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**Galentown: A Tragedy
in Five Acts**

by

Marley Simmons Abril

Accepted in Partial Completion
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Kathleen L. Kitto, Dean of the Graduate School

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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Master's Thesis

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Marley Simmons Abril
May, 2017

**Galentown: A Tragedy
in Five Acts**

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

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Of the Requirements for the Degree
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Abstract

In the insular society of an isolated mountain town, a young child named Sophie vanishes one night into a windstorm. *Galentown: A Tragedy in Five Acts* explores the actions—and inactions—of the townspeople leading up to her disappearance. *Galentown's* tragedy lies in the misdirection of the choral voices that comprise it, which act as a form of erasure and allow the girl to slip away in the fictive world. Ghostlike, she ducks in and out of each of these stories, but ultimately fails to provide the reader resolution to her fate: as the peripheral narrations accumulate, so do potential explanations. This linked collection uses forms of fairytales and classic theater to explore childhood, the gravity of home, and the events in a life that remain persistently unmappable.

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On The Sixth Act:

Galentown: A Tragedy in Five Acts

Setting: Guelatao, Oaxaca State, Mexico

The mountain town of this collection exists. More precisely, the lake at the top of the town exists. It appears in these stories as I remember it, with the single large house at the far end of the lawn, the cobbled streets that slope downhill and away, and the fast-running creek through the forest just behind. No ducks or geese swam in that lake, though its stillness reflected blue sky and the peaks of trees. Despite these trees, no leaves or twigs floated. It looked cool in the humid summer day, but signs all around warned against swimming. I recognized in the lake—in the town that seemed both anchored by and leaning away from it—some essential element of place. Our guide in Guelatao confessed that the lake was rumored to connect to the ocean through an enigmatic underground river, and that a little girl had drowned in there just last year, though whether she had gone for a swim or fallen in wasn't clear.

The actual town of Guelatao became the backdrop for the apocryphal town of Galen. Guelatao and Galen are both haunted by remoteness almost mythological in scale. With their silent streets and dominating lakes, they exist at the end of the road and outside of time. *Galentown* is the story of a remote mountain community that, suddenly and inexplicably, loses its youngest member. The girl—Sophie—vanishes one night during a windstorm. The night of the storm is narrated in turn by townspeople, family members, and the girl's only friend, none of who are able to explain her fate. Sophie ducks mutely in and out of the narratives that surround her. Possibilities are raised without resolution: she has been kidnapped, drowned in the

lake, run away, or simply lost. The stories of this collection orbit around Sophie's mysterious disappearance without ever facing it directly, and the town itself takes on a sinister gloom.

Galen is not just a location, but also a singular stage for the narrative action. As in a play, the setting anchors the events and scenes, which must remain inside the boundaries of the constructed set. For the characters themselves, particularly the younger ones, the distinction between here and there—on-stage or off—is stark. All of the stories include references to “down-mountain:” what is far away in the city, near the ocean, or otherwise simply *not* Galen. Peter cannot fathom what a beach smells like. Dune is desperate to leave Galen, but cannot articulate where he might go or what he might do there. Rae's business in the city is a mystery even to her own children. Every act of leaving requires great momentum. To the children of these stories, who live within Galen's heavy gravity, anywhere else—everywhere else—must be unknowably other.

When characters do leave, their time outside is rendered blank, redacted from the narrative. Rae, Sophie's mother, offers no explanation or description of her months in the city; she notes only that Galen is “slicker” than she remembers, and she has not brought proper footwear for the town. A young lover sends brief telegrams from the city that share his work in the theater, an occupation Gran dismisses as frivolous and false. Malory describes the city to young Peter in language so verbose and flowery that it renders “city” an abstraction and fails to communicate anything at all. This willful occlusion situates Galen as the sole setting for our action, as though the stage-lights on the town are so bright that the actors cannot see past them.

Similarly, the use of the term “tragedy” in *Galentown’s* subtitle intentionally relates the action to classic dramatic stage productions. In the Western theatrical tradition, a play’s main action was often accompanied by a chorus, which commented on, narrated around, and sometimes offered context for that main action. Whether in the form of the dead, the gods, or the living townspeople, this chorus established the play’s moral center, the stable community from which the action emerges. The five stories that comprise this collection represent choral voices spread through the town of Galen. Sophie’s disappearance from the action—her exit from the stage—ought to be the subject of the chorus’ narrations. But Galen’s communal attention strays and allows the central character to slip away, both literally in the fictive world and narratively on the page.

This misdirection of attention is the source of *Galentown’s* tragedy. The chorus, in ways both selfish and utterly human, narrates the marginal action and ignores the larger plot. While Sophie represents the heart of *Galentown*, she is forgotten within Galen. Her mother leaves the family to go down-mountain without explanation. Dune resents his responsibility to care for Sophie in their mother’s absence. Their grandmother means well but suffers within her own fabulist inventions. Sally notices Sophie, but her attention snags on a more immediate concern. Of the characters and narrators here only one—the unnamed narrator of “By Any Other Name”—recognizes the vulnerability in the small girl. Recounting the season’s events from a distance of many decades, this narrator reveals Sophie’s exit from the stage, but with a chilly remove that offers little illumination. Each story in *Galentown* turns the spotlight away from Sophie, so that her disappearance is read not as a single and discrete event, but a slow process of darkening.

Particular images and details echo this theatrical perspective. “By No Other Name” lingers on the image of a small mirror in a birdcage. It is referred to as a “companion mirror,” implying that the occupant does not recognize the self reflected there. When calm, the lake mirrors the sky above it but reveals nothing of what’s below. In “Mud Dog,” Dune watches the action unfold in the reflection of his house’s window, as though viewing a scene performed by others. In “Fang,” Dune even refers to classic tragedy in literature, noting that characters “[have] to have” a fatal flaw. Contrary to Dune’s assertion, in *Galentown* the fatal flaw does not belong to any one character; it belongs to the whole town.

The multiple perspectives of *Galentown* place it within a tradition of rashomon storytelling, with multiple narrators and a fractured narrative truth. The term rashomon derives from a movie of the same name, which concerns the details of a murder investigation. The multiple narrators allow for a decentralization of any potentially central truth, and the form is often used to upend a story’s stability and complicate the axis around which each character’s narration turns. Rashomon, as many other experiments in post-modern literature, questions the basic assumption of simple transactional storytelling: that there *is* a single truth. Or, if not a truth, at least a communicable *trueness*. *Galentown* twists the rashomon form by turning all of the narrators away from the action. The central event—Sophie’s disappearance—is not the direct subject of any of the five “acts,” and is mentioned, when it is mentioned at all, as afterthought or marginalia. Sophie’s story, then, is told not through direct narration but by omission. Even as the stories here accumulate into a stable picture of the night’s events, the potential explanations for Sophie’s particular fate multiply, and her narrative truth splinters.

With *The Color of Summer*, Reinaldo Arenas disrupts linearity in similarly interesting ways. In the Foreword, Arenas takes credit for creating the world's first "round" novel. Readers, he says, "can begin it anywhere and read until they come back to their starting point." Appropriately, his novel contains little in the way of temporal progression; rather, its tension and resonance draw from accumulation. *The Color of Summer* dispatches with any expectations of linearity (his "Forward" arrives over halfway through the novel) and instead creates a work that is mined through multiple and shifting pathways. A reader can follow threads suggested by repeated chapter titles, formal experiments, and serial epistolary interjections. There is a lot of playfulness in this structure, and in the narrative path-finding that it returns to the reader. This format shuffles narrative directionality. If there is a beginning, middle, and end, they are only accidental.

Likewise, *Galentown* began as a thought experiment in hypertextual writing. My project was to take the narrative flexibility offered by newer electronic texts and somehow return it to the tangible page. Katherine Hayles codifies hypertextuality in *Writing Machines*, which provides a good model for understanding *Galentown*. According to Hayles, hypertext is defined (in part) by multiple pathways that lead towards and away from each discrete bit of text—each lexia. *Galentown* reimagines each story as a lexia, and creates linguistic pathways between characters, locations, and events. For example, in "Mud Dog," Sophie begins to tell Isa a story about her mouse, but is interrupted by her mother. This brief and innocuous exchange links "Mud Dog" to two other stories, which can each help a reader understand the circumstances and importance of the night's events. The scene can be understood plainly on its own, but a curious reader is able to tunnel under the surface of the collection, and unearth the valuable connections that hold it together.

The mouse that Sophie casually references in “Mud Dog” is the main concern of “By No Other Name.” Through that story we learn that Sophie reluctantly and recently—only the day before—released this unhappy mouse into the forest. The story’s themes of care and neglect leak into “Mud Dog” and take on a new resonance; after all, it is Sophie’s own abandoning mother who has returned. Neither the mother nor Isa know the content of Sophie’s story, but the reader does. As her mother waves the anecdote away, Isa persists. Even Dune, distant from the drama unfolding in his own home, encourages Sophie’s story. Her mother’s response is a disappointment to all: “No mouse. No story.” This is a flat command, but could be heard by Sophie as a bargain, meaning, “If you don’t have the mouse, then you can’t tell the story.” Thus, in “A Certain Type of Enormous,” we find Sophie back in the forest with her cage, searching for the mouse. In that story, Pete finds little interest in his strange encounter with the girl. But why would he? He’s searching for the heart of his own story.

These decentralized narratives offer an alternative to linear storytelling, where events are defined by chronology the same way a necklace is defined by its beads. Even when the strand is tangled, they maintain their strict order and relation to one another. Postmodern writers—and critics—note objectivity as a narrative element, and there is certainly a school of winking, self-aware fiction that intentionally calls objective stability into doubt. Deconstructionists in particular find great delight in challenging what they see as arbitrary meaning created by linear storytelling. *Galentown* uses these techniques to layer events spatially, and allow dimensional travel between and among them.

On its face, these connections are not so radical; after all, many story collections accumulate meaning and momentum as one reads through them. The

ordering presented here is not arbitrary, but neither is it absolute. This arrangement reflects a focus on the question of Sophie's fate, and its cause, while alternate orders might foreground alternate concerns. For example, a reading that meditates on *Galentown's* strong themes of abandonment might order the stories in this way:

1. "Fang"
2. "By No Other Name"
3. "A Certain Type of Enormous"
4. "Mud Dog"
5. "Gust"

Thus emerges a narrative arc that begins with leaving, pivots around two stories that feature both leaving and returning, and concludes with "Gust," when Rae comes home to her children and the cost of her earlier inaction is fully realized. Other arrangements might surface the importance of storytelling, or Galen's unmistakable sense of isolation, or the powerlessness that the children here feel. This flexibility requires each story to be independent, but also interdependent.

The circular narrative is not without precedent. It is common among oral traditions, and the Maori word *su`ifefiloi* refers to a story told through discrete scenes or episodes "sewn" together, as a flower garland. Ursula K. le Guin, in "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," explicitly pushes back against Western traditions of hero-driven, arrow-straight narratives. She argues that the history of humanity is not that of the spear—as exciting as spears and conflicts may be—but that of the container. It wasn't enough to simply kill food; we ascended to dominance by the ability to store that food. Le Guin borrows this anthropological insight and applies it to fiction. "That is why I like novels," she writes, "instead of heroes they have people in them." In *Galentown*, the emotional container of each story is family, and these families live in fluctuating states of rupture and togetherness. Childhood is not a state of play, but a perpetual question of where one belongs, where one finds their center.

Galentown borrows many of its themes from fairytales, even as it resists the casual magic of fabulism. Like fairytales, the stories here are very much of the home: the houses in Galen are either small, shabby, and crowded, or else enormous and abandoned. Beyond the neat containment of these homes lies an indeterminate borderland of forest. In “Gust,” Rae’s progress up the mountain explicitly nods to this tradition as she encounters homes of stick, beam, and then stone. It might be overly simplistic to cast Rae as an innocent wander like Little Red Riding Hood, and neither is she a wicked mother, but the extended meditation on the habits and modes of motherhood draw a reader back to the forms of classic fairytales. Rae abandons her daughter to pursue her sad past down-mountain, but Rae herself has been abandoned by the carelessness of her own housebound mother. So, like fairytales, *Galentown* contains the seed of a moral: a daughter neglected is a daughter lost.

Ultimately, I imagine these stories as presented together yet bound separately, so that a reader might begin and end wherever they wished. The momentum of the story then travels not left to right, or up and down, but around in a circle. Sophie’s fate is formed and reformed for the reader by the shifting details and connections of *Galentown*’s unstable structure. Each of the five “acts” of this collection turns a light on a different corner of the stage. But in any order, the image they reveal is doomed to be partial. Like Sophie’s half-built puzzle in “Mud Dog,” the stories of *Galentown* piece an outline, but leave the image in the middle to be imagined. In this way Sophie’s fate mirrors Guelatao’s placid lake: central, inarguable, yet tragically unmappable.

By No Other Name

It's been many years since I've had occasion to think of the girl who vanished, and how odd, now, this abrupt flush of recollection. As my own daughter trains her eyes beyond the swaying birches of Galen, I think back to that girl so long ago who simply walked off stage, out of the lights. Even when living, she seemed only loosely written into her own story. As children we enjoyed a friendship and I, like everyone else was startled by her abrupt retreat. But as I grew into adulthood, and adulthood gathered other losses, she slipped further and further from mind. As though her physical departure triggered some sort of amnesia, a psychic departure, so that even the outline of her dissolved into the miasma of memory. It took me time to even remember her name, but then it, along with so much else, returned swiftly to me. Sophie. Her name was Sophie.

We met in the schoolyard. We occasionally sat at the same lunch table, and though she was behind me in years, we united over mutual reticence to engage in stickball, wall ball, other such sweaty frivolities. Afternoons, I sometimes volunteered restocking at Galen's creaky library, where she tailed me with her books through the stacks, asking after this or that. Despite the well-stitched companionship this proximity encouraged, the modes of Sophie's friendship remained starchy with formality. In my presence she was often both hesitant and obedient, her face composed into its single, doubtful expression.

Sophie's mother had gone down-mountain for an unspecified but lengthening period of time. She left Sophie in the care of her grandmother—an excitable woman well-known in town for her weakening sensibilities—and a

hawkish older brother. This brother caused a scandal by dropping out of school the very month his senior classes were due to begin. My father once wondered aloud how it could be Sophie was not devoured by this brother. He wondered how she managed such slight feats of normalcy, to lace up her shoes and gather her books and walk the slick cobbles downhill to our house, where we had meats and tea to share, fresh flowers in a cup on the table, and a rabbit out back which she was fond of gazing at.

My father and I welcomed this timid girl into our routines, and slowly she grew comfortable with the latch on the gate to our small yard, and with the customs of our home. She was endlessly curious about the rituals of normalcy. The very chores to which I committed the full measure of my youthful resentment—raking of rancid leaf litter, scrubbing of mold from the windowsills—held her quiet fascination. It was only my father's consideration for the girl that prevented me from passing her the chores outright, rake and bucket and work-gloves, to happily complete herself.

My father was a man of careful morals, and the loosely defined departure of Sophie's mother rattled his sensibilities. Though Sophie's brother was nearly grown himself, my father believed unshakably that one simply did not *leave* one's children. To become a parent was to become peripheral, drawn elliptically around a much greater source of gravitation. Parents were not to be suns, they were to be moons: arid, reflective, reliable as stone.

I recalled seeing her and her brother one morning that August, standing on the steps of the ratty library at the bottom of the lane. They stood elevated and in profile to me, and appeared to be in close conversation so I intended to merely pass on my way. But she glanced up to me and tilted her palm in a wave. Her brother,

interrupted by the gesture, laid a deliberate hand atop her head and turned her face back to meet his own. Her gaze lingered as if imploring to me, her audience, as though her whole body were reluctant to turn but her eyes alone could resist.

That afternoon she wandered as usual into our yard, where I had been tasked by my father with deadheading the summer blooms. She said little to me, but knelt before the hutch with such purpose I didn't question as she unlatched the door and swung it wide open. When she reached out her arm to within a whisker of the rabbit's panting ribs, with all that patient space between them, I felt I was witnessing a different person. That a commonality of fear might unite them, and that the silent evaluations of each creature might land somewhere within trust. Sophie gestured and murmured, but the rabbit remained in its wary crouch and would scoot no closer. After a long moment Sophie relented, and relatched the door of the hutch. Her bare knees had muddied. A strand of alfalfa dangled from her sleeve. As she walked away she kicked at a low dahlia bloom, scattering white petals into the mulch.

It was not the only time her boldness surprised me. Late that month we walked together down the path around Galen Lake, to the woods to gather the wide leaves of the fruiting thimbleberry. My father claimed the rabbits preferred these broad, furry leaves, and they gave the meat a particular tang he himself preferred. As we walked, hoping perhaps for a shriek or thrill, I teased her by pretending I might push her across the scruff of grass and right into reedy shallows, and was astonished at the veracity of her resistance. Even my flimsy threat horrified her. She dug her heels into the lawn like a horse, and pushed back at my arms, pounding her small fists into the crook of my elbows. I leaped backwards from her, and holding my hands up high I dribbled out lame apologies for my jest. 'It's just that I don't

know how to swim,' she confessed. Though I did not either, I said nothing in response. She returned to the lake path, and we went on into the woods and she affected an odd, unnecessary deference after that. She held up each leaf she picked to show me. 'Will the rabbit like this one?' she asked. 'The rabbit will like this one. Won't it?'

Of course what I knew, and she did not, was that all this gathering of berry leaves was portentous of my father's kind but imminent kill. He would surely have preferred to shield her from it, knowing her affection for the animal, but as is the cruel habit of chance, Sophie wandered up the lane and through our gate as my father and I prepared this routine. She paused in the yard, took in the unusual fact of him, for once, kneeling before the hutch's wide-swung door and myself behind, hands wrapped in a towel. My father looked at her a long moment, perhaps reconsidered, but then re-decided and reached his long arm for the panting animal. If Sophie's appeals to the rabbit were always silent and gentle, then my father must have seemed to her appalling, with his dark arm and sure grip on the rabbit's fat neck. Its paws scrabbled in the sawdust for a moment, before it quit its pathetic resistance. Its body left a long scrape behind in the dirt.

Sophie knelt and gazed at it, put out both her palms. 'May I?'

My father cautioned her to watch the feet. She held the rabbit on her lap, close against her chest. Just as I had on occasions before, I knew she was feeling the rabbit's body through its thick fur, sides jumping with the fast heart and quickening lungs drawn from some ancient animal knowledge. The black eyes gaped. As she held the weak creature, she laid her hand over its head. She turned its gaze on my father, and then the open gate of the hutch, and then around to herself, as though

she and the rabbit shared a horror at the sharpness of the world such creatures must be made to live in.

Perhaps in reparation for this, or for other circumstances he was never responsible for, when my father next went to the breeder's he returned with a young rabbit for himself and a plump mouse for Sophie. September had brought breeze to the mountain, and we sat coring pears in the day's last sun on my stoop when my father labored up the lane with his crates. The mouse he handed her was white with black spots like a cow, or rather like a drawing of a cow, cows being nothing Sophie or I had seen in actuality. She held it in both palms. My father explained she would need a cage for it, or a box. He offered to build her one if needed. 'No,' she told him. 'I have one at home perfect.'

Sophie and her brother and grandmother lived in a narrow house halfway up the mountain, where the cobbles ended and the paving dissolved into dust. I had never been in her house before that afternoon, but she insisted I follow her back there with the mouse. I pinched some straw from the bale my father kept for his rabbits and followed her up the long cart-path, up the hill and into the forest. Her house was small, but it surprised me with its capacity for disorder. The room suffered from both gloom and the heaviness caused by her brother's feral smell. A stack of bowls tilted towards the sink. From a couch in the corner, blankets heaped and spilled to the floor. Clothing lumped around it. The darkness, the limits of visibility, had the effect of amplifying the humid odors of occupation, as though the lights had been dimmed precisely to activate and irritate other, gentler senses.

Sophie's own room was tidy and bright, the window propped up on a coffee tin. She had a single dresser, and upon it a small pile of library books. Sophie touched the top of the mouse's head with her finger. 'She needs a name.' Sophie announced. And then: 'Her name can be Bess.'

Sophie instructed me to wait while she retrieved a wire birdcage she knew to be in her mother's abandoned bedroom. The cage, when she returned, had clearly been empty for a long while. Dust had settled on the dowels, and atop the oblong platform in front of the companion mirror, and inside its rusty hinges. Unmoved by the sadness of this artifact, Sophie cleared her books away and labored the cage up to her dresser-top. I watched her attentions with a mixture of curiosity and awe. It was as though she had waited long weeks to display such domestic proficiency. She scrubbed the mitered edge of her dresser, raked sawdust and droppings from the tray of the cage, wiped the tiny mirror with the edge of her fist, spread out the new straw. She then scooped the mouse from my hands and pushed it through the wire door. The mouse made a single lap around the cage and retreated to the vague shelter under the ledge of the companion mirror, the mirror intended for birds, to fool them out of their solitude.

In contrast, Sophie's own formlessness seemed assuaged by her accidental pet. She came to my yard only once that week. The new rabbit had been installed in the hutch, but it held little interest for her, its fate now known. Neither did the sunny chores of the garden interest her, or my offer of olives to snack on. She seemed not to recall why she had come, and as abruptly as she'd arrived, she left again. She turned to let herself out through the gate, and a slash of sun shone through her curls and the thin hanging fabric of her dress. From then until the end, the balance of our friendship tilted towards this mouse.

Before long, as late summer fell fast into early autumn, the mouse grew round around the belly, hot and lumpy. Sophie brought me to see, and she and I stood side by side at the dresser, watching the poor mouse drag herself across the sawdust. Sophie produced a book on the subject, which proclaimed itself to be in regards to something called "rodent husbandry," about the birthing and raising of small mammals, although as Sophie noted wryly, the mouse had not needed a husband to become round hot lumpy exhausted.

'They'll be blind,' she told me of the babies. The book had informed her that infant mice are born lacking eyes and ears but with bellies full of milk. In one week they grow downy fur. In two they open their eyes and when they move it is by jumping straight up in the air. 'That's called the flea stage.' Sophie already had names for the babies, which she culled from the index of the book, dragging her finger down the rows of words: *Barbering, Diurnal, Diastema*.

When it became the mouse's time Sophie ran down the old cart-path and into town, and she hollered to come fast watch the birth. The mouse had her babies under the companion mirror, in the vague shelter provided by its resting platform. The babies were shaped like beans, wet and red. We gaped at them. As though lit from behind, we could plainly see straight through the wax of thin skin to the milk in their middles. But other than the milk they didn't look like viable anything, with blood or bile or sentience. They each looked like a single organ, pulled raw from a body. They piled together without moving. Bessie lay on her side and squinted at them, disemboweled.

The next day Sophie again hurried down to our lane. She worried at her hands, twisting them one against the other. Behind her, a high cloud moved across the sun and threw the whole lane into shadow, like snapping out stage lights. She

reported that the baby mice were dying. Bess refused to groom or nurse them, and had only moved since their birth to remove each stiff little bean out of the nest, away from her. Sophie stood before me in the gummy gutter, and mumbled down into her fist. She begged me to follow her back to the house.

I was surprised to encounter her brother there, on the couch in the corner. He wore no shirt, and his skin provided a pale reflection. Something about him seemed hollow, as though he lacked the warm and generous fillings that animated the rest of us. Blankets piled on his lap. Sophie strode passed him without a word, indicating by a wave that I was to come quickly along behind. I watched him through my eyelashes. From the loose angle of his body, the light cast shadow onto each rib of his narrow chest as he turned. 'Mom's on her way back,' he announced. Sophie paused on the rug, having no immediate answer for that, then urged me on with a tug at my sleeve. 'Don't listen to him.'

In her bedroom, Sophie closed her door softly. She had pulled the shade down, giving the room a dim cast perhaps meant to be encouraging to her mouse. Comfortable. A tiny, pale carcass lay on the ledge before the mirror. It had no ears or eyes or whiskers, but four half-formed legs that curled up around it, repeated in the mirror. In the straw, all around the nest, pink stains bloomed around rice-sized grains of the tiny mice: their inedible bits, claws and teeth and skull. As we watched, Bess separated one still shape from the squirming pile and tugged it aside. She sniffed at it wearily, then vomited into the straw.

'I looked it up,' Sophie told me. 'It's called perinatal cannibalism.'

I nodded. I had not until then heard a name for the behavior, but I knew through my father's breeding that this was a normal, if regrettable, habit of mammals. The stress of captivity occasionally caused an abstract horror of

motherhood. The mouse ate her own babies to save them: a gruesome but grand gesture. Nothing cast the fact of ownership into deeper shade than that, than an animal's inability to share its own loneliness. I pretended an authority I did not possess. 'You have to let her go.'

Sophie offered a single, sad nod of agreement.

Sophie carried the cage and I followed a pace or two behind with a small dish for water, another for extra food. I held them out before me, one in each hand, grim offerings to some ruinous, twiggy altar. Past the curve in the lake trail grew a dense stand of thimbleberries. Their leaves hung in drooping rows, as though reluctant witnesses to our abandonment. Sophie planned to palm the mouse free into the spiny underbrush and return the rusty cage to her mother's closet, but when she reached through the cage's wire door the mouse rounded her tiny mouth around the soft pad of Sophie's thumb. Sophie jerked her arm out of the cage with a yelp. She stared at her own hand as blood bubbled on her skin.

In the end we left the cage, door propped open to the underbrush. The wire cage seemed hopelessly fragile under the scrub. It offered no more shelter than the wide leaves of the thimbleberry, the browning beeches, the few ferns that freckled the shady lakeside. The temperature seemed to drop as we stood there, and I remember thinking, but not telling Sophie, that a wind storm was predicted to sweep up the mountain, possibly as soon as the following night. I laid the pointless dishes nearby.

'Bess will be okay,' Sophie asked, gripping her bloody thumb. 'Won't she?'

The mouse stared forward into the enormous wild. The small companion mirror reflected shade, and nothing else. Looking back upon it now, across the ocean of adulthood, I cannot determine what variety of cruelty motivated that moment. It

was one of the last I was to share with Sophie, but how were we to know that? Sophie herself would soon disappear into the forest, off the stage and out of Galen, into the wings for good. Whether she went to retrieve the mouse, or the empty cage it left behind, I wouldn't know. I eventually ceased wondering.

Neither of us looked at the other as we walked back to the lake-trail. We turned one last time to gaze at the mouse—Bess—crouched alone in the widening woods. 'She looks so unremarkable,' Sophie said. Her gaze lingered on the cage, betrayed her reluctance to turn. I didn't disagree. There was no other name for it.

A Certain Type of Enormous

First of everything, it helps to know that my cousin Malory can be a very grand and starry person. She's got spotlights for eyes. She turns those lights on you and you feel enormous in a small world, but sometimes this is painful. Sometimes it feels like she could pry your ribcage apart and let the good stuff in there float on away, leave the middle of you dark and empty.

For a great example is this story here, about her latest trip back up-mountain and the gift she brought me. She hasn't been back to Galen since she left, last summer. She's four years older and went to find a new home in the city out west by the ocean, neither of which I've ever seen—not city or ocean. For July August September half-October I got no word from her at all, but then she arrived back in Galen, at my Auntie's one night for dinner, and with gifts. One for her mom, one for my Auntie, and one for me. A bottle—this bottle—which she announced had floated a message all the way from across the ocean and lodged in the sand on the beach near her house in her grand city. There in her Auntie's living room she went down on one knee and held up it to me while her eyelids fluttered and she leaned her face on her own shoulder like she couldn't even bear to watch me accept it. 'Go on,' she insisted.

Her mom and my Auntie both looked at her, and then at me, and then we all looked at the bottle as I took it from her palms. Sand scuffed up one side. She opened her eyes to explain that she had walked the beach all evening, hoping to find a special surprise to bring to me. 'Low sun and weak light so I almost missed it. But there,' —and here she wiped her palm across an entire imaginary beach-scape—

‘where the beach bends outward into the current, where the tide trenches around the rocks and logs and then fades away, I spotted a wink in the sand and knew, just knew, that I’d found something really special.’

This bottle, with a brittle curl of paper inside. I tipped out the message. It looked like this.

It said: Lost! Send Help!
and then under that a phone number
address city country and even continent
though the city is the one where Malory lives, not too far
from here at all

‘Did you send help?’ I asked. I didn’t expect her to laugh. I held the bottle in one hand and the note in the other, not knowing what to do with either. ‘Well did you?’

‘I thought you’d like it. It’s a treasure from far away.’

‘It’s not from far away. It’s from close. And they said send help.’

‘Oh God, Petey. It was a joke, a kid making a joke.’ She stood up and patted me on the shoulder. ‘Why would someone who was lost direct help to their home address?’

I hate when she calls me Petey.

She must have felt bad because after snacks she took me for a walk. She hooked her elbow in mine, and we went up the hill and around Galen Lake. No one else was there, just chubby geese. ‘Watch this!’ I said. I ran towards the geese and pretended I might kick one. But it’s impossible. They flap away every time. ‘See?’

You can't kick a bird.' Brett showed me that. When he gets bored at the fort he likes to go to the lake and practice.

She asked me if I was doing okay. She called me an odd bird, but said that's okay because even odd birds get to fly around and see the world. She called me Petey again.

'Oh jeez, sorry. Are you just Pete now? Peter?' She pushed imaginary glasses up her nose. Just Pete is fine.

She told me I really ought to come visit her in the city. She said the city is perfect at night. That it makes its own stars. The sky is always pink, which is light pollution reflected off air pollution, but that it doesn't even matter, that the lights of buildings and radio towers are bright against the pink and it looks like a cartoon of the future.

I asked her what the ocean is like. She told me that every so often, by a trick of the dense atmosphere, the moon inflates hot and orange and slides up between the seam of water and sky, enormous behind all the pin-size anchor lights of sail boats, and she says at those moments she can finally almost grasp the size of the whole empty universe. She said, when Auntie lets me do anything on my own, I should visit. She'd take me to the beach where she found the bottle, almost buried in sand and almost dragged away by a tide.

'I like getting your postcards,' she told me. 'I like your words and your sketches and how you always describe a scene just right.' I pointed out that she never writes back. She said that just because she never writes back doesn't mean she doesn't completely love getting them, and love how I keep in such good touch even though we live far apart now. She told me she liked that I wanted to know all about her life. She stopped there by the lake and crouched to look in my face and said,

'Your curiosity in those postcards is wide as the sky, Pete. And the world waiting for you is just as wide, and it makes me so badly want to bring you things to prove all the possibilities of the world. That's why I brought you the message in the bottle. Even if, okay, it came from the exact same place it ended, what it means is that the world is full of potential. The world is just enormous with it.' She really talks like that. All of this is true.

I looked up the mountain, towards me and Brett's fort. 'Are you coming to Auntie's for dinner?' I asked. But she said she had plans. 'What plans?' She waggled her fingers and said her and all her gal friends were hiking up up up the mountain to howl at the moon and plan the future of the world and no boys were allowed.

'Brett and I made a fort up there,' I said. 'Me and him and his sister.'

She looked across the lake, and a minute went by and she didn't say anything.

'What does it smell like?' I asked her instead.

'What?'

'The beach. What does it smell like?' She looked up, as though consulting the bloated pink universe.

'It smells like seaweed.'

Not too long after that, Brett came by the house and said to meet him later at the fort because he something to show me. We made this fort along a narrow path that runs uphill from the lake, right next to the creek. It's built out of logs and plywood and rope, scrappy stuff we hauled up the trail and stacked between the trunks of three tall pines. It's tall enough to stand up inside, but only barely. So we

brought folding chairs, and mostly we sit. If you lean on a wall or anything the whole thing might tip and slide apart. Brett's sister named it the Junkyard Social Club, which I think she got from a movie. Then she turned 14 and got a grudge against both forts and boys. Or us boys, anyway.

When I got to the fort he right away said, 'Check this out' and handed me a square of cardboard. He calls stuff like this a girly pic. I think he got that from a movie. The last girly pic he ripped out from a library book on Zambia, so I was skeptical. I'll save you some imagining, and tell you that this one isn't very sexy either. It looks like this. The picture ends before her bottom. I'm pretty sure it's just one of his sister's bra tags. Brett snatched it back from me, and tacked it through the hole up next to the library book page. 'Smokin hot,' he said.

Just a square of cardboard with a blond girl in a bra and a price sticker on it. The bra is beige, with no lace or anything.

But the bra tag is weird. Brett in general is getting weird.

The page from the book on Zambia caught gusts of cold breeze and swung around on its tack. The lady looks like she's in a parade, dancing. She has no top on but a big beaded necklace that covers some of her, but not all of her, and the photo caught her mid-stride so the strands of beads spray out like fingers. I think you're not supposed to care that you can see her boobs. I think the picture is supposed to be about her face, because her smile is enormous, and right behind it you can see other women and two boys laughing as they tug at a soccer ball, not even paying attention to her or her boobs.

‘Want me to leave you alone with your girlfriend?’ Brett put his hands up and flapped them like a girl, or like how boys make fun of girls when they’re actually making fun of each other.

I told him to can it.

‘Oh right.’ He tried to look serious. He leaned all his weight to one foot and wrapped his hand around his chin. ‘She’s not your girlfriend. I saw you with your girlfriend yesterday.’

I asked him where, but that was false because I knew. If you sit in the doorway of the fort you can see through the gap in the trees clear to the lake trail, to where the creek runs in and the footbridge crosses it. You can almost yell down to the path. But only from that spot, from the door of the fort, so he must have been sitting there in his chair looking down at the path when me and Malory went walking past. That’s weirder to me than imagining him inside the fort with pictures of Zambian ladies, or pawing through his sister’s trash after everyone’s gone to sleep.

How did he know his sister got new bras, anyway? To hear him tell it, she’s stony cold to him, like they never even met. ‘You could cut glass with those nipples, that’s how cold she is.’ That’s what he said. You know how I told you how Malory talks, like she can use her huge words to turn on the lights of the world? Well, Brett talks the opposite. Brett talks like he’s stomping his words into the mud.

I hurried home after that. The air had taken on a certain blankness, like a storm was coming. Like the almost-storm slurped up the atmosphere and then held it, incubating it to grow into a screaming full-storm. Do you know that feeling, like you can just tell a storm? Maybe, wherever you are, you don’t get storms like we get

here. Well, the air had that stormy feeling. There was no one on the path but some aimless dogs, and they scattered when they saw me.

After dinner Auntie let me go out and I went by Malory's to ask if she was home yet. Her mom said she was out still with the fella. That's what she said: 'With the fella.' I tried to think about what Malory told me about her plans. Her gal friends, something in the woods. Her mom patted me on the shoulder. 'It's okay Petey. We understand.'

This morning Malory came by with another gift. She stood on the top step of the porch and behind her the day looked dark like it would never again be warm, like we live inside a broken oven. She held a tube tied with a red ribbon. Her cheeks were pink from the breeze.

'Let me in,' she demanded, 'or I'll start calling you Petey again.' On the rug she yanked at the ribbon and the long paper flapped open. I could tell it hadn't been rolled for long because it laid right out, like its natural state was flat. Malory knelt on the rug and grinned huge at me. The map looked like it came from an atlas, with glossy paper and countries filled in pastel. But Malory had scorched the edges to make it look old.

'It's for the bottle,' she explained. 'For a note. We'll write a note. It's not enough just to hear what the world is saying to us, we have to answer back. We'll write a note to anywhere. We won't joke and pretend we need help, we'll just pick a spot and say something nice and send it there.'

'That's not how currents work,' I told her.

She gave a long sigh.

'Anyway, how would I get it to the ocean? Throw it in the creek?'

I meant to be cold, but she laughed and said, 'Yeah, the creek goes to the lake and the lake goes underground to the ocean.'

'It will break.'

'We'll fill it up with air, like a balloon, so the pressure inside pushes back against the pressure outside and all the pressures are in balance and then it won't break, even when it tumbles on the rocks.'

It made me mad how dumb she acted like I was.

I asked her how her night last night was, with her gal friends, when she wasn't at dinner. 'How are your gal friends?' I demanded.

She rolled up the map and tied the ribbon around it, then tugged at the bow so its loops and tails were even and handed it to me.

'It was just my one friend. We had a picnic.'

'In the woods?'

'In his car.'

I looked outside at the dim sky. When it gets stormy in town the wind funnels and moves extra fast between all the houses, and it sounds deadly. I suppose maybe it is.

'Hey,' she said, and tapped the back of my hand. 'Want to show me your fort? It's right by the creek, right? We can write our note in the fort, and then toss it out into the water and wherever it goes after that is the fates and we're off the hook.'

I thought a long time about that. A long time. Perhaps it was Petey thinking, Petey who imagined he could just fill up this bottle with his own breath, the regular breath right now sitting useless in his ribcage. Fill it with fates and the cosmos and

enormous potentials and then just toss it away towards the rocks, to coast flawless unbroken currents to Calcutta, or Cape Town, or wherever.

‘After dinner,’ I suggested. ‘We could go after dinner.’

She stood up from the rug. ‘You’re brilliant, Pete. It’s a date.’

After she left I came up to the fort because I wanted to hide Brett’s bra tag before Malory came and saw. I brought the map with me. I could just tack it right over the boobs, that was my thought. Brett stopped me in the doorway. He smelled mossy, like a crawl space. Behind him I saw another boy.

‘Welcome to the Junkyard Social Club. Your membership is overdue.’ Brett stood with his arms across the entry. He had greased his bangs straight down on his forehead, like the teeth of a comb. The other boy sat in Brett’s chair and tapped his toe in the dust.

‘Who’s he.’ I said. Brett told me Roger had paid his dues. He handed me an instant develop snapshot. It was the same size as the bra tag, but hard at first to decipher, like the shapes themselves were foreign symbols.

The colors are hot with high sun. Two girls lie on a blanket, topless.

The soles of their feet face the camera, and one leans up on her elbows with her head hanging back. A dark bar smudges one side, like it was taken through a fence, or a window.

‘He’s got loads more,’ Brett said, and snatched it back. ‘Collection time. What you got?’ Brett grabbed at the map. The ribbon fell and squiggled up in the dirt, and he held the map open between our faces, like he had to hold it that close to read it proper. On the back of the map was another map, of roads.

Brett said maps weren't what they were looking for. 'Rejected.' He held it out of the fort's doorway and let the wind catch it. It hovered for a moment, paused in a bare winter shrub, then winged itself across the dirty forest floor.

I watched the map land in the creek and slump into the rocks like a pillowcase. I was still thinking of Malory. I figured that if I came up the hill fast ahead of her, I could tear down the bra tag and the snapshot before she looked through the doorway and saw them. Roger said something I couldn't hear and Brett laughed. I left them, went and lifted the map out of the stream and walked with it flapping water on my knees and my shoes, back down to the lake, and to town.

For dinner, Auntie made marzipan rolled with coconut and raspberry jam. Malory's mom brought lasagna. Malory loves sweets, but she'd barely begun to eat one when a car horn honked outside. Malory's mom said 'Oooohhhh' and Auntie clapped her hands together. Malory told her to shush. She grabbed four marzipan swirls while her mom and Auntie looked back and forth at each other with so many wordy glances and chirpy sounds that I almost didn't get a chance to remind her about the fort.

'Are you leaving?' I asked her.

Malory looked all around the room and then at the sweets in her hand. 'Oh,' she almost said, but she only sort of mouthed it, made the word out of empty air. 'I'm meeting my friend.'

'Bring your friend to the fort.'

Auntie said the wind was too high and no one was going into the woods tonight at all, not for any reason. 'Right?' She looked at Malory when she said it. I followed Malory to the door and in secret made her promise to come up and see my

fort. I promised her I'd be there, and she should promise she'd be there, and she could bring her friend, and we'd all write the new bottle note together.

Malory said 'Sure. Okay.' I gave her directions: down the lake path to where the creek falls in and then straight up the hill, and she said again, 'Okay Pete. Okay I'll try.'

'Promise,' I said.

'I promise to try.'

I went back to the table but it felt swampy with silence. Do you know that feeling? Too much heavy thinking that weighs down all the moods and eyeballs in the room? That's what it felt like, and I realize now that Malory never meant to try at all.

It was way past dark when I got to the fort. Auntie was right: the wind is beastly tonight. It worries at the trees above and they creak and murmur all across the hill. Every so often I look up at the roof, where the boughs we lashed flare out to the side with each gust. In the back corner, behind Brett's chair, the sticks are already gone and blown away, peeling insane into the dark. I unpinned Brett's bra picture from the wall. When I held it out through the hole the wind threw it right away for me. I gave it Roger's photo too.

Auntie doesn't know I'm here. No one seems to. I brought a flashlight and a pen and these sheets of paper to write on and the bottle itself. It's clear out but the moon, when I can see it through the waving trees, is regular. It's not red or optimistic or bursting with anything. I moved my chair to the doorway so I could watch the lake trail for Malory and her friend coming. That's how silly I am.

I saw for a second someone down there. It made my chest lurch, but it was just a girl, who didn't walk with Malory's tall stork stride but the shy shuffle of a sparrow. Not Malory but I waved anyway. The girl came right up the path carrying this rusty old-fashioned birdcage from a hook in its top. Moonlight speared through the empty wires of the cage and splayed across the dirt. Her hair blew all around.

She told me she was looking for something for her story. She pointed into the birdcage. I yelled that I had a story. I could tell her this one. Although the cage won't keep words or papers I like the idea of it. Now she's holding it out in front of her like a lantern, pacing through the rocks by the creek. Funny, right? She's trying to save her story in a cage and I'm trying to float mine free.

The wind has peeled away one whole corner of the fort already. There's no shelter in here, air just swarms everywhere. The pages want to rip away into the woods so I have to grip each one as tight as possible. If they're a bit crumpled, that's why. When I finished the first five I tied them up in the ribbon to keep them together. This page will be loose, so you'll probably think you should read it first, but it really comes last. It didn't seem right to toss away the calendar page from Zambia, so I rolled that up and I'm sending it, too. You can ignore how she's got no shirt on, and just admire that really nice smile of hers. Maybe where you are the ladies have nice honest smiles like that, and the kids are so happy to just play regular things like soccer. Maybe, from wherever you are, you can tell me what seaweed smells like.

Fang

Next, Dune drew a wolf.

'A wolf,' he said. He tapped his pencil eraser on her knee. 'I think it has to be a wolf.'

Dune tore a sheet of paper off his notepad and let it drift in stiff breeze. It ran across the gravel path, through the geese cluttering the grass, and slipped into Galen Lake. Sally watched the notepaper sink, greening before it blacked out of sight. The lake was a hungry lake so the paper sunk fast. Dune was already scratching his wolf across the next sheet of notepaper. Buttons of spine knobbed through his shirt curved over his neck. Tight curls of dark hair erupted upward.

'Why a wolf,' Sally said.

'Because wolves watch. They *perceive*.' He looked at her with one eye. 'They have this thing called object permanence. Not even babies have that. Human babies. If you hide behind a tree, a wolf will move to change its perspective, because it knows how to see you. If you try to point something out to a dog, the dog just looks at your finger. But the wolf will look where you point. It will follow its gaze in that direction.'

When had he ever had the opportunity to point something out to a wolf?

He took her fingers and put them over one of his closed eyes. He moved his eyes left, then right, then up, then down. 'Feel that?'

His eyeball felt lumpy. She tried to move her hand away but he clutched her wrist and held it to his face.

'Know why *Ulysses* is written in present tense?'

'Is it?'

'Sort of. But know why? Because the present tense isolates perception, magnifies its lack. There is no future from which Bloom looks back on his day. There's no past that he looks forward from. He's always exactly now.'

Since he dropped out of school Dune had read James Joyce, Somerset Maugham, Sartre, *Siddhartha*, *The Ramayana*. Dune read a novel about a prisoner who made his own tattoos out of guitar string and house paint, about how pain opened gateways to higher purpose.

'Sally I need something from you.'

'Sure.'

He dropped her wrist. 'You don't know what it is yet. Promise?'

'Maybe. What?'

'I need your mom's place.' He gestured across the water. Her mom's summertime guesthouse loomed over the lawn, the lake, shuttered for the season and dark against the pale sky. 'But that's not the thing. But I do need your mom's place.'

'When?'

'Tonight. I'll have my wolf ready.'

Dune's little sister, Sophie, came up the steps to the lake path where they sat. Her hair arrived over the hill first, Dune's same explosive curls. Then her drawn, doubtful expression. The girl looked at Sally. The look contained a question, and Sally nodded without knowing to what. Once, last winter, just after their mom left Galen for some business out by the ocean, Sophie had put her hand in Sally's and asked if she would come to stay with them. Sophie and Dune lived with their frail grandmother in a skinny house halfway up the mountain, right where the rocks

knocked off and the lane turned to dust. Sally, joking, said yes. But wherever would she sleep? 'With Dune,' replied Sophie. 'It was Dune's idea.'

Dune stood from the bench. 'Both my ladies are here.' As he stretched, his shirt lifted to show a rough thatch of hair. He smiled at them with all his teeth.

Sally's mother's place was named Shipley's Inn, after some titled governess or another now long gone from Galen. Few came to town. Fewer stayed. Sally's mother joked that visitors ended up either at Shipley's or at Blankenship's, Blankenship being the man of law, who was authorized to use his attic as a jail. Blankenship joked the whole town was so poor at making a proper impression, it made little difference where a guest ended up. All guests arrived as strangers, dogged by suspicion.

Shipley's lurked empty over Galen Lake, marooned on a long lawn that rotted under the green leavings of geese. Ghosts of disuse suited Dune. They populated the origin myth he was crafting about himself. He and Sally returned to the bench on the path while the sun sunk behind the mountain. Galen felt emptied, and in place of people they had for company just a thin whisper of the coming storm. Wind gusted the lake into froth. Tall pines speared the drape of sky. A stolen key sagged in her pocket.

She unlocked the back door into the old servant's passage. Cold followed them into the house: their house, for the night. A spiral staircase twined into dark. Sally climbed two steps and looked up where the spiral dimmed then dissolved. She'd been up those stairs before but in that moment their shape and shade recalled

a memory, not from here but from somewhere brighter, something distant.

Something that released in her a spear of doubt. She stepped back into the hall.

‘Scared?’ Dune handed her a thermos, astringent with gin. ‘Drink up.’ He led them to a guest room at the rear of the house with a view over the lake. The undressed room looked remote in the weak light. Sally touched nothing. Dune sat in his shorts at the edge of the shower and lit a candle.

He brought a pen and a sewing needle and a wine cork to stab onto the end for grip. He brought his notebook with his wolf. He’d drawn the wolf standing in profile, tail pointed straight back like something snagged and resisting. He tore the page out. The paper lay over his thigh. He turned it around, then around again, before laying it aside. He cracked the pen in half and dipped the needle and traced first the inky spine of the wolf, an arc gentle as an eyebrow. He tombed his efforts in silence. The human leg of Dune began to leak.

‘So what’s this thing you need?’

‘I’m leaving soon,’ he told her. He offered a solemn pause for her to consider that.

Sally sat down on the toilet. Outside the window, branches clawed at every reach of her vision. ‘Where?’

‘Don’t know yet. Just away.’

‘What about Sophie?’

‘What about her? Mom’s back.’ He breathed through his teeth.

‘But for how long?’

‘Don’t know. Until Gran dies.’

‘You can’t just leave her, Dune.’

'I'm not. I'm not leaving yet. Just soon.' Blood rose in clumps on his thigh, left the fine lines of fur illegible. 'When I leave depends on you.' Sally focused on the twisting geometry of his blood, red in a better light but brown in the poor shade of the storm.

Whatever Dune wanted eventually, right then he wanted a story. Dune wanted to be entertained. Dune fumbled with the perspective of two ears and the profile of snout and the perception of depth available to a wolf drawn with only one eye. He closed an eye himself. He took a long drink from the thermos. 'A story,' he said again.

Sally thought of the spiral, its dark ascent. 'A girl goes walking up the mountain behind Galen Lake. She wants to remember something about childhood.'

'Does she show up at a stranger's house in the middle of a storm?'

'What?'

'I know this character. So what's her motivation?'

'You don't know her. You haven't heard the story. And that is her motivation, to remember something about childhood.'

Dune furrowed into his wolf-fur. From his leg, funnels of blood ran sideways into the grout, into squares, made slow progress towards the drain. He tried to wipe at it but it had dried sticky on his palm, and he when he leaned over the pen rolled to the drain. Ink streaked the tile. He twisted the shower knobs but nothing came out. His hand left rusty prints.

'Want my tee-shirt?'

'I'll ruin it.'

Sally didn't mind. He watched her as she peeled off her sweatshirt, then tee-shirt. In her bra, she took the time to fold the shirt before holding it out to him. Must

characters have motivations? Dune: leaking into the drain. What was his motivation for the tattoo? For the leaving?

'I need another pen.' He laid the shirt across his thigh. 'Or a fatal flaw. If the character doesn't have a motivation, then she has to have a fatal flaw.' When he stood, the shirt stuck to his thigh, the loose sleeves limp as a dishtowel. He wagged his knee so the shirt swung back and forth. 'Like Icarus. She rises too high. That which makes her also takes her apart.'

Sally put her sweatshirt back on, the fuzzy lining soft against her stomach, and watched out the window. Branches scratched against the raw night. This late, in this wind, no one should be out but Sally spotted a shadow near the bench on the far side of the Galen Lake, hair swaying like grass in the upsuck of air. Sally tapped at Dune's shoulder, whispering. 'Dune,' she said. 'Dune, look.'

'Look at this,' he told her, and counted to five on his own fingers as he drank from the thermos.

Sally turned back to the window. Shadows lurched across the gravel path and the heaping skin of lake, but the figure she'd seen was gone.

'Let's find a pen,' he said.

He rinsed his hands in the water behind the toilet, and took the thermos and the candle with him out of the room. The arms of her shirt slumped below his knee and he seemed not to be able to straighten his leg all the way. The fingerprints he left behind showed her every stray grasp of his fingers. It seemed he touched everything.

He walked ahead of her up the spiral stairs. He palmed the candle so high the shade of his body cast each of her steps in black. She carried the almost empty

thermos, walked by instinct, or memory. As they ascended, a sliver of moonlight from the upstairs windows shone on the lip of each step.

'This is amazing,' he reported. 'Do you know why spiral stairs always curve to the left?'

'So you can hold the rail with your right?'

'Close. It has to do with holding things.' He ducked behind the spine of the stairs and pretended to hide, jabbed his right hand with the candle towards her ribcage. All the angles in the stairwell lurched. 'It's for defense. Old-times. The Baron or whatever at the top always has the advantage.'

'What if there is a bunch of invaders trying to get up?'

'I don't know.'

'Or what if the Baron is at the bottom of the stairs? What if he's the one trying to get up? And don't Barons have dogs?'

He turned up the last steps. 'Don't over think it. It's just something I heard once.'

To the library. Shelves lined two walls, filled with canvas-bound books. The books were decoration; no one cared to read them. When guests sat in the library it was for the view, not for the books. Tall windows cast squares across the rug but any light from the moon got gobbled by the grim books. Not even Dune was interested. Sally stood at the windows. From the second floor the storm looked even worse, trees twisted backwards, wind raking across the lake. He stretched onto the sofa and propped his tattooed leg up on the opposite arm.

'Where's your sister?' Sally asked.

'She's at home.'

'Right now?'

'I'm leaving soon,' he reminded her. 'But I can't go like this.'

'With my shirt stuck to your leg?'

'No. With—well.' He sipped from the thermos and set it on the floor. He was silent a long time. Every so often his mouth unsealed itself and drooped, loosening a wet gasp as it did. 'You girls have it so easy,' he finally declared. 'You have this clear demarcation between virginity and adulthood, the physical act and then the physical result. The language used to describe it is so vivid: intact, popped. You even get a fruit to refer to, the perfect allegorical image, small and red, inexplicably sexy.'

'You want to have sex.'

'With you. I want it to be with you.'

'When.'

'Whenever you want. Before I leave. But if tonight is our night, then yes, tonight.'

Dune wanted more than just a story. Dune wanted proof of suitability for passage. Through the remote narrative he'd gathered, in the illuminated course of his literary wanderings, it had come to seem to him that the act of crossing into adulthood must be both physical and figurative. Dune wanted a ritual of departure.

'What if I say no?'

'Then I guess I'm never leaving.' He grinned. 'But I can tell you're thinking hard about it.'

Sally pulled out the drawer of a side table. A battery rattled over a paperclip. She left it open, browsed spines on the bookshelf: *Games and Play*, *The Art of Theft*,

Wolves in the Throne Room. She read a passage by moonlight: *The Master's dogs are both a symbol and a tool of his political virility*. The book puffed dust in her palm.

'Do you want a story about dogs?'

'Dogs. I don't know. But cats are pretty great. You know what I like about cats?' Dune tipped his head to the side, as though the thing to like about cats was dropping into his ear at that moment. 'They think three-dimensionally. Like, dogs are curious and will sniff all around, but they only think to sniff at the ground. Flat space. Cats, though, they think up and down. They have a genetic impulse to rise.'

Sally shut the book. 'Okay, so a story about cats. The character of my story is a cat.'

'Like, an actual cat? Or just a metaphor?'

'A metaphor. She's curious. She goes out looking. She finds something, but it's not what she was looking for. It's not how she thought it would be.'

He considers this. 'Is there an obstacle to her motivation?'

'Well, the rain.'

'Cats hate rain. She can be a dog, sniffing up the mountain.'

'She's not a dog.'

'She could be.'

'She's not.' Sally watched him breathe. Under her tee-shirt, his leg bloomed black, the wounds wide and raw. Sally picked up the thermos. It sloshed only a little. She drank the rest of it, still more than she'd expected, and dropped the empty thermos to the rug.

Dune stood and took a loose posture against the wall next to her, his limbs watery. His proximity created static between them. He held her wrist. 'It will be something to remember. Something to remember each other by when I'm gone.'

Sally put her hand to the glass. The mountain had turned itself sideways, a horror of horizontal tree limbs, the pines all the way up the mountain tortured by the storm, pulled down to the lake, everything—every living thing—pulled by the feral wind down towards the lake. The shift in direction caused a type of distortion, left the improbable, the impermanent, the irregular all shortened and flat in the odd moon's light. Down at the lakeshore, the little figure slid out again from behind the tree line. She lifted a hem of shrub, knelt, then rocked back to her feet to lift another.

'Anyway,' Sally's breath puffed the window, 'dogs do explore three-dimensionally. They dig. They dig at everything, through anything. They don't even know what they see but they keep digging. Are you sure Sophie's at home?'

Dune paused in a bog of silence. He leaned over his leg and peeled her tee-shirt away. The skin stuck to it, stretched. He held it up. 'So what do you think? I got your shirt off. Now the rest?'

The moon shadowed swerving branches across the library walls. Candlelight gouged the rug.

His wolf looked terrible. One ear round at the top, the nose too short, every inked line marred by beads and wobbles. Pills of lint in the scab and new blood bright in the window light. His wolf looked worse than terrible: his wolf looked ordinary. Like any ordinary dog, dumb and sightless.

Gust

This story opens on a woman, pensive, at the bottom of a forest trail. She has tugged up her mud boots, twined a scarf around her neck, and looks upwards through trunks and failing leaf cover to the low ceiling of sky. She has recently returned here, to Galen, after months in the city and located a need—unique amongst her others—to walk this morning to the old lookout tower in a meadow up-mountain. She bought the mud boots just yesterday, second-hand, as she's noticed since she's been back in Galen that her footing is often unsure: it's slicker here than she remembers. The boots have red rubber soles, sticky and ridged like exposed gums. Her hair flaps. Her scarf flaps. A storm is due to arrive.

She hasn't been back to the lookout since she was a child with her mother. She remembers the meadow as an emergence into clarity. She: led through shady summer woods then into a high bright clearing swiped out of the tree line. The stone tower roared up from wild clover, stacked rocks spiraling to the sky. In front of them, the long slide of the exposed mountain. Her mother pointed west: *Rae, the ocean is out there somewhere*. Where? she asked. Far beyond the blue hills. Other towers, identical to the first, freckled the skyline before them. What are they for? she asked. *That's how people found each other across great distances. They called out in smoke*. Rae touched the dry stone and looked up. Steps spiraled up the outside, protruding like a spine. Noisy bees hurried in through a gap near the top and honey—no, wax—dribbled thick through the wound.

How simple to be a child. Her mother scripted their solitude, constructed elaborate fables out of fear. The child never asked who hurried to these mountain-

tops to speak in smoke, peak to peak to peak. And what if they wanted more than just a gust on the seam of sky? A brush, a touch, a beloved nudge. And what now will she find of the stone tower? If, at the top, she finds the tower as she remembers, she resolves to climb its spiral steps and call out once more—one last time—into the darkening west. She stands at the open jaw of the forest, looking up its throat through the teeth of winter trees.

The trail leads her swiftly uphill, and hashes her breath into gasps. The forest reeks of green. A persistent breeze shakes a fern frond so fast it looks to her eye like the shaking tail of an animal. She startles, then calms. The trail leads through damp brush and arrives at a low handmade structure, built between three stout pines. She pauses there and unwinds her scarf, already too warm. She stares at the structure. Look how ordinary the slanted thing is. Just a kid's fort, flimsy, with a short doorway and knobby branches for a roof.

The woman creeps inside. A lawn chair rests in one corner. Where dew slips through the roof, it falls into rows in the dust. The rows look like a carelessly furrowed field. When she looks up the racing sky shows through in bars of blue-grey. Tacked to a plank across the back wall is a picture of a dark-skinned lady dancing in front of a crowd of children. Glossy, as though torn from a magazine. It is not meant to be alluring but the poor lady has a coin of nipple showing. She imagines young boys in this fort. They repeat jokes they don't understand, laugh away their own curious wanting. It must be a boys' fort: girls are the objects of such constructions, not their subjects. The woman drapes her scarf on the tack and lets it hang over the picture.

Distant summertime: they lay on towels near the lake. Seventeen, that scrawny but forward-leaping age. He propped up on his elbows next to her with his book and used a sunscreen bottle to hold the pages open. He rolled and unrolled the edge of his beach towel. Up into a tube then out smooth, tube then smooth. They lay so close it hurt her neck to look at him: his popped spine, bolting his thin body together; his shoulder bones mythical in their severity; his skin in the sun brightening to red. She reached out to touch him and felt a wash of heat. It gathered in her palm. *You're burning up*, she told him. She poured water onto her hand and smeared cool across his ribs. His calm surprised her. They'd been friends since they were kids but that was no kid's reaction. *Yes*, he said, letting his chin drop. *Do that lots more to me.*

He turned onto his back and dropped an arm over his eyes. She looked at him boldly. A pimple rose volcanic under his chin. His nipples were small as a cat's and a red arcing scar trailed from his belly button down under his jeans. He had bad guts. That's what the grown-ups of Galen said. He was rotting from the inside and doctors had to open him up to take out what had blackened and died. She poured water on her hand and pushed a finger along the waxy ridge of skin. *Yes*. And all that week what Rae couldn't get out of her mind was that blemish, the violent swelling, the coming eruption from somewhere dark within his bilious body.

The trail scratches an arc across the forest. To one side the creek, to the other a broad face of stone. White trunks of the empty birches stripe the white sky. Around

their roots, a hollow has spent all fall swelling into a bog, with continents of duck weed across its surface and a sweet little green something-or-other afloat amongst the logs. There is a splash she doesn't see: perhaps a toad. Everywhere moss fern gravel sticks leaf-mold mud.

The trail ahead of her splits. One direction winds around the bog and gets gobbled by the black fanning mud. The other is wider: an old cart-path, she now remembers. It swings up through the trees, following the creek, crowded now by thorn shrub and fern. At the junction of the two paths is a tall stump. The stump stands straight as a signpost, sprouting mushrooms in every direction. Which way back to the long stretch of summer lawn? she wants to know. The child's perception of innumerable days? Which way away from regret?

She chooses the cart-path. Before long she arrives in a clearing, and spies an old wooden house waiting dutifully amid the trees. The house is skinny but long, and grips the ground on mossy blocks as though fighting its own failure. Birches grow all around. The forest seems to have made a decision about the house, about its prospects of repatriation, reunion with the mountain. From roof to root the house is matted in birch leaves, flat cedar scales, catkins ferns branches, a prickly vine of berry growing in a long arch down the side of the disappearing house. She hears the rain before she feels it.

A window, no glass: the woman peers in through the yawn of rotten frame. The house looks abandoned at teatime, with a table still in the kitchen, a plate still on the table. In a corner sits a fat iron stove, and she wonders if it works, could be pleaded into heat, but the longer she looks at it the more it seems to radiate not heat but a steady and persistent chill. The old wood house is a ruin of moldering rugs, softening beams.

She has the certain notion that the house animates while she stands there. Vapors crawl across its skin. Breath rises to the sky. It is full, she thinks, not of ordinary ghosts but something dark and dilute in the atmosphere. Something more like an odd cast of shadow on a photograph, like a stain no one can recall the source of. She draws away from the sill, away from the leaking eave and away from the house. The rain rattles on high branches. Down-mountain, beeches and pines rattle rain into the lake.

Later that summer, his guts rotted more and he went to the city for new doctors. They would cut him open again and find more rot and then scoop it out of his body and toss it away. They would return him to her. Before the last of the season's warm air lifted away through bare trees and leaked into fall he would be back with a new scar and she would trace his two scars with her two fingers by the lake. Because of his bad guts, he didn't eat much. In the city he could find doctors for that too. He left in late August. He stood in his coat and fur boots in the fullness of day and promised to come back. The angle of sun haloed his face with dark curls. He left in an auto that coughed bleak fumes across the cobbles. What was light enough to blow away did so, easy into the breeze. Heavier grime settled into the cracks and stayed.

Her own guts greened like spring, like a fern shot up through the season's leaf mulch to unfurl a single bright frond. All fall and winter she bucketed sweat with every turn of her arm, every twist at the waist. She wished she could give him some of her bulk, her heat. *What a shame*, her mother sighed.

He sent her a telegram: *streets here wider than galen lake stop have found a job setting light gels in the theater stop went to grand party even the ladies smoke from the hookah stop come visit I am well come visit stop*

She showed her mother. She could go to the city. Her mother said the theater was for crocodiles and thieves, and fed the telegram into the wood stove. Rae could stay at home, play checkers, nurse her baby son. Rae lifted Dune from the fireside rug. She didn't disagree.

The woman looks back the way she came. The way she ought to return. These flimsy houses could be a scene culled straight from one of her mother's greasy fables. Already, she has traveled up the mountain and back to the woods to visit her mother, now sunk deep into her dusty linens. What next? Is she doomed for a moral?

Clouds crowd the hillside. Brown leaf trash obscures the trail. She turns her ankle on a stone she never saw, then lurches forward into ferns and finds powdery brown spores all over her palms. Or maybe they are bug eggs. She doesn't actually know. The glossary of things she observes without knowing is huge. She never knew how much she doesn't know. In the glooming forest, the woman turns back down the mountain. She won't make it to the tower, and this releases a spear of sadness. *Are you out there?* She can't even ask.

At that moment a shape appears. It is a shade in the sunless day, something short and dim that bolts sideways out of the road. It slips across the moss before her eyes can interpret shapes into pattern into matter into fact. She sees just the tail, and

the whip of its direction. It is only a tail but behind that tail follow long webs of potentiality, strands of a different fable.

He came back once, when Dune was four. He brought the boy a table-top radio from the city and promised to teach him the foxtrot. She plugged the radio into the kitchen wall, but the dial gathered only garbles and static. *No radio towers up here*, and she reached to click it off. He touched her hand, raised the volume. *Dune*, he said. *This is what the ocean sounds like*. He moved the knob to different static. *And trains coming into the station*. He raised the volume. *And applause*. After she unplugged it, they all stood in the kitchen looking at each other, pinned under heavy silence.

He lodged at the Inn on the shore of Galen Lake. Through his window they watched the arc of sun slide across the clean surface of the water. *Come back with me, Rae*. He had more scars under his shirt. His chest was the chest of a man but below his ribs he'd been hollowed out. He had the hips of a dog. He looked like a scrawny dog set upright to dance pleading towards her on his two flat and furry feet.

The woman halts in the path. The animal, as if in mirror, halts just below her. With a slow metronome swing of its shoulders and head, she recognizes—how banal—a dog. Its neglected fur dense and oily. It trots up the path, past her with hardly a sniff, but then turns back smartly from a curve. Behind it, the narrowing

trail climbs unknown through heavy sky. The dog watches her and waits. She commits to incaution, follows it upward.

The dog leads her to a ridge of slick stone. The ridge protrudes from the green skin of hill, and behind it the trees thin, and behind that is the clearing of her memory. Only it looks not at all how she remembers. Knotty vines lace the grass. Gashes in the earth have got all filled up with water, freckled in the random rain. Near the middle, a crumble of stone blocks announces the tower in ruins. There are no flowers, no bees, no high sun or distant towers across the blue valley. Only the stiff wind that scrubs the mountain face. The woman confuses her past with her present, even as that present rapidly approaches a future. She remembers standing here as a child and looking up from the feet of the tower, how it pierced the wide sky, and how the passage of fast clouds behind gave it the illusion of falling. She arcs her gaze out to the horizon, to white nothing.

She had told him she would come. *I'll send word.* But the truth was that her daughter was born with smooth skin across her soft body and her son slouched over his books and never mentioned dancing, and somehow nine years snuck past. She hears herself tell him she'll remember him forever, that memory stretches on and on. But memories are not objects; they are slippery fictions.

Across the clearing the dog watches her. Its breath bursts out in dense puffs that hover in the cold air then breeze away. Another dog slips out of the trees to join the first. And then one more. The third dog drags a bone in its teeth. The dogs are all muddy: muddy on their faces and muddy on their paws and muddy on their bellies, fur clumped in curling strands of mud, as though only recently they were crawling. One dog steps towards her. Then another. The fur along its back sags in rain and the

dog, so slow it seems a joke, a pantomime, a caricature, lifts the corners of its mouth to show a row of teeth wild with feral implications.

She considers scale, the scope of the woods, the distance back to town, to her mother wheezing in bed. And her children—her children!: they cram wet logs into the stove and boil carrots for a meal and the look they give her is bland as a stranger's. It grows dark, not by degrees but all at once. She hones the long blade of her mistake.

After nine years she went to the city to find him but he had submerged under the pavement, dissolved into the alleyways. No one could recall his name. He is a father, she told them. Twice a father. She gestured around her head to demonstrate his hair. He's never met his daughter. They were all very sorry.

She has come up-mountain today drawn by a memory of smoke signals. She remembers herself here as a child in hot sun, looking upwards to hornets. The child ducked in and out of shadow along the tree line. The child called out to who-knew-who beyond the blue hills. But that was the child, and now the storm shivers the meadow clover in waves and pinecones swing from the heavy boughs. And smoke signals? The wind would shred them. She doesn't remember this wretched meadow. She doesn't remember this mute stack of stones.

The woman crouches for a rock. Her hand grazes a thorn and something else that leaves her fingers slick and sticking and she finds and grips the largest stone her palm will hold, and she stands. Every moment the dogs step closer. Every step flashbulbs the singular image of them to her mind. Above her somewhere, a large branch snaps like a shot.

The dogs seem not to breathe. When the branch falls into the ferns it releases a gasp that takes minutes to subside, and the dogs meet new silence with their own

keening growl. Another branch breaks and falls. The dog nearest her lifts its ears and peers to one side, shining gums saggy under mean teeth. Heavy limbs dissolve the cover of dark that keeps her and the dogs stilled there in the clearing, and one by one the dogs retreat to the ridge of stone, back into the forest. Each fallen branch announces the widening sky.

The dogs evaporate from the frame of the story. How empty her fable now: drapes of shade across the rough stones in the clover, broad blades, dog prints in the stiffening mud. She clatters the rock back into its useless pile. Only one dog remains, and it looks at her from the distant ridge of stone. Black, damp, it is a rotten tooth on a shard of jaw. Their mouths are empty and they cannot speak. So they watch each other—dog and woman, boy and girl, wolf with bone—before it follows the others into dark and away.

Mud Dog

I can see how a storm might rob a lady of her way, though what way that lady thought she was holding up on the mountain, up past even the sensible roads, was harder to figure. Outside, the day's easy breeze grew into heavy gusts, dragged leaves and twigs fast through the thin night. Gran, in her infinite fabrications, claimed nights that cold were airless and impassible. But up the cart-path came that lady, passing through the night just fine. Tall and calm in the howl outside, she stepped through the gate and latched it right behind her. Me and Sophie watched her from the window while she stepped through slick ribbons of mud to bang on our front door.

'Jesus,' said Mom. Lamplight got gobbled into the yard. The lady ducked inside and stood dripping on the plank floor. The wood under her bloomed dewy.

'Jesus,' Mom said again. 'What in heaven are you doing out here?'

'Heaven,' mused the lady, and began to unwind her scarf. It was very thin and long, and took many swings of her arm to unravel. She was lean as a signpost, and we all stared at her like we could read her intentions on the fabric of her coat. She didn't look back at any of us: not me or Sophie or Mom. She held that scarf in her fist and slipped her gaze across features of the house as though reminding herself of something distant and tuneless. And then she looked at Gran, through Gran's bedroom door, at Gran's feet sticking up under the bed-cover.

Mom ordered Sophie to set out the woman's coat and boots before the fire. Sophie leaned the coat over a stool, where it humped above the rug, smelling doggish in the close room.

Our house back then huddled above the town on a flat branch of land facing west over Galen Lake. It was no place to put up a structure of any sort. The slope all around it was burdened by pine trees, rough grasses wagging seeds across the dirt, mist and dew and sideways arrows of sun. Even when occupied, those rooms in that house suffered a lonely chill. Our one door opened to the ruddy yard, out to a gate, and down to the road. A turbid creek crowded the house from behind as it passed on its fast way down to the lake. At night, a sneak into town required mud-boots, candles, a close eye for the curve of the grey cart-path. How adrift must a wanderer be, to find themselves up that road in that weather that night.

‘I’m Isa,’ said the lady, ‘and I thank you for taking me in.’

‘I’m Rae,’ said Mom, that and no more.

Isa stood just outside Gran’s door, humming. Her dry eyes moved dark in the lunar frame of her face. She smiled. On her, it seemed an unlikely feature. When she spoke it was as if to Gran, through the open bedroom door. ‘You stand to lose one of yours tonight, and I have come to help in any way I can.’ Help with losing or help with keeping, I realized later she never did say.

Four days before the stranger showed up, Gran decided that she’d prefer to be dead. She stood at the kitchen window and watched swollen clouds blow up the ridgeline behind the house and stick to the hill’s needly trees. ‘That’s it,’ she said. Her nose flattened on the pane and the glass under it puffed, portentous of the storm. ‘I’m ready to die.’ And she took herself off to bed to make it happen.

‘Don’t be silly,’ I replied. Sophie and I watched her from the kitchen, through the open bedroom door. She folded back the spread, corner to corner like a kerchief,

arranged her legs inside the fold, and fell back onto the pillows. She pulled the spread up over her shoulders. Dusty motes clouded around her hair. At the fat-belly stove, Sophie dribbled spit onto the iron grate to watch it whistle into damp then nothing. The sun dropped behind the peak of the mountain, and I fed logs into the stove. We ate dinner without Gran, but talked to her in the next room as normal.

‘Storm coming,’ I told her.

‘Batten the hatches!’ Gran wagged her toes under the tent of the spread.

‘You do it,’ I said, to which Gran said nothing. Gran got up once to go to the toilet, but then went straight back to her bed and ignored Sophie’s plea to let her make tea.

‘At least drink tea,’ Sophie offered.

‘Nothing,’ replied Gran. ‘I’m ready.’

I wired Mom down-mountain and she came back to Galen from the city. She’d been gone for months, full seasons had passed. Her hair was lighter but cut short, which made her look thinner than I remembered. She let herself right in the front door, set her purse on the table and yanked open the curtains like she’d done it every day. That night I lay on the couch, unsleeping. Under my blanket I listened to rough air crawling around up in the rafters. The crooked pine tree at the window dropped cones against the roof, and beat at the windows, and I tried to lay like Gran with my toes straight up and my eyes straight up and my hands folded at my chest, but I saw nothing in the lamp-less air.

Gran never left the house. Even before she got the bug for dying, she only stood around in her bed-shoes and chewed grey twigs from a potted herb on the windowsill. The twigs were for protections, she said, and she liked to scare us with all the rotten ways there were to suffer. Gran told us winter nights grew cold

because the season leaked air through the leafless trees, air slipped up through the loose grip of the branches and away, where we'd follow if we ever stepped past the porch. She sniffed about in her house robe, twig in her teeth. 'You'll whip up into the night and be gone forever.' We played checkers instead. Gran's mind used to snap like a flag but after Mom went down-mountain to the city, to the coast, Gran sagged flat as the laundry. She took on a severe air of she-told-us-so, as though every silly story that came from that mind was plain truth, and she was simply waiting around for it to arrive and prove her right.

Maybe Gran got tired of the waiting. Once she got the bug for dying, all she did anymore was sleep. Sophie didn't understand the sleeping and tugged at her spotty hand to come make a puzzle. Mom shuffled Sophie out of the room, but then whispered to Gran, 'Get up. Make a damn puzzle with your granddaughter.' I tried and failed to think of any recent time when Mom had made a puzzle with Sophie. I wanted Gran to get up, too.

But Gran kept her eyes shut. 'I want to die.' She said it slow. Her throat was dry as a burrow, and the words crawled out like moles to slump on the sheets beside her. 'I. Want. To. Die.'

On the fourth day of Gran's fast, with fat foamy clouds in a race to cross the horizon, Mom went down into Galen. Sophie had the puzzle pieces all spread out. The box showed a lighthouse. Sophie's puzzle on the table showed globs of frothy color around the outside but in the middle a gap, as though some great bite were taken. Mom stalked out to the road in a swarm of her own hair, hooking the gate-latch carefully as she went. That afternoon brought the windstorm to burst against the mountain slope. Mom was gone a while, doing I suppose whatever she does, away. By the time she came back wind cranked up the mountain so fierce she had to

press the house door shut with both hands, as though some grim spirit were just behind her, set to follow her inside.

I felt good about the storm, I remember that. I had my own business down in town and it seemed right to walk there in an alien atmosphere, through one of Gran's airless, inhuman nights.

At Gran's bed, Mom swabbed liquid from a brown bottle onto the inside of her cheek and pressed at her fingernails. They stayed white a long time. I tried it on myself, ribbons of brown under the trim. She lifted one of Gran's eyelids, then the other, then both at the same time. Gran's pupils were shaky little nothings, and jumped like fleas across her face. She wasn't awake and seemed hardly even asleep. Her eyes were bugs and her breath was a mole.

I made noodle soup for dinner. Sophie slurped hers from the spoon and got a little whip of soup on her nose. About once a minute I heard the gate crack. From the window, I watched it lull then crash into the post the first moment the wind turned a new direction. I ladled soup with a coffee mug, and in the last light of the short day we watched the gate swing, swing then slam.

Mom stood at the window holding herself around the ribs. 'I thought I shut that.'

Worms crowded around the dirt step outside our door. I picked one up and flung it, like testing the doneness of noodles. I pushed another with my shoe and it rolled up in the mud. The air smelled mossy, the yard slick under my boot heels. High-up, clouds screamed past. Unmowed grass raced under the fence line and the gate sailed around like a weapon wielded in panic. Up the slope and down, the heavy pines bent over then rose again, in the slow and ponderous way that they must do everything.

I hooked the gate latch and when I turned back to the house I caught Sophie through the window, lit in silence. She slumped alone at the table, and jumping light from the wood stove tossed orange and pink all over her face. She snapped a piece of her jigsaw apart and dropped it onto the floor. She snapped another piece and put it into her soup bowl. She snapped another piece and walked it over to the wood stove, cracked the door open and crouched to watch it swell in flame. She tugged a hair from the nape of her neck, held it in her hand, turned it over then brushed it off her fingers to reach up and tug out another. She didn't look into the bedroom, where Mom sat all day to hold Gran's feet and pedal blood through her lame legs. She didn't look, but maybe heard the catch in Gran's breath as her tongue sagged into her throat. We didn't know it yet, but the stranger Isa was already on her way up the road. Sophie stood from the stove, shut the heavy door, and pulled the flue. Outside, the cold night thinned.

'I have come to help you,' Isa said again. She studied her palms, and behind her her own brown clothes loosened wet breath into the closing room.

'We here are well.' Mom stepped between Isa and Gran to shut Gran's door.

'You have a dying woman in the bed.'

'She wants to die.'

Isa tilted her blank face to the ceiling. The fire illuminated the thin cords of her neck, the hollow of her throat. 'The human body rarely wants to die, and the human soul, never. It's a wicked thing that tricks the mind into thinking it wants to die.'

Mom opened her mouth but Sophie interrupted. 'Help how?' Sophie had got all the puzzle pieces turned upside down so only their cardboard backs showed, and she stacked them based on shape, their blind arrangements of knobs and notches. They rose in uneven towers.

'I want to tell you a story.' Isa nodded towards Sophie then closed her eyes. She tugged at her hem and hummed as she looked back and forth under her eyelids. Thin lids rippled then she opened them, and she looked at Sophie. 'Did you know that badgers lived here before you?'

Mom pointed at the lady. 'You can keep nonsense to yourself, or wait out the storm elsewhere.'

Isa looked up from where she sat at the rug. She made a twitchy motion with her hand. She wore no rings but the metal hoops on her wrist mingled up and down her arm. Mean wind tunneled behind the window glass. 'You opened your door to me. You let me in.'

'And I will see you out in two beats of my heart.'

Mom talked like a novel. She talked like a character invented out of the sense-memory of chimney stacks and old silk. I looked out the window but saw no mountain no road no moon. Just us inside a room, doubled in the glass. Two Moms, two strangers, two sisters, and all the doors open and the night beyond the walls a vast amount of nothing at all.

Sophie got up from the table and sat on the rug with Isa. 'I used to have a mouse named Bess,' she told her.

Isa's mouth went round. 'Used to?'

'She got sick and I had to let her go.'

Isa tossed up her hands. The hoops on her wrist clacked. 'How tragic! Tell me a story about this mouse.'

Mom interrupted her. 'No stories.'

'Gran likes to tell stories,' I said.

'And her stories were false. No mouse. No stories.'

I pointed to mom. 'You should hear about Bess. You should know.'

She slammed in the flue damper. 'It's my house.'

'It's not,' I told her. 'It's not your house. It's Gran's.' Then from Gran's room came a rough wail, a moan of something human but dried, dragged through sand. We all turned to Gran's open door, stared into the dim room, while the wail creaked on then dissolved into coughing and eventual silence. Isa looked into her palms.

Mom leaned and showed me her teeth, like an animal, 'You're smarter than that.' She went back to Gran's room. We all three sat in front of the fire. The room smelled like moss, and something spicy from Isa's coat. Sophie's cheeks pinked with heat.

After a bit, Isa said, 'So your Gran likes to tell stories?'

I said she did, but that they weren't true stories.

Isa said that even the false stories were true in some way, that's why they stick around to get told again and again. 'Tell me a false story, and I'll tell you the truth in it.'

So I told her about Mud Dog. Gran used to say that Galen Lake had never risen or lowered the whole time she'd been alive. She claimed it to be deeper than anyone could measure, that it connected to the ocean through some evil tunnel. And next to the tunnel was Mud Dog, with his big open throat. She told us that Mud Dog's appetite sucked every loose living creature down and away. Gran claimed

everyone in town knew about Mud Dog and that's why no one ever swam in the lake.

Isa pulled her knees up to her chest. She rocked back to look at the ceiling while she thought it over. 'So the lake is his house. He wants company and welcomes you in but once inside he is protective and doesn't want to let you go. Sound like anyone you know?'

Sophie said, 'I think it's just to tell you not to swim in the lake. Because the lake is dangerous.'

'Oh I know about the lake,' said Isa. 'Do you want to hear my story?'

Mom came back in the room and handed blankets and a pillow to Sophie. To Isa, she gestured towards Sophie's bedroom. 'You can sleep there. I want you gone soon as you wake.'

Isa gathered her coat and boots, nodded to each of us, and shut Sophie's door behind her.

Sophie wrapped blankets around her shoulders and stood in front of the fire. She dribbled spit on the stove but it just puddled on the greasy grate. She lay down on the rug, curled herself over tight as a bean. I stood to fetch my book bag. Mom asked where I was planning to go. I told her, 'Down-mountain, be back in a year or so.'

'Dune,' she cautioned.

But Dune what? I went into Gran's room to say goodbye. The spread had fallen off and her nightie rose up on her legs. Mom followed me in. We stood there for a while looking at her swollen kneecaps, until Mom got in the bed and righted all the blankets around them. She worked one arm under Gran's head, held it like a child's. 'Dune,' she sighed. 'Shut the gate when you go.'

I returned to a cold fire, an empty room. Only bright coals shone under the crispy wood, and Sophie had got up in the night, was gone from the rug. For a while I didn't sleep. The long night herded wild hours through the dark. The moon cast pickets of light between the crowding clouds and into the room and I stared up through the window as branches and pinecones wheeled through the freed space of the empty night. Even through the wind I could hear the creek, and I listened to all that water going down-mountain, down to Galen Lake.

Sleep came in dashes. After a while, a thin dawn crept into the yard and I filled the kettle for coffee. Outside, over the ragged remains of the night's storm, low light dragged vapor out of the rock hollows and eaves. Everywhere, the ground was filthy with forest.

The pipes clunked as wedges of ice freed inside and around the bends. My breath puffed around my face. Through the window light I noticed the gate outside swinging loose. It sagged inward then back out, making visible the breath of the morning. A single set of footprints softened the spikey grass, across the shining yard, and out to the road. In places they were faint as a whisper, in others I saw the outline of Isa's furry animal boots, the slight out-facing angle of her toes, the uneven weight of her narrow stride. I saw how careful she stepped across the frosty yard and back out to the road. In Sophie's bed, where Isa had slept, the sheets were all pulled tight with the quilt snug under the pillows and folded down at the top. I paused at that: to take such care with the sheets, and leave the gate creaking wide in the nighttime.

I poured coffee for Mom, tea for Sophie, and toed into Gran's room holding a mug in each hand. Mom leaned down into the pillow. She had two fingers on Gran's neck, where a wide vein bounced in irregular beats. Gran's mouth was cracked at the corners, and skin peeled up from the side of her nose. We counted her breaths, about one per minute, and each put on a noisy fight to rise up out of her throat. In the back of her mouth I saw all the black pebbles of her old bad teeth.

'Mom?' I asked.

Mom turned to me, her face limp as a sock.

'Mom. Where's Sophie?'

I wondered if Mud Dog could suck down thoughts from far away, if he could drag and gnaw at the vapory substance of souls, or if he was only interested in the soft bodies of know-nothing swimmers. The soggy animal under its thin skin of water, fur adrift in the downsuck, pupils sharp with rust. I wondered if the airless nights held everyone safe indoors, or let hollow spirits pass through the hard body of winter. The stranger we'd let in. The gate she had left ajar on her way back to the lake, to the rotten bottom of the world.

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