belle was "a tense girl." I didn't know what that meant, but the way mom said the words, it sounded like praise.

Upstairs, I knock on her door. No answer.

"It's me," I say.

"So what?"

"So, I'm opening the door," I announce as I open it.

She won't look at me, so all I see are her blonde curls illuminated by the pink lamp in the window as she scrolls and scrolls through Facebook pictures on the bulky, sticker-covered shared computer. She hugs one knee to her chest, the other foot tapping a stack of books under the desk.

“Sure, go right ahead. Why don’t you throw some things, too? Ransack the room while you’re at it?” Her voice is scary deadpan.

When she turns around, she looks almost angelic, but then not—the glow I thought I saw is actually sweat, the pinkness in her cheeks, rosacea and blotchiness from acne scarring. Her eyes breed dark circles. She yawns without covering her mouth. Maybe the curse makes me see her clearer, bringing out the rough edges that I used to think were unique, ethereal.

“Three minutes before I scream and summon the Coven to rip every single hair out of your head and dump you in the cellar,” she says. “What do you want?”

I’m flattered by the specificity of the violence she wishes upon me.

“I brought something for you. As an apology.”

She sticks her hand out. “Then give it to me. It better be money.”

The ring is no longer constricting. It is loose when I wiggle it off my finger and feel the smooth stone glide through my fingers as I drop it into her hand.

“What’s wrong with it?” she asks, peering into the blue stone.

“Nothing,” I lie.

“Tell me.”

The curse may not lift if I give it to her under false circumstances, so I tell her. “It makes the wearer undesirable and kind of brainless. Other symptoms too—craving raw meat, seeing faces in dark shadows, that kind of thing. I found it in a marsh, but it used to be my dad’s.”

“That sounds made up, Silas.”

I shrug—better she doesn’t believe, or she won’t take it.

She sticks it on her thumb. It fits snugly. “I’m not going to let it curse me, but nice try.”

It's true—she'll probably be able to resist it. Her cowgirl friends will probably even think the ring is cool. She can make up an older boyfriend and tell them he gave it to her—maybe that's even what mom did if dad let her wear it. I feel the curse wearing off, a sort of unclenching, the way it releases the veins in my arms. My brain starts rewiring. I consider lying on the floor and convulsing to show Belle that it's working, that the curse is exiting my body, to show her this thing I've been plagued with is serious and dark, beyond my control.

But I don't. Being careful not to touch her, I lean over and kiss the lapis lazuli on her thumb and back away quickly, not letting her tell me I'm weird or gross, pretending she's in on the ritual with me because maybe she is, and when I turn my back, she'll say some made up incantations to rid herself of the curse, spells she'll keep from me. I'll sit patiently in the dark later and wait for the prick of a needle, her curse to me through the voodoo doll.

THE PRINCESS IN THE CATTLE BARON'S TOWER

“You have come for your Mistress Darling, but that beautiful bird is no longer sitting in her nest,
nor is she singing any more.”
—Grimms' Fairy Tales

The day the Galleghers sold everything and moved into the former estate of the cattle baron, T.C. Wilcox, in Wyoming, Lisa turned seventeen, an age she wore with constantly knitted eyebrows, high, rigid ponytails (to avoid brushing), and cutting glares. She bought a pair red cowboy boots at a truck stop on the way there as a joke-homage to the Wild West. The Galleghers and Lisa, separate units—Lisa identifying less over the years with her adoptive parents, shimmying out of the old slips Mrs. Gallegher had her wear under flared dresses, flinging shiny buckled shoes out the window in gradual but outward displays of rejection—all agreed anyway to the move. Inside the act was a feeling of fleeing, of dispatching to an older time to escape the trouble Lisa had started, a trouble that was not spoken of in the car ride there or at any point after they arrived.

The dead cattle baron's mansion, planted on the crest of a hill, suggested impermeability. Before, Lisa would have thought it was inhabitable, that you could see and want extravagant things but could not crawl inside them, could not be in your own skin and cohabit something ancient at once. Later, she would know this was true. Later, the mansion, a streak of wildness, would plume like a red stain on a white blouse. It would ravage and ravish.

But in the beginning, it held the colors and angles of an old, forgotten style. Something seemed mildly off about the windows. In the corner of your eye, you could see things pitching

forward, propelled from a window or balcony, things shaped like blossoming lilies or wide skirts. Underneath the poor landscaping of scrappy rose bushes leaching onto the porch and the few window AC units jutting out like tumors was the shape of a Romanesque revival. Romanesque. This Lisa knew from her former homeschool tutor who once asked her to match architectural styles to pictures of houses for a pop quiz.

Before, everything in the Galleghers' world was ordinary, pristinely maintained. At dinner, they set out cream-colored cloth napkins, propped up into starched tents. They kept tubs of bleach under the kitchen for underwear, bathroom tiles, and porcelain surfaces. Mrs. Gallegher carried a toothbrush in her purse in order to brush three times a day. Mr. Gallegher wore a set of matching PJs at night, baby-blue and pinstriped with a black mask to keep the night in, an alarm clock set to 6:15 a.m. to welcome the morning. Of course they gardened but only square bushes, trimmed to maintain shape, and planters of flowers pruned weekly. Mrs. Gallegher chose the cattle baron's house to resettle in after uncovering his journal in their very own attic, the baron belonging to her lineage, a deep pull from her line. She read the baron's journal the way a mother would read from a nightly devotional or a bedtime story, often and searching for truth, turning the book at an angle to follow the slanted script.

"Let this be a lesson on living like a pioneer woman, wanting only what the good earth provides," Mrs. Gallegher had said from the passenger seat, concentrating on her knitting, needles clacking over every bump in the dirt back roads.

"Think of the Victorian dresses," she went on. "We'll buy you vintage ones, find a tea parlor to wear them to."

"Or, I can be Annie Oakley," Lisa said, "find someone to reload my rifles."

Mrs. Gallegher only laughed. "Wouldn't that be a riot!"

Everything packed in the SUV, the towers of pillows, jackets, and hard shell suitcases sandwiching Lisa on either side, and everything in the UHaul following closely behind, would never be completely unpacked, would be rejected by the house, leaving Lisa to stew in the car in one of those last lucid moments, her resentment still small and unnamed.

Mrs. Gallegher recited baron facts the whole way there:

“The baron’s wife held teas in the parlor for little orphan girls.”

“The baron personally slit the throat of the first longhorn to christen his pasture.”

“The baron had a handlebar mustache that made all the women swoon.”

*

Hardly anyone crossed paths during the first few days in the house. Peering through the spaces between the banisters at the top of the curving grand staircase, Lisa would sometimes catch the Galleghers bumping into boxes in the entryway. Mrs. Gallegher, on the phone with a hair stylist, slid a fingernail under the tape of one of the boxes, trying to slit an opening there, but only broke her nail, a deep break. She drew in a sharp breath. A few drops of blood pooled on the tape.

“I want something, ah, *classic*,” she said into the receiver, “With tight curls in the back, done up in the front. Can you do that for me?”

Cupping the bleeding nail inside her palm, she wandered past the boxes without opening any, still struggling to put into words her specific request for her hair. Even in those first days, Lisa noticed a change in Mrs. Gallegher. Always feminine, she had never been one for frill or excess—she valued a neat, streamlined look with scarves and slacks, casual enough to be stepping off of a sailboat but wealthy enough that emblems stitched into shirt cuffs and collars would not go unnoticed. But since the move, she had started wearing cameos and bulky rings Lisa had never seen before and arranging her hair in stiff, elaborate up-dos.

Sometimes Mr. Gallegher would pass by the boxes in the entryway too, considering them. He would pick up a smaller one, perhaps with some intention to open it but then stack it on top of another box to clear a path. He moved things around, organized them into neat piles but then grew distracted by the splayed cowhide stretched across the still unfurnished living room floor. He kneeled next to it with his cup of coffee in one hand, patting the hide with the other. “Honey, have you felt this?” He called out to whoever could hear and then rubbed his cheek against the remains of the dead cow.

Lisa lurked from her perch on the staircase for days, watching the Galleghers come and go, feeling rebellious, not wanting to know or like the house. She wrote drafts of letters on blue chevron-printed stationary to her former tutor, pretending things were the way they used to be. *Dear Mr. Ryan*, she would begin each one. She talked about moving, about the Galleghers’ plans for restoring the house, about how the walls smelled funny, like dead rats, and how the cattle baron’s life-sized portrait was eerie and not cute. *Someone so unattractive shouldn’t have had his portrait commissioned*, she complained in one draft, knowing she would never send that one, not wanting to come across as snobbish.

She wanted to ask, *Will I see you again?* She included the question in some variation at the end of each note. Sometimes she even tucked them in addressed envelopes but never sealed them.

School consisted of a whiteboard with two erasers, Mrs. Gallegher’s principle chair—oak and rotund, a long stick for pointing at maps, and Mr. Ryan, when he came, with a briefcase of laminated study guides, standing in the front of the room, never seated. Sometimes she would call him to ask homework questions, designed to lead to personal questions, inquiries about his weekend, innocent questions with meditated answers—he spoke with pauses before his “wells,”

referenced strolls he took at night alone. Since they had met alone for the first time in spring, she had the memory of flesh to prescribe to her fantasies, a nose and shoulders, and the textures of fabrics he wore, cotton sweater and canvas shoes.

Even before the move, there had been no one else to write with, to call, to invite over to the house. Mrs. Gallegher's first lessons at the whiteboard were in rhymes: "Would you go with luck, a fool you'll be when stuck" or "Three chickens left the yard, a stew they'll be tomorra." The ways she banished the rest of the world from Lisa who was not quite beautiful but who prodded people with an intensity that was unwelcome. Grade school teachers sent her to the corner of the room when she would spiral through extended lines of questioning, unable to catch her breath, murmuring Mrs. Gallegher's rhymes to herself with her face to the wall. Other children became flustered by her insistence on knowing all about them, drilling them with questions about paternity and existence—*Who gave birth to you? Who was there when you came out? Where do your parents sleep at night? If they disappeared, who would you be?* The Galleghers homeschooled her to make the problem disappear. Lisa did learn, gradually, that it wasn't about asking the most questions but about asking the sharpest, most rattling ones.

After the third day of no one touching the boxes at the bottom of the stairs, Lisa crept down to inspect them herself. They contained mostly things she knew, even some finger paint art the Galleghers had saved from her childhood in a sweet gesture, no matter how dusty and crinkled the art became. And other things that she had never seen before, things that seemed to belong to the baron's house, tokens, perhaps of *his* life, in disguise, with the Galleghers' ignored things. Had they even noticed the angelic porcelain women, the milkmaids, the stoneware engraved in cobalt blue, the bottles and tins, foggy and rusted?

The tea set emanated the richest loneliness, the bottoms of the tiny cups sticky with forgotten honey. She could imagine the over-sweetened brown liquid sweltering in there. No golden trim, only minor flourishes, yellow and pinkish flowers, petals falling off, inked in with a light hand—a modest set. A tea set, maybe, kept by an old former homesteading women who, allowing herself to be frivolous, barely dunked the tea bag before discarding it, swirled fresh cream from the Holstein she kept in the yard and sipped with dry chapped lips, while the other cups sat in the cupboard, unused. This tea set was now chipped, one of the cups cracked down to the handle but still intact. Lisa unwrapped each piece, arranged them on the bottom stair and admired the way no two were alike. *These were the bad china*, she speculated, *the set no one loved*. She imagined a wife, a woman like Mrs. Gallegher but with a corseted bodice taking these cups out for the guests she didn't care about impressing. The design had since faded into pollen yellow, the white underneath a matte gray.

Lisa dumped the statuettes and stoneware onto the floor, packed the tea set safely back into the box and took it upstairs with her. She arranged the pieces on her windowsill so she could see the sun fill them in the afternoon, yellowing them, and later, when she looked at them again, she faulted her memory at thinking they had once been so dirty. They looked alright. Not spectacular but just a little bit shiny. By the time she went to bed, she could no longer find the crack and figured it must have been a stray hair sticking to the porcelain.

*

The baron appeared in paintings all over the house: equestrians, sitting portraits, close-up studies of his face, even pastorals, which did not house the baron's form directly, but Lisa could sense his presence in them, a character off to the side, dictating instructions to the painter. Already, she felt like she knew intimately the slope and twist of the baron's mustache, the slight angle of his

wide hat, and the pouches of skin under his eyes. Only one portrait, a notably smaller one, included a wife. She looked a little bit older than him and, posed on the staircase, she stood a step above as if just walking down to join the picture, her appearance an after thought. The stair made her look taller than him. The Galleghers must have brought the portraits out of storage. They only unpacked his things—a portrait in each of the important rooms, candles and gas lanterns at every bedside, quilts replacing fleece throws.

These appearances seemed like they should have been enough, but then the baron started coming to dinner in the shape of a sort of floating diamond with soft edges, a muttering body of light. The first time Lisa saw him this way, she thought he was a pair of headlights in the window, but no one ever drove past their house at night. He would stand outside on the balcony, peering out at something, his face indistinguishable, hazy in the glow. She didn't recognize him until he came to dinner, which was always taken in the formal dining room, usually after eight with the sun setting over their meal. The Galleghers lit candles instead of turning on lamps.

The baron, or maybe not the baron himself, but his light, the glow of his form, presided over meals when he felt like joining them. The baron, an abstract thing who still held shape and character. He only made eye contact with Lisa, cheeky smiles from across the table—the same kinds of smiles she used to look for in Mr. Ryan when he held up his laminates.

“Can't you see that?” Lisa asked, unable to keep the secret, if it was one, to herself. She nodded to the head of the table.

The Galleghers blinked, their gazes finally resting on the centerpiece. “It's a candelabra, honey,” Mrs. Gallegher said.

“Just you and me, dear.” The baron winked. It was a moment of lucidity for him, of awareness to the present moment, the one that held Lisa and him on a shared plane. She

understood from this that the baron was holding them there in that space, that he could have appeared to anyone, but he chose her. She winked back, remembering the signal she shared with Mr. Ryan when Mrs. Gallagher excused herself from the room to make lunch, for when she couldn't help herself and started asking personal questions, straying from the lesson—he would chew his thumbnail to warn her when Mrs. Gallagher came back. When they met in person, he didn't say hi right away, bit his thumbnail just to scare her a bit.

The shape of the baron solidified at the table—she could see his nuanced form, the tails of his evening coat that he would lift before sitting, the asymmetry of his face, one eye slightly bigger than the other, his shoulders pushed back in perfect posture. But then he retreated into a past self, forgetting about her, muttering about the steak cuts, trying through the whole meal to summon a servant who wasn't there for another glass of rye. Every few minutes, he would look directly at her, raise a glass, and say, “Ah, I suppose you're ready for the tour! Let's have it, then...” He would get lost in his speech, muttering truncated phrases:

“The longhorn cows, yes feral, the longhorns. Skinned one, you say?”

“You know they might be buried underneath, you know what? Buried, burned. Underneath.”

A string of cackling.

Then he grew sad, his light dulling—he turned grayer, more opaque, and his hair faded from black to the color of a flickering storm cloud. The sunken eye became absorbed almost entirely into his face, scar tissue cropping up around it. The cattle baron thrilled Lisa, the mystery of him, the evolution of his moods.

The next day he visited her for lunch, which she ate alone in the living room, legs crossed under the coffee table. They both looked at his painting, but Lisa imagined instead that he was

looking at her, from behind. She liked to think of him as watching, as knowing her secret life, her orphaned past, the vagrant mother who had left her. She wanted to seem interesting to him.

She turned around to see him more clearly, and for a moment, Lisa wondered if she had been mistaken all along—there was no way the ghost withering in the entryway could be the same man as the baron in the portrait. Versions of him existed, some immaculate, others—shedding. Lisa could think of no better word than “shedding” to describe the way pieces fell away from his form, a crust of his translucent skin peeling away, his suit coat rotting, hair sprawling as if steeped in humidity.

“What's up with you?” she asked.

He huffed, and a button came off his jacket, disintegrating into nothing. She knew he could return from these spells, that she could see him later, and he would be restored, more like the painting than ever, but she didn't know how to bring him back, only that she had to be the one to do it.

“I'm wearing braids for you. Isn't that how women used to wear their hair?” She had looked up online how to French braid, just for this occasion, in case they would meet that day. She also wore a men's cowboy shirt, black and embroidered with red poinsettias, that she found in an unpacked box in a bedroom that wasn't hers. It seemed vintage but certainly not antique—not authentic. She meant to lightly poke fun of him by wearing it, to share a laugh over it.

But when he looked at her, it was as if he were meeting her for the first time again. She suspected he didn't remember her name. “Indians,” he said finally. “Only uncivilized Indian girls wore their hair that way.”

“We don't call indigenous people that anymore,” Lisa corrected, remembering Mr. Ryan's map of Native American tribes.

“Go on upstairs and put on that lavender crepe affair from the back of the armoire, dear. I never see you in that anymore, Eleanor. Why?”

Eleanor. Lisa had never heard the name, and she couldn't respond, not knowing what Eleanor would have said, unable to encode the script of a wife. She looked around for another flash of light, a flickering diamond of a person to reveal herself to be Eleanor, who would whisper in her ear what to say next. The baron looked away, gazing again at his portrait, seeming to forget she was there.

And then there was no sound, only the residual loneliness that soaked the house, amplifying the stillness, the oldness and strangeness of claw-footed chairs and nowhere-leading doors sitting with Lisa when she let it, when she was too preoccupied to keep it from coming in. Which had become her job. The Galleghers married the silence, became a part of it. Or, they didn't know about it. Sometimes, it did feel like a secret, a thing too big to comprehend and a thing she tried hard to keep from them anyway, a thing they would ultimately say was only in her, not in the house, if she told them.

The baron slipped back into it without another word. Lisa finished her mac and cheese lunch, tonguing the undercooked shapes—cartoon character shapes, indiscernible in the cheese.

“Ah, there's our man.”

Mr. Gallegher came down the stairs. He stood behind Lisa, gazing at the painting for a moment before wandering off.

Mrs. Gallegher came next.

She wore a twill suit—orange, an uncanny shade of halved papaya—with a small flower print and white trim lining the hem of her skirt and front jacket, white, high collar pinned with an unfamiliar broach, one that never existed prior in Mrs. Gallegher's jewelry box. Lisa knew this

because she had gone through every tiny gold-trimmed drawer of the box when she was thirteen, pulling every long necklace (all simple, little variation) off of their hooks, sticking heavy rings from the ceramic plate on her fingers and thumbs, even knotting every silk scarf around her neck the way Mrs. Gallegher would, tucked into a blouse. But she had never seen this broach, a cameo with a thin-necked girl.

Mrs. Gallegher looked like the woman on the stair in the portrait, the one standing behind the baron, wearing the same dress.

She rested a gloved hand on Lisa's shoulder when she approached. When Lisa was thirteen, decked out in her legal guardian's bling, she looked in the mirror and tried saying words with a British lilt, affecting her voice with wealth, a low coolness. "*Yacht. Boathouse. We'll send for a car. Send for. Yacht. Yaacht.*" She noted the shape of her lips, biggish. The circles under her eyes. The uneven part in her hair, the split ends. A sad, poor princess—the "princess" coming from Mr. Gallegher, a sweet if generic endearment, an easy title to bestow.

"Admiring our brave baron too, I see?" Mrs. Gallegher said.

"No. I don't really even know him," Lisa said.

Mrs. Gallegher laughed. "We're having company for tea, dear. Make yourself presentable." She gave Lisa another tap on the shoulder to spur her on, leaned over to fix the doily on the end table. Lisa could practically hear the corset groaning, straining. It whispered, sighed another separate loneliness.

*

Lisa went outside to the pasture in the backyard with her book, stood a good distance away from beneath the balcony where the silence lingered most densely, and imagined holding hands with Mr. Ryan. That was one thing they hadn't done, when they had met.

A small uncared-for garden overcrowded its decaying picket fence. Lisa crawled over the fence into the enclosure, stamped down some of the weeds and lay in it. Green vine plants and plants with wide leaves, and plants with small berries, all unidentifiable to her, crept around her field of vision. Cherry tomatoes bubbled up a vine near her head. She ate two, letting the juices stream down her face, remembering vaguely that her mother, the real one, had liked to garden.

She did this instead of going to Mrs. Gallegher's tea. Did Mrs. Gallegher even know how to make tea? Could she summon the effort to make finger-foods? Lisa imagined others—the wifely figure of Eleanor, a menagerie of the baron's mistresses, and all of their friends—all in white gloves and dresses with ballooning arms, dispersed around the living room, reclining languidly, stealing glances of the baron, their presiding patriarch.

Lisa untucked her book from her arm, propped it against her knees so she could see the pictures she had pasted inside. Mr. Ryan's portrait on the first page, a professional profile from his tutoring brochure—poreless skin and manicured eyebrows. A picture from class, a time she had made him smile. And then the polaroids from spring, dark underdeveloped pictures. Pictures of joints, an elbow or ankle, isolated shots. He hadn't wanted her to take the pictures. He told her to remember the feelings instead, and she did, could still trace the pressures of his hands winding around her forearms, pressures she took for affections then.

She retraced the steps it had taken to get to that point. They were simple steps:

One time, Mr. Ryan asked her how old she was.

One time, he complimented her blouse—a specific compliment, about the color, a good blue.

One time, he slipped her a gift card—five dollars for coffee, for a job well done.

These were the kinds of signs a woman waited for.

*

Mrs. Gallegher sat alone in the living room with her tea.

“The girls have all left,” she said, without turning around to see Lisa come in. “You missed them.” This kind of interaction, Mrs. Gallegher’s brusqueness, was not new. Before, it manifested in different scoldings—over tennis matches, poor quiz grades, and tousled hair.

“What girls?” Lisa asked.

“The orphans.”

There was no evidence of soiled tea cups, no fresh cream or sugar cubes on the table, all of the chairs tucked neatly around the table in a room that hadn’t previously been furnished, but this wasn’t the first thing Lisa noticed. She noticed only later, the transformation, the new antiques having assembled, crept all on their own into the parlor. Creeping, as if the pieces of furniture were animals who came without notice and only when needed. No one used the parlor before those things fell into place. In the stairwell, the boxes had only gotten dustier, the cardboard starting to cave in. It took going outside and coming back in to notice how quickly these changes happened.

Now, Lisa only noticed the tea set. The pollen-yellow flowers whose petals sometimes succumbed to dropping, the artist not leaving out disarray. The cups were brighter, white, like new—the same set she had uncovered earlier but without the chips and cracks.

Lisa plucked one from the table. “You took these from me?” she said. “From my room?”

“No.” Mrs. Gallegher took the cup, returned it from its saucer. “Don’t you want to hear about the orphans?”

I am an orphan, she wanted to say. She wanted to say it meanly, to spit it, a spiteful thing. But it wasn't true enough yet, and in a way she couldn't understand then, she felt like she was still becoming that—an orphan.

“The baron married a widow homesteader five years his elder with very rough hands. His journals make a point of saying so—about her hands.”—here, Mrs. Gallegher turned over her own hands, smoothed them against each other—“She had no children of her own, but she hosted luncheons and teas for orphan girls whose parents died traveling west, girls who were carried along the rest of the way in covered wagons with relatives, who fetched water for the men along the way. Girls whose prospects were dim.” She looked over at Lisa for the first time, as if these last words would resonate.

“So you do see the ghosts?” Lisa asked.

Mrs. Gallegher pursed her lips, but then her gaze rippled, as if she were seeing something else, a realization dawning on the crest of her curved lip, as if she had not yet considered her visions to be ghosts or had not considered the strangeness of ghosts appearing. Then she was sour again. Her face flickered between these two expressions very quickly—someone not Lisa wouldn't have noticed, would have only seen sour. Only Lisa knew the nuances of Mrs. Gallegher's face under interrogation.

“No,” Mrs. Gallegher said. “These are just recreations, memorials. The tea, the girls. We are just remembering them.”

“Mm,” Lisa said. Remembering, recreating. Those words made it seem like the ghosts had no choice, as if she herself had summoned the baron, but that wasn't true. The baron came. The orphans came.

*

Lisa's orphanhood did have roots.

She had a vagrant mother instead of a dead one, a mother that gave birth in the Galleghers' claw foot tub, having slinked in through a back door—slicing the screen with wire cutters left out in the garden and pushing open the unlocked heavier door—for shelter, like a feral mother cat clawing her way inside and nesting in a bed of fresh laundry to push out her kittens. Later, the Galleghers would say she was after their hydroponic herb garden, the fresh vegetables in their fridge, satiating desperate (but manageable, surely) pregnant cravings, that she had been breaking in for months, even, squirreling away their produce. But Lisa didn't know if it was this or if the mother acted instinctually, on cravings, yes, but not for the luxuries of soft bath towels or a full pantry but just for clean water to deliver her young, a place to bleed. Later, the mother did not swaddle the baby in anything except a single small hand towel.

But the Galleghers when returning to their summer home after a swim in the ocean did not see the things the vagrant mother did not touch, seeing only her intrusion, the bloody footprint on the bathroom tile. Appearing very sympathetic, very warm in the beginning, they took in mother and child, were so generous even as to let the mother clean the house for penance while the Galleghers cradled her daughter, who grew up fast, who was four very soon. A moldable four. Lisa wore dresses and could sit very still. She had eyelashes to bat before she had teeth. The Galleghers had tried and could not have their own children. So they pretended Lisa was an orphan, "Our little princess in rags," they said to her and whispered soothing words into the mother's ear when, exhausted, she fell asleep against the ottoman she was dabbing a stain out of or passed out from her low blood sugar while trimming hedges: "Your dearest cries, but you can't hear. Your dearest wilts when you are near." Words the mother over time believed, forging their way into little prophesies.

But these details were still hazy. Lisa had only the words, a version of the incantation, vaguely remembered: “Your dearest cries, your dearest wilts. But you can’t hear when you are near.” The words echoed in silence, crawled up from someplace dark, a memory that tasted like neglect of an uncaring mother, of one who couldn’t be bothered, the fabric of her memory warping one thing into another.

Thinking of the ghost orphans, the incantation resurfaced. Ghost orphans turned over into other vagrant mothers in her head.

She dwelled on this in the tower, which had become her bedroom all on its own. She gazed at its peak at night, dreaming of the spire, the texture of her reality feeling conical, contained. Another bedroom had been made for her. Certainly, there were plenty of bedrooms, but Lisa curled into the narrow alcove of the tower like a burrowing animal, had dragged a twin-sized mattress inside, whose four corners each touched part of the round wall. She wedged bags of chips, vanilla wafers, and beef jerky under the edges of the mattress. In the sill of the tiny window—just wide enough to squeeze through if she had the desire—the tea cups glinted in the sun, exact replicas of the ones Mrs. Gallegher had snatched up but hers still gray, anointed by age, chips decorating the edges like missing teeth. Getting better, newer, but still stewing. The things in the house, Lisa noticed, were not stagnant. They had lives and growth.

It was afternoon, the time she would have had a brief recess from her studies if it weren’t summer. It was the time she would prepare for, dwelling on small interesting corners of her day—the iridescent shell of a beetle she saw by the lake, a new word she learned from a book like “pariah” or “epistemic,” a lasagna recipe she had taught herself to cook—things she could present to Mr. Ryan when he would get up to leave, things she could use to pull him back in. She

felt she could enchant him, not with the texture of those things, which were ordinary enough, but with her own innocent fascination.

Most days, he would classify the beetle, clarify the word, compliment the meal. He would not linger except in small margins, a little bit more each time, another comment on top of another comment, nearly blooming into conversation before stopping.

Then one day, he told her: “You try very hard.”

She had blinked. “What do you mean?”

“You’re very eager. You want too much,” he said.

But she didn’t know how to do the opposite, couldn’t pinpoint his instruction, his lesson in those words. Want less? Want slower? Want not at all?

And still, lying in the tower, channeling the conical ceiling to become more, to go on and on beyond the point she saw, imagining the point was infinite, her enclosure, infinite too, she thought about his advice again. Did the baron find her to be eager? Did he want her to want less? Did he speak only cryptically to her to teach her the same lesson?

When she fell asleep, even though it was afternoon, even though she prided herself in her day-wakefulness, her night-wakefulness too, sleep something she needed only minimally—she dreamt something of an answer. The dream a wash of yellow, old crusty yellow and pearly surfaces, the kind of dream she could only remember the consistency of later. The feeling inside of it was too dense and small to pick up.

*

The Galleghers fell into their dinner positions when Lisa woke up. She got there a little bit before them. Mrs. Gallegher swooped in wearing a different dress—a dark midnight crepe, the color of a thief or a mistress. Mr. Gallegher still looked the same in his usual day khakis and polo shirt.

Lisa had pulled her pigtail braids into a tight, restrictive bun, but still wore the poinsettia-embroidered cowboy shirt.

“Ah, touch this,” Mr. Gallegher said when he passed the spotted cowhide draped awkwardly, like a wall hanging, in the east corridor. He pressed his face against it, enchanted.

The remaining sun squiggled in through the windows, breaking into the baron’s otherwise dank dining room. Had Eleanor approved of this floor plan? Did she float, prim little feet hidden under a wide petticoat, into the dining room at dusk with a platter of some sort of beef, barely able to see her baron’s face, the drapes always settled at half mass? Or maybe she wanted it, to disguise her poor cleaning job. Maybe she was too sad to clean, to maintain.

Lisa could only speculate, Eleanor unwilling to make an appearance.

It took her a moment to notice that every seat was filled by an orphan. Their ghosts came on slowly, and they seemed to only see Mrs. Gallegher, or at least they were quite uninterested in Lisa, at first, and Mr. Gallegher had nothing to do with anything—unseeing, unseeable.

Lisa unraveled her silverware from the cloth napkin, letting it clank across her setting, and shot a glare at Mrs. Gallegher. “So we’re feeding all of them now, too?”

But the orphans didn’t seem interested in eating.

At first she assumed they were each unique individuals, but looking closer she realized some of them were copies, or all of them? It was hard to tell, each girl a dimly lit flourish, outlines of girls rather than solid beings. They wore white frocks, in various states of disarray. They wouldn’t hold still in their chairs, tugging at each other, unraveling their seatmates’ hair bows, pulling until part of the scalp loosened and slid to the floor in a mess of bows and hair. One girl wrestled with another’s glass buttons, greedily pulling each one off, stuffing them in her mouth and pockets, until the other girl started to deflate. They murmured and grunted only to

each other, looking sometimes at Mrs. Gallegher pleadingly, as if she could counsel the whole event, offer some words to make it stop.

Lisa tried scooping up the girls, unsure of how their ghosting worked, if sight permitted touch, but the rules were evasive. She would pick one up and try to move her to another chair, but then the girl's light would go out and reignite elsewhere, tormenting another copy.

"They're quite unapproachable, untamed," Mrs. Gallegher said. "We're not ready to learn to use forks just yet, are we dears?"

But of course, they already knew how to use forks—to jab, pierce, and puncture.

Mr. Gallegher went to the kitchen and came back with a full plate, some sort of beef leftovers. He hummed while he ate. The girls eventually all extinguished, tormenting each other into nothing. Mrs. Gallegher sighed seeing the last girl go and draped a napkin over her lap.

"We'll try again tomorrow, won't we?"

But to Lisa, it didn't seem like a tomorrow would help. It didn't seem like anything had been done. Remnants of the girls soiled the place settings—torn bonnets, scraps of petticoats draped over chairs, broken plates, and Lisa couldn't figure out if some things belonged to the ghosts, brought over with them, or if they infected real solid things, if they could ruin even now, having been dead for so long. More distressing was Mrs. Gallegher, searching for a fork uprooted by an orphan, cupping a crooked flower in the centerpiece, unaware of her own failure.

"You...you haven't done anything!" Lisa said. "Aren't you supposed to do something? Shouldn't you mother them?"

The way Mrs. Gallegher had mothered her before, in small ways, in banishments, good and bad ones. A good one: the night in the garage, when Mr. Ryan had told her to get in the car

and she went to the door instead, to Mrs. Gallegher in the basement, who made Mr. Ryan disappear quickly and quietly. There had been no fuss.

Lisa couldn't help but wonder how people became ghosts, if it was something that began while still living, a predestined thing, or a thing set off by a series of events, a series of banishments. Lisa, who was banished from the real living mother, banished from public schools, banished from Mr. Ryan, held a similar diamond of light inside her chest, she could feel it, a ghostly light source blooming forth, but not yet. Lisa was still a real, solid girl.

*

From the tower window Lisa could see the balcony. It was nearly decrepit. Or it wasn't. It flickered between both things—a hazard with too-low railings, balusters buckling underneath, floorboards coming up, and also a delicate terrace with vines artfully wound, an overlook peering out into the Wild West, the image of manifest destiny scrawled into the sprawling plains, the cows she occasionally saw there. Her own destiny: a small forgotten thing. The tea set was as good as new now, pristine, good enough to be a gift, something a mother gave to a daughter. She felt a part of it all, against her will, like the house and its baggage was something she hadn't asked for.

She looked out at the balcony in the morning, feeling groggy like she did the morning after meeting with Mr. Ryan two months ago, when he drove to her neighborhood, parked a few houses away, and she smuggled him in through the garage of the Gallegher's old house, but then they were trapped, unable to go in through the basement where the Galleghers were hard at work folding charity flyers and stuffing them into envelopes. A similar feeling, she had now, looking at the balcony, seeing the orphan girl—single and whole, no copies—stepping out onto it over and over again, stepping almost regally, determinedly, holding her sun hat steady, combatting a

wind that wasn't there in Lisa's morning, a past wind. The feeling of being trapped, but also of holding some small power and not knowing what to do with it yet.

“Ada, my fairest orphan. You're too saddled by your sadness.”

Lisa turned around. Another woman in a crepe dress, perched on the edge of her bed, as if propped, side-saddle, on a horse. A woman not Mrs. Gallegher. A woman not her birth mother, although Lisa considered this, searched her face for something of her own face, found nothing. But also both of them, this woman from the baron's portrait, this wife who never mothered her own children.

The angle of her stare went through Lisa, landing on the orphan, but she could have been talking to both.

“What sadness?” Lisa asked, not meaning that she didn't know any sadness, meaning rather that she knew the varieties of orphan sadness. She wanted to know which one.

The woman ghost closed her eyes, held her mouth shut too, a sputtering squeak escaping from it. It took Lisa a moment to hear she was singing. Eleanor stopped, as if startled awake and stared out the window again. “Look how you fly, how you tumble. So young. I did what I could for you, Ada. I mothered you as vigorously as I was able, a tough scrubbing to bathe you clean. Don't tell me I didn't mother, didn't lather.”

Lisa looked out the window again to find Ada mid-arc, her hat separate from her, fingers reaching for it, as if her fall followed the hat. And then she disappeared, the whole scene resetting itself.

Eleanor was gone too.

Lisa tried to find her, but the tower door was locked, a detail that seemed obvious then, a thing she had known since waking which she was only just remembering again.

It felt like the baron was near, that he was approaching the way he may have approached the balcony where Ada tumbled like a windswept lily over the rail. The baron in pursuit. She did not think then that the baron was in pursuit of her.

For a moment, Lisa felt optimistic, like she was very close to discovering something. Being trapped in a tower was one small thing. There were ways to get out of towers. Already she could see things building outside, the cars rushing away, the sun rolling in, up from over the hill, faster than ever before, and brown fluffy cows mixed with feral longhorns and black spotted Holsteins. The diamond of light inside her chest was near bursting. It was very warm. It wasn't at all bad, or at least she couldn't feel any badness in it.

She could feel her orphanhood slipping away, could hear the sound of a mother's feet climbing up the wall to meet her. Lisa took out the braids she had slept in, her hair falling out in waves and waves, and crouched there under the sill, streaming with light and energy. It was the same and different from the night she had captured in polaroids, the same energy, a different feeling, of danger and then relief.

But when Lisa looked out the window, there was no mother.

All along she thought it would be a mother, even a ghost mother, an Eleanor, when all along she should have known it would be a prince.

PACK MIND

The Australian Shepard was not quiet about his distress—he wore it like a badge sewn into his coat, a beautiful coat the color and volume of a frothy ale. I bet a lot of people touched him. Maybe they asked his owners for permission first, but nobody ever asked him—*not that I mind*, he seemed to say. I stooped to his level, laid my hand flat on the ground under his snout. He licked it twice. “What troubles you?” I asked.

The woman standing above him coughed irritably—it wasn’t a real cough but a warning message, a cough I knew was meant for me, but the Aussie took it personally, thinking he had given away too much. She stood next to a man, a husband-looking figure, waiting in line at the new pretzel-wrapped bacon stand. Her hand was in a fist, wrapped around the leash four or five times, not giving the Aussie very much space to “be in the world,” a phrase I used a lot with dog-owners who treated their animals like baby marsupials, pouched in sweaters and swaddling blankets, suppressing any signs of wolfishness, chastising every snarl.

“What’s his name?” I asked.

“Mason,” she said. I wondered if she meant like the jar, like stuffing preserves into mason jars. Or like masonry, like a stoic man laying bricks. Whatever she meant, it was an ill-fitting name for the Aussie who possessed a wealth of imagination, his worldview saturated with trembling bushes, wild berries, blue jay feathers, and—of all things!—green coconuts.

“What are your worries, Mason?” I repeated. There were dark rooms behind his eyes, some foggy visions of squirrels outside locked windows, things he couldn’t have, long silences mingling with electronic hums.

“Excuse me,” the woman said. “Who are you?”

I tried not to take it personally. People didn’t recognize me outside of my booth—I wasn’t well-known or easily identifiable without the silk banner proclaiming my title draped in front of my reading table.

“I’m the dog psychic,” I said. I could work with most cats too, even some smaller mammals: sugar gliders, chinchillas. “I’m concerned about...um, *Mason’s* spiritual growth. Within the parameters—”

“Excuse me, we’re not paying for you to read our dog,” she said.

“Oh, honey I’m off duty! I just want to help.”

“We can take Mason to a vet if he needs help. Please leave us alone.” She turned around, giving a jerk on Mason’s leash, leading him to the other side of her legs. He gave me one last look as if to say, *Thanks anyway. It’s really not that bad.* But sometimes I read too selfishly into the animal’s closing sentiments at the end of a session, to reassure myself by over-simplifying their feelings, projecting optimism or progress where there maybe was none. Humans will lie to you for self-preservation; dogs will not. Dogs can only be their full, naked selves in the world.

So I didn’t really believe Mason was okay. But I was more struck by the woman’s words: “Please leave us alone,” the way she angled away to make it easier for her to pretend I wasn’t there. Like I was intruding on an intimate relationship. Was I?

Feeling slighted, I went to the cheese fry stand instead, ordered the works with a tall drink. I thought about going to the parking lot, thinking that I wanted to drive off the fairgrounds

for a half an hour to see if anyone would miss me, if they'd radio in, "Patience, where are you? Nice people with their dogs are lining up. They need you!" It would have been nice to have the reassurance, but then if nobody noticed, I'd have no reason to come back, and possibly I would drive forever. I would just keep going, away, and what would be out there for me?

I thought about Franklin, who returned to me in a vision last night after I had not thought about him for years—he was saying, "Look at us! We're doppleganging!" Over and over, emphasizing those words in my vision. I was nodding vigorously, just nodding. It had felt like we were trapped in an infinite loop.

I used to use Franklin as a placeholder in a journal I kept. "Ways I could have had a better/different life." That was what I named the journal. In this journal, which I filled with things that never happened, Franklin crawled back into my arms when I was twenty-three, at my neediest. We got married. His acting career took off after several false starts, finally, when he was thirty-five (even in this journal of unreal events, there was still disappointment and marital strife along the way, just nothing we couldn't overcome with talk therapy), landing us a pile of money that we mostly donated to dog shelters to feel good about ourselves. Franklin back-dropped all the other good things I would have wanted to happen: renting a permanent space on a main street somewhere next to a bustling gourmet waffle place for my dog psychic practice, being complimented by neighbors at a potluck on my casseroles, getting a good perm. Those kinds of things, normal things outside of Marvo's Miscreants. The fair was always separate from that. The fair was a good place but not a place where you could count on people.

Instead of a Franklin, I had Armisted whose salt-and-pepper stubble, like a dog's muzzle only rougher, rubbed against my shoulder at night when he agreed to stay over in my trailer. Armisted who wore biker sunglasses and a blue bandana on his balding head.

The real Franklin dumped me when we graduated high school, twenty years ago. He was perfect for my journal because he could fold into any role, as an actor, also as a person who wanted to be liked. I was drawn to him when he wore tights on a stage as Tybalt, waving that sword around at Romeo and delivering lines like he didn't really know what he was saying, like there was a little cassette player in the back of his brain reading them off.

Armisted joined the fair when he was forty-five, reluctantly, any eagerness he had in life a little bit dimmed when I met him. He didn't know his magic had a name, that when he was roped into a friend's magic show at the Italian Club and accidentally changed his sister into his other sister instead of sawing her in half, that his magic could be wrangled into something else. He could still only change a person into someone else if they were in a box but could turn anyone into any other living person as long as they were the same approximate size.

People always asked how he did it after. Sometimes I sat with him in his tent, pretending to be his assistant, already decked out in sequins from my psychic act (people won't take you seriously, as a psychic, if you aren't absolutely glistening from head to toe). I directed the audience: "If you're very still and quiet, you'll hear the tear, the moment your friend crosses over..." It was true. You could hear it, a silky pulling sound, like air being let out of a sandwich bag. You could feel the rift too, but no one ever did. It wasn't that they couldn't—they were just conditioned not to be sensitive to these shifts in their plane of existence. Dogs felt it, were sensitive to the rift I built between us before entering their minds—that way I could ask before barging in.

Some people thought we were scam artists, made weekly calls to Mr. Marvo wanting their money back because the magic wasn't real, because they were robbed of feeling whimsy, because when they asked, "How does it work?" we said, "You saw."

It was like this: people saw our plane of existence as very flat and ordinary, rigid. And then, when you shake it out like the top sheet on a bed, they are somehow shocked when it ripples. We lived in those creases—so did dogs. Other animals slipped in and out. But people saw us and thought we were crazy or delusional instead, not believing that what we did and felt was real. Everyone else in the world, outside the fair, was cold and calculating.

Although, maybe that was Armisted too—marginally cold, a bit of a thief. But only on his bad days.

I headed back towards my booth with a plate of cheesy fries, picking a few off the top before realizing they weren't what I wanted after all. Fair food always left me feeling empty and full at the same time. Maybe Aimee would want them—she was so skinny, could use them more than me. Aimee, the levitator—a sweet girl with an asymmetrical face, whom I didn't entirely trust. Levitating was a simple chore, concentrating only on the lifting, nothing complex, which I had told her once. She gave no argument but became very sour. The cheese fries would be a peace offering. But she wasn't there, so I balanced the plate neatly on her stool, sliding a finger around the plate to wipe up the dripping cheese, licking the excess.

I radioed to let her know it was there. "Are you around? I brought you some fries."

It took a second for her voice to come through the static. "Oh, you didn't have to."

Aimee had only joined the fair recently, a few months back, but people liked her because she could sing moderately well but wasn't showy about it. She had a lot of spunk and an edgy haircut, shaved on one side, silvery blue on the other. I didn't know when we started feuding, but she always had suggestions for how I ran my booth—use more incense, lower my speaking voice so people didn't feel intimidated, wear better clothes.

I wanted to ask her about Armisted's party, a birthday party she was organizing even though Armisted wouldn't disclose the date of his birthday to anyone, her being the kind of person who liked to take initiative in other peoples' lives without invitation. It was the kind of thing Armisted would grin through on a good day, would bare it, but lately Armisted had developed an edge—I saw it come through in his act, strangers coming out of the box with maniac eyes and filth. He would have to quickly corral them back in and change them back before any of the family members fainted or screamed. He was distracted—not by me, though. There was someone else—I wasn't certain but suspicious. We were working through things, slowly, which would take enough time without the whole fair meddling at Aimee's party.

I wanted to ask Aimee if anyone else was bringing cheesecake, but at that moment a gust of wind knocked the fries onto the ground, trailing oozing cheese down the legs of the stool. I could get away with not saying anything because the radios were a new thing and I pretended to not completely know how they worked. I flicked the thing off and on again to make it seem like I had cut out.

It didn't matter anyway—Aimee had plenty of customers with or without a cheese-stained floor. Kids loved her. One time, a mom with twin toddlers in one of those double-wide strollers parked by Aimee's tent to sooth one of them. The mom tried fastening this first toddler into some sort of baby-lugging pack but couldn't get the straps right. Aimee, seeing the other toddler catching wind of the crying sibling and drifting slowly into a similar despair, stopped in the middle of her act to lift both toddlers. Suspended slightly above their stroller, they sucked in their sobs. She rocked them softly without ever touching them all while singing one of Tom Petty's mellower hits—I don't remember the name. This mother, unlike the dog mother I had just had an encounter with, was overwhelmed with gratitude. The small gathering *aww*-ed.

Maybe I was a cynic, but I thought the whole thing was a little gross, a little weird. People called her the Baby-Lifter after that. Like baby-sitter. People posted pictures of her floating the babies online with that caption. How dull.

Armisted had told me before to stop being jealous and start promoting myself. I could think of some good portraits to use for ads, like the professional shot I had done two years ago before the crow lines started setting in, the blotchiness in my cheeks obliterated using some Photoshop magic. I was holding two dogs, Pomeranians that gazed at me reverently. The backdrop was outer space. Maybe not great for billboards, but perfect for an advertisement in a bus stop shelter. There was always the chance Franklin would see it too, that the studio photo plastered larger than life before him would remind him of my yearbook picture, a little dazed and starry-eyed, perm burgeoning into the rectangle frame, still dreaming of what it would like to be exceptional. But that kind of dreaming was problematic, a territory I tried not to breach—Franklin and other impossible dreams had to stay within the covers of my journal where they couldn't creep out and become dangerous. I knew that, reminded myself of that when I tried to think of a real, out-in-the-world Franklin.

Last week, Armisted accused me of going through a mid-life crisis “too early” and “unprompted” when I announced that I was going to leave Marvo's Miscreants, denouncing my miscreation to settle down in one spot, buy a house or rent, take some classes and become a counselor or one of those people who holds and pets the struggling dogs at vets. It wasn't a real threat, just something to channel my anger with.

“I could handle it if you were a couple decades older and a new car or a Disney Cruise would staunch it,” he had said, but he was afraid it was more serious, that I would bring him down, never getting what I wanted. We had gotten in a fight in front of the vendor selling sad

Betta fish in little cups, launching every mean word we had been storing up for the occasion, which had been inevitable. We fought every month or so, pulling back afterwards to prepare for the next one. We were in the pulling back part now—we hadn't said more than a few words to each other in a week.

I heard Mason's anxious whimpering before I saw him. He ran, leash trailing. People parted for him, stood back, but no one tried to grab him. He trembled with this power. I closed my eyes, reached out to him in my mind, prodding at that light in there, at the thing he had seized in his escape—a weightlessness, like his body had never belonged to him so much as it did in that moment.

Worried he would hurt himself, I went after him, talking him down, linking myself into the pack mind of dogs, channeling outward vibes for him to slow down. Inside of a dog, is a switch: panic or not panic. I tried to flick the panic off. It is an instinctual thing, hard to touch, but Mason slowed. He came to a trot. I picked up his leash and wrapped it tight around my wrist, looked around for his owners and didn't see them, but I thought I could hear them calling from somewhere.

“We're safe,” I told Mason. “I'm safe.” Then I picked up the whole dog, taking him.

*

Armisted hadn't been around for the early years of Marvo's, back when we were all young and paid under the table for our illusions. People wanted weird things from us, immersive experiences, to be tied up and levitated over a bed of coals, body-swapping, brain-opening things. It was less geared towards families then. I didn't read dogs but instead projected primal, canine fears, infecting people with wordless, dimly colored images of alpha dogs lurking in bushes, making them jump at the sight of any movement. Things were more brutal then, but the

people were more loyal. Sometimes I would try to tell him how it used to be, how I used to be respected and maybe even a little bit feared, assembling whole packs of stray dogs I couldn't completely control, but I don't think he listened or understood.

“Patience, you are a flower,” he would say and never explain what it meant, just expect for me to be flattered.

Armisted stood outside my tent when I got there. Mason barked at him. Armisted nodded at Mason but didn't ask.

The hinges on the collapsible sign posted in front of my tent were starting to go bad—sometimes it would slide, threatening to buckle. I had painted it myself in big mystical letters, the words “Psychic” and “Reading” sandwiching a splayed dog's paw instead of a palm. The tent itself was fair-issued—all psychics had similar purple or red velvety drapes enclosing a box-shaped enclosure with fake oriental rugs inside covering the grass. No windows, but the inner fabric was coated with an inflammable waxy surface so I could use all the tea candles I wanted. I arranged little bulbs of soft light around the ceiling in the shape of Canis Major, the Dog Star glowing the brightest. People just thought it was random.

Normally Armisted stood with a sort of slouch, leaning on things, thumbs in his pockets. But there, in front of my tent, he stood very straight. He wasn't wearing sunglasses. Black sideburns fondled a sort of grimace, a not-smile where I would have hoped for a softer face, a forgiving one.

“There's something I've been meaning to tell you,” Armisted said. He did not speak that way, directly, with intention. Like Franklin, Armisted was a kind of actor, dispensing words, the best sounding ones for the scene even if they weren't the most accessible ones.

A dog I didn't know wandered over, sniffed Mason, and then came to my hand, licked it. I smoothed the fur on his head, which was tousled and rough, a hard dog. He left.

"I'm closing for the day," I said, "to repair my aura." I drew the tent flaps shut.

This was something Armisted didn't understand, how these things could come and go. He was on all the time. Transforming people into other people was the easiest thing to him, something he didn't even have to think about.

"Can we do it now?" I asked.

He scratched Mason's head behind the ears, a rough scratch, as if Mason were a boxer returning with a pheasant in its maw. "Yeah, but just a quick one."

*

For a while I thought it was normal that our relationship existed only in the microcosm of the fair. Things were contained, preserved, with acts swapped out for other acts sometimes, sure, but all minor replacements, improvements usually. We went out sometimes, to bars and barbecue joints. We would stay out late, but I'd still suggest going for dessert after somewhere else—dessert felt high class, like a novelty, something baked or puréed, not fried like the cheap funnel cakes all over the fair. He would put his fingers in my hair, the same sticky fingers that had plunged into a plate of ribs moments before and laugh: "You're all the dessert I need, baby." Coming from a younger man, I would have scoffed at such a statement, dismissed him. With Armisted's gravelly voice and determination, it sounded reasonable. Afterwards, I would stay up late, go to whatever the next thing was, a party or crappy band, anything I could do to feel young and like the world was still my oyster.

We went back to Armisted's booth where a few groups of visitors stood around, waiting for him. I had tried before to understand Armisted's act more intimately, to figure out what the

transformations hinged on—what did people come away with after? Normally there was something fleetingly familiar in the stranger that came out of the box—friends and loved ones could see it, not a physical similarity, but the change was more of a rift, a logical break, like here is Joe or Winifred, a good friend or lover, and then coming out of the box is a Joseph or Winnie, with a disarming mole, ankle tattoos, or ornate pearls where those things would have been unimaginable on Joe’s or Winifred’s body but not so far outside of the realm of possibility, also. It was always the kind of surprise that seemed like it shouldn’t have been a surprise after.

Even later, when it turned gruesome—strangers with flesh wounds, scarred cheeks, faces veiled in cauls—the ugly parts were not random or even over-the-top. They were specific. They made people squeamish. But wasn’t that real art? Real performance? Not like Aimee, lifting babies all over town in her cute tight pants.

It wasn’t about the person changed but about the people around them. I wondered, if he could change himself, what I would learn about the not-Armisted stranger hiding inside the Armisted I thought I knew.

But for the two of us together, it worked differently.

He told the people gathering around his booth to come closer. They all broke through wanting to volunteer to be changed. Mason wagged his tail like he understood.

“Sorry, fine folks. For this act I already have a volunteer commandeered, a weaseling witch I found rooting around the potato stand.”

I loved when he did this, the play-acting, the crowd. I did my part, slouching and dragging an ankle like it was numb, pulling a veil over my face and then inching it away to spit in the dirt.

The crowd didn't care so much. Armisted hadn't spoken the lines well enough. His heart wasn't in it, but I tried not to let that douse the fire I felt for him then anyway.

Armisted made a small show of laying the box on the ground, horizontally the way I liked it, and opening the door. I crawled inside, almost giddy. Lying with my arms crossing my chest, I looked up at him, winked. For a second I was worried he wouldn't wink back but he did.

"Make it a good one," I said. "Make it weird."

"I'll see what I can do," he said so no one else could hear.

He closed the box. I trained all the outside voices out of my hearing, hummed softly, waiting for him to do his magic. We did it often—it was how we started dating. I told him I wanted to feel what it was like to be in the box. I told him maybe I would come out a dog lady, asked if he had ever procured a dog from that other dimension. He had said no and took it as a challenge. I wiggled into his box—me, going on forty, in hulking psychic garb and outlandish makeup the way I wore it then. It felt like flirting. I emerged with no dog features, but he said we would keep trying.

It started in the gut, a hollowing. The sensation felt like being carved, an emptying that made my skin cold and hair stiffen. It was quick, the hypothermic part, and then I was flushed with warm tingling, circulation restored to a point of bursting. Normal people didn't think enough about their own circulation, did not feel the light pulsing in their veins, the flooding. In the change, I could feel my own blood like oceans turning over, breaking and receding. It was the pins and needles of a limb falling asleep, ache and exhilaration. Then Armisted reached in, not with his real literal hand or face but a mental reaching, something we had learned how to do over time. He reached and took something out, an animal in there. I called it an animal. We

didn't know what it was, what we exchanged. It was something in there I could feel wriggling, and it always felt like reparation to have it taken away.

Then it was done. Armisted opened the box.

I came out. I closed my eyes, not wanting to see any of the new flesh I had become. Still, I basked in the scattered claps and gasps from the audience. The feeling of doing what we had done in public, without them knowing what happened under the box. "Oh, she's gross!" someone said. I wanted to walk amongst them, forcing them to look at whatever about me was gross.

Armisted said something to calm them. I wasn't listening. He touched my arm to guide me back into the box. Mason barked from somewhere. I hoped he wasn't running away.

*

I went to my trailer for the store-bought cheesecake I had stowed away in the fridge the night before. I wondered if I should have gotten a berry topping, if Armisted liked berries. The cake looked plain, unappealing.

Mason paced around the door, whimpering sometimes, while I fixed my makeup and pulled a brush through my hair. I knew he wasn't my dog. Sometimes, I liked to tell people a dog belonged only to itself, to display to a coddling owner the dog's dignity, but that wasn't true either. Dogs belonged to packs. They had their people. Mason's would return for him, inevitably, but I tried to sustain the illusion for as long as I could, tried to convince myself that Mason had chosen me. I had turned my cellphone and walkie off right after the theft. People would be trying to call. Marvo would reach me inevitably—I just didn't know whether or not he would think my stunt was too off the rails or not.

Aimee told people to be there at nine, but I wanted to be there with Armisted when everyone else showed up, to be at the center of the party, spoiling the surprise to let him know I

was on his side. I was the one who found him, busking for pennies on main street where other buskers played guitar reasonably well or would serenade a pretty woman and all Armisted had to offer was his box to crawl into. “It’ll change ya’!” he would shout. “I’ll change ya’ into someone you never knew!” He hadn’t really done it for the money, more for the thrill, but back then he still got it wrong sometimes. People would crawl into the box and shiver for a moment inside the other dimension where strangers were procured, but they wouldn’t quite change over.

“Sit down. Stop yelling,” I had told him, had put down my shopping bags by his box after seeing him there for an entire afternoon.

He ignored my command. “How about I change you over for just a dollar? You might find something you like in there...” He gestured toward the box.

“No. You’re doing it wrong. Nobody here wants to crawl into your box.” *I* didn’t even go in it, not then. I held him by the shoulders to stop him from waving at passersby. “Shh,” I said and closed my eyes. I tried to prime him for what was coming, for the wildness I willed into his aura, the canine instinct I projected. What people didn’t know about dogs was that they’re also messengers. People thought what I did was cute, reading dogs, but I could get into people’s heads too in a way that other psychics couldn’t.

That quieted him right up.

“I’ll show you people who will get into your box,” I had said when I was finished.

You might even say I groomed him. He told me later he liked a woman who would tell him what to do.

I dug a piece of the cheesecake filling out and gave it to Mason, who stopped whining and started thinking about all the moles he had yet to uncover in the yard—this was the texture of

Mason's psyche, mostly longing. I had trouble being inside his head for too long without getting sad. I let him sniff around in the yard before carting him off to the party with me.

The fair always looked different at night. You walked inside through a sort of clay dome, a wide adobe beehive structure with little windows punctured through it. But at night, you could see everything lit up behind it, beams of fluorescent greens, reds, and oranges piercing through the little windows. Different people came at night. We were allowed to get freakier with the night crowds, allowed to touch them (people signed a waiver for this when they came in afterhours), pull them into the act, into boxes, fires, harnesses. I didn't usually work nights. Age made me irrelevant at night—or at least that's what I told myself to justify feeling unwanted.

Mason was not calm, was unnerved, tail tucked, his aura staticky, all teeth and snarling. I knelt beside him in the middle of the fair grounds where men on stilts wearing dark purple capes and skull masks circled around us. They had long fingers, knife-like extensions. "Hey, little doggie," they said, hovering over us. "Good boy, good boy," they crooned. Mason barked, showed his teeth. I couldn't pick him up without dropping the cheesecake, so we pushed through.

I should have been more attentive to Mason, should have spared the cheesecake, really, to hold his body against mine. Touch was the only way to really read a dog, touch and gentle talking. He wanted to tell me something, but I wasn't listening. I was thinking only of the fight Armisted and I had, replaying it. Normally I replayed fights soon after the unraveling, repeating the words in my head so often that they became warped, meaner or softer words depending on how I wanted to feel about it, if I wanted to brush it off or not. Not this fight. I hadn't wanted to think about it for a while.

But I thought about it then, on my way to the party, about how it started innocently enough with Armisted calling me petty (because I was, or because I said petty things—this was

not something I didn't already know about myself), and I had called him mean and unemotional. *How about the way all those dogs keep running away from you, don't you think you should reconsider who you're calling mean, huh*, he had said, and it wasn't all true but half true, there were still dogs—there were dogs every night outside my window, strays who maybe came to me for guidance all on their own, but feeling better than them, yes, it was true—I turned them away, and dogs at the fair did not want to be handled by me, they bristled at my touch. *Then what about those corpse-people turning up in your box, you think maybe that has something to do with your coldness lately, huh*, I said because none of us wanted to face our own problems, only attack each other over the things inside of us that were ruined, had gone rotten, with age, I wanted to say, a natural process of decaying, but that was only an excuse. We were not decaying. We were apathetic, were becoming mean all on our own. And he said, *well not everyone is bad like us, there are people who make me better. There is someone—*

Else is what I think he had meant to say. Someone else. He had stopped himself short, noticing all the people who had gathered around us. You see, the fair was like a circus, the way our lives were on display like animals, our personal lives, even. Marvo liked it that way, liked for us to be public and dysfunctional. That's why people came, not always even for the magic but for the drama.

Armisted's booth was already full.

People congregated around the box, some I didn't know, touching it. It stood up vertically, closed, like someone was inside. Some people had their eyes closed, some were humming. Aimee was among the thralls wearing only a sequined, light-up bra and flowy pants, her eyes not quite closed but rolling back, only the whites showing, as she rubbed the box. Her lips were orange, the color of the tangerines she ate and levitated all day.

I was good at detecting when things were not right, at anticipating very bad things. The way dogs were instinctual and pack-minded, I could also vibe off of other people's bad thoughts, but I did not read this. Mason read it, and I didn't listen, which is why he was not my dog. I was not good for him. When his whimpering turned to snarling, I told him to hush and be a good boy.

I pushed my way through. "What's all this?" I said, declaring some sort of self-importance, pretending to have the power to stop it. "Move, everyone." They didn't move. I tried to find a place to set down my pan, but somebody thrust an elbow out and knocked it over. I bent down to pick it up, to save it somehow, and someone touched my back lightly.

"Don't cry over a little spilt cheese," Aimee said and threw her head back laughing. I wanted to grab her skinny wrist, to pull her down onto the ground with me, realizing I couldn't stand up, that the throng of people had absorbed me. She touched my head. I couldn't tell if it was by accident or not—when I looked up, she seemed to have forgotten I was there.

"What kind of a party is this?" I yelled up to them all uselessly, grappling at people's clothes and hips to pull myself up.

The box was opening, a slow opening. For a second I thought it wasn't opening at all, that it was just the lighting, a flickering strobe light making unmoving things look alive.

The un-Armisted came out. Who else could it have been? Smiling and dog-toothed, hairy wrists and yellow-eyed. Dog man, my dog man. But not. The un-Armisted, or the true Armisted—who could know?—only saw Aimee, grabbed the back of her neck in a romantic way, not traditionally romantic, but the kind of thing Aimee would want, said "I'll change ya' into someone you never knew."

I heard it clearly: "I'll change ya' into someone you never knew."

Mason was running away, was barking in the distance. I heard them clearly. My not dog,
my not man.

STRANGE BELIEF

Mom would ask me to wait in the yard while she performed miracles. She would ask me to wait downstairs in the unfinished basement, concrete patch-worked in carpet squares from a church flea market. She would ask me not to ruin it. “Don’t interrupt, don’t tramp all over this, Joc,” she’d say. Then, when it was over she would come out in a purple bathrobe embellished with sequins and beads, a cigarette wedged in her sturdy potato stick fingers, the cloud from it billowing up into the cool vaporous atmosphere, sneaking off with the chimney smoke from the neighbor’s house. Wicked red lipstick smacking the cigarette, shaping her words: “That’s the miracle vapors floating away.” She’d flick her ashes in the wind, wave her potato fingers up to the heavens. “Bye bye!”

It was self-preservation, her keeping me away from the one good thing she could do.

We did this when Ruby came to the house, this dance, this banishment. I saw her from the living room window, coming up the porch steps, getting closer to my world than I ever thought she’d be, her walking, like something that couldn’t be stopped. I didn’t try to catch her eye but caught it, barely. She flanked her mother—through the window, she looked like a wisp of her, a lean shadow following her inside. Mom yanked the cord on the blinds, the rungs slapping the waxy arms of her houseplants whose leaves craned in unison towards a sun that wasn’t out. She lifted me off the ground by my armpits as if I were much younger than thirteen. I kicked, feet sliding on the hardwood floor a few times before I could stand and yank away from her grasp.

“Out, Jocelyn!” she ordered, giving me a second to disappear, enough time for her voice to melt back into the sticky, throaty melody of green tea drenched in honey. She opened the door, and from the hallway, I could hear her voice lean up against the new-snow silence seeping inside.

I knew Ruby from when we were kids, in elementary school, both of us rummaging around in the lost and found, stalling for time until recess ended, which we both skipped when we could. We acted like we were trying very hard to find something that was missing. It was weeks before we spoke, coming clean about having never lost anything, laughing shyly about it and asking each other our reasons for hiding.

“The cold,” we had agreed, a safe answer.

We would meet there every week, then every day. Sometimes we played a game where we were animals burrowing underground to survive, wrapping strangers’ smelly scarves around our necks and faces, putting mismatching, too-small gloves on our hands, building a musky fortress around our bundled bodies, me in there thinking I had made a friend. Sometimes we counted to three to start breathing and matched each other’s breaths. Then, it got warm outside again and I never saw her anymore. That had been years ago.

Ruby and I didn’t talk, did not go to each other’s houses. Maybe she didn’t remember me. I remembered her teeth from the time we went on a field trip to the orthodontist’s office across the street from the school where they crammed wet alginate in our faces to take molds of our smiles. Little ceramic trophies to take home to our mothers and show them the evidence—“I need braces, mom,” I came home and pleaded. “Please, please, please!” She pocketed my mouth and told me, “Braces are for rich girls.” She squished my cheeks in her finger and thumb and

said, “You smile just fine.” I found my teeth later in the loose change bowl on the dryer, a chip in the left incisor.

In the classroom, after the little plaster trophies had dried, we played guess-whose-mouth-that-is holding our classmates’ teeth in our palms. The spaces between my teeth looked like two pieces of corn had been knocked out of their row on the cob, a bunch of deformed little kernels clustering around them. Ruby’s mold, assembled with straight little pony beads all strung up in a crescent-moon row. I ran my hand across the rough cement of her smile and wished people would think her teeth were mine.

Mom ushered Ruby and her mom inside. Their footsteps creaking on the floor above me. Most of the time, I didn’t mind being banished when Mom performed readings, so I could pretend she was at an office somewhere, at some made-up “real” job. My pretend mother, who could drive herself to work, who went to office parties and made deviled eggs and casseroles and didn’t wear anything veiled or sequined. But this was not my mother. My mother had acrylic nails too long to even peel a hard-boiled egg with.

Once they were on the patio, I crept back upstairs, loitered in the kitchen as their voices drifted in through the screen door. The leaves on the big oak turned inside out, and the tea candles flickered. Mom’s hands always got almost too close, stirring up some drama in the psychic atmosphere without setting anything on fire. This trio—a psychic, a mom, and her daughter—looked diced and fractured through the screen window. She left the glass door cracked open, so their words wafted inside. I pretended that I was just passing through to get a drink of water, that I wasn’t paying attention, that I didn’t care. I opened and shut the cabinet doors. But what did it matter? Nothing my mother ever said was true, anyway.

*

When I was nine or ten, Mom would wake me up by swatting me with the paper, horoscope page folded over so I could read them to her before we began our days. We were both Tauruses. She liked to hear the pretty little verses inscribed to us so she could relate to the supernatural scriptures. She would close her eyes, tap her cigarette in an ashtray next to my covers and say, “Mmmm, tell me more, Joccy. What’s in store for us?” if she liked what she was hearing. I learned to only read her the Taurus horoscope if there was something good in it, and for all the other times, I read her the best parts of the other signs. I quit trying to make it coherent after a while. I told her contradictory things, that she would be in a collision with a man who might be the one and that stars were aligning for women who chose a solo path in life. In the same breath I would say these things, and she just closed her eyes, nodding. Like a coherent life wasn’t the one she was looking for.

On the patio, later, mom would feed little incoherent lies to Ruby and her mother, like small parcels of soft cheese, easy-to-digest premonitions. The mother cried but was not showy about it—it was mostly in her shoulders, the crying, could almost be mistaken for fidgeting or bad posture. She wrapped her fingers around the plastic checkered tablecloth, puncturing little holes in it. She wore a starched white blouse with a thin burgundy cardigan that barely covered her small convulsing shoulders. The rain plastered the white blouse against her chest, revealing every wire of her bra in a raised outline. I assumed it was part of the plan, the rain, that my mother had read the forecast and told them to come, made them sit out there, the soaking making people feel flustered and miserable, their pain amplified and dramatized.

Ruby’s mother explained about the Jell-O, which I took to be the crux of her story:

“The silliest part is, I thought he would drown, his face planted in the bowl of unsettled Jell-O. I thought he was making a joke. The first thing I did was yell at him, but then he was

unconscious, and then there were the tests at the hospital later, the seizures. Well, everything...”

She shook her head, holding her sleeve against her nose like a tissue.

My mother said, “A bad omen, the red stain.”

“They say he won’t live past childhood.”

My mother linked hands with mother and daughter so they formed a chain, a perfect trifecta of spiritual energy. Her body quivered. She threw her head back, too elegantly, I thought—too much like a model in a shampoo commercial, her hair falling lavishly in the rain. It was artificially beautiful, the way grief shouldn’t be, but mother’s and daughter’s eyes were too obscured in tears to notice. Mom bowed her head and said, “The boy, if he is not for this world, then another. We will close our eyes now, though, and lift the darkness. Visualize the lifting, all at once. Squeeze my hand tighter if it helps.”

They all squeezed. “We will lift the haunts at his bedside now,” Mom said.

I couldn’t see if Ruby was crying, her face covered in an ugly baseball cap. All I had to go on were her red knuckles clutching Mom’s hand. Did she want to be here at all? Had she been coerced?

Mom said, “Now we will let the good haunts in, the vessels your boy will fill if he is not for this world. You will meet your boy again, when he passes over, you will learn to love him a new way.”

Those were new lines in Mom’s performance, uncharted territory. I did not think she knew what she was doing.

Later on, after they were gone, and the rain had mostly stopped, and my mother’s feet were boiling in a foot spa with her shows blaring in the sitting room, I said behind her back, “What are you, an exorcist now?” loud enough so she would maybe hear. She didn’t.

But also there was the part of me, standing there beside the patio door, feeling her voice and the rain pounding inside my chest—I admit I closed my eyes too and tried to ride away with them on their strange belief. How easy it would have been to go there, to close my eyes too and squeeze away the bad things.

*

Ruby slid a piece of folded paper into my notebook. The whisper of paper touching paper sounded like her voice asking a question. I thought at first that she was asking me to her birthday, which I knew was soon. Birthday parties at our school were all-inclusive because there weren't very many of us. For mine last April, I invited all the girls in my class to go bowling—this year I was considering roller skating or ice skating, anything to keep them out of the house with its strong incense smell and Mom's stern eye and unwanted premonitions. But usually the other girls had them at home, their mothers lingering in the kitchen comparing recipe notes about lemon cupcake frosting and packing little plastic rings and tootsie pops into favor bags. We wore the newest J.C. Penney dresses or thrift store knock-offs if we could get away with it.

Ruby paused a moment, her hand still touching my notebook, just the two fingers making an upside-down peace sign. She dismantled the connection one joint at a time, until her nails—long nails, over the finger and then some—brushed away. It was really much quicker than this, but I was so absorbed in the gesture.

But when I looked closer, it wasn't an invitation. It was a folded piece of scratch paper that opened to a drawing of a ghost, the gray smudgy lines intersecting the stark blue ones. It looked like me, the shape of its face similar, rounded, but maybe that had been accidental.

“What is that?” Tanya, my friend since second grade, poked her bug-eyed face over my shoulder to see the message and frowned like it wasn’t juicy enough for her. Then her eyes followed Ruby to her locker. “Oh, a Ruby scribbling. She’s a real lezo, ya’ know.”

I spotted an actual invitation wedged in Tanya’s pocket and grabbed it before she could dodge. “From her?” I said.

“You bet. You going?”

“I don’t know. Are her parents going to be there?” I thought of her mom’s streaky face in the rain, the Jell-O on her brother’s cheeks that I wasn’t supposed to know about.

“Yeah, but whaddya think, bet I can get away with smuggling in wine coolers?”

“I’ll bring some thermoses,” I said.

*

Once, Tanya told the whole school bus a boy hit her, a quiet boy who sat in the front, who chewed his nails and poured raisins from a box into his mouth, spilling them sometimes and leaving them behind on the seat like mouse droppings. He had not hit her. She used to steal lipsticks, bottles of whiteout, cough drops, whatever things she could grab off the shelves of the CVS and stuff them in strangers’ purses and bags so they would set off alarms trying to leave and then watch these flustered or hostile people be pulled off to the side to search their bags, the denial of the discovery blooming on their faces like small victories, tokens of the control Tanya had to wreak havoc. She liked to see things destroyed, in small ways. She liked to brag about it later. Mom said she was troubled, but this trouble had nothing to do with upbringing or trauma—it was just who she was.

But I stuck close to her because she was an instigator, because alone, I felt often like a pile of wet leaves, a little bit frozen, cold and decaying. Around me, things didn't happen. I didn't start them. Tanya did.

So I pulled a chair up to fridge to get to the cabinet above it, where I reached around blindly for thermoses, but most of them had cartoon characters or picnic-themed spreads—red and white check prints with lines of marching ants obstructing the symmetry. In the way back were old flasks, slick metal. I held one loosely, but dropped it when I heard Mom coming in, took the Mickey Mouse thermos instead.

“What's all this about?” She reached over and shut the cabinet as I pulled back, thermos in hand.

“Tanya and I are bringing orange juice to the party. All Ruby's parents' have is filtered water.”

Mom didn't comment, just scooted the chair back into the kitchen table. I wanted to ask her about the reading she had with Ruby and her mother, greedy for the intimate details of Ruby's life, greedy for the sick brother. I wanted the whole gruesome story, even though I didn't know what I would do with it yet. But even if I asked, even if she gave it to me, Mom would only muck it up, make it into something undignified by sprinkling in the lies and ghosts.

Ruby's scribbles felt like messages to decipher, and now Mom had the code, but she was too unreliable to approach. Ruby scribbled lots of other things too—animals and faces, mostly, on locker doors and other people's class notes (hers were diligent, neat)—a tiny rebellious streak or a desperate attempt to be heard, to document her existence for it to be uncovered later. I wasn't the only one to ever receive her graffiti. But the ghost was specific. It existed in Mom's world, and Ruby must have thought I would understand.

Mom's specialty was ghost problems, which a lot of people didn't at first identify correctly. People came to mom for readings, but they also came when they saw wisps of atmosphere, of light and air, translucent things, floating out of walls and floors at night. One woman had silvery spirits inhabiting her carpet. She tried applying diatomaceous earth to the corners of her home, but they didn't go away—they just started crying. Another woman claimed they messed with her vision, making lights appear in the corners of her eyes whenever she looked at her dead husband's picture. There was a man with ghost problems who didn't really think they were a problem—he just wanted them to quit being so flighty and sit down with him for a beer and a cigar sometime. My mother said a lot of people with ghosts were just lonely.

If Ruby had ghosts and was trying to tell me, I could mentor her through it. Not like my mother who would confirm their reality and banish them. No, I would do what people were meant to do—I would sleep over at her house on her tandem bed (which I imagined she had), stuff notes in her locker, stop her from being lonely. She would realize there were never any ghosts to begin with.

Tanya knocked on the front door. She wore a red halter top that looked like starched linen. She grinned, showing her row of crooked teeth, locked together in metal braces with alternating blue and hot pink bands. What a security that must have been, to have them all in place like that, moving and shifting only very slowly like the plates the earth was made of, the ones we had learned about in school that could cause earthquakes but only in certain places, not where we were. I had always been jealous of Tanya's braces. Mom handed me the thermos I had left out on the table and guided me with an unwelcome hand on my back, ushering us to the basement. "Go. Downstairs. The clients will be here soon."

“I couldn’t find any wine coolers,” Tanya admitted once the door shut. She looked out of breath, like she had been running or sneaking.

“That’s okay. Mom’s wine cellar is down here.” We browsed through the cabinet by her antique turntable, reading labels and pretending we could evaluate the aromas through the sealed bottles. We settled for a pink wine, most likely a gift she’d never miss because she only drank red, and squeezed Capri-Suns and Daffy Duck orange juice into it. We poured a Dixie cup to sample, swirled it around in the cup and each took a sip. It didn’t taste like alcohol or like juice, but Tanya said it tasted different enough from anything else the other girls were used to, so they would believe us when we said it was mostly alcohol.

“Sangria!” Tanya said. “That’s what we’ll tell them it is. They’ll believe anything.”

I checked my watch to see when we needed to leave. Tanya started listing the people she thought would be there. Janice Burton, Lainey whatsherface, Bryan Thomas, the Marcus twins.

“Oh god! I forgot...what about her brother? He won’t be there, right? I heard he’s super contagious. Why would they even have the party at her house?”

“He’s not contagious, he’s terminal,” I corrected her. “There’s a difference.”

“How do you know? He could be contagious.” Tanya sniffed the thermos before taking another sip. I kicked over an old microwave box, climbed onto it and looked out the glass block window. A slushy rain was starting to pick up.

“We’d better start walking if we want to get there in time,” I said.

Other girls had moms who could drive, but I walked anywhere I wanted to go. The more miracles Mom pumped out, the less practical things her body could do, like there were two women inside of her fighting for control. She used to drive. I knew because she told me stories about when she delivered pizzas, about how she looked in customers’ coat closets while they

were getting the money and stole forgotten dollars out of their pockets. But then she lost that job and others, and floated around for a while, and sold her car, and then it didn't matter anymore if we had one or not.

The way she was paid now was different, but at least now we were always afloat. The miracles sustained us. Last year we went to an old man's house to look at a car he was selling. We had to take a bus all the way to his neighborhood and walked until we found the address listed on Craigslist, but when she got in the car, her hands, the same ones that channeled miracles, gave out. "What is all this? That man must have been tampering with it," she said angrily, looking at the perfectly normal controls. But then she quit lying to herself and started sobbing, saying, "What do I do, Jocelyn?" Her hands hovered over the wheel, looking plastic and stiff. She couldn't even figure out how to put it in reverse to get it out of his yard.

She cancelled all her sessions with clients that week because she said she needed the sleep and then came back two inches taller with gems punched into an old pair of heels from the back of her closet.

I could hear the floorboards creaking as she stomped above us, probably joining hands with the client and swaying or circling around a leather wallet or an old cigar box infused with some evilness the client named, a curse. People were always believing things were cursed. They would wait for my mother to deem it safe. Her best miracles were the ones that called for theatrics, a chance to dance around in her bedazzled shoes.

Maybe it was her curse, that she had to become extraordinary, that she could not be a pizza delivery girl, a petty thief, a wife—she had to be something else. And magic was what she chose.

Tanya and I slipped out into the rain through the empty garage, leaving my mother to her sticky magic sweltering in the living room.

*

Ruby's house was pristine, antiseptic. The high, cavernous ceilings were etched with a rough texture in the plaster—rolling peaks splayed out like flowers. They had no paintings, no plants, no music boxes, or Precious Moments statuettes, just tepid little studio photographs of their family in different formations: father and mother holding swaddled daughter, father and mother with toddler daughter and son kneeling in a garden, father and mother with able-bodied daughter and wheel-chaired son. Would they take another picture if the son died? Would they hold up his picture inside the new picture?

In the adjoining living room, the brother was confined to a hospital bed with tubes that wound around like crazy straws, taped to his skin. Everyone else huddled in the dining room playing Cranium. I thought he was asleep, but every time the girls yelled or laughed, a shadow of life would pass over him, and he would smile, look over at the game. This was a ghost-like thing of him to do, making you think he was not there when he was, similar to the feeling of going to sleep alone and waking up with someone in your room. He was a presence. Why didn't the other girls look more disconcerted by him, the prop of a brother? I didn't see the parents anywhere. I wondered if this was him on a good day—the rumors all played out a scenario where he was comatose. I had pictured him drawn in faint lines, powdery white and ghost-like, but his cheeks held color ever so delicately.

They were too far into the game to let us join, so Tanya and I sat at the table and watched. Tanya whispered something that I couldn't hear to the girl next to us, Katie, and then handed her the thermos. Katie cringed when she sipped it and then giggled, wiping her mouth with her hand.

She wore a teal and white chevron patterned dress, made out of that stretchy fabric you can buy off the bolt and sew up the seam to make a dress that looks like it came from a department store. Lots of moms made their daughters dresses like that.

Katie looked at me with a smirk. “Ruby’s object arrives. Finally.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that Ruby has the hots for you. Can’t stop talking about *Jocelyn*. I’d watch out if I were you unless you *want* to kiss her.” Some girls listening hid embarrassed grins with their hands. Then it was Katie’s turn to roll—she winked and blew a kiss before prancing around on her toes until someone guessed what she was trying to be, a gazelle or antelope. It wasn’t clear which.

“Katie’s full of shit,” Tanya said under her breath to me.

But a part of me wanted it to be true. I wanted to have a secret and for that secret to be Ruby—the victim of my mother’s false prophesies. I could comfort her through her grieving when she found out Mom was a fraud. If she loved me (or thought she did), she would see that I didn’t have anything to do with it. That meant I would have to come clean, to confess that my mom was a liar and that her brother was a ghost, but not the way my mother made him out to be, not in the way that they would continue to have a relationship with him after he died, in the way that they wouldn’t forget things about him when he was gone. They would. She would probably cry, maybe even want to hurt me at first, to punch me in the eye, which would be understandable. We would work through it, over time. It was possible she wouldn’t forgive me for years.

I had dug around in Mom’s jewelry box for hours that morning trying to find something beautiful to give Ruby. All I found was a silly pin shaped like a cat with a long skinny neck and a wobbly head. I knew she wouldn’t like it—nobody could—but I wanted to hear what she would

say, what she would write me later if her parents made her send out thank-yous. Maybe she would think I was trying to start an inside joke with her, and she would smile understandingly as she peeled back the wrapping paper.

*

Mom never disclosed any personal details about her clients to me—I had to give her credit for that, at least. I didn't know what was medically wrong with Ruby's brother. At school other kids would whisper their speculations, standing just close enough to Ruby so she could see their lips moving but not hear. "Car accident, maybe?" "No, nothing that middle class. Probably he's allergic to money or something." "I heard it's contagious—have you seen those marks on Ruby's face? I bet she's getting it." Lately Ruby would come to his defense, as if the accusations of sickness were the reasons for his decline. She would say things like, "He's on track to get better," and "It won't be obvious, but he's coming around."

The parents wheeled his bed around in the living room so he was facing the party while Ruby opened presents, but his eyes were droopy, and a tuft of straight blond hair stuck up at an odd angle. Everyone in the living room tiptoed around him as if his bed housed a collection of precious teacups they couldn't afford to replace.

The party was too busy trying not to look at the brother and stealing sips from Tanya's thermos, which had made its way around to a dozen girls with red faces pretending to feel buzzed, that no one noticed me sneaking upstairs to Ruby's bedroom. I thought I had wanted to see Ruby open the present from me, but I didn't. I wanted her to look around the room when she opened it and see that I wasn't there. I wanted to make her come looking for me, the way we only knew each other in mysteries.

Ruby's bedroom conformed in a startling way to the rest of the house, with only small Ruby touches: vases full of fake flowers, movie ticket stubs wedged in the lining of her mirror, a shiny lizard beanbag toy on a bookshelf. No drawings. No scribbles. None of the drawers peeked open with spilled over sleeves. The furniture was sleek and modern, nothing leftover from childhood. She had perfume bottles on her nightstand, which I thought made her very elegant, like she was an old soul or someone who would someday date college boys even while she was still in high school.

Some people downstairs laughed, and I wondered if Ruby had opened the cat pin. I didn't go back down. I promised myself then that I wouldn't, that I would wait for Ruby, and then there was the part of me that felt like I was hiding from Ruby instead, that she wouldn't come upstairs at all.

I crawled onto her bed and leaned back, looking at the clean walls that surrounded Ruby's existence. I loved the house, the order of it, the way everything was where you would expect it to be. Even with her sick brother and the smell of rubbing alcohol braided into the afghan on the couch—those things were predictable and they belonged. And there on her dresser was the perfect set of pony bead teeth, the kind of teeth that needed nothing, that sprouted from Ruby's gums like straight little gravestones. But I was not looking at the real teeth, just the model of them. I closed my eyes and tried to be so still it would seem like I was asleep, and then at some point I was.

The door creaked loud enough to wake me when Ruby slid inside. She stood over me but did not look alarmed. "I saw the light on from the hall," she said. "Tanya's been looking for you. I think she already left."

"That's okay," I said.

She looked around the room, at distinctive points. There, there, there. The lamp, the water glass, the window. Like she was following something, tracing its movements. Her eyes let go of it. She ran a brush through her hair, recoated her candy pink lips with a shimmery balm.

“Your mom said it would be like this. She said about the ghosts.”

“Well.” A few hairs fell off of the brush, onto the floor. “My mom says a lot of things.”

“No, it makes perfect sense. It’s something we’ve all felt for a while. But we didn’t know it was Will. He’s still in his body now, but…” This was the way people with ghosts talked, with a hesitance, a fear of saying it out loud. She pulled out every blonde strand from the hairbrush and shook them off her fingers into the trash before she sat on the bed next to me.

“Let me look at your hands,” she said.

These were my mother’s words, her lure. It was the warmth of another hand that made people feel assured when she issued the verdicts of their palm lines.

Now Ruby was saying these words, her knees folded and socked feet wedged into the gray and yellow patchwork quilt. I put my palms out for her to see, and she took them, picking them up like two bags of soap beads, careful not to crush what was inside. “This is what your mom did when we came to your house, but she could read the lines.”

“She can’t really read the lines.” I took my hands back, gently. “She tricks people, makes them think they feel things they don’t.”

Ruby shook her head. “My mom doesn’t think so. Your mom was right about everything.”

She turned around to reach for a red pen off of her nightstand and unfurled my fingers, taking back my palms and tracing tributaries in red all over the creases. “Here. There you go. Now you do mine.”

*

Ruby took me outside to her backyard. I felt like there should have been gates and manicured bushes lining the house, but instead there was a wilderness nestled outside the back porch, the beginnings of a pine grove swathed in foggy blankets. The trees held each other, their shadows leaning into us, and Ruby held my hand. I thought the trees and the fog were everything she wanted to show me. I felt on the edge of understanding something from seeing it, but then she tugged on my wrist to stop me and shook my hand roughly.

“We have to say the right words,” she said, “to make the positive energy surround us like your mom taught us to do. I’ve been doing it on the dead hamsters to make them come out.” She knelt down into the pine needles and brushed away the muddy slush. The dirt and needles were loose like someone had been turning the soil over. “See where they’re trying to get out? You would think it wouldn’t be so physical, the way the ghosts get out.”

I tried to be gentle, tried to hold her hand again, but she was kneeling over the hamster ruts, her whole body hovering over them. I touched her dirty fingernails and said, “I don’t think it works like that.” And then, “What if they don’t want to come out?” I asked just in case, because I knew it wasn’t true, but just in case.

“They want to come. You’ll see the way they want it. Why would anything buried want to stay under the ground?” She crossed her legs like she was about to meditate, and I tried to inhale the smell of her perfume, but the fog had carried it all away. I wanted to tell her to stop behaving like a child. “Will is already giving himself over to the other world, but mom and I aren’t worried. We are learning how to be with him when he’s not...here. Not in that bed. He hates that bed, you know.”

My feet crunched the pine needles as I stood up. I felt surrounded by the possibility of hamsters coming out of the earth. I didn't want to have to explain them. "I think I have to get home soon."

Ruby was still planted in the earth. "Did you notice how he's there but not there?"

"There's this whole other world on our world," she said dreamily, "overlapping."

This was what mom did to people, haunted them, took away their bad feelings and gave them these ghosts, and the ghosts would grow into worlds, and underneath it was hard to find the people you loved or the people you could have loved. When Ruby threw her head back to smile, I tried to count her teeth. I tried to fast forward through all of the grief and find her at the end, unhaunted.

Ruby looked down at the scratch marks, touched the dirt, scooped it up in thick clods. Her body started swaying like it was moved by something else, something she had found on my patio, something soft and menacing at once. The dirt quivered just a bit, ready, maybe, to dislodge what was underneath.