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# European Cars

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

Department of English

Writing Program

European Cars

by

Kelsey Peterson

A thesis presented to the  
Graduate School of Arts & Sciences  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Master of Fine Arts

May 2016  
St. Louis, Missouri

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## Acknowledgments

I am entirely indebted to the MFA Program at Washington University in St. Louis for its generous support, and to the wonderful Olin Fellowship Program. In particular, I am deeply grateful for the wisdom, investment, and care of my professors and mentors: Kathryn Davis, Danielle Dutton, Marshall Klimasewiski, Edward McPherson, Carl Phillips, and David Schuman.

I must acknowledge my peerless peers, my cohort, who for two years read with generosity and sharpness everything I dumped on them, and whose own work I admire and treasure: David Hansen, Jon Lee, Christina Wood Martinez, and Julia Yost.

Finally, I must thank my parents, Michael and Christine Burritt, models in parental love and sacrifice, and in creativity. And Ryan, whose endless encouragement continues to astound me, and who never fails to spot a usage error for me.

For my parents

—a collection of half a dozen little objects  
made fine  
with enamel in gray, yellow, and dragon-fly blue; a  
lemon, a  
pear  
and three bunches of grapes, tied with silver: your dress, a  
magnificent square  
cathedral tower of uniform  
and at the same time diverse appearance—a species of  
vertical vineyard rustling in the storm  
of conventional opinion. Are they weapons or scalpels?

—Marianne Moore

## 1. European Cars

Before she was in the business of stealing cars, Lucia was in the business of selling them.

Everyone on the block adored her pistachio pudding. With imported fabrics, she sewed all of her daughter's dresses.

She believed in European cars. She worked for Volkswagen, and before that, for a brief stint, Fiat. Bright-eyed, she once envisioned her fellow employees uniformly drinking flat whites and dressing like Delfina Fendi.

At Fiat, they brewed Folger's. At Volkswagen, she was designated a windowless office whose chair collected more lint than a dryer trap; there, she inputted data. Once promoted to the showroom floor, her manager side-eyed her bubble skirts, her jewel-toned jodhpurs, her fur collars, and yet she sold.

Lucia sold cars with few words. She offered clients espresso from the machine she personally installed in her office, caressed the models as if they were her pets, and by her affection clients could detect the vehicle's worth. Later, she went over her fingerprints with a terry cloth.

She carted Mara around the supermarket after day care. Mara never cried in public. The child played with her chin to mirror her mother while she assessed two types of almond flour. For a snack to share, Lucia set a bowl of blueberries on the table while she prepared dinner, but Mara played in the living room.

They played zoo together after they ate, and Mara relentlessly corrected her mother's animal impersonations. Quickly losing confidence, Lucia resigned to the role of the zookeeper. Lucia cleaned the dishes with a glass of Pinot Noir and Classical radio, then read Renata Adler or Marguerite Duras, then went to bed.

The espresso pods rested like a gradient of colorful bullets in the cushioned box. She lifted the lid to show her clients. Carrying their three cups of espresso on saucers, they surveyed the floor and then settled on testing a Jetta.

She guided them to a silver model in the lot, handed them the fob, and said, "Have fun. Bring it back in one piece and preferably within twenty minutes." Delighted with their independence, the young couple made a predictable joke and Lucia laughed politely.

Lucia returned to her office and phoned her father about dinner. The young couple returned, wide-eyed, twenty minutes later. They managed to lock the fob in the car.

Directing them to the waiting area and the water cooler, Lucia made her way to the Service department. She unlocked the box for spares but the silver Jetta's happened to be gone. She found Glen and explained the situation, the espresso accelerating her words into a jumble.

Glen brought his laptop outside to the model, launched an app to break the code, and opened the car. "Easy peasy," he said, strolling back inside. Lucia fetched her clients and assured them all was well. Out of guilt, they signed for the Jetta on the spot. Lucia handed them her fountain pen and smiled.

Her father rang the doorbell, hummed while he waited, holding a plastic bag of sweets and his violin in its battered case. They tucked in Mara and talked late, the news playing on



mute. He refused to stay overnight until Lucia pulled the bed out of the sofa and unfurled the linens.

The next morning, he was the first awake and whipped up pancakes, spreading Mara's with Nutella. Mara stood at the edge of the sandbox and watched her peers play with a worried expression. While grandpa waited at the bottom of the slide, she paused at the top tier of the playground, letting the breeze rustle her skirt before she lowered herself into the chute. Lucia taught her how to pump on the swings, but when grandpa pushed her she went higher. She pretended to press her feet flat into the blue sky. Grandpa told off some teenagers by the picnic benches. They spit on him and then ran away. Mara let grandpa pick her up and didn't complain when they went home early.

He went in the bathroom to take his medicine. Mara walked in on him accidentally, so he used the opportunity to point to the letters on the row of tiny clear compartments: "These are the days of the week." She named them all and he sent her away before she asked questions. He took his pills one at a time and bent down to the faucet to swallow. The daytime television selection exhausted him, so he let her watch *Frozen* again.

Then the DOW dropped 878 points, and didn't climb. Before she could order a new case of espresso pods, Lucia was let go. She brought the espresso maker home and put it on the counter, although she had to move the bread maker. She couldn't remember the last time she made bread. She couldn't sleep, so she sewed a denim jumper for Mara. She spilled wine on the first one and then made another one. Her father's visits increased.

When Lucia phoned the day care, snipping the ends of a bouquet of garden roses into the sink, she said she wanted to stay home with Mara since her husband now made enough money to

sustain them. The sofa bed remained open and fitted with sheets, collecting crumbs when Mara sprawled out with a fistful of macarons to watch *Frozen* again.

Lucia wore her best pleated skirt and silk blouse to interviews. Then she resorted to her best and only pantsuit, whose blend of wool and flannel made her sweat in the Indian summer. She bought it for the coldest winter work days, when the pleasure of showing her legs didn't outweigh the cost of freezing them. Then she began stealing cars, to which news her father responded with a laugh, a shake of his head, and the flip of a pancake.

While grandpa played Mara a lullaby on the violin, Lucia bought an amplifier, listed as a garage door opener on Amazon for \$17. She began in the bad parts of town. Her first was a blue Toyota Prius, a car whose unfortunate design cushioned the guilt, even made the crime feel retributive.

Approaching the Prius, she peeled away from the sidewalk, brandished the amplifier, and unlocked the car with the confidence of an owner. She pressed start and tried to fasten her seatbelt, but the buckle wouldn't hold still. She checked her blind spot and drove away.

Lucia was in cahoots with Glen, a mechanic from Volkswagen who was fired at the same time as she was. They got along because he thought she was funny and she thought he was mildly competent. The deal was: she stole the cars (with a wife, five kids, and a heavy conscience, he couldn't bring himself to do it), so he disassembled the parts and sold them.

Lucia drove that blue Prius three times around the block, once even re-parking it, before taking it away. When she re-parked, she looked around the car. It was remarkably clean; there was an umbrella in the well in the backseat. It was a classic, non-collapsible umbrella with a

hooked wooden handle and a silver buckle. It was yellow. Years later, she wouldn't remember the second or third cars.

Lucia brought her iPhone and listened to *This American Life* while stealing a Subaru, then a Hummer. "Easy peasy lemon squeezy," she said, applying lipstick in a Ford Fiesta's rear view mirror. She wore sensible black pumps and a spectrum of sheath dresses and nobody batted an eyelash.

She parked the cars in Glen's friend's dad's old barn, which was not in use. Glen told his friend he was starting up a private auto repair business. When this friend asked Glen to fix his Cobalt's coils, Glen had to do it to keep up appearances, and free of charge to keep the barn.

Lucia came home and left her black pumps at the door. Soon she allowed Mara to leave her shoes at the door without reprimand, since she set a precedent. Eating baby carrots at the kitchen table, Lucia told her father she was still job-hunting as she ordered a roll of aquamarine dupioni silk.

Lucia had prepared multiple excuses in the case that she was caught, or intercepted. "Oh sir," she rehearsed while sudsing a loofa with sandalwood body wash, "I swear I thought this was my husband's car. The fob worked and everything. I was just beginning to question it when you pulled me over, because I realized none of the radio presets were right!

"Ma'am, I can't imagine how this looks. You have to believe me when I tell you that I had every intention of bringing it back. My daughter — she's in the hospital. Are you a mother? Can't you understand?"

"Listen, he made me do it. He said if I didn't do it he wouldn't feed me. I thought maybe I could get away. Please, don't make me go back. Just arrest me. You have to help me."

She stared absently into her fridge, holding an espresso cup of a flat white gone cold. She dumped it out and made a new one. Her father had a doctor's appointment, so she had Mara for the afternoon.

They went to the park to swing, raked leaves in the front yard, then put on water to boil for apple cider. The next day, the roll of silk arrived, and Lucia handled it with glee, tiptoeing upstairs to hide it in her closet before Mara could see. A week before halloween, Lucia unveiled her creation: a gown to match the ice queen from *Frozen*.

Mara squealed and immediately disrobed to try it on. She couldn't stand still in front of the mirror while Lucia pinned the dress to be slightly hemmed. Her gown skirting the cold sidewalks and dry grass, Mara left children and parents alike slack-jawed when she passed by to knock on doors.

"My, my, my," people said as they answered, wearing attempts at a costume or holding back a dog, "what a beautiful Elsa you are!" Suddenly nervous, Mara touched her braid, just to make sure it was still there.

Reclining on the sofa bed, Mara in his lap passed out from all the sugar, Lucia's father read a *Times* special report on human trafficking. He rummaged through Mara's bucket of loot for a Reese's, stripped the cup of its foil, and ate it hurriedly.

Meanwhile, Lucia broke into a Hyundai Sonata and, upon ignition, Holst's *The Planets* boomed so loudly from its stereo that lights in a house across the street flicked on. Lucia launched herself out of the passenger door and, imagining a nosy neighbor already at her heels, dashed across the road. She barreled down a bank to the river that ran through this part of town by the university.

She took off her pumps and walked for some time, occasionally humming the phrase from *The Planets* because it reminded her of her youth playing in orchestra, and the memory kept her company. She came upon several students smoking weed. Once they confirmed she was not affiliated with the university, they asked if she wanted a hit.

She said yes and took two or three. She fell asleep against the trunk of a tree, listening to the students argue about coding. The next morning, her father had already seen Mara to school and prepared Lucia tea instead of espresso as a way of communicating his concern.

“If we need more money,” he said, “I could pick up a part-time job. I don’t mind.” Mara came home with a lima bean in a Ziploc bag, growing.

Mara pretended she was stuck under her bed and screamed and watched as her mother’s quick feet came into view and then her hands and then her face. She got rug burn on her back when her mother dragged her out, but she didn’t wince. Mara took a bath, rubbed shampoo in her eyes, made no sound. The next morning, Lucia woke up early and prepared French toast with strawberries, but Mara played zoo with grandpa, who could convincingly portray a lion or a snake at her command.

Glen, from underneath a newly-stolen Pontiac, shouted, “That’s where the money’s at!” He wheeled out from under the car, stomped a clump of flattened hay from his shoe, and looked up at Lucia, who stood over him.

So she began stealing European cars. From a winery late on a May night she stole an Aston Martin after imbibing a glass and a half of Cotes du Rhone; she came alone and mostly stood in the bathroom, waiting long enough for people to forget she was ever there. Then, up the grassy hill to the spot where this man had parked his precious convertible, away from the danger

of swinging car doors but also out of the scrappy valet's sight, she trekked. She plopped onto the dual-tone leather seat, revved the engine, and soon the wind pulled her hair from behind her ears. During the jazz fest downtown, while the combo on stage grooved to the old standard "Caravan," Lucia scouted the parking overflow when the monitors unfolded a sandwich board that said "FULL" and meandered to the frozen custard stand. Lucia snuck into an Audi A7, adjusted the driver's seat at the touch of a button, then moved aside the sandwich board, and drove away.

Lucia burst into Mara's room past midnight and shook her awake to remind her of the spelling test tomorrow, that she needed to study. Mara pushed herself out of the covers, snapped on her study lamp, and looked at her mother, who clutched the list, once clipped on the fridge, in her hand. Mara recited the spellings of words that her and her grandfather had already practiced over dinner. Lucia tugged a golden chain and locket from her pocket and fastened it around Mara's neck. "For you," she said, with a kiss on the forehead.

The Bentley Continental Lucia tracked for a week until the owners drove it to a lake house and there, with Glen in tow, they took it. She scooped the BMW M6 Gran Coupe, whose lights blinked when it unlocked, from a neighborhood street on the outskirts of town, and drove it to the nearest gas station because she had to relieve herself. The Jaguar XF sedan, with the high gloss spokes, jetted by her house one morning and then zipped back, having overshot her neighbor's house. The owner went in for a visit. Lucia set down her espresso and went to work.

For dinner, Lucia fluffed the farro with a fork, then doled it out on three plates, then made a bed of each and topped them with three salmon steaks. She uncorked the Amarone and poured it for her father. He swirled it, let it breathe, then tasted it, and she said, "How about that." Chin to chest, Lucia snoozed on the loveseat while grandpa nicked stickers from a strip and Mara

pointed on the journal page where to put them. Mara belted to her boy band and Lucia awoke to applaud.

At Mara's new private school, a dad drove a Maserati Quattroporte, so Lucia was late to the open house. It was at the county fair that Lucia saw the Mercedes-Benz roadster, so she left Mara with grandpa by the billy goats while she took a phone call. The Mini Cooper convertible she nabbed while on a jog in the park. She stubbed her toe on her way into the Peugeot Saloon. The first time she wore her Prada sunglasses was when she stole the Porsche 911 Carrera Cabriolet.

Grandpa prodded each box of tampons from the shelves and adjusted his readers to scrutinize their labels. "That one's fine!" Mara said. After school, he rolled up curbside and chauffeured her home when running club had ended. They picked up sandwiches in paper bags for dinner and, while he had her, grandpa listened to Classical radio and extolled each piece's virtue and its history. At home, Mara stepped out of her shoes and went to her room. More and more often, when Lucia returned, her father was asleep, but once he was in the kitchen reading Petrarch's sonnets and sipping a glass of water.

It was not in the Rolls-Royce Ghost, but while she was absconding with a Volkswagen Jetta that the angel appeared to Lucia, bright as a dentist lamp. Lucia realized it was the very Volkswagen Jetta she sold to the guilty couple years ago, or at least she had the distinct feeling it was the same Jetta, and so, quaking and whimpering, she parked it and let it be, and shouted at the angel as she unbuckled. She collapsed in the grass still wet with midnight dew. Then, the next house down, she noticed a Volvo V60 Cross Country, crawled into its backseat to take a nap, woke up to a timer on her phone, and drove it away before daybreak.

Then Lucia's father died. Mara, who had just begun reading Camus, wrote the eulogy, and Lucia made them both complimentary black dresses out of a stiff jacquard.

Afterward, they drank green tea at the kitchen table and had little to say. His life insurance check arrived. Lucia inspected it for a time, even took it into the bath with her, but never folded it, or wrinkled it, or tore it, or got it wet from anything, or misplaced it.

Three days later the neighborhood threw its annual block party. Lucia lugged along a ceramic bowl of pistachio pudding. She set it on one table and then moved it to another, one with a yellow tablecloth. Inside the host family's house, she snuck and found a serving spoon, and took it back to her bowl. Everyone ate it up and they loved it; they just loved it. Two separate women asked her for the recipe, but she never sent it to them. Mara filled a kiddie pool for all the younger children. She had grown into an adamant cyclist, and so only at her mother's urging began studying for her driver's test. "I don't know what you know!" she shouted when Lucia assumed she knew to turn left on green when clear, after cars had honked and drivers hollered.

Lucia's father had left behind few belongings on earth but the few were given to Lucia and to Mara. Lucia inherited her father's violin, with which she remembered the old concerts, his foot-tapping when she practiced as a youth, the clicking of his tongue when she missed a note, her own unwelcome tears when sitting in the squeaky balcony seats, thinking, this is what I will have of my father when he is gone, this music.

Lucia took up playing again, improvising simple melodies. Her father's sheet music, browned pages fanned across the foot of her bed, proved too difficult. Mara listened through their shared wall while she read the books she inherited from her grandpa, setting aside those in Italian for the future when she promised to learn the language. One book was not a book but a



photo album, filled with a young grandpa and her grandma, whom she had never known, in a tea-length wedding dress, hugged close to her grandpa as if they came in a set. In one photo, her grandma itched her ankle.

Mara read a *Times* special report on digital car theft. The next evening, she tailed her mother on her bike to confirm her suspicions. Peering out from behind a rattling AC unit, she watched Lucia step into a car they did not own, and drive away. Mara tracked back to where Lucia had parked their SUV, shoved her bike in through the hatchback, and drove home. At the kitchen table, Mara cradled the tupperware of leftover pistachio pudding and spooned the light green stuff into her mouth.

When Lucia arrived, dropped off by the waving Glen, she sat down across from Mara and the two discussed the weather, and her grandma's wedding dress, and the difficulty of bowing certain chords, and how Camus is actually awful, and how they should learn to bake macarons, and how their first kisses were in fact fantastic, and how it would be resourceful for Mara to learn to sew, and how juice cleanses were mistakes, and how they might be happier fat, and how they hate their bodies, and how they love their bodies, and how hats should come back, and how they should go to the movies, they never went to enough movies.

The next day, Mara turned her mother in, and in she went. Her one qualm was the violin, and through some red tape, it was permitted. Mara brought a box of macarons to split for her first visit: apricot, espresso, Nutella, pistachio.

Mara brought in spreadsheets for her college decision, which Lucia helped her color-code. Then Mara carried in a floral jumper, for Lucia to examine and critique, which she did fastidiously, turning it out and eying the inseams.

When requested, Mara hauled in reams of composition paper. Lucia played and composed in the portion of time allotted each day. For her birthday, Mara gave Lucia handmade chambray pants and an asymmetrical tee. Lucia still inspected them for mistakes.

Then, a non-profit lobbying for better prison conditions discovered Lucia. The non-profit started a KickStarter. NPR did a story. They recorded a live performance; Lucia played at the front of the cafeteria for a group of honored guests and her inmates. Even Glen was there. Mara sat on a metal swivel chair in the back of the room, listening to her mother's original compositions. When Lucia bowed, Mara left the facility, unlocked her bike, and pedaled away.

When the applause died down, Lucia said, "This encore is dedicated to my daughter," and the audience searched for her face.

## 2. The Carriage House

Two decades ago, when my family first moved into this house, my father placed a crystal prism in my hands. He refused to tell me its origins. “A housewarming gift,” he said. He knew I had, as I still do, an affinity for portable, antique curios. It was slim, the shape of a thick stalk of asparagus, and could stand upright in my windowsill to catch the rays of sun. Its yellowing tincture betrayed its age, but the patches of rainbow it exposed on my walls and floor were true to color. The house was in the foothills, an old Tudor, complete with sidings of green copper and stucco. A series of French doors looked out to a large but dry stone fountain, and the carriage house, which for the original owners would have stored a phaeton or two, for us served no real purpose. The house’s space allowed both of my parents their own study, and me my own room, with low built-in shelves and a tiny wooden doorway in the wall which, after some research, I discovered was a laundry chute. The property bordered several acres of farmland, the view of which was obscured by a row of poplars. My mother would leave the French doors open in spring, no matter the number of ladybugs we would then carry out on scraps of paper, or bees we would shoo away while eating. Of course, as the years went on, there were less and less of them.

My parents would take turns giving me lessons at the kitchen table, but more often than not they would simply assign me books to read, and when it came time for dinner they would ask me questions. My mother would tuck lavender sprigs around the house and my father would cook elaborate meals. We occasionally visited the next town over, but mostly kept to ourselves. Although, through the years, the three of us entertained an ambitious and idealistic notion of running a small orphanage out of our property, clearing out the extra rooms and attic in the house and refurbishing the carriage house. It was to be a free institution for the neediest applicants, and

was to supply them with a holistic education. My mother would teach them classically: logic, grammar, rhetoric. My father would instruct in the culinary arts. Somehow I was to be involved, heading up sports or fostering camaraderie. Prospective parents from the big city and the three smaller cities would tour down with their matching luggage to undergo a series of rigorous interviews. The children and I would plant microphones in jars of breath mints and eavesdrop on the parents after-hours. The final decision would fall to the child, and we imagined many of them would choose to remain. A handful, over the years, would leave, but only with the most highly qualified adopters, and otherwise we would love and cherish them as our own flesh and blood until we sent them off to the academies. Even then, they would return for the holidays, for which we would order not one but three trees to station in the great room with its peaking atrium. We would play a property-wide game of hide and seek, and the winner would be awarded first pick of the Russian tea cookies and the fig bars and a chalice for the mulled wine.

But we never founded the orphanage. We had only begun updating the carriage house when my father passed, and it was nearly finished when my mother passed. They died too early, as their generation was wont to do. They left me with the property and everything within it. For a while, abstaining from grief, I sold some of our possessions to make ends meet, delivering by drone to the marketplace much of my mother's jewelry, a dozen of my father's pens, the excess of culinary accessories that clogged up the kitchen drawers. For a time, that was my only interaction with the outside world, meeting the twiggy mechanical arms of the drone each morning on our stoop, handing off packages or receiving groceries. That drone always looked to me like a sort of bug, its levers like appendages, its storage like a swollen abdomen. It made me nostalgic for my childhood and its insect infestations. That is, until the drone was remodeled, and resembled nothing living or once living, a floating silver sphere, nondescript but efficient. Soon

thereafter, my means dwindling, I spent a long afternoon in my mother's desk chair, swiveling and turning over my options. That was when I saw, past the thick volumes on the top shelf and the porcelain clock wedged between them, what appeared to be a small feather, almost translucent, twirling silently in some unseen draft. It picked up color for a moment, and then was gone. I turned, suspecting the crystal prism, but saw the windowsill empty — the prism, of course, was in my bedroom, and so could not have been responsible for whatever trick of light I witnessed. Inspired, I set to finding a way to support myself financially, picking up my mother's work, which she suggested on her deathbed, of selling lesson plans and syllabus designs. It paid little, but kept me busy and fed.

Years passed, and I felt close to hollowed from solitude, despite bouts of time spent in the next town over, whose occupants proved uninteresting to me. They spoke quickly and inarticulately about the news of the world, which I eschewed. And so it occurred to me that, rather than venturing out, I might invite people in. I set to opening our long-awaited orphanage. I advertised in the big city and the three smaller cities, emphasizing the pastoral setting and the classical education, and after several months received only one response. Her name was Pru Perla-Sing, and at 16 she was about to outgrow the age limit at her current institution in the outskirts of the big city. She had a beloved, as she called him, whom she met in the big city on weekend outings, and she intended to, by working part-time as a hired hand on the adjacent farm and earning an academy-equivalent education, attain the minimum market value required to marry him. "A noble passage in life," I said, attempting optimism.

"What security are you running?" she asked.

"There's a classic lock and bolt," I said. "We are in the country. You're welcome to add more security measures, but I'd like to know about them in advance."

“Got it. I’m just storing a collection of some value,” she said.

When my father died, he left a prized collection of fountain pens, some of which he left to his sister and I’ve never recovered, some of which I sold, some of which I keep in a shadow box on display in the library, and one of which I use to write. My father was a man of letters, journals, notes, and other various printed materials, which, as I understand, made him old-fashioned and endearing to my mother. As a child, if I woke up early, when the tile in the kitchen was still cold, sometimes I found him bent over the table, writing. Dressed only in his white undershirt, briefs, and socks, he looked at me from his chair. He would sometimes borrow my mother’s robe in the winters. I asked him what he was writing, and he said, “Oh, the great mysteries.” And then he would pour me ginger ale and discourse on his pen, its engraved nib or specialty reservoir. I have his journals, too, but I’ve never read them. His penmanship appears like slanted stitches on the page. I haven’t had the patience to decipher it.

Pru Perla-Sing arrived in a truck, its bed chock full of her belongings strapped down with bungee cords. She was a head shorter than me, which isn’t uncommon, with tight-curved brown hair and a face shaped like a radish. “Pru Perla-Sing,” she said. “Working the farm, beloved’s in the city.” She must have been under the impression that many orphans applied, that many were indeed living there, and that I needed a reminder of who she was. Her handshake was a little too firm, and she failed to make eye contact. She already sized up the house, surveyed the view of the foothills, inspected the partially kept garden, the dry fountain. Her eyes roved, but otherwise she presented as calm, unmoved. She folded her hands in front of her waist as I led her on a brief tour. I showed her the great room with the French doors, where I would hold lessons, and the kitchen where we would share meals, and the library where she could study or borrow books. I finished the tour in the carriage house. Because of its asymmetrical ceilings, no matter where I

stood inside of it, the carriage house felt like an attic. In one area, the ceiling ascended with a hidden staircase to the loft, and in another, it hung low, like a crawl space. I showed her the tricky doorknob to the cellar, which she had to lift, jiggle, and rotate several times. Pru took a passionate liking to its lack of architectural unity. She knocked on a wall, pressed her ear up against it, asked, “Is all of this — historicalized?” I offered to help move her things inside, to which she replied, “No, thanks. I’m transitioning to the next chapter. I should go it alone. Also, that collection. Not that I don’t trust you.”

We missed each other at meals for a time. She kept strange hours — lunching late, dining even later — and often ordered delivery, as I could see the little lights touching down in front of the carriage house toward midnight. She sent me messages blaming training with the farm for missing lessons. This lasted several weeks. Finally I insisted we at least have dinner, and I set a time and made a pot roast. On the scheduled evening, Pru let herself in, wandering into my father’s kitchen with her hands folded in front of her waist. She marveled at the gas stove, the cabinets whose hinges weren’t automated, that she had to close entirely on her own. She reached up to the hanging rack of copper pots and pans and unhooked an old Bundt cake mold.

“May I? Is this for a cake?”

“You may,” I said. “I’m not one for Bundt cakes.”

“I see, I see. You’re not one for Bundt cakes,” She leaned knowingly into the island, eyeing the latticework of wine storage next to the pantry. “I dig all this, but I don’t know if I could live it full-time.”

I moved to the spoons drawer. Despite selling a good chunk of my father’s tools, I still had separate drawers for specialty spoons, forks, knives, and other miscellaneous utensils.

“Maybe I could. Maybe sometime I could make this crazy soup I know. I love this soup.”

As I measured out teaspoons of spices and tablespoons of oils, she began telling me how this soup was her beloved’s favorite soup, recalling how he would blow on it and splatter it, how he could never handle anything too hot. If she made a batch, and sent him a meal-sized container of it, by the time it arrived he would find it the perfect temperature. He’s in the big city, remember. She laughed, and turned her face away in the manner we all do when confronted with tears in the presence of someone to whom we would rather not appear vulnerable. She changed the subject for herself, shifting the Bundt cake mold a little farther away from the edge of the island, saying that she didn’t mind working for the farm. She did all her work from the carriage house, but loved taking breaks to peek at the fields past the poplars. “It’s storybookish. I just log their nutrient levels, sometimes algorithming.” I looked into the spoon drawer, at a ladle tarnished blue in its divot, as though a drop of water had rested there a long time.

A week later, I snuck into my mother’s study. Everything was the way it was, unaltered, which is to say I hadn’t moved anything since I sold a few of her more inconsequential tomes. “I’m sorry to barge in,” I said to her, as I sometimes still do. I pulled the chain on her old brass lamp with its green shade, then dug into the desk drawers. I brought up some of her notebooks, leather bound. “Pretentious Paulette,” I and my father used to call her, and she would bow. These were notes from her years of schooling, a course on logic. In the corner, she had drawn many tiny swirls. On this page, she’d misspelled “Aristotelian” as “Aristotalian.” I stuck my nose into the notebook’s spine and breathed. It smelled like her, or her desk, or she had always smelled like her desk — of cedar. I wrapped my arms around it and fell asleep like that, my face on her notebook. When I awoke the next morning, I put it all away and started a fire in the great room,



found a clean notepad and one of my father's old fountain pens, and boiled a pot of tea for our first lessons.

“First, there's the law of identity.” I paced while I taught, pausing to thread my toes in the rug. “An entity is itself, and therefore different from another entity.” Pru sat in the wingback chair by the fire, nestled in a shorn fleece blanket. She sat with her legs propped, the notepad on her knees. I doubted if she listened, since she never wrote a word, and seemed only to gaze with a lackluster expression at every item in the room. She poked at an old photograph of my father and I, when I was a kid with white blonde hair and when he was young enough to be in his skinny jeans phase. Now my hair is simply white; it turned early, as my generation's hair is wont to do. Pru kept touching her finger to the photograph, perhaps expecting it to respond. I stoked the fire. “Second, there's the law of noncontradiction. A statement and its opposite cannot be true at the same time.” Pru gave up on the photograph, and stuck out her foot by the hearth. “I hope my attempt at fostering a comfortable learning environment is not inhibiting your actual learning.”

“Not inhibiting,” she said, now sticking her other foot by the hearth. “I'm stimulating my limbs so my mind's premium. I'm increasing its receptivity.”

I sat on the chaise lounge and looked out the French doors at the fountain. For a moment, I saw some dew drops resting on the ledge, beneath the spout of one of the stone nymphs. But I knew the fountain had been dry since I lived there. The droplets reflected iridescently.

“So, two laws?” Pru asked.

“No,” I said. I blinked, and the drops had gone. “There's a third, the law of excluded middle, which is sometimes confused with noncontradiction. It says that any proposition is either

true or false.” I got to my feet, turning my back to Pru and facing the window in a manner I hoped to appear profound and thoughtful, but in reality masked my own desperate attempt to relocate those droplets, to confirm their appearance, if I could. “Now, what is an example that upholds those laws?”

“A proposition!” she declared. I looked back to see her standing in front of the fire, the blanket at her feet, a hand extended with her thumb and pointer finger touching, as if pinning a thought in midair. “My beloved is here with me. Either my beloved is here with me, or not here with me, but it cannot be that he is neither here nor not here. As it is, he is not here.”

“I suppose that stands,” I said. I left the room, asking if she wanted to break for tea.

I’m not sure why I agreed, at a later point, to go with her to visit the farm. It was the closest I’ve ever felt to being an older sister, as I knew already what she wanted to show me, and responded with mild distaste to the eagerness with which she ushered me to the fields. Those closest to us were planted with gourds, low rows of squashes and pumpkins and cucumbers, in vivid but uniform colors of gold and orange and emerald. “Watch!” she said, and crouched at the border between where the dirt ended and the neat rows of gourds began. She extended her hand until it hit, as though miming, an invisible surface. “Forcefield!” The layout of the forcefield always beguiled those who had never seen one in real life. It did not shock or sting, as she expected, but only stopped her hand, as glass would. Nor, as she surely expected, did it take the shape of a wall, barring all potential trespassers, but rather spread like a net across the viney lines, hovering only an inch above the harvest. As an older sister would, I went a degree further by stepping on top of the forcefield, demonstrating that it could hold weight. Pru leapt to join me, jumped up and down to test its mettle, and then lay flat on her stomach, pressing her cheek against it, staring down at the gourds. I followed suit, as I had once done this before with a

fresher awe, and recalled that original lift of the heart, to feel as though my body weighed less than raindrops, than pollen. With time, more than the awe, I felt a disconnection from the world, to see and yet not touch what purportedly was real. It rang acutely of an illusion. “Does it disturb you?” I asked after a while of watching her smile. Pru said, “Ah, yes. The problem of the impalpable. If what is real can be touched and cannot be touched, how do we account for the unreal?” I rolled over and sat up, asking her if she had been enjoying her logic. “But that’s you, correct me? I memorized it from one of the journals in the library. Maybe I’m misremembering.” I kept my journal in my room, under my mattress. Those, of course, were my father’s journals, which I did not tell her. That meant, somehow, she was able to read my father’s handwriting, which I, to this day, cannot bring myself to do. At first, I could not, for its difficulty, but now I will not, partially in bitterness, as if there was a tool he had failed to give me before he died, and worse yet, one that managed to come naturally to someone else.

Someday thereafter, I set out and took my morning walk down the road to the nearest stop sign. The dirt road was on an incline, so upon cresting the intersection, a view sloped down, birch trees naked and wiry, like the roots of a plant jolted and flipped upright, and then an empty lake bed that gaped like a crater. It had been drained years ago, its water sent to the big city. Now, filling out its basin were rows of solar panels, glinting, from this distance, as if the lake were still filled with water. I pulled out my mother’s binoculars, and looked to the lake, then I pulled back and examined the road. The dirt had impressed in it the treads of wheels large and heavy; they cratered nearly half the road. A machine larger than Pru’s truck, I imagined. From one of the tracks, something caught a bit of the clouded sunrise, a strand of hair or a thread of spider web; this string shimmered, and then was gone. At the time, when I saw these things, I thought all the world was a series of happenings enacting a patient wonder, that every dozen ugly

entities nurtured the growth of one of surpassing beauty, which is to say I thought my parents' spirits, when proportions allowed, could find me where I was.

The morning of my mother's birthday, I woke early, measured heaping spoonfuls of coffee grounds into my press, and then, while it steeped, went to the stoop. The drone's route had it stopping at my house half past six. Despite its new design, it had a reputation of dropping packages from too great a height, and so damaging them, or misaiming and leaving them in a bush or a ceramic pot. I leaned beside the front door with my hands in my pockets, watching the cool grey lift from the lawn and the poplars, as though a lens were untwisting from the sun. Eventually, I saw the drone spinning down the tree line. As it arrived, I stepped forward so it would find me and deposit gently into my arms what I had ordered.

"S'that?" Pru asked. She was already awake and drinking my coffee.

"You'll see." I placed the package on the counter and fetched a knife to cut its flaps. I removed the pockets of protective stuffing, and then removed a bundle of lavender tied with twine. Annually, I ordered the bunches in my mother's memory, and filled the house again with their sweet scent. It was a special, and increasingly expensive, treat. Pru adored it, saying she had never really seen or smelled lavender before, and likened the fragrance to how she imagined her heart would feel, cleaving, the next time she would see her beloved. I asked her when that would be, and she said in the summer, which is when she'll have saved enough money to drive to meet him, and he'll have worked enough hours to earn a few days' rest. I was quietly sorting the lavender into little piles for different places in the house, when she asked if I ever had a beloved, or wanted one. I told her what I believed, which was that I doubted the genuineness of romantic love, that the market's stipulations had defiled it for me, and that, as it was, I was fine on my own. She picked up a stem and touched the purple buds to her upper lip, then spun it between her

fingers, back and forth. “We are in love,” she said. “It’s not stupid what I’m doing because we’re in love.” I asked if she wanted to keep some lavender to take to the carriage house, and she nodded.

On one of the more temperate spring days, I found myself in a decent mood and with a hankering to play badminton. It was my parents’ favorite sport to play, especially my mother’s, since she so excelled at it, and my father and I teamed up on her periodically to keep her humble. We had stored the net and the rackets in the loft of the carriage house, so I went to collect the supplies and to ask Pru if she wanted to hit with me. Early evening drew in with a sheen of grey, but the days were long, and dusk forbearing. As I crossed the yard, I eyed the plot where my father would stake the net, between the fountain and the poplars. I thought of my mother’s serve, her knees bending, then her arm stretching to send the birdie up, then the thwack of it, windfallen to our side of the court. If I blinked, I would miss it.

I knocked and knocked again on the carriage house door. I heard movement on the other side. It opened a sliver, enough for Pru to stick her head through. It was not that I had ulterior motives, but simply that I also had grown curious about how Pru kept her living quarters, and so I didn’t mind, in addition to seeking a badminton partner, stepping into the house. I invited myself in, and she made apologies for the mess. “Work is totalizing lately. I had to trailblaze to the bathroom.” Her desk was barricaded with boxes of delivery food of various stamped brands, and piles of books borrowed from my library were lined against the wall from the couch to the crawl space where she fit her bed. Tubs of vacuum-packed clothing were stacked by the kitchen counters. By the sink, there was a plastic canister, the kind I used to catch bugs when I was young, with holes pricked in the lid so they could breathe. We walked up the winding stair to the loft, which she hadn’t much touched. There remained the old tool boxes and gardening supplies,

the shelves of photo albums from my parents' parents, and in the corner the net, the rackets, the basket of birdies. I hauled down the net and Pru took the rackets and the birdies. I pointed to the invisible court in the yard between the fountain and the poplars. We laid the equipment in the grass outside and I began discoursing on the game, which Pru swore she'd never learned to play, when I remembered the cellar.

“I want to check on something — the old furnace,” I said. I went back inside the carriage house, sidestepping boxes and bunched-up rugs, with Pru at my feet, asking where the old furnace was and why it needed checking. I stopped at the cellar door, which I jiggled and pulled and finally twisted open. How I had left the cellar, with nothing more than the old furnace and an heirloom tin cabinet, was not how I found it. Rather, the cellar overflowed with glass objects, containers. All shapes and sizes of Pyrex with rubber lids, glass mixing bowls and a glass body of a blender, clear salad bowls and prep bowls, cups and crystal flutes, serving dishes and vases. They lined both sides of the open stairwell, filled in the room from the corners, squeezed atop the tin cabinet. I stepped carefully between them. I opened the cabinet to see more glass on every shelf. Each container was sealed, with a lid or a tight covering of plastic wrap. But each container, on first appearance, seemed to hold nothing at all. “Careful, please! Don't touch them!” Pru tiptoed right behind me.

This, then, was her collection. I looked into the nearest vase. A sharp glare of color shone, and I saw what appeared to be the scale of a fish, and then it vanished. Pru gushed with explanation, tripping over her words, that she spent her childhood seeking and collecting these things, now spouting “the great mysteries” and evidence of “the rumored regenerative properties of earth.” “But you've written all this, haven't you?” Again, she mistook my father's journals for my own. She had backed up against her precious vessels, arms spread as a mother protecting her

young. What I knew then was that the great mysteries, if they were for her, were not for me, or rather I had misread the thread of meaning in my life. She, and my parents with her, were like people who hang and dry bouquets, afraid that disposing of the browning, crackling heads of flowers would mean disowning the occasion they once commemorated, the hands that once held and snipped and vased them, even the ground in which they grew, and my eyes became hot as I thought how I hated her for it.

### 3. L'École

Leona, conceived, born, and raised in central Florida, though pale, coils of auburn hair poking out from under her white swim cap, ovate face pinched in concentration, buried Bertha, her younger sister, in sand. This was the ritual, performed each year with increased artfulness, until Bertha's granular encasement approached a second skin, finely adhering to her torso's shape and buttressing at the hips to resemble a *robe de style*. Bertha patiently chewed a stick of Wrigley's Doublemint and stared at the sky.

Leona's parents watched Leona's trek like clockwork to the mailbox, where she collected each issue of *Women's Wear Daily*. She read them with rapt attention, lying on her stomach on the sunroom floor. After her mother demonstrated how to affix a patch and right a fraying hem, Leona taught herself to sew shawls, sweaters, chemise dresses. It was evident she was to design clothing, but what kind? Leona hovered over the glossy spreads of the avant-garde fashions from the French masters: pantaloons for women, drop-waist shift dresses with fabric belts, and — most impressionably — a whimsical line of sweaters stitched with trompe l'oeil ribbons by a designer named Elsa Schiaparelli. There was work aplenty as a machinist churning out *prêt-à-porter*, ready-to-wear, for the masses. But Leona, standing before her mirror, using her bed sheet to practice draping fabric on her body, would design haute couture in its birthplace: Paris.

When her fine Floridian public schooling came to a close, her heart was set on attending *l'école de la chambre syndicale de la couture parisienne*. Because the fashion school's students went on to apprentice the French masters, and because Elsa Schiaparelli was one of those masters, Leona felt it was the only school in the world she could attend. She knew her father,



whose commercial fishing business had been largely unaffected by the depression, could afford to send her. But he refused, balking at the school's name and the idea of his daughter swimming in the immoral backwaters of France. The Central School of Art and Design in London, nestled in Bloomsbury — with English speakers — seemed more fitting to him.

Shortly after her ship arrived in London, Leona delisted from the Central School. She found work as a waitress at a J. Lyons & Co tea shop, for which she dressed in a maid's uniform. More than once she tripped over herself while rushing for piping hot kettles of Lady Grey, and then had to pay for her uniform's laundering. She lived in a measly flat and saved every pound she could. Between shifts, she flipped through British Vogue and practiced sewing the latest trends with the ancient treadle machine she purchased for cheap in a pawn shop down the road. She admired Madeleine Vionnet, her simplicity and elegance, but above all she loved Schiaparelli, her theatricality and pizzazz. Leona brushed up on her schooled French. She submitted her application to l'école. While she waited, she crafted imitations of Schiaparelli's latest creation: divided skirts, cleft to look like wide-legged shorts. The day after she received her acceptance into l'école, Leona walked into J. Lyons & Co in her maid's dress restructured with a flaring peplum waist, a hem well above the knee, her apron tied backwards around her head, and her maid's hat pinned around her right thigh like a garter. They quickly dismissed her from the premises. Within the month, she was on a night ferry to France.

L'école had a three year program: the first, sewing techniques; the second, tailoring and garment structuring; the third, dressmaking. Leona appeared the first day wearing one of her imitation divided skirts, hoping Elsa Schiaparelli herself would be there. She and the rest of her class, 18 total, were soon to discover the couturiers of *la chambre syndicale* would make rare appearances, the classes mostly dictated by their apprentices. Such apprentices were the two men

that met them in the lobby, Gaël and Luc, who escorted them to their studio workroom. It was a high-ceilinged space on the second floor with three long rows of sewing stations. Dress forms cluttered the corners. Cabinet doors flung open to tall rolls of textiles. Leona walked to her station and touched all of her supplies: her notcher, her awl, her pinking shears. Her hands settled for a while on her new sewing machine, sleek, with the motor hidden in the casing.

Luc was one of Elsa Schiaparelli's apprentices. Nonetheless, he sauntered around the studio as if he were her second-hand *modéliste*. Luc dressed exclusively in three-piece suits. On the day of Luc and Leona's first exchange, he wore a black handkerchief tucked in his coat pocket. As he made rounds during their third week of open studio time, he paused next to Leona, who was bent over her sewing machine, stitching a series of knife pleats. She stopped, then looked up at him. He smoothed the hair above his ear with the butt of his palm, a habit she would come to identify as one of his anxious tics.

"Would you mind standing up?" he asked. Leona obliged. He looked her up and down. "So, that's not one of Schiap's divided skirts."

"No," Leona said. "I made it myself."

"Clearly."

Leona smiled in spite of herself.

"I see yours is made of a — what is that? Denise," Luc called the attention of Leona's adjacent classmate, who looked up from her own sewing project.

"Yes?"

“What kind of fabric would be ideal for a bias cut, such as one would want in a divided skirt?”

Denise, who appeared bored, looked from Luc to Leona, then back to Luc. “I suppose something woven with silk.”

“That’s right,” Luc said. “Just so you know for next time.” He continued down her row, and Leona sat down, her throat constricting and her head pounding.

Denise, who otherwise had been a silent if not apathetic neighbor, leaned close to Leona and said, “Don’t worry. I hear he has a small cock.”

Since Leona had not taught herself French slang, this devolved into a confused dialogue about what exactly Denise meant, until it was made abundantly clear, and the two snickered maniacally. The rest of the day they held up short strips of fabric and asked, “Like this?” Every now and then, Luc glanced at them from across the room.

Gaël was an apprentice of Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel. He wore predominantly white sportswear, which made him Luc’s visual opposite. He also happened to be far more pleasant. After every examination, he invited the class to his apartment in the tenth arrondissement, which had a balcony overlooking the grid of train tracks threading from Gare du Nord. There, he would spin American jazz records and mix Pépas from cognac, vodka, and quick dashes of bitters. His apartment betrayed his outmoded Orientalist fad, with a few lanterns and scrolls, as well as a burgeoning interest in surrealist photography.

Leona began wearing solely divided skirts, cut from every kind of fabric except those woven with silk. She made a name for herself in studio. On the eve of Luc and Leona’s second exchange, during one of Gaël’s parties, Leona premiered her latest creation, a divided skirt made

of muslin — a coarse, semitransparent material used only for design mock-ups. It was marvelous for dancing, which composed the first half of the night. Once people had enough to drink, they slumped on sofas or pillows on the floor; some argued about the Spanish Civil War, others fondled each other halfheartedly. Leona, bored, went to smoke on the balcony. Luc, slightly drunk, followed her. He snapped a flame from his lighter, lit hers and then his. They smoked in silence for a time.

“Are you gunning for Schiap’s apprenticeship?” he asked. “There’s only one spot, you know.”

“I want to work with Vionnet,” she lied. They continued smoking in silence. Luc stubbed out his cigarette on the railing.

“Suppose you really better work on that bias cut, then,” he said, and walked back inside. Leona picked up Luc’s cigarette butt and threw it at his back, but missed.

On the annual first-year tour of *les petites mains*, the little manufacturers, around the city, Leona’s class stopped at Françoise Lesage’s embroidery. The shop was a hole in the wall suffocated with hundreds of tiny drawers. Leona clandestinely opened one and discovered a mound of ostrich feathers. Lesage’s assistant, a waif in a skirt suit, greeted them. Leona peered beyond her, into the back room, where she saw Luc, Schiap, and Lesage himself. Schiap sat in a chair, her back to the visiting group, her head wrapped in a purple turban. Lesage presented his latest embroidery for her winter collection, an elbow-length black cape modeled on a dress form. A dazzling filigree of chariots and sunbeams burst from the collar to the hem.

“Bring them back, Mathilde, might as well,” Lesage said. The waif in the skirt suit ushered forth the students, who huddled together in collective awe. Leona watched the back of Schiap’s head.

“As you can see, I’ve just completed a piece for Ms. Schiaparelli’s winter collection, inspired by the Neptune Fountain in Versailles, if you’re familiar.” Lesage cleared his throat, stroked his thick eyebrows, placed a hand upon his quickly balding head. “I’ve employed these gold sequins, these dainty bugle beads to evoke the, eh, the jets of light or water, whichever—”

Leona imagined Schiap turning around, looking Leona up and down, recognizing the alternative take on her own divided skirt, hushing Lesage, taking Leona’s hand, and declaring that she’s found her protégé.

“—bullion, sparingly, for places I want the eye to catch; we want to manage the eye—”

Schiap and Leona would nod at one another in wordless conspiracy, she imagined, and leave Lesage and the embroidered cape behind. They would retreat to the Riviera to recast the house’s vision. Dalí and Cocteau would come along too, bringing with them exquisite liquors and high quality drugs.

“—you see, is about finding equal balance between discipline and imagination; we must be exacting but inventive—”

Leona’s reverie was interrupted when Schiap turned to face the group. Leona looked away.

“—the type of thread, the material, the placement; all while, of course, not forgetting weight, lines, silhouette—”

After a moment, Leona chanced a glimpse, but Schiap was not looking at her, nor any of the other students, it appeared, but out the window beyond them. The full weight of her daydream's idiocy bloated in Leona's chest. She pulled out a notebook and took notes on what she remembered of Lesage's lecture, but kept misspelling French words, scribbling them out, and misspelling them again.

Two weeks later, Leona was working late in the studio, as she had been every night since their visit to Lesage's. She nibbled on a bar of Cémoi chocolate, putting the finishing touches on her first pair of suit pants. Luc burst in, explaining he left some papers for a meeting with Schiap's designers in the morning. She nodded, and returned to work on the buttonhole. He shuffled through some papers at his desk in the corner, and was slow to leave.

"Do you want some chocolate?" Leona offered, breaking off a square.

"That's alright," he said. He walked over, folding his papers and sticking them under his arm. "What are you doing?"

"The buttonhole for these damn slacks."

"Let me help."

"No, I've got it."

"Please."

Leona begrudgingly slid aside, and Luc took up the needle and thread.

"You can't be timid with the buttonhole stitch; just punch it through, like..." Luc threaded the needle, reversed, punched it back through and swore. He pricked his finger.

Leona grabbed Luc's wrist and brought his hand to her face. She inspected it. A dot of blood formed on the pad of his finger, like a red sequin. "You're okay," she said, and, without any thought, leaned forward and licked it off. Luc's face changed, but he said nothing. Leona watched his puckered finger ooze out another little circle of blood. She licked it again.

They spent the spring rendezvousing alternately in Luc's apartment, the leaking but larger, and Leona's, the well-insulated but smaller. At l'école, they maintained a steely indifference to camouflage their affair. Nights, they would make love and then argue about design, such as which of Schiap's pieces was to be her masterpiece, the lobster-print gown or the hat shaped like a shoe, until one of them had to leave, to smoke and cool down. By the summer, their feigned vitriol at l'école fooled no one. That fall, Leona moved her belongings to Luc's in the second arrondissement.

They designed by draping fabric on their bodies, rather than by sketching. They lugged rolls of muslin to the apartment and, after drinking several glasses of wine to stay warm, took turns standing naked so that the other could drape and pin muslin into garments. Luc teased Leona for her pinched face when she worked, the gravity with which she handled the muslin. "Maybe this" was Luc's refrain when he pulled the fabric around Leona, and then rearranged it: "maybe this." More often than not, one would arouse the other, and they would have to take a break. Their designs, however, notably improved. Vivienne, a first hand in Schiap's atelier, complimented Luc on what she called the "familiarity with and empathy for the female form" emerging in his work. Gaël, although more keen on women's fashion, admired Leona's series of sports jackets for men, praising her in front of the class for her "intuitive instinct with regards to the male body, and the cool looseness with which she manipulates it."

That winter, Leona received a letter from her sister. Her parents cut off Leona financially after discovering she delisted from the Central Academy; they ceased communication entirely once she moved to Paris. Bertha, however, kept up correspondence. Leona would provide an occasional piece of fabric, perhaps to prove to her sister that her work was legitimate and tangible. This particular letter, received on the fifth of December, bore news that Bertha and William, her husband of less than a year, were pregnant with their first child.

It was this moment, more than any other that Leona was to confront, that most tempted her to leave Paris and return home. She could hardly imagine her sister married, let alone pregnant, and felt an intense desire to see with her own eyes that it was true. Perhaps it was because Leona wanted to ask Bertha something she couldn't in a letter: if this was what she wanted, if William was good to her, if she was ready to take care of another life. Or perhaps because this news cemented for Leona that she had irrevocably divided from her family. Between them lay an ocean, although Leona measured the distance not in length but in depth, as if one could sooner touch off the craggy floor of the Atlantic than Bertha could step into l'école and run her fingers through a drawer of buttons. Even inspecting maps, tracing the distance from Florida to France, brought her family in a closer and cleaner trajectory to Leona's life than she felt was right. Their life was not hers, and hers not theirs. Were she, someday, to see Bertha's child without ever having seen her pregnant belly, Leona might walk past it, smiling absently, as she would to any child bearing no relation to herself.

The haunting of Bertha's gestation all spring resulted in a second-year project of evening jackets for men and women all with the same oval panel on the chest, which strikingly resembled a bib. Leona received a note from Schiap after the exhibition. The exceedingly private Schiap,



who wouldn't stay to mingle, wrote: "I liked your bib jackets. Keep having fun. Do you know which maison you're considering for an apprenticeship?"

That night, Luc and Leona went to their favorite brasserie and sat across the red and white checkered tablecloth, avoiding each other's gaze. The waiter brought them mussels in white wine sauce, but neither touched the plate. They'd reached a stalemate. It had become a problem for Luc, although he had long known, that Leona never intended apprenticing with Vionnet, the tasteful seamstress, but always had her heart set on the whimsy and the spectacle of the Schiap Shop. This competitiveness led to a series of petty fights. Leona cut up several of Luc's silk ties which, in retribution, Luc then repurposed so that the pieces hung thin and long, like a patchwork silk rope. His innovation caused a stir at the atelier, and he was promoted to second hand, his ego bandaged. Leona entered her third year under the watchful eye of la maison Schiap.

One day, Luc erranded to Schiap's jeweler to collect the gold cicada buttons. That fall's evening jackets, in velvet, were to be surreally appliquéd. Returning with the parcel of fine insect molds, he found her shop empty. On her drafting table lay a copy of the afternoon paper. Atop the newsprint, a note in Schiap's signature hand: "Out for the day."

Back at l'école, Leona kneeled beneath a dress form, her head inside a full-skirted taffeta, embroidering a leather trim from within to hide the seam. A hand grasped her ankle around her sock, and she gasped. Another hand lifted the skirt to reveal Luc's face. He held up the afternoon paper's main headline above the fold. Germany invaded Poland.

It was imperative for the French economy that the Parisian couturiers, worth two and a half billion francs, remain open for business. When the men were mobilized that September, the

government pardoned the embroiderers, the hatmakers, the milliners and the furriers, the enamelists, the vendeuses, the designers and their apprentices. For the duration of the Drôle de Guerre — the Phoney War — they attended to their ateliers.

The size of the entering class at l'école quartered. Schiap hired Leona early since la maisons, even with the pardon, thinned out. Leona drafted a letter to her sister: "Dear Bertha," it began. "It's happened! I am now an apprentice of Elsa Schiaparelli." She paused, then crossed it out, and crumpled the letter in her hand. Bertha couldn't wholly understand what that meant, although she might appreciate it faintly. Leona imagined, if she could, sending her sister trunks of Schiap's clothing, stuffed with gowns and capes and sashes and hats, to bury her sister in ornate trappings, until Bertha, gasping for air, beheld the matchless glamour of the French master. But these masses of fabric, the closet rod bending with the weight of Leona's designs, dissolved, immaterial in the face of the war. What good was a well-turned collar? Leona withdrew another sheet of paper from her stationery. "I'm sure you've heard the news. I'm writing to say I'm fine, and I sense I'm in no real danger here."

Luc remained in body, although he was often aloof. Schiap, uncharacteristically drained of ideas, launched a fall line of military-inspired clothing, bomber jackets and khaki coveralls. The *colecciones de permissionnaires* came and went. Luc wasn't able to sleep, and took to late-night ambling. Paris at night, the grim fantasy, the molten métro signage, the streetlamps casting wrought iron shadows deep into the apartment rows, the fog thickening but the quicksilver of cobblestone in light clear. Leona began losing hair.

In May, the Maginot line fell, and Luc was called to Alsace. Leona accompanied him as far as she could, riding the métro with its electric blue lights. Many women bid adieu at the station but she followed him until she wasn't allowed any further, and there they said goodbye.

Luc would never write, hoping that with this negligence Leona would consider their relations severed, and return to the United States.

From her apartment window, Leona watched troops of Germans parade French platoons about town to mock them. A flag with a swastika was raised on her street corner. Their brasserie was closed. The heads of *la chambre syndicale de couture parisienne* — Lucien Lelong, Schiap, Chanel, Vionnet, et al — met in Bordeaux. Some decided, so that their employees wouldn't be sent into forced labor, their shops would remain open. Schiap left for the United States, where she lived for the duration of the war, delegating the operations of *la maison* to her team in Paris. Lelong returned to the city, to encourage the ateliers and designers that endured the occupation.

Not a month later, the Germans stormed the offices of *la chambre syndicale*. The Germans ordered that they move the entire industry to Berlin, for the glory of the Reich. Lelong refused, but with good reason. If they moved *la maisons*, they would have to move *les petits mains* — the tailors, the shoemakers, the jewelers, etc. “If you want to move us to Berlin,” he said, “you’ll have to move half of Paris.”

Leona and the remnants of the Schiap Shop worked under German supervision with strict rationing. They tried to make clothing out of newspaper. Leona wore wooden-soled shoes and cardigans made from yarn. When Balenciaga was shut down for violating the ration, Leona and a small band of designers from other ateliers finished their collection for them. Leona inquired at Lesage's one day to find his embroidery abandoned, the drawers turned out and pillaged. She bartered cigarettes to afford bread. She heard rumors of Chanel hid away at the Ritz with a German lover. Leona watched a shrunken mother, her boy holding her skirt, count out the francs for the small hill of rice to last them the month. At night, Leona would wrap herself in muslin, clasp it at her nape and whisper, as Luc would, “maybe this.”

The wives of German officers were now frequent customers. Leona worked with one, a Frau Müller, who insisted on a charmeuse dress despite the fabric's extreme shortage. Her husband came in the next day and ordered them not to record the purchase. Leona fashioned a two-tone dress of red charmeuse for the bodice pieced with black tulle and chantilly lace for the skirt. As she buttoned Frau Müller from the back for her final fitting, Leona imagined what cocktail this woman would sip at her party, what topics of conversation would prove popular among her fellow German emigrants, what sort of chatter could blanket their conscience. Leona grew sick looking at the dress she had created. The more Frau Müller smiled, the more Leona found the sight of it grotesque. But what right had Leona to condemn when Leona was the one to clothe her, to attend to her luxury? She furnished the German upper crust with a lifestyle of denial.

Leona set her mind to making simple, strong, sturdy clothing for the French. A new fashion, whose value was utility. Her people would look simple and chic, she dreamed, lingering obstinately over a jacket's seams she wanted perfectly parallel. And yet their sales were to Germans, to Italians, to Spaniards, and to Americans. Leona moved to cheaper and cheaper fabric, doubly lining them, so they would last. She waited for the day she saw a French woman on the street wearing the clothes that she so painstakingly designed. She imagined this French woman's face would brighten with a sort of dignity, the calm carriage of a person effortlessly dressed, as she waited in line for rations, or ducked into a storefront before curfew. One day, Leona thought she saw a woman, pacing the Seine, smoking, wearing one of Leona's coats, but she couldn't be sure.

At just that moment, Leona was shot in the hip. The bullet was a stray from a skirmish across the street; a small deployment of Resistance fighters had ambushed what turned out to be

one of the headquarters for German radio operations. In the end, the mission was a triumph. The Resistance killed the operatives, seized the equipment, and delivered thick stacks of transcriptions for intelligence. They only sustained three casualties, one of whom was Leona, a civilian. She, along with the two fighters wounded, was brought to the American Hospital.

Inspired by the raw brutality and harrowing dread of the infirmary, Leona was eager to return to la maison Schiap, filled with ideas for jumpers with tromp l'oeil bullet holes, nurses hats made of simple black felts, embroidery with rubber tubes and needles. Metals would be key to get across the sterility of the hospital. This was it! she thought. A return to whimsy, in spite of the horrors of war; irony and play, to transcend the very forces that would inject despair. Schiap would have agreed, were she there. Just when she began sketching on medical forms and napkins left at her bedside, her doctor discovered in Leona's records an expired visa. Fearful that Leona would be mistakenly targeted as Resistance, the doctor falsified records to reflect that she had perished in the hospital, and arranged for her passage home. As soon as she recovered, Leona was aboard the next vessel to the United States.

Leona moved in with Bertha, William, and their one-year-old son. She found a job working for the Army as a machinist, producing uniforms. She was able to afford her own apartment within a couple of months. She visited her sister occasionally, bounced their son on her knee and ate stuffed ziti, but more often than not Leona remained at home and sketched. After a long and convoluted search, Leona found an address for Schiaparelli in the United States. Leona sent her latest drawings along with a letter about the state of the house when she left Paris, and her current conditions. Three weeks later, the envelope was forwarded back to Leona's address, having never been opened.

America joined the war, the war ended. It never felt like the war in Paris. Leona dutifully rationed, exhibited a respectable dose of patriotism. She hung a flag from her porch. When the war was over, she felt the brunt of the shift in the increase of men her age, and in that she lost her job. But she picked up work as a machinist for JCPenney, and continued living a quiet life. Bertha, worried about her sister, set her up on blind dates. Leona went bowling, miniature golfing, to soda shops, to baseball games, to the movies. She danced the jitterbug. Eventually, a man named Thomas, with a cleft chin and a service medal, pursued her with such inexhaustible determination that she gave in. They married. He taught economics at a public high school. Leona quit work and bore and raised two children, both boys. While out shopping, she had to avert her eyes from racks of style magazines. The last time she read Vogue, when her first son was six months old, she had wept over a spread of belted ball gowns. Now, just looking at the covers, she tasted acid in the back of her throat.

Thomas, however, in front of company, loved nothing more than to bring up, as if it were something he only newly unearthed from his memory, Leona's past. "Did you know," he began, setting down his fork, "that Leona used to work as a fashion designer in Paris?" They said no, or pretended to need a reminder. Leona looked at her plate. "Yes, right before the war, or during the war too, isn't that right?" he asked, although he knew the answer.

"When the war started, yes," Leona said. "Excuse me, I'm going to check on our youngest."

"Potty training," Thomas said with a wink. The company laughed.

Leona went into her youngest son's room and knelt beside his bed. She asked how they fit, the new pajamas she made for him. Pretty good, he said, pulling down the covers to show

where the sleeves met his wrists. She asked if this design was better, without the collar. He nodded yes. And did he like the fleece? He nodded. Better than the flannel? His eyebrows furrowed. She clarified: the blue pair, those are made of flannel. He turned his head on his pillow, thinking. Then he nodded yes. Leona kissed him on the nose and then the forehead. She got up to return to dessert and drinks with their company, but left the door cracked.

When the war ended, Luc returned to Paris. With no news of Leona, he assumed she returned to the States, which he spent a long time convincing himself was for the best. Schiap returned to Paris as well, but within two years closed her doors. A young designer named Christian Dior, whom Lelong wrangled to work for his house during the war, gained prominence. Luc, unemployed with Schiap's Shop gone, found work as a tailor for Dior. He would never design again; he only wanted to make things fit. The next year, Dior premiered his New Look, a line of dresses with V-shaped bodices and accentuated hips, and was praised for a return to the feminine. "I drew flower women," he said. "They are like flowers in full bloom."

#### 4. Accidental

A hot shadow.

Some lazy diamond.

My sky TV.

That dumpster with the blue calla lily.

During her road test, she hit and killed a boy, which haunted her for all eternity. These aluminum quilts won't fold. Whistling, she bivouacked once, but that was another decade. Beneath the judge's bench, an infestation of ants moved in an orderly line.

A luscious carousel.

Some salted mailbox.

"My darling eglantine."

That wide receiver with the bottle of red wine.

She had crashed before, in a way, on skis into a pine tree. The type of countertop depends on your cooking needs. Darken the bubble for the correct choice, c) Pandemonium. Deciduous trees died that year without exception.



A thousand gorgeous eggs.

Some Egyptian toothbrush.

My bib direction.

That arpeggio with the warbling inflection.

The cherries picked had nothing to do with her lips or her complexion. Mutely, he sharpened all six of his Ticonderoga pencils. Blown bubbles settled on blades of grass to end their short-lived lives. Her father said, "If you pitch in for insurance, I'll call it a deal."

A late petalled water.

Some amenable zit.

My am-pm pinwheel.

That shopping cart with the tangerine peel.

To strengthen her burgeoning sex appeal, she snipped her bangs. The longbow made of yew, flexed, released the arrow. Foam made her think of the ocean. He clapped his hands on "e" and "ah" for one-e-and-ah-two.

A cross-country paintbrush.

Some bald scream.

My marble flu.

That pipe organ played by silver tap shoes.

She pressed “yes” for wax sealant before she knew she could choose. A nurse in mint scrubs noticed them circling, so took his mother’s elbow and pointed down the hall to a second set of elevators. As instructed, she snapped the bundle of bristly spaghetti noodles in half. The pearl studs pierced her ears for the first time.

An ambitious pollywog.

Some licked frosted pane.

My indivisible prime.

That way she cut the carrots into nickels and dimes.

The third movement called for djembes, tom-toms, and bar chimes. The blueberries lacquered blue were tart on the tongue. Clearing his throat, the teacher readied his mini gavel for the mock Scopes Trial. It was delivered in pieces; they assembled it with tools.

A sponge airplane.

Some sleepy rollerskates.

My unfiltered cool.

That kiosk with the falsely priceless jewels.

It unspools. She ran the vacuum over its own cord several times but didn't seem to mind. He struggled to wrench the last Pepsi from the binding then left the plastic in the fridge, a habit his parents considered disciplining, since he was old enough to know better. Gradually, she related more in her head than out.

A pilling blanket.

Some blanched bench.

My dill sprout.

That cabin bathroom pasted with rainbow trout.

Against his will, his mother enrolled him in boy scouts. Penning heart after heart in the margin, she practiced for the day it would matter. The deer had been there, they were told, because the brush had been cleared. Every time his grandparents drank gin and tonics he thought they were waters.

An unemployed keyhole.

Some crusty silly string.

My kilned pottery.

That family in that house with what happened to their daughter.

If it weren't for the track meets, then she wouldn't have bothered. The roller coaster halted at its apex and from there the world was visible. He collected state quarters and mowed lawns for five dollars a pop. A choir in their coats, stepping out from rehearsal, lingering to chit-chat on the steps, saw it all.

A noble algebra.

Some long-awaited laundry.

My pickleball paddle.

That secret passage in the game if you knock on the wall.

He was grinning when he learned how to crawl. The Smithsonian Exhibit assumed everyone was interested. At noon, there was a live feeding of the lions. Sliding into her bus seat and laying her cheek against the window, she considered the possible settings in which she and the object of her affection would finally kiss.

A prompt Christmas card.

Some braided lanyard.

My grocery list.

That corner of the pool where he routinely went to piss.

She was a deft shuffler but when it came to dealing she often miscounted. While writing “skid right turn right,” the teacher’s chalk broke in half, and he had to pick it up from the carpet. The two of them, father and son, carried the wooden toboggan up the hill to try again. All rose and heard, outside the courthouse, the mechanical jingling of an ice cream truck in the street.

A thickly marshmallowed spit.

Some private constellations.

My sleeping bag.

That bug with needle legs and mote-like feet.

Squinting in the brightly blinding snow, his father kicked off and held him tightly, the slope a steep decline. They considered this a difficult ruling, so they asked for one more day. Her mother, tying a windbreaker around her waist, brought out the kerosene lamps. After the abrasion on his cheek, his mother brewed him hot chocolate on the stove top from German bars and heavy cream.

A tie-dye mouth.

Some sentimental clock.

My 5x7 glossy dream.

That exposed wall with the red brick and the sand white seams.

He played the glockenspiel with rubber mallets, three blind mice. Eventually, his parents asked some friends if they could clear out his room. He prized the embroidered badge for archery, so pinned it in a prominent position on his vest. She fixed the flower to her beau's lapel and smelled his cologne and aftershave.

A vivisected carpet square.

Some caramelized drink holder.

My play workspace.

That divot in the lunch tray for peas and the liquid that settled at the bottom.

They bagged tomatoes then surveyed an aisle for basting oil. After a successful three-point turn, proceed to the next stoplight and make a left. She placed her hand invitingly on the cold metal bleacher, and the object of her affection laid his hand on top, fingers buttery from popcorn. Once the frame is constructed, insert the drill bits and install the shelves.

A naked tree.

Some confetti.

My unstudied self.

That body with the twelve cranial nerves.

The sled curled at its front like the stockinged foot of an elf. When they moved, they moved across town, and didn't bother color-coding boxes. Fences of orange perforated mesh reminded him of the plastic binding six-packs of soda. His own blood looked heroic to him.

A book-fair book.

Some fool's gold medals.

My lights dim.

That chapel in the airport with the prerecorded hymn.

She had to kick for the last lap in order to win. They had to stop his heart to try to start it again.

The conductor began at measure ten when the choir was ready. Breathe through the mouth, breathe, breathe on beat three.

A dusty controller.

Some browning valentines.

My burnt CD.

That picture frame with the other picture underneath.

Someone had to learn his bass drum part for that piece. He couldn't feel his fingers in his gloves when he reached for the rope tied to the sled. She couldn't look at her posters anymore and when she tore them down she ripped paint off the wall with their tape. She had a stray hair in her mouth and had to pull it away.

A black suit.

Some glasses.

My clay.

That conference room, that hospital room, each room they stayed what felt like an age.

On the sand, she lay on her back and retched saltwater after she was rescued by her mother. The continents are navy and the oceans are black. A crab toddled through the dry heat, its appendages finnickin'. Around the globe, a rim of white turns the outer edge of the planet tan with day.



A boy.

Some black ice.

My windshield.

That dumpster in front of her when the car stopped.

This is a picture of the earth when the sun is behind it. The grains of sand caked in the hollow of the shell she picked up. In a patternless array, spangles of gold prick the surface. Behind them, the grass poked up next to wild flowers, stalks meeting and parting.

## 5. Elin, With Pliers

Elin, with pliers, pulled an old nail from the floor of the deck. She had cut her heel on the nail the day before; there was no blood, but it peeled away a rind of callused skin. She snipped the flap of skin with scissors. Isaac lifted her foot up and kissed the divot, as they called it. At dinner, she kept her foot on her chair and occasionally pressed a finger into the groove.

After Elin yanked the nail up, squatting over it and using the full force of her body to heave it out, she dropped the nail in her palm. She pressed a fingerpad to the tip, but it had long dulled and rusted. She shut the sliding door to the deck and threw the nail away.

She clicked on the ceiling fan in the living room for the first time that year and felt the air move. She cracked open the windows too. It was spring. Isaac brought her half a clementine; the other half was in his mouth. He asked if he could touch her divot, and then tickled her feet.

She rubbed her whole body with cream, but Isaac had fallen asleep reading in bed. Back in the bathroom, she pulled out cleaning supplies from under the sink and scrubbed at a sticky caking of soap residue. Then in the bowl of the sink, she cleared away lines of toothpaste and granules of exfoliating face wash. She peed, and when she went back to bed Isaac was awake, but now she was tired.

“No hay ninguna duda. Pero claro.” Isaac dressed up for the phone call. He moved between the kitchen and the living room while he spoke. Elin sat on the carpet with a beer, serenely working through an assembly line of mailers for parent-teacher conferences.

They went to dinner and moved the basket of hot nachos so they could hold hands across the table. Isaac had a way of gesturing when making emphatic claims in conversation, of slicing the air and striking the table as if karate chopping in slow motion. He also, when less emphatic and more ruminative, smoothed napkins out flatly, like a map, as if to say, this is what we're dealing with. Elin sat with her arms criss-crossed at her hips, and bent forward with keen interest as though always led by her chin. Elin clutched the edge of the table and laughed into her lap.

Isaac told her as they brewed coffee, and he tried to finish telling her when the machine, as it did sometimes without rhyme or reason, flooded the basket of grounds with hot water and spilled unfiltered brew all over the counter.

They drove to the nearest coffee shop and once they took a window table with their mugs, she asked questions, slowly, while eating a cinnamon scone piecemeal. Isaac answered her questions one at a time, holding his hand over the top of his mug as if warming his palm with the coffee's steam. Across the coffee shop was a seminary, and Elin watched a student reading on a bench with her hand in her hair.

Their friends threw them a party. They printed a poster of Elin and Isaac's faces pasted over a map of Spain, on which they all signed farewells in Sharpie. In the kitchen, Elin grabbed two bottles of beer from the fridge, twisted them open and set the caps on the counter. She paused by the sink, tipped the bottles until some foam sloshed out and collected in the drain.

There were enough empty seats on the plane that Elin and Isaac could both lie down to sleep, but a metal seatbelt buckle kept Elin awake, however she adjusted, jabbing her hip bone or her stomach.

The apartment was down a side street of a central plaza, the lobby all marble with lots of plants. They were on the fourth floor with no elevator. When they first walked in, the apartment was empty. Isaac held Elin's head between his hands.

At the grocery, they wheeled baskets from behind, like wagons. Elin lifted a liter of milk from the unrefrigerated display of cardboard cartons. He brandished a sack of oysters. She used the neighbor's WiFi to look up how to cook them, and they ate the oysters straight from the pot on the floor of their balcony. He pinched her nose with the empty halves of a shell, and she swatted him away.

Elin woke up after Isaac left. She showered in rationed spurts of water, since the country was in a drought. She shivered while she shaved her legs. She toweled off and stood in the only patch of sun in the apartment, in the kitchen. The rest of the apartment faced west, shaded in a morning chill.

She packed a book and set out for a cafe, but none were open. The only storefronts open were bakeries, and those without tables or chairs. She ordered a coffee which came in a very small cup, and a pastry with many fine layers, like sheets. She imagined a filling, of chocolate or fruit, but was mistaken. She sipped and ate on a stone bench in the plaza by the apartment. She could not read for the loud screeching of the birds that circled overhead.

Isaac came home for lunch and, more out of a desperate need for the familiar than desire, they had sex in the kitchen. This was something Isaac liked to do in their previous home, but here the counters were slightly higher, and the cabinets slightly broader, so they had to readjust, and eventually resign to their bed.

They set out north for tapas, crossing the newer, thicker city roads to the ancient and slenderer ones that snaked in cobblestone up the foot of the mountains. They found a bar charming for its hanging wooden sign. Elin ricketed back and forth on her chair, and eventually wedged a menu underneath so it was stable. Their wines arrived with small crisps of bread topped with slices of hard cheese. Isaac peeled a papery napkin from its dispenser and wiped the crumbs from his hands.

Two men, one on the other's shoulders, wore a demon costume and loitered on a corner of the shopping district. The mask was dark green with black eyes and spiraling horns. Elin watched a child approaching the demon and laughing, but Elin spun around to avoid the corner, even though it meant going a block out of her way.

The gelato stand served cones that were long and thin, with scoops the size of a very small plum. Elin zipped up her windbreaker. It was maybe too cold for ice cream. She took her treat into the nearest building, a church, and sidestepped down a corridor to the restrooms. She stood next to the radiator and licked the drips from the cone. When she finished, she heard a choir singing in the nave. Their voices rounded the buttresses and refracted against the stained glass windows. The acoustics were wet and bright. Elin sat in a pew to listen. The choir was in rehearsal. The welling of voices ceded to the director, whose muffled voice corrected them, and then they began again.

Crossing the footbridge into the old Jewish district, Elin pulled at her skirt, which bunched with static cling up her knees and between her thighs. The river was small, and still, and smelled briny. The farther it traveled north to the mountains, the more it narrowed into something babbling. She buzzed in the building's main entrance and climbed the stairs to the

third floor, mindful of the loud echoes of her heels. The man interviewing her did not smile or break eye contact.

The flamenco dancer, in her red and white polka-dotted dress, stomped the floor, harder and faster, spasmodic as though possessed by a spirit, but wrangled into rhythmic precision, as though steered by a deeper and tempered passion. “What here they call *duende*.” It all began with a quiet gesture, when the dancer, gliding soundlessly to center stage, unfurled the beaded shawl from her shoulders. The shawl dropped and shot the dust up from the ground.

Elin met her tutees in the plaza with the small coliseum, by a cafe with chairs and tables set out with umbrellas. She cleared her throat to ask a tutee for her number, but cut herself short. She wandered up the northeast sloping streets to a park, walked its dirt paths webbed through sunken pools. In the shade she saw a peacock dragging its heavy feathered tail on the ground.

The church held a vespers service. The doors were left open.

Isaac wouldn't be home for another hour. Elin put on music. She wrapped a scarf around her shoulders, and then loosened it, trailing it along the tile floor on her way to the kitchen, stepping long, dramatic steps, then halting and snapping.

Elin did not take her shoes off in their entryway, Isaac's coworkers, and when they reached the kitchen Isaac took her wrist and pointed to her shoes. They padded around the apartment in their socks and the coworkers showed off their hobbies, his guitar and hers pottery. The woman coworker lit a stick of incense. They had two types of bar soap in their bathroom. Elin sniffed each before choosing.

“I think she thought you were great. She even asked you to join her pottery class, didn't she? Oh, she offered... I knew you would say that. I knew you would.”

In the old Islamic fortress, Elin and Isaac took pictures of one another standing by latticed windows, patches of wildflower, or sudden vistas. They posed. In line they complained about the price of bottled water. They draped their guest pass lanyards over their heads. At the edge the ramparts, where the wind picked up, Elin twisted her ring around her finger.

“So, another common aspect of Islamic art is the transcription of the Koran and other traditional or poetic texts into their dwelling places. So, in some antechambers soon, you’ll see some passages carved in stucco, repeated up the walls to create a texture or a pattern... Again, symmetry, geometry... Here, and in several other places around the palace, the passage reads, ‘There is no victor but Allah.’”

Elin laced her fingers together and asked if she could pray. Isaac straightened his fork and knife and shrugged, as if to say it didn’t matter either way. She cleared her throat and pressed her knuckles into her forehead. Her head jerked up when she finished and she asked if he would rather she prayed in silence. Again, he picked up his fork and shrugged.

She stopped Isaac on his way to the pantry and squeezed his sides. She squeezed his shoulders. She squeezed his neck. Isaac reached around her and picked up a glass of ice cold water from the counter and poured it over her head.

“Unbelievable!”

Elin wound the pulley system to send their socks out to dry on the line. They bounced slightly as she clipped one, then rotated the line, then clipped another, and rotated the line. When she took everything down to fold, she could feel indents in the fabric where the clothespins once held them.

When she came into the bedroom, Isaac had lifted the cover of her Bible and was peering inside. He turned to see her and let the pages drop, then moved to his side of the bed.

The city smelled of incense and candle wax for holy week. Elin and Isaac sat on their balcony and people-watched. Children crowded the pastry shops for torrijas and licked their fingers and patted their parents' legs for more, and then fell asleep in all positions while their parents sipped beer with friends. Isaac went inside.

“You hadn't written anything on the list so I was just calling to see. Yeah, I'll grab some more. Okay. Love you too.”

In the cafe, when Elin asked for iced coffee, the waiter brought her a glass filled with two big blocks of ice and a small cup of hot espresso. She poured the espresso over the ice and a steam rose. The blocks glazed from the heat but melted slowly, so she began sipping the espresso still warm. The ice slushed down and bumped against her upper lip.

For the holiday, crosses coated in red carnations appeared all over the city. Elin and Isaac walked past arches of heather, vased marigold and potted verbena, open patios and garden tours. Isaac plucked a geranium from a stranger's patio arrangement and stuck it down Elin's shirt.

They licked their cones and he asked about her church. Around the corner, the doors were open. He put his whole hand in the basin of holy water, until his palm touched the bottom, and the water reached past his wrist. He pulled his hand out, looked at it, front and back, then shook it dry.

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She snapped the white sheet in the air and it ballooned. The room was hot with sunlight. She stretched the sheet to tuck under the mattress, but couldn't fit it around the farthest edge. She ripped up the other three corners, balled the sheet up, and threw it on the floor.

When she tried to pray, she felt this same action of pulling taut, and springing loose, of crumpling, and resigning. There was a flatness to her first attempts at prayer, which filled a given shape, the way a sewing tutorial provides panels, or the way a sonnet prescribes a form. The incantatory nature of these prayers proved a comfort, but one day, passing under the shade of an orange tree, she felt her cadence vary, a stray thought erupt against the pattern of her prayer. This happened more and more, not just in the shadow of orange trees, but lying in bed, or listening to the radio. And so, what first manifested as rebellious or noncompliant swerves of thinking, Elin nurtured into adaptations, or varied permutations. Her prayers, less like the smoothed flatness of a sheet or a map, grew to be like rooms. They were the sheet, but also the bed, and the door, and the windows, and the hard tile floor, and the closet, and the desk. She let each thought be, whether sparkling or bickery, and aired it before God. She discovered that her thoughts and the things of her life were as much God's as they were hers, in the same way that one finds, beneath a bright layer of paint, an early and stubborn primer.

She might say, thank you for this day. Thank you for this sidelong, alley-slice of sun. Thank you for the apricot jam I have not yet eaten but I know is in the fridge. Why is there not enough water in this country for me to take a nice long shower? Too much to ask? Selfish. Sorry. Why drought, why famine, why war? Real questions! Forgive me for leaving the dishes for Isaac to clean; I feigned exhaustion on purpose. Help me get up before my next snooze alarm. Help me to remember you are faithful and loving. Sometimes I forget, and when I do, each rock and sway

in life upends me. Even good things become objects of anxiety and overexertion and defeat. Like this bed, which I can't fit a sheet on, and this down comforter, which, with Isaac and I beneath it, makes me sweat and sweat and sweat. Soften my heart like down! I'm glad for this other body. Thank you for him. May he awake with unimpeded clarity of thought and peace of mind! Hunker me down with joy so I may parcel out my load.

She rolled over in bed to see Isaac blearily opening his eyes. He blinked several times. He did not reach out, as he once did on instinct, to bring her close to him, but looked at her from his side of the bed, as if he knew she'd already been taken up by something else.

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All the walls in their first home were white, and the carpets beige, save the new one they installed in the basement, which was blue. When cleaning the dishes, they could look out a partial window to the forest that appeared, tastefully hemmed, between their subdivision and the next. The chain of the low-hanging light fixture above the kitchen table was tied up with a red cord. Their deck lay bare, then laden with a gingham blanket, then fringed with pots of orange mums, soon empty pots, then lay bare again but freshly stripped and stained, then filled with a picnic table and benches, a black kettle grill to follow, then staked with tiki lights to keep away the mosquitoes, then smattered with beer bottles, then cleaned, then cleared of all its decor pieces one by one, then swept.

In their apartment in Spain, they kept a shoe rack by the door. While cleaning the dishes, they could look out a partial window to roofs of clay tile and someone's laundry. The bidet sat

squatly next to the toilet, large enough for someone to sit in it, accidentally, and make another person laugh. In the foyer, there was a large round mirror mounted on the wall. The space had no light fixture, which allowed them to observe their reflections flatteringly in the mirror. The foyer led to the bathroom, the kitchen, the living room, and the master bedroom. Somehow, the position of the master bedroom window angled the early morning light directly at the headboard. In the beginning, the window had no blinds or drapes, so a large throw blanket from the living room was repurposed to block the sun. Then, a set of blinds replaced the blanket, but even those slatted in thin golden quills of light. A set of dark navy drapes replaced the blinds, and those they left behind in the apartment, for the next tenants. The drapes, not wholly dreary, sported bright orange stitching around their hem. The living room led to the two extra bedrooms, kept closed: on the left, storage and laundry, on the right, the guest room. The line for drying clothes ran between the windows of the two rooms, so she had to step out on these large windowsills to hang the clothes or collect them. They hung a little bucket here for storing clothespins, which they also left behind for the next tenants. On the top shelf of the pantry, they left behind a cookbook unintentionally, perhaps because it was lying flat, and the topmost shelf is beyond the average person's reach. It was placed there when they first unpacked their things from America, and its pages were stained and bent at the corners and marked with conversions for halving recipes.

In that old Islamic fortress, the Alhambra, rows of myrtle, closely clipped, encase a reflecting pool. Therein, the tops of the courtyard arches are visible, those most ornamental tops, to draw the eye up. The stucco perforated daintily, as though it is a very fine lace. The galleries of marble columns precisely symmetrical, as if sliced down the middle by a mirror. Four streams of water funneled by ancient aqueducts meet here without a sound. Over there, a whispering gallery. Its dome dripping with honeycombed stalactite. This was built by Christian slaves. The

horseshoe arched windows in the palace reveal the landscape, the green mountains, with sudden force, in the way that certain memories, or certain smells, like those of spring, can halt you. Glazed tiles ribboning in tessellations, flagging triangles swirling around stars, now blue, now yellow, now green. It's the patterning apparent in nature unimpressively; the skin of a starfish taken for granted, but when replicated, arranged on a wall by human hands, it's remarkable once again. Through this labyrinth, past this basin held by six stone lions, between these clumps of coxcomb, wisteria, sage. This court erected with gray drab pillars bears flecks of pyrite, darker granite. It was built by the Christian ruler who conquered this place. He destroyed part of it and built atop its ruins. In the tower for the harem, flecks of paintings remain on the walls, depicting an animal, a dog or an elk, someone playing the lute, a war party readying for war, but whether they are attacking or defending is unclear.

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It is said that the last Sultan of the Alhambra had three beautiful daughters. Their names were Zayda, Zorayda, and Zorahayda. When the Christian rulers invaded from the north, the Sultan locked his three daughters in a tower so they could not be captured, or worse, made Christian Queens.

The battle was short, the Alhambra fell. The last Sultan mounted his horse and sighed his way into exile. It is said this very sigh still sweeps down upon the city from the peak of Mulhacén. Not long after the conquest, three Christian princes heard a rumor that three Moorish princesses were locked in one of the Alhambra's many towers. They bridled their steeds for the

search. They rode to the foot of each tower and called to each high window: “Dear princesses! We three Christian princes would like to convert you, and take you for our wives.”

The princesses poked their heads out of their tower one at a time: Zayda, of the strong chin; Zorayda, decked with many jewels; and Zorahayda, with the lute. Then, back in the tower, the three princesses convened. Not one wanted to stay locked in the tower forever. Zayda wanted adventure, Zorayda wanted riches, and Zorahayda wanted beauty.

“Dear princes!” they called. “We three princesses would like to convert, and become your wives, but first you must free us from this tower.”

So the princes threw up a rope, and down climbed Zayda, and then Zorayda, taking their places on the backs of two steeds. But Zorahayda had a change of heart.

“Dear princes, and dear sisters, I do not want to stay locked up in the tower forever, but I cannot turn from my God.”

So the princes took down their rope and rode away with their princesses, and not much else is written of them. Zorahayda, on the other hand, found beauty in her solitude. She communed with her God and played her lute with heavenly skill, so that all in the countryside would wander near the tower, to hear the music of Paradise.

Many centuries later, the King and Queen of Spain and their court traveled to the Alhambra for a time. A young and dashing page wandered the gardens, enthralled. He came upon the tower of the three princesses, as it was still known, and heard from within a lute. It was said, even then, that the ghost of Zorahayda still played. He collapsed before the tower door, so transported was he by this celestial music. He begged that he might enter, and the door swung

open. Within he beheld the pale and slender muse, a rose in her hair, holding the instrument on her knee. He dropped before her and confessed his love, crawling forward only to kiss her toes.

“Come again tomorrow,” Zorahayda said. “You will find what you seek.”

The page obliged and returned to his room, but he couldn’t sleep a wink. He tossed and turned and thought only of her long white arms, the rose in her hair. Finally, in a delirium, he rose from bed and snuck through the moonlit courtyards and ramparts to Zorahayda’s tower. He knocked on the door, but heard no reply. He pushed the door open.

Here is where the tale diverges. Some say the room amassed with dry bones and ash, the unstrung skeleton of a lute. Others say embered honey, flakes of bread, gold dust.

## 6. Belle Belle Belle Belle

Charles was called home early from drilling the 19th light infantry when his wife, Yvonne, went into labor. Perturbed by any lapse in decorum, Charles concluded the drill ceremoniously and then walked the icicled bridge over the Moselle to his family's lodgings in the slopes. A long-limbed man with a penchant for solemnity, Charles folded his hands behind his back and lifted his head to the bare trees by the river bank, the starless sky. Stepping over the threshold, he paused to wipe his runny nose before anyone could see him.

A wood fire glowed in the salon, where Philippe and Élisabeth hovered in long nightgowns with their governess. "Papa!" squealed Élisabeth, the elder, sliding across the polished wood floor and wrapping her arms around Charles's knees. "Mama is laboring!" Philippe did not approach his father. Charles, exhaling steadily, tugged off his white gloves, which Yvonne had ironed that morning. He said to the governess, "Get them to bed." And she promptly obeyed, bending to clasp each child by the shoulder and coaxing them around the corner to their room. Charles hung his jacket and beret, then paced the stairs to their room, the scent of cloves and jujube from the pot-pourri in the salon soon undercut by chloroform.

\*\*\*

Yvonne sat next to her husband in the high-ceilinged natal center of the hospital. As decorous as her husband but more resilient, Yvonne insisted on accompanying him, her hair

pinned up beneath her black cloche hat. Before them, a young doctor in wire glasses listed their baby girl's physical abnormalities: protruding heels, large chest cavity, offset jaw, wrinkled ears, flat nasal bridge, thin upper lip. The hospital was holding their baby girl somewhere for tests. "Mongolian Idiocy," the doctor said. Charles's chair shifted, scraping against the tile floor. The doctor reviewed their options: send her to the nearest facility outside Stuttgart, or leave her at the hospital for the doctors to take care of. Yvonne looked across the room at a nurse who, taking a food tray away from a postpartum inpatient, snuck the remnants of a breakfast roll into her mouth. "I very much appreciate your discretion, doctor," Yvonne said, "but I would like to see my daughter, and take her home."

They decided they would release her the following day, along with instructions for the child's treatment. Walking home, Yvonne steadied herself on Charles's arm. She suddenly felt as if she had inhaled some gilded air, and for that breathed more warmly and more heavily. "Do you feel that?" she asked Charles. He was silent, ducked aside from a cart rambling by on the road, then kissed her hand.

\*\*\*

Charles led his troops on a long march up the river. He refused that they camp overnight and marched them back that evening. It was a test of stamina, he told them. Endurance was not a virtue in war time; it was a necessity. They returned by midnight, and then Charles himself marched home.



Yvonne rocked in a chair by the fire, staring absently at the embers, Anne asleep in her arms. She had sent the nurse home and the governess to bed. Charles planted a firm kiss on her forehead. "You're home late," she said.

"Let me hold her for a while," he said. "Go to bed."

Yvonne stood and placed Anne in his arms. "Don't be long. You'll exhaust yourself."

"I won't, *chou chou*," he said.

She paused at the stairs. "I don't know what that doctor... Don't you think she's lovely?"

"Yes," Charles said, without hesitation. Yvonne climbed the steps.

Charles leaned into the chair, kicking out his boots to warm by the fire. He rubbed Anne's back, exploring tactics of comfort, and then he observed his daughter with precision. Her snub nose had pores, and her eyes, as big and brown as chestnuts, had lashes. The ears were not wrinkled but enlarged at the top and pinched slightly at the side, not too different from his own. He touched his ears, and suddenly, as if he had swallowed an ember from the fire, he felt choked by a desire to furnish for Anne a life of security, delight, and inquiry. This child, his child.

\*\*\*

The villa the family rented in Beirut featured large windows, marble columns, and floral upholstery. It was so perfect that Yvonne could not justify leaving unless necessary. Charles, on the other hand, daily walked to headquarters and back, and left on several long trips with the Army of the Levant, to Baghdad, then Damascus, then Jerusalem. Philippe attended a Jesuit

school, Élisabeth a small academy run by nuns. Yvonne relied on Marguerite, a governess they hired specifically for Anne. When Charles was home, he escaped to his study after dinner, reading or writing late into the night. Yvonne read to Philippe and to Élisabeth, administered Anne's medicine with Marguerite and put her to bed. The days were harder than the nights, the long dry days of leafing through French magazines, staring at the cypress trees and smelling salt from the sea.

Sitting in an armchair with Anne on her lap, Yvonne buttoned the back of her daughter's new blue frock and tied a matching ribbon around her head. Yvonne dressed her up every day, although she never took her outside. "There she is!" Yvonne said, snapping on Anne's cloth mary janes and beaming at her daughter. "My beautiful girl!" Anne did not return the smile. Yvonne cleared her throat, called Marguerite over. She gave her the child and told her she'd be back shortly. Yvonne grabbed her hat and handbag and left for the market. She circled it twice, the mounds of spices and the goat flanks, only to buy nothing and return home.

\*\*\*

Yvonne and Charles were fighting in bed again, under the covers so their voices were muffled.

"We don't need radiators!"

"Anne needs radiators!" When Yvonne invoked the child's name, Charles fell quiet.

And so they had radiators installed in their apartment in Paris, on the Boulevard Raspail, so Anne wouldn't catch a cold. Although Charles took a pay cut at the academy, Yvonne found ways to repurpose broth for stew, stew for meatballs, and so forth. She frequented bargain shops, reversed Charles's shirt cuffs until they were too worn to salvage. Anne could not speak or walk, but she could crawl, and now carried enough weight to pester her siblings. Philippe and Élisabeth came to Yvonne with the complaints.

"Anne broke the doll that Papa bought me from Beirut!"

"Anne won't be quiet and I can't focus on my recitations!"

When Charles came home from teaching, Philippe and Élisabeth straightened and silenced. Yvonne had the plates and bowls and cups set out, impeccably. Charles sat first and then Yvonne and the children, and they ate in silence for a time. Charles asked Élisabeth what she learned in school, and asked Philippe if he had yet committed to memory Acaste's monologue from *The Misanthrope*.

"No," said Philippe, swallowing. "I should have it ready by tomorrow."

Charles made no response, and looked at Anne, who kept grabbing the spoon from Marguerite and splattering the au jus. Suddenly, Charles burst into laughter, whipping his napkin from his lap and standing to wipe the mess from Anne's face and the table.

"If I spilled something at the table—" Élisabeth began, but Yvonne cut her off.

"Don't encourage her, Charles." Yvonne reached over and took the spoon. "Enough of that," she said, pointing the spoon at Anne. "You are no longer a baby; you behave as such at this table." The table silenced again, but Charles grinned and sniggered privately through his nose.

“I remember when I was young,” Charles reflected in bed that night. Yvonne turned her head to listen. “My father would quiz us on our Latin. Mother always had the soup laid out for dinner, almost too early, sometimes it would be lukewarm. And she would always scrub my hands clean before eating, quite hard.”

\*\*\*

Yvonne played the upright Pleyel, an indulgence she hadn't allowed herself in some time, stiffly but repeatedly plunking out the two Bach preludes she remembered. Marguerite took a break in Anne's lessons and they sat on the bench next to Yvonne. Yvonne played the C major scale for Anne, then held her hand and pressed the notes down with Anne's fingers, and then Anne played it on her own.

\*\*\*

While visiting Yvonne's sister in Brittany, the family took a day trip to the beach. Charles sat on a canvas deckchair in the sand, Anne on his lap. She wore a wide-brimmed hat with a strap under her chin, and Charles wore a bowler hat with his suit; he wasn't one for swimwear. He counted on her fingers up to ten, and then curled them down from ten, one at a time, into small fists. He pointed to himself, said “Papa,” and she repeated, “Papa.” Charles beckoned Yvonne. Again, Charles pointed, said “Papa,” and Anne repeated, “Papa.” Elated,

Yvonne fetched their Brownie to commemorate the moment. As the film developed, Yvonne clutched her daughter's hand, imagining this to be the first of many words she was to speak in her life. Then, hearing a scuffle, Yvonne went to mediate Philippe and Élisabeth's squabble over who had the rights to the last deckchair and who had to lay in the sand.

\*\*\*

The family filed out of La Boisserie for Sunday mass. Charles held Anne's hand. She could nearly walk on her own, although occasionally she tipped sideways, her head falling against her father's hip. Once steadied, she would laugh at herself, and flatten her bangs against her forehead. A two-storey manor house, La Boisserie overlooked fields and clusters of forest, and belonged to a tiny village called Colombey-les-deux-Eglises, of whose 500 residents only two owned cars. The village had a single telephone in the post office. Every Sunday, the family sat in the same pew, ten rows from the front. Charles stopped Anne's legs and shook his finger when she kicked the missalettes and hymnals out of the pew racks. Yvonne worried the strap of her handbag and stared at the stained-glass depiction of Joan of Arc. She squinted at the woman, who didn't look much like a woman in the rendering, androgynously fitted with armor that stifled any femininity. Yvonne licked her lips and then kneeled for corporate confession.

Philippe and Élisabeth made a game of switching the electricity on and off in the house, even after Yvonne told them they were using only the oil lamps for the night. Marguerite was giving Anne a bath in the first floor washroom, but it soon ran dry from Anne's splashing. Since they had no running water, Yvonne tracked down Philippe and told him to draw more water from

the well in the garden, whatever he could get, and then scolded Élisabeth for playing with the lights, and gave Marguerite a towel to keep Anne warm in the meantime, and collected the bucket from Philippe when he came back inside, and set it to boil for Anne straightaway.

Meanwhile, upstairs in his study, Charles drafted his latest book by hand. “France’s assumption that a nation in arms is superior to a professional army,” he wrote, “is a fallacy.” His thin, slanted handwriting proved impossible to decipher, even for Yvonne, who forced him to read aloud whatever passages he felt required her opinion. Charles paused to light another cigarette. Yvonne forbid him to smoke anywhere else in the house, but in his study he smoked continuously. “No form of battle is more bloody than that of nations in arms.” He leaned back in his chair, ashed the cigarette in his glass tray. “Without a professional army, there can be no French defense.”

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After Charles was stationed in Metz in June of 1947, he drove 140 kilometers home every night to ascend the stairs, kneel at Anne’s bedside, and tuck in her blankets. Read a book, if he was early enough. Then he drowsily hung up his uniform, crawled into bed next to Yvonne, and fell asleep mid-conversation. He woke at the crack of dawn, drowsily put on his uniform, and drove the 140 kilometers back.

\*\*\*

Charles returned to La Boisserie for his birthday. Yvonne ordered one of his favorites, that hard bleu cheese from the Pyrenees. In a rare showing of joviality, Charles stood and declared, “Let’s sing *La Marseillaise!*” And so they did, and Anne conducted.

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“We can’t send the artillery in with the infantry; it’s a fatal error. Petain won’t listen.” Yvonne read Charles’s letters in the doorway, as soon she received them. Then, after dinner in the living room, she would read out selected parts of the letter to the children, Anne included. Philippe and Élisabeth asked the expected questions, about how likely the war was to take place, where it might happen, what they might do. But Anne, Yvonne found, always asked the most important question, which was when Papa would come home.

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On the eve of the war, Charles returned home for the last time. The children were in bed, but Yvonne made coffee for the two of them as they discussed the plan. They stepped outside for air. Charles tucked her arm under his and they walked through the garden, listening to the soft crunch of their footsteps in the snow. Once or twice, Charles asked if her feet were cold, and she said no.

\*\*\*

Yvonne and the children scrambled for the last boat to Plymouth from Brest. Yvonne told them not to pack anything, just get in the car. She stashed the few jewels she owned in her handbag, rushed for Philippe's diplomas, and finally Anne's medicine. Marguerite hauled Anne into the car. She didn't want to leave without her books; she wailed the whole car ride. Élisabeth plugged her ears and glared out the window. Philippe sighed, and Yvonne rubbed the back of his neck. When they arrived at the port, Yvonne took Anne into her arms, and the family ran to the docks, only to discover the ship had disembarked; they had missed it.

"What, then? What are we going to do?" Yvonne asked.

"We'll find a way," Philippe said.

"How? Anne can barely walk 100 meters, she's a nightmare in any form of transportation, it's impossible!" Yvonne cried, while Anne, hoisted up in her arms, looked away at the docks. Yvonne pressed Anne's head into her shoulder, muttering that she was sorry. Then she set her down and told her to take Élisabeth's hand while she searched for help. Yvonne bartered their way onto a Flemish trading ship that was en route to England, and the five of them squeezed into a single cabin like sardines, laying head to toe, slumped and slumbering. Yvonne told herself she wouldn't rest, only pray through the night. But she kept falling asleep, jerking awake with guilt, repeating whatever prayer she left off until she dozed again.



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In the lobby of the Rubens Hotel in London, Charles saw his family for the first time in months. There was Yvonne in her black hat. She was so fond of black hats, he knew. He ran — sprinted — to Yvonne and kissed her full on the mouth. Philippe and Élisabeth gaped; they had never before seen their father kiss their mother in public. Yvonne pulled away, blushed, looked around, then went in again for another peck before Charles greeted all three of his children. Élisabeth, a grown woman, received a gentle embrace; Philippe, now a young man, a handshake; Anne, lanky in her adolescence, clung to him, kissed him all over his face.

\*\*\*

Because their little brick house had no cellar, the family hid under the staircase when the air raid sirens blared. It became so frequent an exercise that Yvonne dusted and cleaned out the nook, put down pillows and blankets. Even with a dose of St. John's Wort and her earmuffs, Anne was inconsolable during the raids. One night, when the alarm sounded past midnight, and everyone dragged themselves from bed to cram under the stairwell, Élisabeth snapped. She pummeled her younger sister in the shoulder and shouted, "Shut up! Shut *up!* We're all afraid! We're *all* afraid!"

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From the dining room windows, Yvonne watched Anne and Marguerite toss bits of bread into the pond where ducks had appeared overnight. Occasionally, Marguerite pulled Anne back from the water, in which she was eager to swim. Yvonne would sit and read and reread French magazines, front to back. She always kept Charles's latest letter in her pocket. She would occasionally reach for it, just to touch the paper, and then return to her magazine. When Anne and Marguerite came back into the house, Anne extended a branch of purple wisteria, which she had broken from their bush in the side yard. Yvonne gasped, marveling at the tiny new buds as if they were grown by fairies. "Do you know the name of that flower?" Yvonne asked. "Wisteria," Anne answered, as if her mother had just asked her for her own name.

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Charles agreed to pose for publicity shots with Yvonne. The couple sat on the stone steps behind their new tudor manor, framed by two ornamental elephant statues. Feigning candidness, Yvonne looked away from the camera at Charles. "Fix his pin!" the photographer called out. Yvonne leaned in lovingly and played with the Cross of Lorraine on his jacket, then smoothed out his lapel. The crew followed Yvonne into the kitchen, where she posed drying a dish, and then by the counter, canning jam. Marguerite kept Anne in her room, working on penmanship.

\*\*\*

Yvonne decided to teach herself to use a sewing machine. They kept chickens so Anne could eat fresh eggs. Charles, one night, said he had invited their neighbors over for dinner. "Of course you did!" Yvonne had the roast split over six plates rather than four. Playing rummy after the meal, Charles dealt Anne a hand and the guests chuckled. Sometimes he leaned over to help pick cards for her, very strategically, other times he let her choose. The guests clapped for Anne each time she laid a card down. After the third eruption of applause, Yvonne spoke up from the corner of the room: "There's no need for that." The guests fell quiet, cleared their throats. Yvonne continued knitting, listening to the radio.

\*\*\*

The power went out regularly in their house in Algiers. In the dark, Anne would hunch closer to her sketchpad, squinting to make out her lines while Yvonne and Marguerite scrambled for the matches and candles. Anne was enamored of the landscape, the flora and fauna. She dragged her mother and Marguerite alternately out into the dry heat, to drop into tea shops or wander into cavernous markets to ogle the hanging lamps and rugs and sniff at the bundles of incense. Anne didn't mind sweating. She pleaded with Yvonne until, surrendering, her mother purchased a pet okapi, a brown giraffid with striped buttocks that Anne named Lorraine. Whenever Charles managed to come home, Anne and Marguerite would plan picnics to take into the mountains. They were bright and quiet afternoons, stilled by the palatial expanse of pink

hills, and Anne would spend them drawing her parents side by side, her father always in suits, her mother always in black dresses and black hats — despite the heat, in mourning for France.

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Yvonne departed the Paris hotel dressed in white, to watch her husband march in victory down the Champs-Élysées. Anne and Marguerite remained in the room, Anne pressed to the window, Marguerite busying herself with tidying up. Anne took off her shoes and lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling. She returned to the window, sneaking in front of the heavy drapes. She couldn't see very much; the parade was around the corner. Every now and then, couples and families scampered down the side street, waving French flags on sticks. "I'll take you down if you want to go," Marguerite said. "We don't have to tell your mama and papa." Marguerite watched Anne shake her head through the gauzy drapes. "Are you sure?" Marguerite asked. Anne nodded. She stayed at the window, her cheek against the glass.

\*\*\*

Charles was president and then he was not president, which made little difference to Anne, except that it required more moving. She had grown into an efficient packer, without Marguerite's help. In fact, Marguerite feared losing her job, for Anne's sudden growth in independence, and for the family's sudden drop in income, since they now lived on Charles's

retirement pay. Back at La Boisserie, finances were strapped. Charles would ask about a missing piece of the family silver, and Yvonne would snap, “What do you think we’re living on, my dear?” Then, filled with self-pity, Charles would retreat to the salon to “put more logs on the fire” since “that’s all he was good for anymore.” Anne sat on the floor of her bedroom writing stories. Tired of the constant interruption involved in asking Marguerite for proper spellings of words, Anne made them up, or wrote down what sounded right to her ear, until she encountered a word too long or convoluted, at which point she abruptly ended the story, and began anew. Anne filled a page with these beginnings, until it was time for bed, at which point she held onto one word to ask Marguerite how to spell, only one, like “*merveilleux*.”

\*\*\*

Anne took Charles by the hand and accompanied him down the garden path. He held her steady as she leaned sideways to pick a daffodil, but she wrenched free from his hand, insistent that she could do it fine on her own. She went to put the daffodil in her hair, but Charles said, “No, madam, allow me.” Anne rolled her eyes, something she picked up from Yvonne, as her father held her head and took the flower from her fingers. Closing one eye to aim, he brushed back a tuft of hair, and tucked the stem behind her ear. Anne cupped the petals with her hand against her cheek. She was nineteen; she had never been kissed by a boy.

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It was Charles and Yvonne's silver anniversary. Philippe came with his wife, Henriette. Élisabeth came with her fiancé, Alain. They opened bottles of good wine, nothing exorbitant. The cook made a simple cake. It was perfect for spring, decked with berries. Yvonne made a trip into town to buy pig ears, Charles's favorite. They brought part of the festivities outside, as the day was temperate. While Philippe and Alain spoke about the consul, Charles reclined with his legs crossed and watched Anne play in the grass with little Charles, his grandson. She was pretending to be a car, her new fascination after watching Yvonne learn to drive in their new American vehicle, and she was tall and sturdy enough to let little Charles ride around on her back. She waved away her mother when Yvonne expressed concern about Anne dirtying her dress. Later, Anne sat between Élisabeth's knees and let her braid her hair. Marguerite took Anne to bed early, since Anne had, of late, become easily fatigued. Anne could change and wash herself, but still wanted Marguerite to pray with her, to tuck her in and say goodnight. The rest of the family talked late into the evening, trading bits of memories and polishing off the wine. "And you would have had us move to Canada," Yvonne said that night, slipping into bed. They whispered about the family before falling asleep. "I would've fished, you would've cooked," he reminded. "And what about Anne?" she asked.

\*\*\*

Anne caught pneumonia. Her breathing went from bad to worse. She never left her nightgown. "*Mademoiselle, vous êtes belle,*" Charles spoke to her, he couldn't sing, "*belle belle*

*belle belle, mademoiselle.*” It was night. Marguerite kept asking if anyone wanted tea. The curate sat in the chair by the door, frowning into his lap. Yvonne sat, then stood, then untucked and retucked the bed corners, then sat. Charles tried to fit himself on the side of the bed, his legs dangling off the side, and secured Anne in his arms.

They buried her in the small churchyard at Colombey-les-deux-Eglises. Yvonne wept into Charles’s shoulder; he stiffened to maintain his composure, but soon he was crying too, privately, through his nose. He placed his hand on Yvonne’s head, and thought, Anne was always the same in this way, that she would walk and talk and laugh and sing; that she would love a spring day; but also that she would struggle with certain things her whole life, no matter how she tried, and she would learn disappointment, and grow tired, and fall asleep. In this way, she was always like the others.

**ONE** M inherited the sea. A went with him.

Sea grass lined with grey,

Evergreen cypress blue.

It was known that the wind circled the earth. After its first cycle, the wind came around again to pass through the grass and the cypress. Although the wind had traveled the world, it remembered this grass and this cypress. But the grass, new shoots from old roots, did not remember the wind. And the wizened cypress, accustomed to the salty breeze, no longer distinguished this gust from that. The wind passed through without recognition. And so forgetfulness entered the world.

**TWO** M went to the sea and listened. A went to the grotto and cried out.

A sooty tern winged against the wind, black beak searching, forked tail poised. The tern had been at sea for seven years. It called, *Ker-wack-a-wack*. It lowered to the shore and spume flecked across its white breast. *Ker-wack-a-wack!*

There was made no answer. The tern landed on a lichened rock, inspected the blooms, arched its black wings. It folded its black wings in. It would rest first, rest and then call again. It drew its beak into itself.

A salamander in the grotto cut its tail. Blindly, it found its inlet, not much larger than its body, to recover. Entirely still, the salamander waited for the pain to lift.



**THREE** So M tended the fungi. And so A  
healed the salamander.

Sea skimming the shore,

Dragging to green undertow.

Come back.

The sea gave the shore a dead fish. There lay a  
unicornfish, its lustrous orange scales already  
the color of sand. It had lived to an old age. It  
had been swimming in a crowded reef, looking  
for a companion, when it died. As its body  
drifted upward, it passed flush against a  
blackeye goby, which bumped the  
unicornfish's corpse with its anal fin. The  
goby looked for a place to burrow. It readied  
for a sex change.

**FOUR** M and A laid together for many  
years. After many years, they bore a child, B.

The silver sage lichen draped radially around  
the westward corner of the rock. Its outer lobes  
ridged like wind-raked dunes of sand. In its  
center, blue discs flared, their rims warped like  
dampened strips of wood once dried, curling,  
some resembling mouths.

The lichen lived before the sea grass grew,  
before the cypress sprouted, gangly. The  
lichen was both algae and fungus. The algae  
produced food and shared it with the fungus.  
The fungus sheltered the algae within its  
fibers. The lichen released its spores, whose  
cells bore imprint of the fungus and the algae.  
The wind dispersed them. The lichen fed and  
reproduced. It grew each year a millimeter.

**FIVE** B grew and left his mother and father and went to the desert. A set loose from this world and for a year M buried himself in sand. Then M returned to tending fungi.

In its nest of dead sea grass and dried seaweed and brittle twigs the sooty tern guarded its eggs.

It looked out to the sea. Its three eggs appeared speckled with mud. Down where the shore curved, the sooty tern watched a larger bird swooping predatorily down, snatching. It considered the sea, the eggs. Its instincts were divided.

**SIX** B roamed. B rested under a tree.

A worm appeared from the ground. Its wrinkled folds retracted and contracted. Its skin gleamed in the sun, as if polished.

B watched the worm and asked for it to dry up in front of his eyes.

Nosing its way back into the ground, its rings expanding and its skin ballooning out like a blister, the worm was unafraid of B, who then picked it up by its tail end, stretched it taut until it snapped into two pieces, and ate it.

B asked for another worm to appear, and one weaseled up from the ground. B held his finger out to it. The worm blindly inched away. B touched its skin, then pinched the worm until it burst. B spread the jelly in his mouth.

B asked for another worm. He waited, and it did not come.

**SEVEN** B dug into the ground, gathering other worms and insects to eat. B hollowed out a chamber for himself.

Not far away, a pocket mouse burrowed with its teeth and hid a mouthful of seeds. In a week, it boastfully showed another pocket mouse its hoard, and they reproduced. Twenty-three days later, the pocket mouse gave birth to five baby pocket mice. Nine days later, they grew teeth. By the next summer, the baby pocket mice ground their teeth into the earth to make their own holes to place their seeds in admirable hoards, then returned to the sunlight again, the white hairs above their rubbery ears bristling.

**EIGHT** B found I, and found I pleasing. B wrapped her hair around his forearm and pulled her into his chamber.

B asked I to lay with him. I said no.

B threw I out of his chamber, but not before he took a hair from her head. He wrapped it around one of his fingers. And so it continued until B had a silver hair tied to each finger.

Again, B asked I to lay with him. I said no.

“Very well,” B said. “Then let me return the hairs to your head.”

B spread his hands and threaded his fingers into I’s scalp. Then he grasped her skull and dashed it against a rock. I fell unconscious. B lay with her then, and once he had finished, kept her with him underground.

**NINE** Above ground, a century plant stirred. Its toothed edges sawed the air, the spike at the end of each broad leaf weighed it down. Some backbended, some folded. The plant began growing its stalk, unseen, from its center. The stalk would grow to be nearly as tall as a saguaro, finally budding yellow flowers. Once the stalk blossomed, the plant died. So it went; it knew no different. Until then, it slowly grew the measure of its death, to be crowned with yellow flowers.

**TEN** By the time the century plant had produced a stalk the size of a baby pocket mouse, I had given birth to a girl, V. I fell prostrate and blinked tears into the earth, begging.

The desert wind slowed and the sand settled.

I had first drank. I ate. I walked. I climbed a saguaro. I pulled out spines. I faced snakes. I

looked them in the eye. I swam through a sandstorm. I shuffled slate rocks into stacks. I dammed them.

I suckled prickly pear juice. I peeled burnt skin. I knew the stars. I soothed the soil. I irrigated. I grew many things. I grew jewelflowers. I grew nightshade. I grew desert peaches and rock cress. I warned jack rabbits not to eat them. I nicked one with her onyx knife, to warn it. I kissed each petal. I gathered every sunrise into herself. I enrobed in every covering of rain.

Then, one day, I looked out and saw B.

Is it not written in the annals, B and I, their fate, and what they birthed?

**ELEVEN** I gave V her onyx knife and told her to leave. V climbed out of their chamber and into the desert. I asked for her protection.

I wandered deep into their chamber to meet B. I sat. B asked where V was. I did not speak. B asked again where V was. I still did not speak. B took a bone from his dinner and pushed it down I's throat until she died.

B left his dinner and ascended out of their chamber, but layers and layers of slate had appeared where his hole once led out.

**TWELVE** V walked the desert. V looked behind for I, but did not see her. Crisped and wearied, V stretched out on the desert ground. V closed her eyes.

A spring of water gurgled from the earth. V drank and then the spring vanished. The

ground where the spring erupted was damp. V pressed stones around the site. V cut her skin with a sharp stone and pressed the damp dirt into herself.

V walked. The moon was full then thin then full again. V came to a river and waded in. A red cougar pawed up to the shore on the other side. It leapt into the water and emerged a sleek burgundy. It approached V. V held out her hand. The cougar hissed. V remained still. The cougar circled V and approached from the other side. V remained still. The cougar purred. V remained still. The cougar licked V's hand. V put her hand into the cougar's mouth, benignly. Then placed her hand atop its muzzle. The cougar pressed into V's shoulder with its head, and V climbed on its back. They swam across the river.

**THIRTEEN** It was night when B crawled out of his hole, fingers bleeding. B pursued V, denying food and rest until he found her.

V and the cougar came to a cave. The cougar left and returned with a mangled river otter in its maw. V learned to eat meat. The cougar left for days at a time. Alone in the cave, V shivered. Winter came and made the outside white. Without the warmth of the cougar there, V struck stones and sparked fires.

A wind gusted in and blew out her little fire made of twigs. V stood and looked out into the night. V left the cave and searched the forest for fell branches, but all were damp with the coating of snow.

An aspen's tallest branches caught the snow. The thin branches below were left untouched. V reached and snipped them off one by one until she had a bundle. Before V turned away,

she looked at the aspen, the many lip-like creases of brown in its white bark silent.

V brought the bundle to the cave and lit a fire. V warmed.

**FOURTEEN** V slept. V awoke with a fierce hunger and the cougar had not appeared with food. V felt the point of her onyx knife.

V spotted the otter by the river. The otter sat on a rock, grooming. Then floated on its back. V approached, and it was unafraid of her. It floated. V dove and stuck it with her knife. V tried to find the heart, but the fur was matted and lumpy. She stuck it again. She held its body, light in the water. The water was icy.

**FIFTEEN** V wandered back to the cave. V heard the cougar growling. V crept inside. The cougar, tail flexed, hissed at B, who stood in the back of the cave, arms raised helplessly. V looked at B, who began to weep. B kneeled, reached for dirt from the ground to pour on himself, but only found pebbles. V placed her hand between the cougar's ears and said, "No."

V turned to B. "Leave and do not follow me," she said. B grabbed her feet and kissed them and dribbled over them. V withdrew, then pointed out of the cave, into the coming night.

"Go."

**SIXTEEN** Forty winters later, when V did not detect the season by the mounds of snow on tree limbs, but rather by the slim icicles hanging from grapevines, her children asked her to tell them again the tale of that winter

when V triumphed over old nasty B. V took up her gourd tambourine and began to sing.

"I traveled far 'cross rivers wide  
Up mountains tall great valleys in stride  
My fierce ally the cougar red  
Prowled by night whilst I instead  
Struck stones set fire alight  
Admired fauna and flora alike  
E'en in winter O what I found  
These slender trees white, abounding  
With silent beauty and I in awe  
Returned to my cave where cougar's claws  
Reared up against some shadowy knave  
Twas clearly B this figure depraved  
Eating cave dust while cougar wild  
Bent to pounce fanged jaw smiled  
And I thought here in my hand  
The life of an evil evil man  
Whose blood ought spill, but no  
Someday it will I told him to go  
To face the ends of the earth alone  
And so he crawled and went away  
And I've not seen him to this day"

The children clapped and cheered and ate their raisins by the fistful. What V did not tell them was that she did see B again, one day.

**SEVENTEEN** When at last came the time for V to leave, to cast off the comforts of the cave and seek the sea, she did not bid farewell to the red cougar. Rapidly arose this acute calling, and rapidly V followed it.

V traveled. V thought she saw the red cougar once, but it was the thick red torso of a hind instead. It halted behind a thicket of brush to scrape its budding antlers against the trunk of a tree. V wished it would look at her. V felt some transparency when hinds' black eyes met hers. But the hind did not look her way.

V arrived at the sea. V swam, then coughed up the water. V caught a fish. It floundered in her hands.

**EIGHTEEN** M came down to the shore to tend the fungi and V, startled, hid from him. M sensed her presence; he had grown accustomed

to being alone. Once he finished tending, he called out, "Hello!"

V emerged from a clump of sea grass. M looked and saw in her instantly some trace of A that had nearly left his memory. He ran to her and V, startled, embraced him.

They reconciled their family histories. M sat and listened with such stillness that V thought he was paralyzed, or camouflaging. When M did speak, it was with a guttural but soft voice, as a pebble smoothed from lying eons at the bottom of the ocean. His movements were subtle and each purposeful. In the grotto, M picked up a salamander, and V did not notice until the sheeny thing clambered up to his shoulder.



**NINETEEN** In his tending, M was diligent; in his diversion, easily amused. M spent hours gathering stray feathers from along the shore; it was not out of a sense of cleanliness or necessity, but an old habit of gaming. It was a ritual V would never know, when M and A used to produce handfuls of feathers and, grinning, release them in a gust of wind, watching to see whose would fly farthest out to sea, arguing about whose feather was whose.

By the time M let loose from this world, he had taught V about the ritual of mourning. V dug a hole in the sand, sticking her feet in first, but hardly submerged past her knees. V revised, decided to lay horizontally and pile the sand on top of her from her sides. She lay there for two days, itching. Then she broke out of the sand and, sensing the sea had nothing left for her, moved inland.

**TWENTY** V, alone again, searched the brooks and hillocks for a companion. The air sweetly sung of spring and fresh soil, and V followed the scent until she found J, plowing. V began without pause the second ritual M had taught her. V plucked a hair from her head, stepped over the mounds of soil, and offered it to J. J plucked one of his own hairs. They knotted the hairs and buried them in the earth. And so V and J lived, and laid together, for many years, planting vineyards.

One day, after chase and play, V wrestled down her beloved J, bundled him in a divot between two strong roots and fed grapes into his mouth. Then, desirous, she left him to fetch more grapes. "Where are you going?" J asked. "Hush," V said. "Wait."

**TWENTY-ONE** Loping through the corridors of wild grass, V sauntered toward the heaviest vines. V paused, saw a strange sight, turned to look again.

Scrawny as any spindly branch nearby, but without glossy leaf or tender fruit, B knelt, fanning out branches and licking his lips. As V approached, she saw that he had gone blind. Grey scales fixed over his eyes. A twig snapped underfoot and B looked up. "Hello!" he said. His voice cracked.

Here's the lie, V thought, that she could plunge now twice, once in each of his eyes, her onyx knife, and feel satisfied. To break through his crust of grey scales, to slide through the cold jelly of his eye as through the slippery belly of the first feeble fish she caught, which wriggled even as she sliced it, if violent action could revise time, the most

stubborn magic she ever knew, it might just do. She might just do it. So what had stopped her hand, held the cougar back, so many years ago? O, but she knew, and the cougar too, even as it swam across the river to retrieve her, that she was no animal, but something far more brutal. She was young. She felt an act of mercy undid the haunting of injustice. She thought she would find her mother by the sea, but instead found sand and feathers. O, the lip-like bark of the aspen, the black eyes of the hind, they refused to speak or look at her, a killer not by instinct, but for protection and for vengeance. But what of the tree, of the hind? Never has one tree beheld the next and thought, I want to embrace you with each limb and perceptive instrument of my body! Never has a hind beheld its parent and thought, I pardon you, live freely! But I am more love and more cruelty, V thought. I will eat every grape and I will take your eyes.

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I would be remiss not to include a brief bibliography of sources that helped greatly in the writing of both “L'École” and “Belle Belle Belle Belle.”

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