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Glasgow and Other Stories

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing, Fiction

by

Hannah Choi

B.A. Boston University, 2002

May 2013

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor, Joanna Brent Leake, for the continuous support of my work, for her patience, motivation, enthusiasm, and immense wisdom. Her guidance helped me in all the time of writing and revising of this thesis. I could not have imagined having a better advisor and mentor for my MFA study.

Besides my advisor, I would like to thank the rest of my thesis committee: Frederick Barton and Milton O'Neal Walsh for their encouragement, insightful comments, and hard questions.

My sincere thanks also go to Barb Johnson and Amanda and Joseph Boyden for their help and guidance during my many fiction workshops.

I thank my fellow students, Ben Shields, Kiki Whang, Melissa Remark, Carrie Chappell, Sara Paul, Daniel Morales, Michael Haines, and Neil Ranu for the stimulating discussions, for the sleepless nights spent at Parkview Tavern, and for all the fun we have had in the last three years.

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Glasgow

Coney Island mermaids crowd the Red Room Bar. There are dozens of them. They fan their aqua-fins and blow soapy bubbles. A blue-suited clown dances in the center, jiggling his belled stomach like a pregnant Poseidon. He tries to give me three balloons, which I let float to the dark ceiling. I'm holding onto delicate threads. The mermaids form a conga line behind the clown and snake around me. I'm practically one of them, even in my unglamorous ripped jeans and T-shirt. I say that because I feel like I can understand them. They're gazing inward, with their painted faces displaying the shades of emotion that come from a life underwater, the longing, sorrow, wonder, and a constant falling for illusions, like a mirage of your long-lost sailor swimming to you, only to find out it's just a cloud of bacteria flickering neon in the sunlight. And you kick your tailfin and dive back down to where it's dark and still and the algae glow around you, until the next time when you think you see him swimming again.

Liam and I weren't so special, even if we thought we were. People find love at the Red Room all the time. I was sitting inside the back photo booth, waiting for the bathroom line to move, when he pushed open the curtain. His blue-gray eyes weren't ready for the bright white flashes, four in a row, swallowing the red darkness. I'm the type to look away, but he surprised me. The black-and-white pictures came out with the first one of me alone, staring ahead, and the next three were of us, staring at each other. For the rest of that night Liam tried to rub out the blind spots when he looked at me.

That's how it always works. The dance floor is never washed, and the bar smells like the armpit of a biker's leather jacket, but you never mind until you've found the one you love and you don't care about seeing other people anymore. All you see is him, and then you go with him to one of the fancy bars where it's like another world, not crowded, dark New York at all but somewhere slow and radiant, with antique ceiling fans and Flamenco singers covered in gold sequins. A white marble bar with robin egg swivel seats, where a sagacious, dark-eyed bartender serves you cocktails with ingredients like coconut milk, pomegranate molasses and cardamom honey. You dress for the beach even during winter. You sip from a tall, narrow glass lined with pink salt crystals. You listen to the music and understand what it means.

My best friend Amina and I drink at the Red Room most nights after work and talk about what love is. Brodie works the door Thursday and Sunday nights, and he's there even when it isn't, working extra shifts, looking out for trouble in the raucous, beer-guzzling herd. I can tell he's

lived his whole life like that, eyes alert, shoulders thrown back, arms ready. Gladiator mode. Amina's in trouble a lot, and I guess it was bound to happen that one night he would rescue her. She found love here, too.

Amina likes to say that love doesn't belong to one person. It's not some solitary, private event between your soul and skin. When you really "click" with someone else, like the two of you are locked in for a long haul, then he becomes your mirror and you become his. You even gesture like him and see the world the way he does. And she doesn't believe that love is exclusive. You can love anyone. You can love many times.

I hope she's right, but she makes it sound so effortless. I don't know if she's ever lost love. She's only found it.

I think love is about not being afraid, I tell her. You have to lose everything.

The garden outside is filled with smokers, and ash flies around like the world's smoldering. Everyone talks and checks everyone out. Even Amina scans the crowd whenever Brodie's in the front working. Tonight, the three of us sit together and drink beer, near the pond that used to be filled with koi fish but is now filthy with sunken pennies and floating cigarette butts. Amina laughs and calls out to someone, "How do you get your hair to stay like that?" I look up and see a boy with Jesus and Mary Chain hair, smiling sleepily. An unlit cigarette rests between his thumb and index finger.

He slurs in a foreign accent, "It just coifs like that." He stumbles to his knees and asks if I have a light.

“Where are you from?” I ask, cupping a match flame.

“Glasgow.”

The match burns my finger and dies. “I was supposed to go there,” I say.

“You still can.”

“I was engaged to an English guy who was going to take me.”

“Don’t let the British deter you,” he jokes. He wobbles from boot to boot as he stands.

Ashes stick to his black slacks. “Glasgow’s the friendliest city.”

“More friendly than Dublin?”

“Oh, sure,” he replies and kicks an empty beer can into the pond. His bangs fall over his eyes, and he shakes his head to move his hair back into position. “We also have the highest murder rate in all of Western Europe. Most impoverished. Highest rate of cancer. Lowest life expectancy. We only live up to the age of fifty-three.” He sits down beside me.

“Why is that?”

“We live with our hearts on our sleeves. We live dangerously.”

“What’s so dangerous about your life?”

He takes a deep drag of his cigarette. “I want to be a writer. That’s pretty catastrophic.”

I roll my eyes. “You and everyone else here, buddy,” I say.

“I’ve been in a Kerouac and Burroughs storm lately.”

“Maybe it’s the July humidity.”

“Vonnegut, too,” he continues, with a solemn expression. He studies my face closely.

I cover my right cheek out of habit, but there’s no point hiding the obvious. I run my finger across the scar forking at my jaw down to my neck. “Car accident six years ago,” I say. “A moose on the highway. I’m lucky to be alive.”

Glasgow's eyes dance, and he's about to say something else, but his friends appear, a boy and a girl. The boy has blond waves that sit sculpted perfectly on his head, and the girl is a mermaid, with bright blue hair and tattooed vines around her eyes.

"She lives dangerously," Glasgow says to his friends, smiling at me. But they don't want to talk to me. They sit on his lap like children, one on top of the other, and I turn back to Amina and Brodie.

"Was that guy trying to get your number?" Amina asks.

"I don't know."

"He's still looking at you," she says, smirking.

I turn back and meet Glasgow's eye. I read somewhere that making eye contact is a gateway for love. It's called neural synchrony. Your body has the biological ability to "catch" the emotions of the person in front of you just by looking into his eyes, making your prospects for love limitless. Brodie and Amina keep talking, and maybe they're talking to me, but I'm not listening. I'm cultivating love, and Glasgow's cultivating back. I hold up a cold beer can to my cheek and push it along my scar. The night's sweltering, and I can feel the temperature rise past what must be the thermometer's breaking point as more people push into the garden. Then something happens that makes me look away, something no one else seems to notice but me. Two of the Christmas lights, decorating the fence, burst. Two little *pops!* then the slow burn of electricity.

Vonnegut once wrote, “I want to stand as close to the edge as I can without going over. Out on the edge you see all the kinds of things you can’t see from the center.” Liam used to recite those words like they were oxygen. Who knew the edge would be somewhere between Colorado and Utah on Interstate 70? We had thought it was California. We were driving across country to move to Los Angeles. One in the morning, shoe to accelerator, he blasted Fugazi on the car stereo.

“Next summer, I’ll take you on the River Clyde,” he shouted over the music. “When I was a kid, my grandfather and I used to kayak from Glasgow Green under all the suspension bridges until we reached the old part of the city, where steeples had blue clock faces and balconies. Merchants used to watch for their ships coming up the Clyde from those high windows.”

I turned down the volume. “I’ll go to Scotland, but I’m staying out of the water.”

He smiled and slowed down a little. “We’ll see,” he said and leaned over to kiss me. He pushed the hair away from my cheek and tickled the curve of my ear, and that’s my last, real sensation of him, a feathery tingle filling me from my toes.

What am I looking at in the photo booth? Pink lipstick poems. Black Sharpie regrets. I see my scars in the tiny vanity mirror, but they’re nothing, just dead skin. The real wounds from the accident are invisible. I slide money into the machine and wait for the flash. I hold my breath the whole time, until my face drops out of the picture slot, multiplied by four. I tell myself, love’s going to find you like the first time, and I feed more money in, wait, smile, freeze. Clench my teeth. Pinch the soft part of my wrist.

I still remember Liam’s pale fingers, his palm open on the road. The rest of him lay under a white blanket soaked through with blood.

Languid mermaids surround me in the Red Room. I search for Glasgow and rehearse the conversation that we'd have about Vonnegut, Burroughs and Kerouac, about getting in a car and driving through fields of burning sugar cane until marsh meets forest then ocean. But I can't find him in the crowd.

The bar feels like it always does. The past hides in its thick grime, and I know I'll carry its stink when I leave in the early morning. Sometimes I go straight from the bar to the pool, and I have the lanes to myself. Eventually I get into a seamless rhythm with the water. I make a diamond with my fingers and catch the sunlight filtering in. Strange thing is, I used to be afraid of water. I dog-paddled in shallow pools and never submerged my head. But now I swim a mile every morning and can't get through my day without the surrender, diving in, arms spreading to soft, endless waves.

Brodie looks up at the clouds in the sky. "Something's coming," he says and wraps a hefty arm around Amina's shoulder. The three of us gaze up and wait, and after several minutes pass by, with us just staring at the sky and not even talking anymore, the first drops fall. Everyone else in the garden stops talking and looks up. Cigarettes hang in arrested hands. Ashy tips grow larger.

When it starts pouring down, people squeeze inside with the mermaids. When you're searching for love, you never really stop, even when you're barely standing or awake in the darkness, grabbing for the closest hand before last call.

Glasgow shows up again, drunker than before. He circles in front of me.

"He's looking for you," Amina says and grins.

I stand still to see if it's true. There's only movement. Poseidon leads the mermaids in a song, and the Red Room vibrates like the belly of a whale. The conga line breaks and re-forms as sequined fins brush against my arms and legs. Glasgow dances to me, his coiffed head bobbing in the crowd. Balloons cover the ceiling, losing air and sinking back to the sticky floor.

After the accident, I used to have all kinds of nightmares about Interstate 70, moose splattered over the highway, Grim Reaper slashing the car roof, Liam hanging from a tree and impaled with a mighty antler. But now when I imagine the edge, it's almost a peaceful place because it's so quiet. There are no cars, and Liam and I stroll in the middle of the road. Eyes watch us in the surrounding forest. "I don't think they're human," I say, but Liam doesn't notice. He whistles softly and walks on to the water. I stay behind with the rustling trees.

The Red Room empties after the rain stops, and it's just the clown, mermaids, Glasgow and I. He has a wild, abrupt dancing style, but his face remains serene as he spins me around. I close my eyes and pretend we're in Scotland, where I bet the sky turns violet after a storm.

Sandoval and the Shark

Sandoval realized her life's calling while leaning over the performance pool at the Seaquarium in Miami. She knew such moments of epiphany were rare, and she felt a deep sense of gratitude that she was standing where she was, as if singled out by the universe. Serendipity dove toward her, in the form of a giant orca named Lola, who splashed across the pool and sprinkled water on Sandoval's head. No longer was she Sandoval, twenty-four-year-old art school dropout, but from then on she was *Sandoval, aspiring aquarist*. She turned to her boyfriend Lee and said, "This is what I'm going to do with my life. I'm going to become an aquarist."

Lee understood her quirks, and that's why it seemed even more fortunate that he was there.

“I always thought you had the soul of a whale,” he said. He turned the plastic dial of a disposable camera. Sandoval posed like a pioneer of the sea, the thin pleats of her yellow strapless dress blowing in the wind.

After Lola’s show, Lee sped onto the interstate and rewound the heavy metal mix that he played in the tape deck whenever it was his turn to drive. Sandoval tried not to listen. She unfolded Seaquarium brochures and pored over them. She lit a cigarette and stretched her arm out the window. In the side-view mirror, her dad’s Ford minivan looked like a blue fish racing in a golden sea, with bubbles of dust and car exhaust floating across the highway. Her father bought the minivan the same year that Sandoval was born, and the irony of it surviving all those journeys on the dry, flat Texas highways of her youth did not fail to impress on her the significance of the Aerostar.

She flipped through her father’s old roadmap and searched for the ocean. His things were worn away, but she felt stabs of guilt for leaving most of his possessions behind. He would have wanted her to take his teacher-of-the-year trophies and pictures of the soccer team he had coached, especially the wildly smiling boys who had made it to sectionals. But there was no room. Lee had said that the apartments in New York were tiny as closets. There would barely be enough space for them, let alone all their baggage.

Lee pulled into a gas station and got out to fill the tank. He kissed her tenderly through the open window. The smell of gasoline filled her head. He two-stepped around the Aerostar, squeegeeing the windshield. She watched him, dancing in his jean cutoffs and black T-shirt, smiling at her from window to window. Recently reconciled after his one-year jaunt through South America, they were shuttling up the East Coast. The only other time she had traveled so far from the state line had been during middle school, when she had ridden a plane alone to Las

Vegas to visit her estranged mother, a pianist who traveled with Cirque du Soleil. She sat alone on the airplane, zigzagging her finger on the window over every swimming pool. She could fit entire Houston suburbs in her hand.

In the Aerostar, Sandoval fell asleep and dreamt she could speak to the orca through the geometry of bubbles that bobbed around them. Lola felt depressed because she finally understood her home was a prison. Sandoval explained that not even the ocean was big or isolated enough to keep Lola safe. She spelled out the details of the modern world, of inventions worse than Frankenstein's monster, of war tanks that turned into ships on the sea and how Sandoval's own father had been dying from cancer for years before the doctors even knew. He had to be kept alive in the last months of his life by a breathing machine. She explained further how even after he had died, she had woken in the middle of the night with the terrorizing thought that he'd become unplugged and grabbed at his throat, unable to call her. She stepped out from her room and listened for his respirator wheezing across the corridor only to realize that she had been dreaming.

Lola nodded her large head, and Sandoval took this as a comforting sign. The orca seemed resigned to the fact that she was a trapped creature. Acceptance led to forgetting, and soon Lola swam laps around the pool again.

Sandoval woke in the morning, hugging her father's map in her arms. They were somewhere in North Carolina. She looked outside and identified the Blue Ridge Mountains from the map. She was disappointed that the peaks were not the exact, dazzling, blue color as on the page.

The next evening, across the Triboro Bridge to the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, Lola continued to swim in Sandoval's head as a local station broadcasted from the Mozart Festival in the composer's historic hometown, Salzburg, Austria. Lee slept beside her, his hand on her knee. She tapped her fingers softly against the steering wheel to the persistent motoring pulse of bassoons and horns. Soaring above the rest, an oboe answered the cry of a clarinet, and Sandoval pictured the giant orca swimming above her in a boundless sea.

She parked the Aerostar in front of a large, white building on Bushwick Avenue that stood out against the smaller, dilapidated brownstones surrounding it. Their new home was on the second floor. The landlord, a balding Hasidic man with white curls that spiraled down from his ears, waited for them behind a black, cast-iron gate. He wore a full, black suit with a white shirt, though it was the middle of July. Old men sat on plastic folding chairs in front of the brownstone next door, passing sections of a Spanish newspaper and fanning themselves. The men looked up with some amusement as Sandoval and Lee unloaded the van. "That all you brought?" one of them joked, pointing to her meager suitcase and his three orange milk crates of vinyl records, comic books and John F. Kennedy, Jr. memorabilia. Guitar on his back, Lee lifted his amp and put his other arm around Sandoval. "All I need, man," he said, smiling.

Later that night, Sandoval climbed to the building's roof deck where the wood smelled minty and ivy draped down from a latticed fence. She lay on the hot surface and turned her head to the Manhattan cityscape. It didn't feel real to her yet. Lee appeared with his laptop and a grocery bag of beer and sandwiches. He handed her a bottle. Even under the big city, East Coast sky, he still looked like the San Antonio boy who'd sat down next to her in Life Drawing class

freshman year, his piercings and arm sleeve tattoos as permanent as his clear, green eyes. She wondered if she looked the same, too.

“What exactly is an aquarist?” he asked.

Sandoval drank her beer in long, thirsty gulps. “A person who works with aquariums,” she replied. “Maybe I’ll look for something at Coney Island.”

“What about Craigslist?” Lee said and opened his laptop. “Aquarist Goddess available for all your home-aquarium needs,” he said, while typing. “Will give your fish loving care and tenderness. Do not fret about your fish while you’re stuck at the office. Whether in a bowl, pond or pool, big or small, your fish will be in good hands with the Aquarist Goddess —”

Sandoval laughed and kissed him. “Aquarist Goddess! Lee, you’re a genius!” She kicked up her legs like she was swimming, remembering all those long, sun-drenched summers perfecting her butterfly stroke. Her father had worried about her spending so much time in the water, and she could still picture him on the patio, waving his arms and trying to get her to come out.

Lee posted his own ad for a metal band that needed a bassist. He mentioned the band he’d left behind, Possum Blood. “Possum, possum, o-possum,” he said, without looking up from the screen. “Rhymes with blossom. Rhymes with colossus.”

“Colossus is not a word,” she said, taking the laptop.

“It is in Latin.”

He could’ve been right. Sandoval flunked Latin in high school.

She blew smoke at the computer screen. When she searched for the position of aquarist on the job boards, the Internet kindly informed her, *Your job does not exist in the tri-state area.*

“What if we have to sell the Aerostar?” she asked.

“We can’t sell our baby.”

“It was my *dad*’s baby,” she corrected. “It’s not like I want to, but we can’t just blow through our shitty savings while we find our perfect jobs.” She inhaled deeply from her cigarette.

Lee groaned. “I might need the van. In my post, I said ‘bassist with a van.’”

A Morrissey-inspired pop band called Burn Down the Disco needed a van. They’d settle for a bassist, too, if it got them the Aerostar. Just keep the strumming mellow, the lead singer had said. Lee came home and recounted their conversation while slashing the band’s sky-blue T-shirt with kitchen scissors. He tried the T-shirt on. “Tell me it looks less lame now,” he said.

“You made a hole in *Disco* big enough to show your whole left tit.”

“Men don’t have tits, Sandy. They have chests with nipples.”

She lit a cigarette. “You can’t stand Morrissey or any color that’s not black. What are you doing?”

“It’s temporary,” he said, frowning. “Hey, Sandy. You know I’m saying this because I love you, but wanna ease up on those cigarettes?”

Easy for him to judge, Sandoval thought. Three weeks in New York and he already had a bartending job and now a band. She had an overflowing ashtray.

Her cell phone rang, a rare occurrence, and it flew out of her hands when she grabbed for it. She picked it up from the floor, hoping that it was Coney Island calling about her application.

A man with a faint French accent spoke on the other end. “Is this the Aquarist Goddess?” he asked.

“Aquarist what?”

“Your ad says whether big or small, size doesn’t matter.”

Sandoval punched Lee in the arm as he walked out of the kitchen. She held the phone against her chest and said, “Remind me to kill you later for posting my number online.”

Lee shrugged. “I did it for our future, babe.”

She pressed the phone against her ear. The man was still talking. “Money is not a problem,” he said. “I will pay whatever you ask. I just need you to start right away.”

French-speaking fish fetish pervert, what are the odds? She was about to hang up when she heard him say *shark*.

“Excuse me?”

“Black tip reef shark. He now swims in a twelve-foot tank in my uncle’s townhouse on Gramercy Park West. I’ve inherited both from my uncle.”

Sandoval switched the phone to her other ear.

“ — Pardon? Mademoiselle, are you there? Will you help?”

Sandoval bit her lip. It was most likely a joke or a trap. But if the universe wanted to throw a shark at her, then she would take it. She took down the address and agreed to meet the man within the hour.

His name was Percy, and he was a thirty-six-year-old engineer who designed trains and lived in Montreal. He disliked New York, aquariums and fish of any kind. Sandoval sat across from him in his uncle’s townhouse, sipped her tea and admired the sliced oranges that he had arranged on a

blue dish. The rinds looked like shrimp tails dancing in a circle. The shark's tank took up half of the living room, leaving just enough space for two leather armchairs and a round coffee table. The adolescent shark was two feet long. His fins and tail looked like they had been dipped in black paint, and his mouth clenched with teenage angst.

"My uncle was an eccentric," Percy said. "At the hospice, he confided to me that he believed the shark to be the spirit of his father, my grandfather, who had been a Nova Scotian fisherman. Before my uncle died, I promised to love the shark as if it were grandfather."

Sandoval nodded and smiled politely. She waited for the moment when the ruse would be revealed. Maybe a reality show host would jump out from behind the velvet curtain, or maybe it would be Lee. She couldn't decide whether she would pretend to be pleasantly surprised or angry.

"Does he have a name?" she asked. "Or do you just call him *grandfather*?"

"I do not call him anything," Percy replied. His dark, mournful eyes lingered on her face.

"He looks like a baby," she said. "I've never seen a shark so small. He doesn't look very happy in there."

"I want to find a new home for him as soon as possible. But in the meantime, I would like you to be here as much as you can manage." He took out his checkbook and clicked his pen.

"How much do you charge weekly? I will pay you for a full month up front."

She named a ridiculous amount and was shocked to see him write the sum without another word. He was being serious. She beamed up at the tank like it was the Seaquarium all over again. She wondered what the best job title would be for her resume: Shark Caretaker. Shark Confidante. Shark Whisperer.

“Lose the shark,” she said, taking the check, “and there goes the legacy of your grandfather.”

Percy nodded. He seemed so grateful.

Faint music played in the background. An electric cello lulled across like an anchor dragging on the seabed. Percy was not someone she would describe as handsome, but he was endearing in other ways. He smelled like rosemary and oranges, and he had rich, red tones in his wavy hair. He had slender fingers that made slow, graceful shadows on the wall.

“You are not afraid?” he asked.

She looked at the young shark and shook her head. “The Aquarist Goddess is a friend to all lost souls of the sea,” she replied.

Percy’s uncle had used a private aquarium service to maintain the tank, and a specialist from the service came every day to read the numbers like he was from Con-Edison. She wondered how many sharks were on the company’s daily roster.

For the first month of her new job, she was relieved not to worry about her share of the rent, but the shark made her nervous. She had the fish vet on speed dial.

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong,” the vet said when she called him for the fifth time in one week. “You’ve got a reef shark living in a Gramercy row house. How would you feel if someone switched out your ocean for a cubbyhole?”

She hung up the phone and watched the shark. He was a silver bullet in the water, hunting shadows.

For an hour or so during the afternoons, she walked to the park across the street and smoked two cigarettes before coming back inside to email Percy her daily update. She wrote things like, *Shark is doing fine, under the circumstances of being a shark without his ocean.* Percy kept his responses short. *Thank you, mademoiselle.*

Sandoval imagined him in a dark raspberry, Italian suit sitting in his office in downtown Montreal, behind a large desk covered with neatly rolled blueprints. He took off his jacket and carefully folded the cuffs of his white work shirt up to his forearms when he took important calls from clients. She and the shark were one of the several dozen items on a list that his secretary typed into his computer's diary.

She stopped calling the vet so much and left the record player on. Percy's uncle had been a fan of Liszt, and she listened to the composer's whole repertoire. She couldn't tell if the shark liked it, but she swayed in front of him, pretending to play an invisible violin. Dancing like that made her feel that everything was better. Her favorite was "Liebestraum," and she played the piece again and again, lifting the needle and letting what she imagined as the ghost of the record catch its breath. She started spending more time at the townhouse and told Lee that she had to be at the shark's side all day. She found that she liked the long, uninterrupted hours to daydream about diving with Lola in a vast, purple sea. She really did start to feel like a water goddess hypnotized by the shark's captive swim. Her thoughts eventually turned to her father.

The subdued, solitary feeling of the uncle's home resembled her father's house toward the end: cold and dark with the stale air of illness. Her father had been connected to tubes and wires from his bed. She used to paint him on large canvases that had taken days to fill. She had made the mistake of bringing a painting into class, and her professor had praised her use of light to convey the realism of death and held it up for the rest of the class to see. He didn't know it

was her father. No one in class knew, except Lee. Her professor wanted to see more paintings, and she told him there were several, that she couldn't stop painting them.

His face lit up. "Don't be afraid of it," he said.

She brought in more paintings, and to her horror, she found them displayed in the gallery of the Fine Arts building. Canvas after canvas, her father crept toward death in the fluorescent-lit corridor.

She stopped going to class and received an incomplete for the semester. She stayed at home, sat beside her father and begged for forgiveness. He was too sedated to respond. The hospice nurse was there, but Sandoval wanted to do everything for him.

The entire second floor of the Gramercy townhouse was covered in Persian carpets. Paintings of ships and whales adorned the walls, with maps of Canadian canals and islands. Sandoval came upon one photograph of a dashing man standing on the deck of a white yacht. She knew it had to be Percy's grandfather. He was turned to the side, facing the sea that splashed in. He wore a linen shirt and teal-colored khakis. He smiled confidently, hands on hips, sprinkles of water on his muscular forearms, looking like a man who had sailed in the waters of Nova Scotia like a priest worshipping the sea.

She couldn't stop thinking of him. Hours later, while on line at the supermarket with a basket full of canned mackerel, she imagined the patriarch stalking down the coffee and tea aisle, a white sturgeon under his arm. She had to swing her head around to make sure it wasn't real, that she wasn't about to be lifted off her feet and carried off in his other arm. She could smell the sea breezing across her face.

Back at the townhouse, she cracked open the cans of fish, climbed a stool and opened the tank. She set the pale flesh on the end of a tong and lowered it inside the water. The shark

accelerated, circling anxiously before he snatched his food and swam away. She tried to feed him more, but he knocked his nose against the glass. What is it? she mouthed. He peered at her, bullet eyes pleading. He wanted out, she could tell. He wanted real fish. He wanted a real hunt.

Two months later, in the middle of the night, Sandoval woke to strong gales blowing through an open window. She lifted the screen and stuck her head outside. It felt like winter, even though October had just begun. The wind shook the sidewalk trees and power lines. She watched and listened for a few minutes. Without warning, the power went out, and she turned around to the dead screen of the alarm clock.

She heard Lee's keys in the front door, followed by multiple pairs of feet moving through the living room. He usually came home with the other bartenders for some after-hours drinking. She hurried into bed and pretended to be asleep. He would be drunk, and she didn't want to deal with it.

Lee tiptoed in and kissed her on the forehead. "Sandy, you sleeping," he whispered, whisky on his breath. "The power's out."

He was growing a beard and nuzzled her cheek with it. His wallet chain felt cold on her arm. She didn't open her eyes. He slipped back out into the hallway, and she imagined him settling on his favorite spot on the couch with his friends, shots poured and candles lit on the coffee table, guitars unplugged and fingers padding over the strings like mice running across the floor. The power came back on, and she reset her alarm.

On the way to work in the morning, Sandoval sat on the subway with heavy bags under her eyes. As more passengers crammed into the train car, which still had its air-conditioner set to *summer* mode, she felt like they were fish packed into a freezer.

Later, when she walked through the foyer of the townhouse, she saw the shark collapsed at the bottom of the tank, head pushed into the corner. His oval eyes looked empty. No response. No light within. The tank's heater had failed during the night. The shark made no movement other than the slow wave of his tailfin.

"My guess is that he's got hypothermia," said the fish vet over the phone. "If it's not that, you've got to understand that sometimes these reef sharks die without warning while in closed captivity. They just can't handle it."

She wept over the keyboard as she emailed Percy. The specialist from the tank service stayed for hours raising the tank's temperature gradually by adjusting the pH. He grabbed the shark with a net, in order to push him to swim. But the shark sank to the bottom after a couple of forced laps. Sandoval paced in the room and made the man anxious, and he ordered her to leave. She went to the park, where people stared at her.

One little girl stood from the slide and came up to her. "Boo boo?" she asked. She pointed to her mother on the bench. "Boo boo. Kiss," she demanded of her mother.

Sandoval looked at the mother. The woman was dressed in a black trench coat and designer jeans. Cell phone pressed to her ear, she looked at Sandoval impatiently. Sandoval hurried away and walked to a path that circled around some dead rosebushes. She cried into her sleeves and considered calling her own mother. It was a moment of unreasonable desperation

because she never called her mother, not even when her father had been sick and dying, or even after he had died and been buried and she'd been left with the hospital bills. She never called her mother because her mother never picked up the phone, not after Cirque du Soleil started touring Europe when Sandoval was in the ninth grade.

She sat on the grass and smoked two cigarettes. She considered calling Lee, but he was working that night and surely asleep until dinnertime. She called Information and asked for the number for the Seaquarium and waited on hold, until someone in Miami finally talked to her. She had a shark that needed a home. Stat. She pled for the shark's life and left Percy's information as the contact. She lit another cigarette and cried until the filter burned her fingers. She went back to the townhouse.

"Don't worry," the tank specialist told her. He was packing up his things. "He should be back to normal in a couple of days. But we just have to go about it slow, not put him under any more shock."

But what's normal for a shark in captivity? That night she couldn't sleep, terrified to find the shark dead in the morning, his shadow cutting across the lights of the aquarium tank. When she walked into the townhouse the next day, she noticed a small suitcase in the foyer. In the living room, Percy stood in front of the shark, looking distraught, with listless eyes, disheveled hair and wrinkled clothes.

"Good morning," she whispered, surprised.

"Good morning, mademoiselle," he said. "I talked to the specialist earlier. The shark has started to eat a little more. The tank service managed to raise the temperature to seventy-five. He swims but lethargic."

"He's going to be fine?"

“I believe so.” Percy gestured miserably to the shark. “I did not expect to feel this way. Although the practical, intellectual side of my brain knows that the shark is not my grandfather, my heart feels differently about the matter. I know it sounds mad. I lost my parents when I was young, and my grandfather was both mother and father to me. I have been an orphan since his death, more so than I was when my parents died.”

“I understand,” Sandoval said. “I lost my father two years ago.”

Percy turned to her. “I am deeply sorry, mademoiselle,” he said. “There is some good news, however. The Seaquarium in Miami called. They informed me that you contacted them about the shark’s dire situation. They have agreed to take him.”

“That’s excellent news!” she exclaimed and grabbed his hands. She couldn’t remember the last time she felt so relieved.

Back in Brooklyn, the living room was lit with candles, and Sandoval wondered if she had forgotten another anniversary. Lee appeared from the bedroom, beard shaven and clearly nervous. He pulled out two plane tickets to Sweden. The band was invited to a Morrissey festival in Copenhagen. The departure date was in a week. “Come with me,” he said.

“I can’t leave the shark,” she explained. “The Seaquarium in Miami agreed to adopt him. I have to go with Percy.”

Lee’s face fell. “I knew you weren’t going to say yes,” he said. “I thought I’d at least try.” He started blowing out candles. The smoke of burning wax filled the space between them, and she couldn’t stand the smell, the darkness or the silence. She opened the window to smoke a

cigarette on the fire escape. He stood behind her and drummed a finger on the glass. He spoke slowly, and she knew it was a practiced speech. “You promised when we moved to New York that we’d start a new life,” he said. “Shed old skin. Be our better selves. But you’re doing it again. Living like everything’s dying.”

She remembered the way Lee had come over every day after her father had died. He had made sure she had eaten and slept, and when she hadn’t been able to talk, he’d filled in the silence with sounds from the kitchen, the opening and closing of the fridge, the slices of a knife on a cutting board, the murky music of dishes under soapy water. He opened the windows and let the warm, night breeze in and out. That’s when he planted the idea of New York in her head. Fresh start. New coast. That kind of thing. But it took her awhile. She couldn’t leave her home. Lee settled for an adventure alone, while she worked behind the perfume counter at Sears during the day and cleaned office buildings overnight. When he showed up again, singing Peruvian love songs about Lake Sandoval in the Madre de Dios of the Amazon Basin, she grabbed him like he was a life jacket.

But now the chasm between them felt even greater than the Gulf of Mexico. Sandoval stayed quiet, her eyes on the lights outside. Lee stopped tapping. He didn’t say anything else, and she smoked her cigarette and stared at the apartments across the street. She watched the occasional stranger appearing from a hallway, sitting in front of the television in the living room or making a sandwich on the kitchen counter. She followed shadows as lights dimmed and people settled in bedrooms, pulling blankets over their bodies, their eyes closing for the night. She watched for so long that she didn’t realize she was shivering, her cigarette pack empty. She looked bewildered at their dark, empty apartment. Her plane ticket was on the coffee table, and Lee was gone.

The following week, Sandoval flew with Percy to Miami. The shark and tank were strapped below in the cargo area, and Sandoval sat next to Percy in soft, leather, first-class seats. He perused her old Seaquarium brochures. She had a tall glass of champagne in her hand, and the bubbles raced to her head. She wondered if the shark could feel their ascension. She looked out the small, circular window and daydreamed the sky into sea, with fluorescent corals breathing from clouds, schools of fish gliding from deep white caverns, suddenly bursting in orange and blue flames. Fin for wing, water for air. She imagined rainstorms as dark as the deep ocean, with the thundering roll of whales making their presence known. A depthless sea, falling, but not falling, swimming eternally.

“What will the Aquarist Goddess do now?” Percy asked. “Do you have other clients?”

“No,” she replied. She thought of Lee but couldn’t feel him through the imagined haze of Swedish static. She took another sip of her champagne. “Maybe I’ll pick a place on the map and take off with the Aerostar.”

“Aerostar?”

“My dad’s Ford minivan.”

“Well, you are young,” Percy said. “Many fish to save.”

She realized her glass was empty, and she wanted more. But she wasn’t going to ask him. She noticed how he leaned toward her, his eyes following her fidgeting hands. She wanted a cigarette. She didn’t know if it was the champagne, the altitude or the significance of the trip, but she could see a strong resemblance between Percy and his grandfather, the aquiline nose, the

dark, sea-faring eyes. He touched her shoulder. Maybe he thought she was afraid of flying and was trying to reassure her.

At the Seaquarium, the shark had to adjust to the aeration system before being placed in his new home in the Indo-Pacific section. Sandoval and Percy watched him swim in a large temporary pool, several times larger than his home in New York. She had never seen him swim so fast, and she thought of a falling star. Percy wiped his eyes. Moved by his tears, she kissed him, surprising both him and herself. Embarrassed, she knelt down to the pool bottom and searched for the shark. It was foolish to say goodbye. He knew her no more than the shadows in the water, but she pressed her palm on the plexiglass and waited to meet his dark, bullet eyes one last time.

On their way out, Sandoval and Percy passed the large orca who had started it all, but Lola was no longer performing. She looked nothing like the glowing, symphonic creature of Sandoval's imagination. She lay slunk to one side of the pool like an aged lounge musician on a cruise ship, and Sandoval realized that for months she had been dreaming of a dying thing. She panicked and looked at Percy. Conjuring Lee's smile across the older man's face, she drew closer and kissed him again.

The following summer in the Gramercy townhouse, while Sandoval cleared away some boxes to make room for the nursery, she found her father's roadmap. She had donated the Aerostar months ago to Citymeals-on-Wheels, and sometimes she saw her dad's minivan driving through the neighborhood, painted white like an angel reborn. She opened the map and unfolded his

highlighted itineraries. The roads felt as familiar as stepping into her childhood pool, her father's inky, blue lines barely visible like the veins under her skin.

Percy was settling into his new office in Midtown and wouldn't be home for hours, and Sandoval felt lonely. Yes, the thought that the shark was alive and full-grown comforted her, the Seaquarium still sending monthly email updates about his progress, but the shark's space in the living room remained empty. Sandoval had put an easel there, but the muscle memory of the brush in her fingers had paralyzed her hand with unbearable pain. Remembering her father's wheezing breath, his ashen skin, she had set the brush down and shoved the easel in the corner.

She held the map to the light and followed her route from Texas. She wondered if she would ever see Lee again. There hadn't been any contact between them since he left for Europe, and his band was under a major label now and playing at the Glastonbury Festival in England. She recognized his reedy baritone in the chorus of their Morrissey-inspired songs, which she still chuckled about, songs with titles like "Aerostar Blues" and "Sandy, Sandy, Down We Go Together." She stored countless email drafts to him that she never sent.

Folding her father's map, she returned it to the box, and the box to the closet. She stepped outside and walked to the park. In place of cigarettes, she chewed peppermint sticks. She felt the baby growing inside of her, shaping what only seemed like a formless future. Hands on stomach, Sandoval marched on the pebble path and remembered when Lee stood in front of her at the Seaquarium, taking her picture and capturing her soul. Ever since the release of the band's new single, their most ambitious piece yet, a sprawling, seven-minute, ten-verse ballad called "The Aquarist Goddess of Magnolia City," Sandoval realized that without Lee, she would have never seen across any leap in her life. The song sampled the same Mozart serenade that had accompanied their arrival to New York. She remembered the hopeful rhythm of oboes, clarinets,

bassoons and horns as she had driven across the East River. Lee had kept his hand over her knee. She had thought he was asleep, but he was awake with her the whole time.

Long Haul

Kate and Amos have been dating for two months, seeing each other a couple of times a week. Mostly he comes over with a six-pack and pizza, and they watch television. Or they share a bottle of wine and sit outside smoking cigarettes and talk about God and the kindness of people while they gaze at insects circling the streetlamp. He puts a hand on her leg. He kisses her softly. They walk inside her apartment and take off their clothes in the dim, amber light of her bedroom. He sits on her bed and smooths his hands over her legs and waist, kisses her until she closes her eyes and curls over him, and they fall to her pillows. They make love before turning off the light. Then, before they sleep, they kiss one last time. He says, good night, babe. She says, good night.

But when Kate sleeps, she dreams that her ex-boyfriend Win sits on her bed. His blue T-shirt shines electric in the moonlight. Win looks sad. She touches his warm cheeks, and static stings her hands and arms. He has his mother's light eyes and his father's dark skin. It's been too

long to dream of him still, but here he is, drumming on her lap and singing their song. He wasted no time after she broke things off. Everything had changed after he froze on stage at his band's biggest show in front of agents and local press and he stopped writing music or even being himself. He must have hitchhiked and hustled all the way back to Alaska, since he had three dollars to his name and that in small change slumped at the bottom of his coat pockets. She knows because he emptied his pockets on her floor. His eyes flooded with cheap rum, he didn't waste any time. He laced up his boots, stuffed his wrinkled clothes into a duffel bag and did just as she said. But a part of him stayed to haunt her dreams. In her sleep, she wraps her legs around his waist and locks her fingers behind his neck.

One night, the dream changes. Win stands and climbs out the fire escape to her roof. He's alone in New York, and he wants to go home. He thought their love was home, but he was wrong. He stands on the edge and takes off his clothes, which fly in the wind. His shoulders, chest, thighs and knees are covered in the black and red tattoos of his great-grandfather, who was a warrior chief of a disappearing tribe in the Alaska Panhandle. He's covered his body with his family crest of the Raven, to preserve something of himself that he never had. He wants to fly, but he can't move off the ledge.

In the morning, Amos holds her hand. Her eyes adjust to his pale face, his dark eyes, the opposite of Win's. Amos has a tattoo of a cigar-smoking bunny on his neck and the numbers 4932 tattooed above his knuckles. He bites his nails when he's nervous. She squeezes his hand, and he smiles. Resting her head on his chest, she shadow puppets a raven on the wall, connecting her thumbs and spreading the rest of her fingers.

On Sundays, Kate strolls with Amos in the park. They buy frozen mojitos in plastic cups, and the drink makes her head spin. One step after the other, she follows the curving path that takes them from the dog run to the softball fields. Routines like this form naturally, even when terms are tenuous. Amos doesn't talk about his ex-wife, and she doesn't talk about Win. They circle the softball fields and watch the games. Every so often, there's the crack of a bat and the ball flies overhead. A young girl kicks up dirt, and Kate marvels at the ease of her sprint.

Kate turns to Amos. "Tell me a secret," she says.

He slurps the last of his mojito and throws the cup away. "I don't have any secrets," he replies.

"Of course, you do," she says. She hasn't caught him in a lie yet. Not even about his ex. She knew about her from the start. But Kate wants to know what he's like when she's not around. She wants to know his fears. People change when they're *really afraid*. People also change when they love. Love and fear go hand in hand like life and death. She learned that from Win.

"Maybe you do," Amos says. "But there aren't really things that I wouldn't tell people."

She grabs his shirt. "Think of one. Please."

"Last time you asked me to tell you a secret, remember? I didn't have any then either, and you told me yours."

She frowns.

"You've got so many secrets you can't keep track of them," he says, amused. He sits down on a bench and rests his arm over where her shoulders will fit.

“What secret did I tell you?” she asks. She sits beside him. “Did it have to do with Alaska? Or my dream about ravens?”

He raises his eyebrow. “Ravens?”

Kate hasn't dreamt about Win for weeks, and she worries that he's gone. She thinks about the missing part of him that he never could forget. Everything that can be known or said about it is in the story he always told her, which was the same story his father told him as a child, passed down from his grandfather and his great-grandfather and so on, moving backward in time like that. It's about the beginning of the world when the creator's name was Raven. He wanted some light, but an old Chief hoarded it for himself. Raven changed into a cedar leaf and fluttered into a cup, just as the Chief's daughter was taking her sip. She swallowed him and immediately, so the story goes, she became pregnant and gave birth to Raven, except he was human now. The Chief loved his grandchild and gave him whatever he wanted. Raven asked for the Stars, Moon and Sun, and when he had them in hand, he threw them across the sky. The world filled with light, and Raven turned back into his true form and escaped into the darkness.

Kate remembers how Win strummed his unplugged Fender with his boots propped up on her kitchen table. It sounded like the opposite of music, like he was plucking heavy chains. Once, when she asked him to stop, he said, “My people's language is on the endangered list like Pacific blue whales. There's only a few dozen native speakers, and the youngest ones are in their seventies.”

“You can learn.”

“To speak to who? My ancestors?”

“I can learn, too.”

“My great-grandfather used to rule over thousands, but after the Europeans came, our tribe was reduced to three villages. My father was the son of a poor fisherman, who was the son of a great warrior chief.”

“Your dad is a trial attorney in Juneau,” she reminded him. She grabbed his calloused fingers before they reached the bottle on the table. “And your mother is a judge. Of Dutch descent!”

“I don’t expect you to understand,” he said. He pulled his hand away and poured another shot.

She learned that Win had always drunk like that. He stopped hiding it after giving up his music career.

“My great-grandfather came to me in a dream and told me he never named me,” he said and wiped his mouth.

Win was obsessed with disappearing, and Kate didn’t understand why at the time. She thought he was an alcoholic like her uncle, and she didn’t want to end up like her aunt, with three young kids, a mortgage and a husband in and out of rehab. The last time she visited her aunt, there were piles of clothes in the living room that needed to be washed, dried or folded. Her aunt was sobbing and folding bed sheets by herself.

But Kate had the wrong diagnosis for Win. Alcoholism was just a symptom. She knows because after he left, she started to act like him. She stopped going out and seeing her friends. She stopped going to work and let her phone die under the couch. She had kicked him out, but she didn’t know what to do without him. Months passed by like that, until one day she found the

right word for their condition, and she wrote it on a postcard. Metathesiophobia: the fear of change. She sent the card to Win's last known address, a gas station on Prince of Wales Island, but she never heard from him.

Kate reminds herself every day that she's getting better. She found a job as a coat-check girl at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and made new friends there. Amos helps, too. On one of their dates, he takes her bowling. She picks out a glittering, purple ball and imagines sliding it down the lane, but she can't move. She stares at the smooth panels of wood and the lights that hover over the pins. Amos comes up behind her, hand on her elbow, and guides her arm back. The ball rolls from her fingers and creeps down the lane. Under the pink and teal lights of the bowling alley, he tells her that she has beautiful poise, and she realizes that fear can be beautiful. She tries to transport that same knowledge to Win. Fear doesn't have to stop you, she says. But she imagines him in his winter furs, covered in snow. He can't hear her.

Kate and Amos have a string of things they do together regularly, even if they like to keep things unsaid. On Wednesdays, they make their own veggie-adorned pizza and watch *Law and Order*. On Fridays and/or Saturdays, they see their friends perform in bands around the city. On Sundays, they get frozen mojitos from the Mexican place near the park and promenade the tree-lined paths. And every other Tuesday, they do laundry at Igor's, a bar with coin machines in the back room. The ceiling curves like a brick cave. She likes to stare at the street sign, dive bar paraphernalia and the photographs of famous dead people. Jim Henson. Marilyn Monroe. Elvis Presley. Even William Shakespeare hangs out up there.

One Tuesday afternoon, she wears a blue button-down dress with red flowers, one of the few clean items found in her closet. She hasn't worn it in years, not since her last anniversary date with Win. She has on purple track shorts underneath. Amos wears swimming trunks and his favorite concert T-shirt, a ripped, black relic from the 90s, Junkyard's *Aces High* American tour. They order burgers and fries and queue up the jukebox with Hank Williams. They play chess while they wait. Amos makes the first move with his King's pawn. She may have her secrets, but he has his strategies. He bites his nails when she takes too long. She stares at the board and finally jumps her knight over the front line. Amos shakes his head. "Don't you have a plan?" he asks.

He forfeits when she starts to cry, and they dance instead, under the tawny lights of the bar. She stares down at his work boots.

"Are you looking at my steps?" he asks.

She nods. He holds her tighter and in the crook of his arm she can feel Hank Williams' twang.

"What are your fears?" she asks Amos.

"Nothing."

She glares at him. "You don't have any secrets, and you're not scared of anything. You expect me to believe that?"

"There's not a lot that I'm not willing to face. I'm sorry."

"You're lying."

"I can tell you the things I used to be afraid of, in chronological order." He counts off on his tattooed fingers. "The Bogeyman. Spiders. Airplanes. Oakland. My mother dying. Marriage.

Divorce. But now I feel like spending your whole life avoiding shit you can't really avoid is a waste of time."

"Easy for you."

"It's a choice," Amos says. He dips her suavely.

Her head draws near to the black-and-red parquet floor, and she imagines Win following them in the shadows, playing tricks on her heart. Sometimes she thinks that all her dates with Amos are practice for when she finds Win again. But it's wishful thinking. Win has vanished from her, piece by piece.

Amos brings her back up. "Don't look so sad, babe," he says. "We're just cleaning clothes here." He steps to the right then left.

She smiles and keeps her eyes focused on his.

They dance until the dryer stops. She takes out her queen bed sheet, cerulean warmth in a twill weave. He holds one side, and she keeps the other, and they even out the wrinkles, stretching the sateen across from brick wall to brick wall. They fold it in half, and he walks to her, and their fingers grip for a moment. He tucks his half with hers, and they do it all over again until they've made a smooth, folded square between them.

The Saint of the Slots

It's been a long time since Horatio's believed in anything, but his Nana never lies. She's been dead for over fifty years, but she still has a way of getting his attention. Tonight, without a doubt, he feels her presence in the darkness of his bedroom. He can smell old gauze and Oil of Olay cream, and his forehead feels flushed. *Big Winner. Jackpot*, he hears her thick, Hungarian voice say. *The casino never close for dreamer like you. Get up. Claim your prize.* Horatio stands from the bed and listens to the rain hitting his window. Alarm clock on his nightstand reads 11:52. Last bus is 12:15, he thinks. I have time. He grabs his cane and steps outside in his raincoat and yellow galoshes.

Horatio lives alone, three blocks away from the bus stop, right outside Nathan's Hot Dogs. He gets his usual double-decker chili cheese dog and waits for the bus. He wipes chili on his pajama pants. A play area inside Nathan's is lit up like an outer space rest stop. Horatio

watches a small boy inside, falling asleep beside his sister in a merry-go-round of Porsches and Corvettes. They should be home, Horatio thinks half-heartedly. But what does he know? His own children haven't spoken to him in years. His son lives somewhere in New Rochelle, and his daughter moved to the city long ago to be a Rockette.

Night ride in an aqua blue Porsche. Hot dogs and cheese fries for dinner. The boy's probably loving it. Horatio adjusts the grip over his cane, and his wrist trembles. When he was a young man, he could sprint to the racetrack. Now he waits for the bus to go a mile down the street. He feels like a fool in this rain, but Nana's never wrong. He can remember three different times when she's spoken to him. Right before his mom died, Nana told him to claim his childhood house quick before his sister got on the plane in Cleveland, and the night of his wedding when Nana got him to hide his savings bonds from his wife. And before he was shipped off to Vietnam when she told him to take a Greyhound to Canada. That was the only time he didn't listen to her, and he's still making up for it.

Across from the overpass of the highway, billboards flash over the Yonkers Avenue casino. Usually, he's leaving it at this time, but he couldn't get out of bed this morning. Diabetes makes his legs swell to the point where his mind goes blank, and he lay for hours staring at the squirrels on tree branches and the birds that touch and go on the power lines.

But tonight, he feels elated. He attempts a dance with the rain and spreads his hands to the empty street.

"Sweet is the night air, where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land," he recites from the only poem he knows by heart, Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach."

"Listen! You hear the grating roar

Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling —"

The golden headlights of the bus shine from a distance. Horatio waits at the edge of the curb, eager for the driver to open the doors and greet him like they're friends. He's not a pretty sight in this rain or ever, but he makes sure to smile.

"How's it goin'," says the driver as Horatio struggles up each step. The bus is empty, and he chooses a seat in the middle. The merry-go-round kids climb on, and their mom drops quarters into the slot. She settles in a seat, phone to her ear and talks rapidly in a foreign language, while the kids sit behind Horatio. The girl kicks his seat. Horatio turns around, and she sticks out her tongue, and her brother does the same.

Horatio wants to knock their heads together. Just once, not too hard. Instead, he curls his lip like he's Elvis and sings with bravado, "You ain't nothing but a hound dog, cryin all the time."

The kids widen their eyes. Their mom sets the cell phone against her chest and yells at them. She's really yelling at Horatio. Stay away from my goddamn kids, she's saying with her sharpened, dark eyes.

Horatio doesn't care. He jingles quarters and tries to get the little boy to laugh. "When they said you were high-classed, that was just a lie," he sings, tapping his rain boots. "You ain't never caught a rabbit. You ain't no friend of mine."

The boy chuckles.

The climb off the bus feels excruciating, but the bright, blinking lights of the casino promise reward. The adjacent racetrack on Yonkers Avenue has been closed since the summer, but

Horatio doesn't miss it. Horses are sons of bitches. Never found one to run right for him, with their names crazier every year like he's betting on a flavor at Baskin Robbins. He's had his low days, pounding on the plexiglass wall as Color me Blue fell right on the track or crying and ripping up his ticket as Chocolate Thunder coasted around the turns. But Nana's spoken to him. *Big Winner. Jackpot.* Never too late to turn his life around. Horatio steps through the automatic doors inside the cool, climate-controlled, red-carpeted casino. Warbling spirits rush to him, whispering beneath the manic music of the slots. *Ding ding. Come to me, come to me, come to me,* the voices spin all around him. *I'm your fortune, I'm your destiny,* they ring. *Horatio, Horatio, Horatio.*

An amateur would get distracted by such choices, but Horatio likes his one-armed bandits. His trigger hand trembles, anticipating the pull of the lever and the metallic drop of each quarter. None of that computerized fancy shit they're filling up in here. He looks around and waits for the spirits to settle down, until it's a single whisper of *Horatio* from a Super Slot in the corner, the last one in the seventh row of Super Slots, exactly ten paces away from the restrooms. He knows the one. *Horatio,* it sings. He limps to it, pushing his weight down on the cane so he can get there faster.

"Nana. It's your little Hora," he says and drops in the first quarters.

She left Budapest during World War I, but she never forgot the dead horses or the tanks buried in the snow. Those were just memories, but she acted like they were more real than her family. Nana watched Turkish soap operas all day, videotapes borrowed from the deli owner, and sat in front of the little television in her bedroom, drinking beer. As a kid, Horatio crushed the empty cans and made clunky tambourines, tying them around his waist and legs to dance like

the actors on her shows. She wiped tears and held him. “Hora, my little Hora,” she said. “You dance like an angel.”

A waitress walks by, and Horatio touches her arm, but not too friendly. He remembers last time when the manager called the cops.

“Whisky double, sweetheart.”

The waitress scowls.

He looks at her going and kisses the air. “Work of art, that one,” he says to a guy sitting nearby. The guy nods but doesn’t take his eyes off the slot screen or his hand off the lever.

Horatio doesn’t know why women get so annoyed when he’s just showing affection. If that waitress could see the handsome stallion he was thirty years ago, when the wives on his mail route used to find any excuse to invite him inside their floral-scented bedrooms. He rustles out a candy bar from his pocket. The chocolate’s melted, which is the way he needs to eat it since his teeth have started to rot. How he used to bite at the ladies. Gnaw, lick and suck. He smiles, remembering his magic touch.

The icons fall after he pulls the Super Slot lever. Cherry. Diamond. Watermelon. He drops in two more quarters. He can almost smell the sugary beet soup of Nana’s breath. Lemon. Lemon. Bell.

“*Shit*,” he shouts, hitting the machine.

He tries again. Diamond. Orange. Strawberry. The icons fall and fail him.

He looks for the waitress. “Have to do everything for myself,” he grumbles. He slides off the seat and walks to the bar.

“A man orders a drink, he should goddamn get it quick.”

The bartender looks at Horatio's half-buttoned pajama shirt and the eagle tattoo on his chest. "What's your poison?" he asks.

"I told her, now I got to tell you. Whisky double."

The bartender pours the cheapest whisky into a plastic cup. Horatio pays in quarters, sliding each one slow enough to make the bartender remember next time. The drink tastes like sweet rubbing alcohol, but Horatio's used to it. He scans the length of the slots and concentrates on Nana. The spirits create a torrent of whirling, spinning *Horatio Horatio Horatio*.

A powerful *ding* boomerangs from one of the King Tut slots in the far corner. *Horatio*, it sings. He believes in it instantly.

Someone else beats him there. Goddamn, he thinks. It's Tien, the delivery boy from the noodle shop. He got the kid fired accidentally after complaining about an order. A couple of weeks ago, Horatio stood incredulously at his front door, holding a brown bag sopping with spilled sauce. Noodles wormed out and scattered on his sidewalk.

The kid tossed his long hair and glanced back at the mess, heavy metal blaring from his headphones. "Sorry."

"I'm not paying for this goddamned shit," Horatio said, lifting up the ripped bag.

"No, Mr. Horatio," the kid begged. "If you no pay, uncle fire me. I save money for guitar. Band say I join if I buy awesome guitar." He lifted three fingers and emitted angry, guttural growls like a caged animal. "I practice death growl," he said, smiling.

Horatio was still thinking about Tien's death growl when he sat at his kitchen table. He remembered that his dinner was ruined and called the noodle place to complain. But he didn't blame the kid. Tien got fired anyway, and Horatio feels bad about it. He sees himself in the kid,

alone on his beat-up scooter, with nowhere to go but around the block. He's a luckless fuck-up, but that doesn't make him a bad kid.

He walks over to reason with him. "Hey, Tien. That's my King Tut."

Tien shrugs. "This free country," he replies.

"A man's got to stick to a code out here. Otherwise, it's all shit."

The kid ignores him, and Horatio grabs his arm, but the manager eyes him like a drill sergeant from across the room. Horatio flashes a smile and waves.

"Goddamn kid is hexing my luck," he mutters. He sits down at a nearby King Tut and stares at Tien's reflection in the screen, superimposed on the Mummy's face. He imagines burned flesh and bones underneath the gauze. Dead, lightless eyes. It makes him think of war, when the spirits of the jungle came alive, loud and frenetic, after a steaming rainfall. He dropped out of college and tried to get in with the poets in Greenwich Village, but he got drafted. One night, "Dover Beach" came back to him when he was just a pair of eyes looking out from a foxhole. He made the mistake of reciting the poem to the others.

Love, let us be true
To another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light.

He was a target after that. He didn't catch on at the time, but the other guys in his platoon lied to him about the Vietcong burying treasure in the forest. There's a path, they said. No way to know it's there unless someone points it out. They let him in on the secret, and soon he was in

the jungle following gold capella leaves strung on the branches. Evening approached fast, and he realized that he'd been abandoned. The jungle was a maze that led him in circles.

Then he saw a golden star rise to the air. It was the badge on a Vietcong helmet. The expression on the kid's face looked so green that Horatio thought he was seeing himself. He lifted his rifle, and VC did the same. But Horatio didn't shoot, and neither did VC. He remembers the kid's finger pulling away from the trigger. That's how close they were. Horatio let his arm weaken, too, and both rifles were down. When he started walking away, the kid almost smiled. But then flaps of wings ripped through the thicket, and Horatio thought it was VC's rifle. He turned, and this time, with no thought to it, he fired right into the kid's chest. Eyes locked on Horatio, VC dropped to his knees and fell face down in the grass.

Horatio's trigger hand went numb. Birds beat their wings, and the forest came alive around him until he saw helmets of leaves rising everywhere. He sprinted north and didn't stop until he saw his base. He looked back but saw no enemy soldiers chasing him, only the forest heavy under the darkening sky.

The kid was the first and last person he killed. Every other shot he took was a little off the mark, and his platoon made sure to give him shit for that.

Horatio looks up from King Tut when he hears a rare, beautiful sound like all the casino spirits are in harmony, ready to crown a new winner. Ceiling lights dim, and the bulbs of a winning slot flash like a lighthouse. The waitress and manager appear with champagne. The other players rouse from their machines and rub their tired eyes.

All the spirits fly toward Tien, who's bent in front of a Super Slot, the last one in the seventh row, ten paces away from the restrooms. The kid catches a river of quarters in his arms,

a smile so large across his face that his head looks about to split off. Super Slot goes crazy and spins more zeros than Horatio's ever seen.

Horatio limps outside to the drizzle. Although he resists, the bell of the winning machine pulls stinging tears from his eyes. Quarters are still flowing from a subterranean supply. Casino's been sitting on it this whole time. That was *his* machine. Spirits calling his name from the moment he stepped through the sliding glass doors. The resentment tightening in his chest is familiar. Nana's left him for good now, just like everyone else in his life. But then he feels something else, something different. He remembers Tien's ballooning smile, like when beer-can tambourines lit up Nana's face. He loosens his grip and remembers what Nana said. *Big Winner. Jackpot.*

"Me or him?" he asks and looks up at the starless sky. Nana only smiles.

I'm a goddamn saint of slots, he thinks. Saint Horatio, guardian of Yonkers Avenue.

The world blurs until he blinks and the tears fall. He sees the vast parking lot of the casino. The puddles glisten and connect into a shallow black sea. He crosses it slowly, easing his cane beneath the water, eyes on the blue light of the bus stop.

Moses in the Modern World

Moses sweats in the grimy noonday sun and imagines Sarah's cool, composed face, so unlike his wife's. Sarah's like one of the paintings that the firm keeps buying. The blue-toned Chagall in the North end of the thirty-fifth floor is his favorite. He doesn't know if it's a painting of a wedding or a funeral, but it's a party. A woman's face floats in the corner, either the new bride or the departed wife.

In the morning, he saw Sarah in the office pantry and stepped inside, thirsty and hungry, reaching aimlessly for water, juice, cookies and finally an apple that he washed at the sink. She refilled her tea and smiled at him. He didn't say anything to her, thinking if he remained silent and took no action, then he could watch her and dream for as long as he wanted.

He paces with the manic restlessness of Midtown and realizes that he's circled the same silvery fountain three times. He stops. Water splashes his face and hands and stains his silk tie.

Around the fountain, a legion of gray and black suits rests on lunch break, littering the ground with cellophane wrappers, soda cans with broken seals and napkins stained with ketchup and mustard. He feels trapped in the stifling humidity and heads back to his office. He passes young associates strategizing on their phones, their futures riding on the plans hatched in their cubicles. He misses when he used to be as single-minded as them.

He's barely spoken to Sarah in the year that he's known her, but he can't stop thinking of her. The first time he saw her, he held the elevator door open, and she was breathless beside him, smiling her thank you. She looked like a dancer, not a lawyer. It was her posture, her gliding entrance into his life. He didn't say anything to her, not one word, but watched her ballerina face in the mirrored wall and waited for the crashing fall, twenty-six floors down to the lobby.

After that first encounter, he searched his floor until he found her sitting alone in a conference room near the firm's library. She pored over a contract, red pen in her hand. He couldn't stay at his desk. He walked to the library constantly, carrying volumes of law books, just to glimpse her. She was extra coverage for the Goldman deal, and while everyone panicked around her, she took frequent breaks and strolled from window to window. Her curly hair twisted in a loose braid that fell around her shoulder, and she didn't seem to mind those errant strands that spiraled down.

He envies her repose. Youth does that perhaps, gifts her the luxury of serenity. She looks up at him whenever he passes by. Her face without a wrinkle. Her smile unblemished by cynicism.

Late in the night, Moses is still at work. He's waiting for a client to send him back a contract before the long July weekend. Sarah's working late, too, and passes by his office. The rules of how they engage are perplexing. He follows her in the hallway. She doesn't turn around.

She doesn't have any shoes on, and he watches her naked heels sink into the sienna-toned carpet. She goes into her conference room, with only a green lamp lit. Papers scatter across the wide table. He doesn't knock because the door is open. His reflection blurs on the windows with the buildings outside, their lights also dimmed for the night.

He notices a slim, colorful paperback among her contracts. On the front cover, an oversized green eye hovers in a swirling, red vortex.

"Lovecraft," he says. He's aware of how foreign his voice sounds to him outside of his head. Who is this nervous twit? he wonders.

She glances back. "It's just something for when I get bored."

He stands next to her, eyeing the distance between them. "Can I borrow it?" he asks.

"Sure." She stares at him in the window reflection.

He moves closer. His arm almost touches hers. He can see the top floor of the building across the way, where a security guard's flashlight moves from corner to corner. He wonders if the guard can see them, if he can see everything.

"What are you doing for Independence Day?" he asks.

"Overtime. You?"

"Beach in Delaware."

"Just you?"

"Well, me, my brother, his wife and his son, my nephew." Moses looks away uncomfortably. "He's named after me. Moses. Little Mo, we call him. He's actually the third Moses in our family. Gramps was the first. My father was supposed to be the second Moses, but he was born the year *Casablanca* came out. Grandma lost her heart over that movie, so the family lore goes, and my father came out a Bogie." He doesn't mean it as a joke, since Gramps

was a federal judge and always expressed extreme disapproval over his son's name and subsequent reckless ways, but Sarah laughs.

She leans against the window. "You know I've worked at this firm for five years, on and off, but I never saw you until this year, not until they moved me to the twenty-sixth floor. Isn't it strange? We've probably passed by each other a million times without knowing it."

He imagines the two of them circling, locked into the same routine of missed opportunity, and he wonders if it's worse than adultery. Up close, she smells like Earl Grey, lemon and honey. He leans in and opens his mouth to say something, but he feels a fluttering spasm. He thinks it's a heart attack, which his doctor warned him about ever since he became partner at the firm. It's finally happened. He clutches the book to his chest.

"What's wrong?" she asks, her hands out to him.

He can't talk and lies down on the carpet. He waits for his heart to rupture. She panics over him, and he holds her hand. She wants to call an ambulance, but he won't let her go. He feels the short fibers of the carpet and the wind of the ceiling fan whipping dust. He hears Sarah's voice and tightens his grasp of her soft hand.

Through the window, Midtown is dark and asleep, and offices outside are stacked in a row up and across like high-rise tombs. Red sensor lights blink inside and create the usual night pattern of skyscrapers. But that's not his current view. All he sees is desire. It's like a switch that turns on somewhere when billion-year-old stars take over, and the universe that has been there all along reaches closer to him.

The next day, saltwater foams onto shore and braids the sand before slinking back to the impenetrable depth. With hands on hips, Moses looks out to the Delaware Bay and stretches his arms and shoulders as if to conquer the Atlantic. But he remains onshore, toes in the hot sand, and squints at the horizon. Cringing from the chalky antacids melting on his tongue, he takes out two more and swallows them whole. If only his life were fiction, where gold throws magic around the dreaming wharves of Lovecraft's sailors who ride at anchor. He gazes at the sea and feels dizzy from the memory of Sarah's skin. He doesn't know what he'll say when he sees her again or how she even feels about last night, but the glory of his daydreams is that he never has to say anything. He imagines them in a small boat, rowing to the sunset, her legs draped over his.

Nearby, two boys crouch in the sand and argue excitedly. The boys seem to be brothers. The little one, whose hair is practically white and translucent, bellows desperate, tragic vowels. He pushes out his pudgy stomach and reaches up when the older boy stands with the desired object in hand. The older boy smirks and studies it in the sunlight, a black and silver discovery of many grooves and crevices. Moses draws closer. It looks like the skeleton of a blowfish or a meteor petered down to practically nothing.

"I waaa," the little boy cries. "I waaa."

The older boy ignores him. His hair is golden ash and sprinkled with sand. He turns to Moses and lifts the object. "What is it?" he asks.

It fits in the palm of Moses' hand and reminds him of the deep sea fish at the Natural History Museum that had primitive holes in their heads for eyes. But the material is lightweight and polished by the ocean.

"Looks like it used to be some kind of sea creature," Moses suggests. He scoffs at his own lack of eloquence. Forty-six years on Earth and that's all he can manage? Sea creature.

The little boy giggles. “Creecha!” He jumps and lifts a chubby hand. “I waaa! I waaa!”

“Actually, it looks a little like this.” Moses takes out Sarah’s book folded in his khaki pocket. The object’s resemblance to the front design is uncanny, and he wishes she could see it.

“There’s a monster in here,” he says.

The boys peer up.

“Gross. What is that?” The older boy points to the paperback cover.

“It’s the monster’s eye.”

The little boy squeals with delight, hands pinching the air. “I waaa!”

Moses saves the book and hands over the unknown object before the kid has a fit. Soon, the boys are arguing again. But a bright, pink starfish washes up on shore, and the boys ditch the relic to poke sticks at something that’s at least alive. Moses lingers alone to contemplate the ancient thing. He looks at it from all sides. It smells like fire and tastes like salt. There are scratches on it that resemble writing. It certainly can be prehistoric or from a sunken civilization, like Plato’s Atlantis, or from an island of lepers. But Moses is no geologist or historian. He doesn’t know what it is except it feels very old and strong.

The boys stab the starfish, making it squirm and glisten, and it reminds Moses of his own childhood summers. The last one his family spent here, Moses was eleven and his brother Noah was five; it was right before their parents divorced. His parents fought in their bedroom with angry whispers and once in awhile something heavy smashed against the wall. Then Moses heard his father yell, “Christ, Elizabeth! Are you trying to kill me?” His parents thus occupied, Moses ruled over the strip of sand and water outside their beach house with little adult supervision. Noah was his humble and only subject.

One early evening, Moses climbed the mountain of rocks on the shore, though his mother had forbidden it, and Noah followed several paces behind.

“Wait, Mo-Mo,” he stammered. “Wait for me.”

Moses climbed faster. He reached the peak and panned 360 degrees with his binoculars, from the ocean to the long, narrow path that led to the lighthouse. Beyond the lighthouse, there was a decrepit dock where he’d seen older kids run and dive into the bay.

“Mo-Mo,” Noah cried from below.

Ignoring him, Moses focused on the dock. His father appeared in his viewfinder. Only his father would wear a fedora on the beach with his swimming trunks. A crime against decorum, his mother said. But Moses liked the fedora. It made his father look like a wise explorer. Moses pulled the binoculars away when he saw a woman wave to his father. She stood on the edge, near the water. Moses looked through the viewfinder again, his hands sweaty and cheeks flushed. The woman was not his mother. His mother didn’t wear bikinis or have long, straight hair that reached past her waist, which his father was now squeezing. Moses breathed hard. He wanted to scream across the water and shake the uneven planks. But he stayed quiet and watched them long after the sunset disappeared.

On the way down, Moses found Noah crying between two boulders, holding a scraped knee. He inspected the injury then let his brother ride on his back. Their mother waited on the steps of their beach house, smoking a cigarette. That summer was the only time he remembers her smoking. He could tell that she wasn’t waiting for them, but still, she made a big deal about Noah’s knee and berated Moses for not taking better care of his little brother.

Later that night, while more heavy things smashed against the wall, Noah sniffled in the bunk below him and tapped on the window. “Why isn’t there a Milky Way in New York?” he asked.

“It’s there, dummy,” Moses said. “You just can’t see it because of the city lights.”

A loud crash made them both sit up.

Noah climbed up to his bed. “What are they doing?” he asked.

“Who knows,” Moses said. He made room for his brother and tucked him in.

A year later, at his father’s *second* (and not the last) wedding, while the woman with the long hair recited her vows under the altar, Moses imagined their silhouettes on the dock against the water, darkness against even greater darkness.

He still hasn’t forgiven his father for cheating and leaving them. For over thirty years, he’s used the man as the example of who to not be and taught Noah the same. But now, caught in the reverie of Sarah’s embrace, Moses realizes that he understands as little about love and lust as he did as a kid looking through binoculars.

The ocean must have swept away his mountain because Moses can’t find it. He’s walked the length of the beach several times, but the coastline has been flattened over the years, with gravel and shells overlaid on the pale sand.

The boys are still preoccupied with the starfish, and the little one cries when his brother chops off one of the limbs with a stone.

“Chill, you baby,” the older boy says. “It grows back.”

But the starfish arm doesn't heal fast enough. Moses walks away, ancient object in hand. The crying boy reminds him of his teething nephew, who wailed ruefully in the morning from the room next door, while the more subdued, muffled cries of Moses' wife persisted in bed.

From the boardwalk, Moses sees Helen sitting under an umbrella and reading, and his heart sinks. A part of him wants to confess everything, but he can't let seven years of marriage just slip away.

"What's that?" Helen asks him, looking up from her magazine. Her dark hair is covered in an oversized straw hat, and she wears tortoise-rimmed sunglasses, which she takes off to peer up at him. Her eyes are swollen and red.

Grimly, Moses lifts the ancient object. "I don't know. Washed up on shore."

"It looks like radiation. Why are you carrying it around?"

"Can't seem to let it go," he says, studying it again. "I feel the formidable history of this thing."

"It looks dangerous and quite ugly," she says.

"A deep sea relic."

"I hope you're not going to bring that home with us." She sits up and adjusts the straps of her striped bathing suit.

"I was considering it," he says. He sits down beside her and takes out Lovecraft from his pocket.

"Haven't you finished that already?" she asks.

"I'm re-reading it."

"Why? I've got the latest issue of *The Economist* for you."

“Thank you. I’ll get to that.” He opens the paperback. “I just want to go over my favorite parts. It’s very beautiful, particularly in the first chapter when he’s describing old New England.” He flips through the pages. “Listen to this: *His first memories was of the great westward sea of hazy roofs and domes and steeples and far hills which he saw one winter afternoon from that great railed embankment, and violet and mystic against a fevered, apocalyptic sunset of reds and golds and purples and curious greens.*”

Helen glares at him. She probably hasn’t listened to a word. Can he blame her for being angry? A loving husband, hell, not even a husband but any human being, would reassure her. The holiday was her plan to rekindle things between them, and like a devil, he persuaded his brother to join them for the weekend.

For a moment, as Moses gazes into her eyes, he thinks of their honeymoon when they climbed the hundred steps up Mount Athos in Greece and watched the water bead into a mirage of a pearl blue necklace on the horizon. He remembers how connected he felt to the beauty of the world, seeing it thread from her eyes to the sea. He feels a wave of sadness and longs to return with her, but to where? Not back to the beginning, that would be impossible.

“The book cover looks like your friend,” she says and points to the relic. She puts on her sunglasses and turns away.

At night, before the fireworks begin, Moses waits for his family in the yacht marina. He swoons over another section of Lovecraft under the buttery glow of a lamplight. His brother shows up, a mirror image of him, but he’s got the baby in his arms.

“What’s going on with you and Helen?” Noah asks.

“What do you mean?”

“She’s inside with Miranda. She thinks you’re having an affair. She says you haven’t done it in months.”

Moses sighs heavily. “Is nothing sacred in marriage?”

“I can’t help if I overhear things, Mo. Are you having an affair?”

Moses can’t lie to his brother.

Noah frowns. “Helen says you also dug up some weird, dead, radiated fish and set it on the mantle in your room.”

“It’s not radiation, I don’t think.”

“Who is she?”

“Someone from work.”

“Of course, it’s someone from work. You practically live at the office.”

“You sound like Helen.”

“You’re not planning to jeopardize your marriage for a work fling, are you?”

“A fling? I’m not the type who flings.” Moses grabs Noah’s shoulder. “Are you in love with Miranda? I mean, does your heart flare when she walks into the room, like you’re going to explode from your skin when you see her?”

“No. How would I get through the day?” Noah replies, alarmed. He touches Moses’ forehead. “Are you sick? It’s not like you to talk about *feelings*. You sound like father.”

Offended, Moses pushes his brother’s hand away and reaches for more antacids, but the bottle’s empty. He gnaws his lip and takes Little Mo in his arms. His nephew grabs the antacid bottle and shakes it in the air. Then he hurls it into the water and laughs when he sees it splash.

Helen and Miranda arrive, and the four of them sit in silence and wait for the fireworks. Only the baby has things to say. Little Mo points to the darkness, in anticipation. Every so often, he cries, unable to handle his anxious knowledge that something will surely arise from the night. Moses kisses his nephew on the top of his head and holds him like the way his mother must have held him when he was small. He peers over at his wife sitting beside Miranda, drinking a lime spritzer. She's not bothering to meet his eye anymore. He almost wishes they could fight, but then it never seems to be the right time for even that. The first fireworks explode, and Little Mo pushes into his embrace, frightened. Showered in light, he cries and grips Moses' T-shirt. Noah, Miranda and Helen coo at him all at once while craning their necks to the sky, but Little Mo screams, and Moses takes him away from the spectacle.

"I know," he whispers.

He walks to an unlit shore with his nephew in his arms. The baby stops crying and stares at the dark waves. Just a change in scene, and he's forgotten that he was upset. But Moses can't forget. As he wades into the water, the pain intensifies until he's the one crying and Little Mo points at his leaking eyes. He squeezes his nephew and kisses him. Then he feels something more surprising than fear or guilt. He feels his father's arms, or the memory of them. Moses was *young*, and his father carried him to a shadowy ocean. This was before his father started to wear a fedora on the beach, before the divorce or before school. It was even before Noah. Moses knew nothing about the world, only what his father told him.

"The ocean is as old as the Earth," his father said.

"How old is the Earth?"

"Definitely older than Gramps, but younger than the Sun."

Moses frowned and imagined lanky, white-haired Gramps holding court on the beach in his black robe and gray-wool socks.

His father cupped waves as they rippled past. “It’s as old as love,” he continued, “when Hydrogen burned up a fever for Helium and the two exploded and formed the universe.”

The ocean felt like a million charging horses. He clutched his father’s shoulders and kicked the water fiercely as his father swam them away from shore.

Moses stands in the water and remembers. His nephew wrestles in his arms, his soft, plump limbs wriggling like he’s unfairly trapped. He wants to touch the water. He wants down. Moses ignores his pleas. What will he find there but the darkness of desire and the gap between what he imagines and what it really is, an endless ocean ready to drown him without thought or reason? The waves surge at his knees. His nephew cries again, and Moses turns and walks back to the fireworks.

I Will Always Love You Though I Never Loved You

I

When Sean hasn't had a drink in a while, he gets this feeling that he can't breathe like when he was a kid and one of his older brothers was choking him, and he feels stuck in between them again with the world turning black, every light cracked and exploded by one of their fists. So he keeps the drinks coming, one lined up after another in what he imagines as a well-oiled assembly line of golden malt shots, poured expertly into a metal flask. He measures his world according to his thirst. Too thirsty, and he's in trouble, flailing like a fish in the desert, which has happened to him more times than he's willing to remember in his years of service in the great U.S.A. — A standing for Army, of course. Ever since boot camp at seventeen, he's learned how to stay

breathing and keep his mind on cruise control. That's the key, achieving that perfect, cool blankness where there's no pain or fear, where there's nothing and he feels as clean and precise as his faithful assembly line. Sometimes there's a kink in the machinery, and it happens that he has too much, and then it's like he's swimming through his childhood in Technicolor, overwhelmed with suspect memories, galloping high on one of his brother's shoulders, dancing around the living room with their beautiful mother or sitting on the good knee of his wounded but distinguished, war-hero father. Sean is the last son. He is the favorite son. He is the final triumph after the family's long struggle, and all the potential for courage, honor and happiness converge in him. He is the blessed son. Sean usually blacks out when he's had too much like that. He wakes up somewhere unfamiliar, thirsty again, the wondrous, radiant family of his fantasies evaporated.

Tonight, this oppressively, god-forsaken, hot summer night, while walking alone under the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, Sean can feel the hands of his brother Michael gripping his throat. It's been so long since he's taken a full, deep breath. You're not a true brother, Michael says. You're a scar. A stupid consolation prize because Mama couldn't stop crying. Mama's little angel, he teases. But actually their mother, not known for her patience toward angels, called Sean her handsome devil. She called him her Fred Astaire. When he was very young, she dressed him in bow ties and suspenders and slicked his hair to the side every morning, wetting her own hand to add the finishing touches. He knew that she loved him because she brushed him with her hand like the cat across the street licked her kittens. Sean always thought his brothers were jealous.

But he remembers one morning when she forgot him, too. His hair stuck up in a sad, tousled state when he looked in the side view mirror of the station wagon on the way to school.

Hands folded on his lap, he waited for her to notice. Black eyeliner curved up at the edges of her dark eyes. Red lipstick stained her burning, white cigarette.

On the radio, a trumpet blew over a sea of drums in soft, staccato breaths. He watched his mother ash nervously to the beat as they waited for the line of cars in front of the elementary school to move. She always dropped him off at the front entrance.

Lowering the volume, she said to the sun-filled road, "I will breed no more soldiers." She looked at him, and her hands gripped the steering wheel. "All Jacob and Michael do is roughhouse," she said. "No finesse. No poetry."

"What's finesse?" he asked.

"You know what finesse is, baby. Flair. Swing time. You remember, with Fred and Ginger?"

"Oh, yeah," he said, smiling.

"Your father used to have it," she said. "Or was I mistaken?"

She took out a photograph from her purse and passed it to him. "Have I shown you this? Your father's portrait from the Marine Corps Ball, 1961. I was standing by the window when he came over, grinning ear to ear. He said, *Baby, do you wanna dance?*" his mother mimicked, lowering her voice. She laughed. "I never knew I was a dancer until I danced with your father."

Sean studied the picture but couldn't connect the young, handsome figure with his gaunt father. For one, he wasn't missing a leg like his father. And second, the young soldier was smiling.

"Michael says Dad is trying to be like the Six Million Dollar Man."

His mother threw her cigarette out the window. "He's just fooling with you, baby," she said. "You can't rebuild a man."

Mama's little angel, Michael's mocking voice continues in his head. Sean can feel his brother's eyes, the same dark color as their mother's, and his smile, the same elfin expression as hers. Michael's angry because he never saw real combat; he died at nineteen during his first solo-flight over Pensacola Bay. Sean's easy to blame because he never fights back. He never says anything.

Near the Williamsburg Bridge, just when Sean thinks he can't take anymore, he sees at a distance a glimmer of a warm, golden light and thinks there might be something good there. He walks closer and finds a ramshackle house made of teal bricks. Leafy branches snake around the exterior, and the light shines from its upper floors. He rips through the brambles and knocks on the boarded up front door.

A piece of cardboard slides from a window. A bald, dark-eyed man glares out. "What do you want?" he asks in a gravelly voice.

Sean's throat is parched. He licks his lips. "I was hoping for some help," he says.

The man squints under the moonlight. "This isn't a charity."

"Please," Sean says. "My father just died, and I've got a week before I ship out again."

The man changes his tone and straightens his back. "Why didn't you say so, soldier? I served in Desert Storm," he says. "Sorry about your old man."

Sean nods and looks past him to the darkness. "Anything to drink inside?"

The man takes out a flask and hands it to him through the window. Sean drinks, one slow swig. He wipes his mouth and hands the flask back. "Thank you," he says. He feels Michael start to relax his grip.

The man waves at him. "Hurry up if you're coming in."

Sean struggles through the window and falls inside. The man sweats in a long, tattered coat, patched with red swatches, and an old janitor's uniform underneath. He shuffles through the foyer in bathroom slippers, lights a candle and holds the glass-encased flame with both hands.

The man walks through the debris, and Sean follows him down a dark hallway that smells like ash and mold. He can hear faint music. The hallway ends at a large room, and he sees the skeletal ruins of the first floor, tall, blackened beams that rise above his head. Most of the interior walls are gone, and a tree grows in the center. Sean breaks off a twig and rubs it in his hands. The tree smells like rotting sugar. The man blows out the candle, and the smoke travels up through the broken floorboards upstairs.

"I know a secret way to the building next door," the man says and points to another dark hallway. "You want to go?"

He drinks from his flask, and Sean nudges him for another. The man gives it to him.

"What's there?"

"Girls." The man smirks. "You pay to see them."

Sean has no interest in girls. "Anything to drink?"

"You pay for that, too."

"You go," Sean says, showing him his empty pockets. "I'll find you later."

The man shrugs. "Suit yourself." He turns and disappears through the hallway.

Sean stands alone, testing his balance back and forth on his boots, looking up at the sky through the cracks. Corroded water drips onto his head. It tastes metallic. Michael wrestles with Jacob in the shadows but can turn against Sean at any moment.

He explores the large room and discovers another hallway, not the one he came through or the one into which the man disappeared, but a third one that curves like a wine glass into the kitchen. Something hums from above, different from the music and the thump of bass below. He looks on the dusty shelves for something to drink but finds only a jar of peanut butter and some beans.

Fights in his house usually started in the kitchen, plates crashing, table legs shaking as one brother throttled another. Sometimes their father was there, too, cracking his knuckles. Sean was too young ever to understand, born a decade too late, but he used to pretend to be as strong as they, even stronger. While watching *The Six Million Dollar Man* on television, he whipped his legs around and kicked as fast as he could until he collapsed, out of breath, fingers poking at his mother's accidental cigarette burns on the carpet.

In the darkness, Sean can feel the mysterious hum vibrate through his bones and travel up through his esophagus and throat muscles. He hates thinking about his family, but then memories ambush him in their fragmented patterns, springing up like land mines in the desert.

He searches for whisky. There are garbage bags of children's clothing and toys at the bottom of the pantry, a box of detergent on a radiator, and snaking, black-and-blue extensions cords dangling on the wall, but nothing to drink. Cockroaches scuttle from the sink and fall in rows to the floor. He crushes their small backs and limbs.

When Sean was eight, Michael snuck him into the shed to find their father's purple heart. In the stifling room, a half-empty bottle of Jim Beam sat on a transistor radio that grumbled about guerilla warfare in South America. For now, they were safe because their father snored in the tent outside, though he could wake up at any moment. He slept there with a stray dog that he started feeding a couple months earlier. He forbade everyone else from coming inside, even their

mother, who once zipped it open to vacuum inside. Their father went ballistic and pried the vacuum from her hands and threw it across the yard. They faced off with each other until his father relented and climbed back in the tent.

“I want to see the damn thing for myself,” Michael said and rummaged through the array of prosthetic legs on the worktable. Sean wasn’t so certain and imagined the purple heart rotting in his father’s secret things.

“Are you going to help?” Michael demanded.

Jacob had started his first year at West Point, and Michael waited restlessly to leave for flight academy in the Fall.

“Jacob says Dad’s a hero,” Sean whispered to his brother. “He says if his leg hadn’t been blown off, he would’ve been a colonel. A general even.”

Michael frowned. “Jacob’s full of shit.” He searched through the books and papers on the shelf. “Stop standing there and help me look,” he said.

In the corner, an old wheelchair held stacks of canned beans, water jugs and foreign magazines. A framed photograph of their father’s platoon sat on top. Sean reached for it.

“What’s wrong with him?” he asked.

“The old man’s just an asshole,” Michael said. “Born that way.”

Still on his toes, Sean grabbed the photograph but not without knocking over empty liquor bottles.

“Shit,” Michael whispered. He grabbed Sean’s arm and pushed him under the worktable. They crouched together and waited, his brother’s arm around his neck, hand covering his mouth. He could feel Michael’s heart beating and wondered if the purple heart was down there with them.

The tent zipped open, a curse under the breath, a bottle thrown and broken in the metal drum outside. Sean could hear the ache of the prosthetic leg. The shed door swung open, and their disoriented father pushed his head through the small doorway like a gray-bearded giant. Dog tags clinked against each other.

He narrowed his eyes and scanned the room.

“Michael,” he said. “Don’t you dare hide from me.”

Under the worktable, Michael looked wild-eyed and afraid, and this alarmed Sean. He didn’t think his seventeen-year-old brother was scared of anything.

Sean stepped out first, hands up, the enemy surrendering. “We wanted to see your purple heart,” he said.

Their father pursed his mouth.

Michael stood up as well. “I wasn’t hiding from you,” he said. “Just playing a game for Sean.”

“Cat and mouse,” their father said. He stepped from the doorway and stood outside, hands on hips, one good leg rooted into the ground, unstoppable, the other, less so. It was hard to believe that he was ever a dancing man.

In the large room, the stinking sumac grows from beneath the house’s foundation. Sean roams in circles. He decides the best solution for his thirst is sleep. He prays that he can and when he wakes up in the morning, he’ll find a way back to the dumpling place in the Lower East Side where his old platoon buddy works. Johnny lives in a room behind the kitchen, and that’s where

Sean stayed when he got to New York last week. He can't remember how he even got to Brooklyn. The dumpling place has a giant smiley-face sign, and it's on Grand Street. He has to remember that tomorrow. The sign is a bright neon sun, with large purple eyes. He liked that sign, like a happy friend wishing him well. He misses the smell of dumplings and lying drunk beside Johnny's naked body, gazing for hours at the red lantern on the ceiling. The paper crinkled in the steam coming from the kitchen. He wasn't thirsty then, not at all.

Sean wakes when a couple appears, standing over him and arguing loudly. The man pushes the woman down, and she lands in front of where Sean was sleeping. She stares at him with bulging blue eyes. She sobs against his shoulder, and the man charges toward them. Sean hurries to protect her, and the man punches him. The woman grabs the man's back, and the two pull at each other, their cries cutting through the humid air. Sean tries to break up the fight again, and the man throws him on the floor, and Sean stays down, palming shards of glass and dirt. He can't breathe.

Then he looks up and sees the golden light from upstairs, the same light he saw outside. The hum grows stronger, like it wants to wail through him. The couple wrestles to the tree, pushing and breaking branches. He leaves them and climbs a broken staircase that ends in mid-air. He jumps the rest of the way and pulls himself up. The house shakes in painful response, until he stands in the ruins of the second floor, with more gaps than planks underneath him. He forgets the couple below and follows the hum and the light.

The tree grows through the floorboards. White leaves sprout from young branches and fill a gutted bedroom. Taller than he, a spectacular, black cabinet rumbles, bleeding lines of gold over its exterior, humming a persistent, guttural *aum*. Plugged into an outlet, golden light seeps from its cracks. Sean opens the cabinet door, and light bursts from a miniature chandelier. It's an

ancient minibar, with little round liquor bottles and a mirror shining soft light and glitter on his reflection.

Sean picks up a blue bottle, the liquid inside generating its own heat. The face of Jeremiah Johnson is embossed on the front, with his name and title, *Mayor of Brooklyn, 1837-1838*. On the back is his signature. The bottle sparkles like an oversized blue penny. Sean shakes it, and the liquid foams. It's most certainly rank poison, but the bubbling color makes him thirsty. He crouches inside the cabinet and finds a wooden bench, like he's on a rocking ship. He imagines long, peaceful journeys where the hum serves as the perfect score to the wax and wan of the changing moon. That would be a wonderful kind of life, floating at sea in a sturdy cabinet like this. He discovers that the bench holds an icebox. He opens the lid, and cold, bluish vapor fills the air. Picking up a handful of small ice cubes, he drops them into a dusty glass tumbler and pours a drink. The ice melts into a silvery film on the malty brown surface. Sean sniffs. Sulfurous. Before he takes his first sip, he sees a young man with dark hair, sleeping on the floor, curled under blankets of women's dresses.

Sean watches him perspire. Tiny beads form over his freckled temples and slide down his cheeks. Sean leans down.

The young man opens his eyes, startled. "What are you doing here?" he asks.

"I'd ask you the same thing."

"It's where I sleep," the young man says. He sits up and yawns. "You're the first person I've seen up here." His hazel eyes widen when he sees what's inside Sean's glass. "You're not drinking that, are you?"

Sean sets down the glass and reaches out his hand. "I'm Sean."

The young man shakes it, reluctantly. "Nathan."

“You live here?” Sean asks, following Nathan when he walks out of the cabinet.

“I dress the girls next door,” Nathan replies. “I know that sounds strange, but strippers should look beautiful, too.” He reaches into a back pocket and pulls out an empty pack of Camels, which he crushes unhappily in his hand. He pats his other pockets. A black fountain pen is clipped to his pinstriped shirt. “Do you have a smoke?”

“No. You run the place?”

Nathan laughs. “Me? I’m just the talent. I’m not really supposed to be in a place like this.” He smooths down his slacks and slips on a pair of burgundy wing-tip shoes. “I’m the son of a very rich man. He’s a senator.”

“What are you doing here?”

Nathan runs his hand through his disheveled hair. “Making my own way. I’m going to be a famous designer. Everyone’s going to be wearing my clothes. Well, everyone who is anybody.” He looks unimpressed at Sean’s faded green T-shirt and jeans. “What are you?”

“I’m a soldier. I got leave because my father died.”

“I’m sorry,” Nathan replies, sympathetically. He leans down and wipes a smudge off his left shoe. “Did he leave you any money?”

“I don’t think so. If he did, it’s in North Carolina.”

“What are you doing in New York?”

“I always wanted to see a Broadway show.”

Nathan smirks. “I guess you got on the wrong train.” He walks to a deteriorated wall, where only the outline of a window remains. He grips onto a tree branch and climbs down.

It’s not a far drop. “Where are you going?” Sean shouts.

“The bodega for some smokes.”

Sean looks down and thinks of Michael diving from a burning jet. He spreads his arms and jumps.

“Sure,” Nathan says, grinning at him on the ground. “Why don’t you come along?”

From this perspective, Sean can see the condemned house completely. There’s only one intact floor, and the front of the house is literally a façade. The third floor is nothing but sky. The second floor is halfway there.

Sean and Nathan stroll through streets of graffitied warehouses and empty lots. Broken beer bottles litter the ground wherever they step. Sean realizes after several blocks that walking with Nathan feels good. They’re not talking, but they’re definitely walking together. Nathan’s jittery and stays a few steps ahead, but Sean feels him looking back and sizing him up. They’re about the same height, with almost the same build. Nathan looks like Michael, but his brother never grew his hair past the close-cropped style of a Marine.

They reach a dead end where the street empties out to a cement brickyard. It’s a different world past a long, rusted fence. Nathan finds a large enough hole and crouches through, and Sean follows. A cement mixer sits on a white heap. Nathan climbs up, the moon illuminating him. He hurls a rock at the sky, and it falls to the ground.

“God, it’s so fucking quiet,” he shouts.

Sean waits and wonders where the bodega is.

Nathan slides down the hill, skidding on the heels of his shoes.

“When do you go back?”

“Reporting at Pensacola in seventy-two hours.”

“Then where?”

“Back to Afghanistan.”

“Are you scared?”

Sean frowns. His brothers and his father would think the question too ridiculous to answer. “No,” he replies. “You got something to drink?”

Nathan shakes his head. “Sorry,” he says and tiptoes along a damaged wall, arms out like a tightrope walker. His balance teeters, and Sean walks over to help him.

“I know these buildings like my dreams,” Nathan says and pushes him away. “I can get through them blindfolded.” He regains his footing and races to the other side. He waits for Sean to catch up.

A sign reads Morgan Street. Train tracks split across the pavement and continue down an abandoned lot, overgrown with grass. Sean sees the bodega at the end like a gold and orange hut in the darkness.

Nathan kicks gravel and glass beside him. “Are you sad about your dad?”

Sean doesn’t respond. What’s he going to say that would mean anything? They finally reach the store, and Sean checks his pockets. Sometimes money just appears, crumpled and dirty, but definitely real. He finds nothing.

“Will you get me something to drink?” he asks.

“If you pay me back,” Nathan says. He disappears inside the bodega.

Sean sits on the curb between two parked cars. The night sky is a bruise. He thinks about his father. He hadn’t seen or spoken to him in over a decade, but his father’s voice is still right there in his mind, a piece of shrapnel never to discharged.

“Faster, faster,” his father demanded.

Sean was twelve and living alone with the old man. His mother had left a year after Michael’s death. She’d been halfway to California when he got her letter in the mailbox. *Love is loss, baby*, she wrote. *I look at you and I see the end of me.*

His father woke him up at dawn to run drills in the back yard from tire swing to blue shed. Sean ran for so long that he no longer felt his feet jumping over his father’s hoard of junk.

“Faster, faster,” his father shouted again and blew the whistle around his neck. “Whether it kills you or me, boy,” he said, “we’re going to whip you into shape.”

Sean’s so thirsty now that his heart starts to race. The muscles in his neck tighten. Nathan walks out of the store with cigarettes and a bottle of water. Sean stares at the water.

“You said you were thirsty,” Nathan says.

“They don’t have anything stronger in there?”

“That was my last dollar.”

Sean lies on the pavement, sets the cold, plastic bottle against his forehead and shuts his eyes. He tries to black everything out. He can feel Michael’s hand around his throat.

“What are you doing?” Nathan asks.

“Consulting death.”

“What?”

“Death never lies to you.”

“My mother says the one who never lies to you is the one who loves you.”

Sean opens his eyes and sits up. He watches Nathan light a cigarette. He wonders if Nathan’s right. Maybe Michael always loved him.

The match flame flares in Nathan's hand, and he throws it to the ground with two quick flicks of his wrist. He dances down the street like he's showing off. Sean knows what his brothers would say, What a fucking pansy. But Sean thinks Nathan is beautiful, a cross between Astaire and Rimbaud, with moves that even his mother would love.

"You know anything about shrimp?" Sean asks.

"Like shrimp fried rice? That pink white stuff?"

"Yeah. Shrimp. Crustaceans. They swim in families mostly and can survive in polluted waters, resilient fuckers. And ugly as shit. Snapping shrimps are the ugliest, but they light up in the water. When you find them in colonies, they can disturb communication on the boats because the fuckers are seriously loud."

"What sound do they make?"

"Whatever you think a thousand little claws clapping together sounds like. Bunch of static. My family used to go to Florida every summer when I was a kid. My brothers and I used to watch the boats leave early in the morning. Sometimes whole days passed before we saw them come back. Nets full of shrimp and other things, too. Discards. But they just threw the extra shit back into the water."

"Is it hard work?"

Sean nods. "Long hours. I just like the idea of being out there all day. That's what I'm going to do after the Army. Catch some shrimp." He opens the water bottle and drinks. He looks at the traffic lights, and the pavement transforms to a dark sea where he will cast his nets and catch glowing shrimp. "You should come with me to Florida."

"I've never been."

"It's great."

Nathan grins. "Sure, it is."

They head back to the teal-brick house, and neither says anything, but they're definitely still walking together, and Sean feels a strange, calm clarity because of this. He slows down so that it can last longer. He's forgotten about his thirst, which hasn't happened before with anyone else. He thinks this is what it may have been like when he was first born, before he knew his family, before anything bad happened to him, when he was new and innocent, carried in a nurse's arms through a white corridor with bright, shiny lights and clean, clear corners.

Dawn fills the steel-gray sky. Sean stares at the pigeons lining up on a power line. They crescendo like chords on a music sheet and fall to a concrete playground. A toddler and an old woman, maybe her grandmother, stand in a large circle of pigeons. Maybe the baby can't sleep through the night either. Her face is fat with red cheeks, and she tries to pick up a pigeon. She's not a good walker yet and stumbles around, and the pigeons fly away. The old woman laughs and gives her a slice of bread, and the baby throws the whole piece to the ground and watches the fattest pigeon attack it.

Nathan stands in front of the child and twirls his fountain pen. The baby reaches for it, but he lifts it away as if it's a game.

Gazing at his new friend, Sean memorizes his face for later, his jeweled gold-green eyes, angular cheekbones, jaw line and haphazard, dark hair.

"What if I do go with you," Nathan asks him. "What will we do there?"

Sean sees them lying on the Florida beach until the sunset in the evening, their joyful bodies imprinted in the sand. His family will fade, no more significant than boats drifting away in the distance. He smiles and says, "We can do anything."

II

Nathan waits for his mother at her favorite bar in the East Village. Through the window, he watches skateboarders in the park and admires the jeans that hang from their hips. An hour earlier, he saw Sean get on a bus to God knows where, some place in North Carolina. They spent the past three days together, hiding out in the cabinet. They slept entwined in the small, enclosed space, and it felt good having someone there with him. Nathan promised to meet him on the beach at Pensacola tomorrow, at sunset. He *promised*, on his mother's *blessed* heart. He meant it as a joke, his mother's heart, except it's not a joke because he loves his mother and he's never promised anything to anyone before.

Sean's eyes remind him of the fireflies that he chased as a child, across the empty fields in front of the bus depot, across from his mother's shabby apartment. He used to run and run in circles until he could no longer see straight. He can't even say who that child is anymore.

His mother appears from a cab in a black trench coat with a foxtail collar. A cigarette hangs from her mouth, and she doesn't even bother to remove it when she kisses him on the cheek. "Sorry, baby," she says through her teeth and dusts ash from his face with her red nails. She takes off her sunglasses and sits down. The waitress comes over, and before she can say anything, his mother puts out her cigarette on the floor, waving the smoke in the air. "Two old fashioned," she says. "And don't put any fucking maraschino cherries in them." She looks at Nathan. "You look awful. Where did you sleep last night?"

Nathan smooths the wrinkles of his sleeves. Even after forgiving her for leaving him in Michigan as a kid, he still can't get her to be a real mother. Five is his earliest memory. She worked nights at the casino, and he learned how to take care of himself, pulling food from the

refrigerator and bringing it into her bed. He played with her makeup and bras. He sprayed her perfume, layered on her dresses and walked in her heels, click-clack click-clack on the floor.

She cups his chin. “God, sometimes, I forget how sensitive you are. Still such a baby.”

“I feel like an old man.”

“You have an old soul,” she corrects. “I always knew, even when you were little. You never cried. You just sat there, quiet and thoughtful like a little, chubby Buddha.”

The waitress brings their drinks, and his mother finishes hers immediately. She resembles a crazy-eyed Jackie Onassis, and not so long ago, she was a young, wild beauty. He’s seen the pictures. Most of her tattoos aren’t visible now except for the stars floating on her neck.

“How’s Bruce?” he asks.

She snorts and looks away. “I don’t want to talk about him.”

Nathan can feel the black tornado of his mother’s life descending over them. He continues to feel her in the deepest part of him; while other mothers fed their babies milk, she fed him misery. It was always over someone lying to her or leaving her. Men appeared and disappeared like symptoms in her life. One month, she was in love with Bill. Then Bill was gone, and his mother had migraines for a week and shunned the sun like a vampire. The next month she loved Tom. And maybe Tom stuck around longer than Bill, but eventually he was gone, too. His mother had lumps in her breasts. She had sores under her arms and holes in her intestines that leaked bile into her stomach. After Tom was Mark, then John, then Richard. She had cysts in her armpits and a tumor in her brain. The doctors said she was fine. But she wasn’t fine.

“What happened?” he asks.

She puts on her sunglasses when she starts to cry. “He’s having an affair. How boring is that?”

“Pretty boring.”

“I haven’t been back at the apartment, not since he *confessed*. He wants to marry his fucking secretary.” Her voice becomes shrill. “I’ve been imagining them all week. The two of them in his office together. Her sitting down to take *dictation*. She knows what he’s going to say even before he says it. She knows his pauses, his hand on his forehead while trying to find the next word. There she is to speak it. He says something like, ‘You know me so well,’ and walks to her, gets on his knee —”

Nathan cuts in, “You’re thinking about it too much.”

“I can’t stop, like this movie in my head I can’t stop watching. Maybe I’ll get something surgically implanted or removed.”

“I hope you’re joking.”

“Suddenly you want to be my moral compass. I mean, you should see her pant suits.”

Nathan sips his drink. “I’m sure she’s got some nice tits under there.”

“Nice tits?” His mother opens her coat and pushes up her cleavage. “I’ve got nice tits. He used to be crazy for me. Couldn’t get him the fuck off of me. And now I find out he never loved me at all.” She finishes her drink and orders another round.

The bar is nearly empty, and Nathan looks around. It’s strange to have these endless, idle afternoons. He remembers the first real job he got in New York. He was eighteen and working as a window dresser for a boutique store. He loved those peaceful hours of counting inventory and dressing mannequins. Dressing strippers pays better, but he misses the store’s ivory cream walls and its gold-framed mirrors. His own heaven, on the corner of Broadway and Prince. That was before he found his mother.

After another round of old fashioned, his mother gets up to use the restroom. Her walk is a stumbling signature that echoes on the wood floor. He listens to her disappear, his eyes following the shafts of light. Nathan glances toward the bathrooms then pulls out a few loose twenties from her red hobo bag, which lies open on her chair. Her keys fall out with the cash. The largest one is crescent-shaped, with her apartment number etched into a groove. He takes the key off the ring and slips it into his pocket.

Nathan remembers the feeling of loving her as a child, his heart expanding painfully with heat, in and out, in and out, except sometimes it expanded more than it contracted, and he thought he'd explode from how much he loved her and wished she were home, and from this desperate love he burst into tears on her bed and wailed until his voice was gone. He was always searching for her. When he came to New York, all he had was an old address, a psychic shop on Saint Mark's, and for months he had to trace his mother's life from apartment to apartment until he found her in a penthouse on the Upper West Side, married to an investment banker.

His mother returns to the table, carrying her coat over her shoulder. She's in a sleeveless black dress, and her shoulder cap tattoos look faded and forgotten.

He shifts in his seat. "Can you lend me some money, mom?"

She searches inside her bag and gets more manic as she digs. Nathan wonders if she even knows what she's looking for. She must have taken something in the bathroom.

"I remember the first time I saw you again. God, you were a sight. I didn't recognize the tall boy shivering in front of my apartment building. God, that fucking blizzard. I was stuck at the fucking airport for six hours, waiting for my flight out to Belize that those fuckers eventually just canceled. I had to go back out into the snow with my suitcase full of bikinis. Can you imagine what I must've been feeling, and then I see you standing outside my building. You

didn't even have a fucking coat on. But think about it, if my flight hadn't been canceled, then what would you've done?" She talks so fast that each strung-together word is her way of breathing.

She finds her wallet and pulls out some bills. "That's all I got, baby," she says. "Don't know where my checkbook is." She leaves fifty on the table for the drinks then heads toward the door.

He grabs her arm. "Where are you going?"

"I have to go see my lawyer," she says.

"Like this?"

"Like what?" she says. "Do me a favor, baby, and get me a cab."

On the street, he lifts his hand, and a cab pulls up to the curb. His mother kisses him and stumbles in. "You look so much like him now," she says, smiling. "You know, he was my first love."

Watching the cab drive away, Nathan realizes that he didn't tell her that he was leaving.

Nathan stops in at a favorite pizzeria on Saint Mark's. He orders a slice and leans back in a red booth. A framed drawing of the Leaning Tower of Pisa hangs beside him. There's no one else in the pizzeria, other than the Mexicans behind the counter, who blare the baseball game on the radio. He imagines sunbathing on the beach, Sean's sand-speckled mouth and the taste of saltwater, his bronzed skin against the pale blue sea. Seagulls, sand, sun and water. Nathan keeps

it going like a prayer. Out in the distance, the boats float with their flapping white and yellow sails. Everything is clear. Seagulls, sand, sun and water.

The psychic gave him a place to live when he showed up looking for his mother. Her name was Martie, and she gave readings in a bright storefront that had a white table and two gold armchairs inside. Behind her psychic nook, she lived with her husband and three kids. Crystals and an incense burner decorated the table, along with a deck of tarot cards. That wasn't the deck she used, though. Her real deck she kept in the folds of her long skirt. In the colder months, she sat inside for hours, chain-smoking and glowing like a painting with her hennaed hair and olive skin. Her Pomeranian yapped from underneath her chair. On summer nights, Martie sat outside and solicited drunk college students. She picked one out and whispered, "Hey, you. I've got something important to tell you." Her voice traipsed with the aroma of incense and candles until that chosen kid turned around.

Once when it was slow, she read Nathan's cards and meditated with her eyes closed for a long time before she spoke to him. "You're under a powerful family curse," she said. "Your parents really loved each other, but your grandmother, your mother's mother, was jealous of their happiness. She sent your mother away when she got pregnant with you, and your father didn't know how to find you or her." She collected her cards back into a neat stack as if she had solved his problems.

It was true that his parents had been high school sweethearts and his mother got pregnant at sixteen. But then from there, Martie's words turned to pure fiction. His father had promised to marry his mother but instead, he'd left Michigan for a college in the East, married into money and become an architect. He came back to their small town and rebuilt Main Street, along with the library, high school and credit union. He designed the mayor's house. And for himself and

his new bride, he built a large mansion on Saginaw Bay. His father never visited his first love or their son in the one-room apartment across from the bus depot, but Nathan did see Saginaw Bay once.

He prefers Martie's version of his life though. Turning the corner, he hopes to find her smoking in her chair, a size-six, golden flip-flop dangling on her bare foot. But her place is boarded up with planks, and he peers into the ash-filled interior. It seems a fire started in the bar on the corner and spread. He wonders if she saw it coming and if she's safe now with her family.

The doorman in his mother's building has a surly expression and doesn't look up from the Sports section folded in his hand. Nathan's never been past the lobby. That first night when he found her, his mother gave him her credit card and promised to meet him the next day at Martie's. She didn't show up until a week later. Bruce doesn't even know that Nathan exists or that she's from a small town near Detroit. She told him she was from Connecticut. His mother told Nathan everything.

As an ornate, ancient elevator shuttles Nathan to the twelfth floor, he pictures the concern on his mother's face after hearing that he's leaving with a soldier. But his mother won't be home. She never is. The elevator opens to a foyer, and a black, cast-iron gate stands in between him and the elegant apartment. He calls out, "Hello?" His voice thuds on the carpet. He unlocks the gate with the crescent key.

The apartment is so pristinely beige, he thinks he's intruded upon the wrong home. He can't recognize his mother in any of these rooms. But when he opens a large walk-in closet in the

master bedroom, cigarette smoke and perfume breathes out from the dark. He turns on a light. Her shoe cubby is taller than he, and most of her shoes are black. Most of everything she owns is black. Her belts are hooked on the wall, sharp-teethed leather, some thorny with spikes, others glittering with small diamonds. He takes a belt with emerald stones and wraps it around his head like a headdress. He sits at her vanity and stares in the mirror, pulling at the skin around his eyes and cheekbones. He wonders if he really does look like his father, if people back home who know the great man could easily recognize that Nathan is his son.

Pocketing some of his mother's rolled up twenties, which he found in her top bureau drawer, he lights a cigarette and throws clothes inside one of her Gucci duffel bags: accordion-pleated dresses, leather belts, dozens of silk scarves and one opal-beaded thong that looks particularly expensive. He walks through the master bedroom into the hallway.

Ashing the cigarette on the polished wood floor, he imagines he's in his father's house, which had the longest driveway imaginable, cutting across a manicured lawn of pollarded trees. The driveway finally ended at a four-story white house with large columns and tall windows. Behind the house, the lake gleamed in the early evening sun. Nathan remembers standing alone on the front porch and ringing the bell. His half-sisters, Abigail and Stephanie, opened the door. They were both in elementary school and dressed in ruffled dresses, white socks and black Mary Janes. Long pigtails fell below their small shoulders. They looked so much alike, but the surprising thing was how much they looked like him.

Abigail and Stephanie's mother appeared in the foyer. She was a slim redhead with perfect white teeth. She wore a blue, flowing dress that made the pregnant bump of her stomach almost invisible. Nathan noted the giant diamond ring on her finger.

She opened her mouth to speak but hesitated. He could tell, she was looking at his disheveled hair, his thrift-store clothes and the holes in his sneakers. She smiled, turned to the girls and said, “Go and play with Nathan.”

Nathan looked for his father. He had seen him several times in town, but from a distance, cutting ribbons in front of new buildings, posing for photographs that headlined in the newspaper. They never spoke. Nathan felt ashamed to even bring up his name.

The sisters, holding hands, followed him while they whispered to each other.

“Why are there holes in your shoes?” Stephanie asked.

Abigail giggled. “Are you going to steal something?” she asked.

Nathan scowled, hands in his pockets.

Stephanie’s hazel gaze turned bright. “You look sus-sus-pitious.”

He tried to ignore them, but his eyes burned with tears. He walked from room to room, wanting to get lost in the bigness of the house. The sisters watched him, and he started to play along and picked things from tables and shelves to slip into his pockets. The girls gasped then erupted in laughter. He took little things that could fit in his hand: paperweights, small picture frames and snow globes. They shadowed him until he reached large burgundy doors. There, the girls stopped.

“You can’t go in,” Stephanie whispered.

“Why not?” Nathan asked.

“Daddy’s in there.”

He started to sweat. Hand on knob, he cracked the door open.

A tall, thin man stood by the window. He wore slacks and a pinstriped shirt, and his tie was loosened at the neck. The girls ran away, and Nathan was alone, face pressed to the door.

“Come in, Nathan,” his father said.

Nathan walked in, his pockets bulging. His father gestured to a red armchair, and Nathan sat down, his sweaty palms sliding on the leather. His father stayed at the window, hands in his pockets, looking at him with a perplexed expression.

He cleared his throat. “I spoke with your mother on the phone,” he said. “She’s in New York. Something about Broadway auditions and meeting the right people. I guess she plans to stay there.”

“Grandma hates me,” Nathan said, terrified.

His father sat down behind his desk and twirled a sleek, black fountain pen. For a few moments, he said nothing, and Nathan stared at the rotating pen.

“I’d take you in here, but I don’t think that’d really work,” his father said. “I’ve decided on a boys’ school in Holly Township. I will pay for your tuition until you graduate, and then it will be your responsibility to make your own life afterward, just like the way I did. You know, my father gave me nothing.”

Nathan froze on the word *father*. He tried to imagine what his grandfather had been like.

“Any objections?”

Nathan didn’t say anything, and his father set the pen down. “Okay, I’ll arrange everything.” They shook hands, and Nathan’s heartbeat careened from his chest when they touched.

His father stood to pace beside the window, and Nathan sat quietly then walked out of the room, ashamed.

Abigail and Stephanie waited at the foot of the stairs. They wanted to show him their room. They wanted to play tea. Nathan sat with them and their stuffed animals around a small

white table. The balcony of their bedroom looked out to the water, and he was jealous of their view. He sipped unhappily from an empty teacup. They tied a gold scarf around his neck like their stuffed animals and gave him the nickname, *Mister Thief*.

When it was time to leave, the sisters and their mother walked him out. One of his pockets ripped, and a trail of trinkets fell behind him on the front porch, all the way to the cab that waited for him. The sisters erupted in laughter. Their mother seemed embarrassed. She walked to him and inspected the weakened stitch. “Oh, dear,” she said. “Someone will have to sew that pocket for you.”

She left the stolen things on the ground for the maid. As the cab rolled out of the driveway, Nathan looked back to watch her, a queen strolling through her enchanted life and giving quiet orders as if naming flowers. He wanted to stay with her, with his father, even with Abigail and Stephanie, and watch the lake every morning and night. The gold scarf was around his neck, and he pulled it off. He pulled out his father’s pen from his pocket and practiced twirling it.

In Bruce’s study, Nathan puts out his cigarette on a Civil War plate on the mantle and stands transfixed in the center of the room. The walls are a burnt desert mist, muted and ethereal, with paintings of horses and ships. The sofa is hard leather, and the shelves display nineteenth-century almanacs, which Bruce has probably never opened. Nathan’s fingers itch to touch everything, but he resists and sits at the mahogany desk on a swivel chair, circling a few rotations. He stares at the spinning room.

He opens a top drawer and takes out a sheet of Bruce's stationery. He uncaps the fountain pen from his pocket. *Dear Father*, he writes. Putting the pen down, he stares at the paper. What is the best way to ask for money? *Believe in me. I can become someone, too.* He takes a globe paperweight and rolls it with his palm. He looks at the birds perched on the balcony through the gauze of the curtain and imagines they're seagulls on the sand. He sees broken shells and twigs form a pattern on the shore which floats away with an incoming wave, a silvery, shallow layer like foaming glue, sticking to the ocean surface. Seagulls, sand, sun and water. Seagulls, sand, sun and water. He doesn't know how long he's been sitting in Bruce's chair when he hears the elevator doors slide open.

He looks up and stands, crumpling the letter into his back pocket. It could be his mother. Or the maid. The gate in the foyer opens. Heavy footsteps draw near in the corridor. He rushes to the balcony, unlocks it and looks outside. Twelve floors down.

"What the fuck?" Bruce stands in the doorway, shorter and much older than Nathan expected. "Who are you?"

Nathan can't speak. When Bruce moves toward him, Nathan escapes out onto the balcony with his mother's duffel. He races down the fire escape until he reaches the street. He's breathless and his thighs burn, but he heads to the park and sprints across the lawn where two excited dogs, off their leashes, start chasing him until their owner whistles them back.

Nathan turns on 71st Street and walks into an upscale bar. An elderly couple sits in the corner, drinking martinis and staring out the window. Nathan drops the bag, sits at the bar and orders a

double whisky. He panics when in the mirror behind the bar he sees the emerald crown on his head. He takes it off and smooths back his hair with trembling hands.

The bartender leans against the bar and watches the baseball game on the television.

“Who’s winning?” Nathan asks.

“No one yet.”

Nathan stares at the screen and breathes deeply, his eyes following the slow game and the announcer’s voice. There’s the smack of the bat, and a ball sails through the air.

The ceiling fan whirs, and the countertop shines like he’s in Cuba or Bermuda, lost in afternoon laziness. His heart stops racing, and he lets the alcohol linger in his mouth. He takes out his father’s pen and stares at his unfinished letter.

The bar fills with people who wear pastel-colored polo shirts, khakis and navy baseball caps. They order beers and yell at the television, faces turning red, fist-bumping each other, while Nathan nurses his drink in the corner, stealing glimpses of the lean and muscular bartender. They talk whenever there’s a lull. The sky darkens, and he doesn’t move from the barstool. He doesn’t answer the phone when Sean calls. The soldier will disappear back into war after the weekend, and any promise of love will float belly up on the Florida beach. Nathan imagines their footsteps in the sand washed away.

Night is never true darkness in New York, never a time when he can’t see his hand in front of him and know he’s there. He’s survived twenty-three years, and he knows he can last for some more.

Two hookers stand near the expressway ramp, waiting for opportunity to stop, usually some lonely trucker. Nathan suspects the money exchanged is meager, and it makes him depressed. They are unattractive, middle-aged women, unlike the girls he dresses. These women remind him of his mother, with their childlike legs, skinny and bruised. One wears a pink halter-top under a puffy blue coat. The other is dressed in black.

Nathan walks past them and crosses the street to the condemned teal-brick house. He hurries down to the basement entrance and enters a small, curtained room, lined with green and red marijuana tapestries. He has his collection of bikinis, wigs and headpieces as well as his mother's clothes inside her duffel bag. Alecia, sits in a black robe, smoking a cigarette and flipping through a magazine. A light bulb hangs from the ceiling.

Alecia's already has her fake eyelashes on. She flutters them over her large dark eyes.

"Thought I'd have to go on naked," she says.

He kisses her on the cheek. "I would've been here sooner, but a guy on a bike got slammed by a truck. Seems like the whole Brooklyn police force is blockading Grand Street." He takes a drag from her cigarette and remembers the cab driving past the scene. "Blood everywhere," he adds.

"I was wondering about the sirens. I keep thinking they're getting closer."

"You were ready to grab your shit and run?"

"Something like that."

Nathan empties his mother's bag and starts untangling bikini strings. "Where are the others?"

"Some are in the back. I'm up first tonight." Alecia stands and takes off her robe.

He chooses the opal-beaded thong for her, and she looks in a dollar store mirror, pulling the thong up around her hips. He double knots a red bikini top around her back then ties her hair in a tight bun at the nape of her neck. She sits in a chair as he applies red to her heart-shaped lips, cigarette between her fingers. She stares at him with a dreamy smile, tracing the braided leather of her top.

“Nathan, your shit takes me to another place,” she says.

He nods and takes another drag from her cigarette.

People crowd into the front room of the basement. Some are from the projects across the avenue, and some are bearded, pale-faced art students who live in the cheap lofts around the neighborhood. Alecia’s thin but with a round ass that curves like a sun when she’s horizontal on the pole. The beads on her thong catch the lights from the disco ball. Nathan smokes from the blunt that goes around and walks over to Chase, one of the guys he knows here. Jeans slipping down his ass, Chase doesn’t even look at him. He waves his cash for Alecia, gold rings reflecting light around the bills. Nathan waits for Chase to notice him. They’ve ended up together, three or four times in the basement corridor, Chase’s glittering necklace, cold and heavy, pressed between them. It shows the picture of his baby son, Chase, Jr. His arms and chest are inked with names of the dead. He’s a walking gravestone. But Nathan knows things about him that others can’t see, the way his Jamaican accent rolls from his tongue and the warmth of his platinum fillings against the heat of his mouth. He’s explored Chase’s scars and named them secretly as his own broken pieces, Chase one, Chase two, Chase three, the real Chase lost in the darkness around them. He looks at Nathan, nods then turns back to Alecia. All these men may as well lay their money at Nathan’s feet. The back rooms are none of his business, but the stage belongs to him.

Smoke fills the room and creates a fog around Alecia's dancing silhouette, and even Nathan falls in love with how good he's made her look, swaying to the bass blowing from the discount speakers. She looks unattainable as she glides higher on the pole. She looks expensive.

III

When Sean arrives at his father's grave in New Bern, North Carolina, there's only a photograph to greet him, a small, square-cut portrait of his father as a young soldier in full dress uniform. He assumes Jacob left the photograph on the plaque and squints over the rows of stone markers to see if his eldest brother is lingering under the trees. Or maybe their mother, but he knows that's unlikely.

Much younger in the picture than Sean is now, his father sports a slick, dark moustache and a tilted, white cap. With one hand behind his back, he gives Sean a wry smile, like the joke is on him. *Look at you there, hiding, like I don't know what you're about.*

Sean doesn't want to hide anymore. He hasn't had a drink since Brooklyn and thinks maybe he won't again. But the thought's not fully formed, as delicate as a spider web.

His cell phone rings, and he reaches into his backpack and thinks it might be Nathan. But it's Jacob. Sean lets the phone ring. Jacob is like the grim reaper; he only makes contact when someone is dead. Otherwise the colonel never calls, too busy working for his stars. Sean wonders who will call when Jacob dies.

Sitting down on the grass, he holds up his father's picture. "Who are you really?" he says to the young soldier. "He was never as young as you."

Sean juts his chin out and clenches his teeth with resentment the way his father did. He purses his bottom lip and sucks on the soft skin until it starts to bleed. Almost thirty now, Sean feels confident that he has perfected his father's signature look. He places the photograph back on the plaque beside a miniature American flag.

Rising from the cemetery grass, Sean straightens his back. After all, this is veteran ground, and the occasion, though he's late for it, requires a soldier's posture. He clasps his hands and closes his eyes. As the rote idea of forgiveness creeps in, memories return with painful clarity. Whisky kept the old man smoldering. Armored by backyard clutter and broken machinery, he became more and more afraid of the world. The real man of flesh was buried deep inside; in that dark center, his heart was soft. Sean caught a glimpse of his father from time to time, eyes white as pearls flashing from the shed's window.

In the grass surrounding the Raleigh bus depot, flowers line the dirt like soldiers under a hot sun. Sean sits among parked Greyhound buses, his arms crossed, sucking the soft skin of his mouth. There's still been no word from Nathan. Like a primitive shelled thing, Sean's clammed up and motionless, dark through and through. Yet his heart beats like a whirlwind. Why does he always assume his father's posture? As if with an enraged expression and a piercing whistle, the crippled man had succeeded at creating his likeness. Sean's been carrying around his father's armor like a dutiful son, and it's too late to tell him even that.

Flowers wilt down as if to say, sorrow is enough proof of love. Sean knows flowers don't speak, and the words he hears belong to the broken loop in his head. Alcohol kept those words muffled, but now they stream out unfettered.

He remembers his first-year as a recruit, at Fort Eustis in Virginia, when the Army whipped him into shape, except he strayed off some nights to explore the ghost fleet anchored off of Mulberry Island. He climbed inside a decaying ship and found a wrecked control room where he sat until dawn with a fifth of whisky. His childhood echoed in the rain and wind outside, beating down on the ship's deck. He relived the funeral dance of the uniformed men in black folding Michael's soul in a flag. A volley of rifles shot across the sky, scattering the birds from the trees. The slow dance wound down to nothing but the whisper of a nameless soldier, kneeling at his mother's lap. She took the flag, and Sean, who sat beside her, peered up at her veiled face. But there was nothing of her that he recognized.

One night on the abandoned ship, he looked up to see a light from a match. Another recruit stood in front of him. A man. He was a man because he had a wife and baby, though he was only two years older than Sean. The man followed him around, shadowing him but never saying much. It had been going on for months.

The man's face was beautiful that night, with red-flushed lips and vibrant eyes. The match burned out, and he started to light another one. Before he could, Sean stood and kissed him. The man kissed him back and put his arms around him. The next morning, when he saw the man again in the mess hall, he smiled. But the man stood from the table and walked outside. When Sean called his name, the man didn't turn around but kept walking. Sean caught on quick. Fumbling over love then gone, he had only the taste of it to remember.

Sean looks around the depot. If he doesn't move now, he'll never move. And he's afraid the part of him that doesn't care will win. He watches people line up beside a bus. It lights up for Pensacola, and he grabs his backpack and hurries on board. He pays the driver for a ticket and sits in the back, resting his legs on the empty seats across the aisle. He eyes a bar outside, but the bus is already moving.

His arms crossed, hugging himself, he tries to sleep but can't stop thinking, the same things he always thinks, like how things might have turned out if his parents had been different and all the ways his family could've loved but never did.

Finally in Florida, the Pensacola sun rides low on the horizon. Sean walks to the beach across from Greyhound, takes his boots and socks off and puts them in his bag. He waits for Nathan and wavers from that old feeling of abandonment and fear to something else, something that feels as real as the hunger of his growling stomach. He was focused on his thirst for so long that he never wanted food, but now he wants a feast of barbecue ribs to share with Nathan as they float on the Atlantic.

A dog with large, brown eyes saunters over to him, wags his tongue and swishes a straggly tail. Sean kneels down and pets his ginger head, the touch bringing a wave of relief over him.

“Where's your family, boy?” he asks.

The dog licks his hand.

Sean circles over his footprints in the sand, looks up to the sun and thinks of Michael's ghost haunting the ocean. The dog steps behind him. Jacob calls again. Sean feels almost willing to talk to him, but the phone's signal dies. The ocean isn't good for communication, but it's good for washing his feet. His gaze drifts with sailboats in the distance. He feels the sky open up. Give this soldier some room, it seems to say. Let him breathe. Let him fucking breathe.

People start running toward him, women in silky dresses and men in tuxedos, with their hair glossy like from a magazine page. The air is perfumed and thick with their laughter. Flower petals fall everywhere around him, and the dog looks as nervous as Sean, tail back and forth like the needle of a metronome. Sean realizes it's not an advertisement, with these well-dressed, happy people, but a large wedding party. He's lost within its chaotic bliss. A barefoot, tuxedoed man walks through the crowd, playing an acoustic guitar and singing, his head lifted and voice rising to compete with the ocean waves. And behind the debonair minstrel, a procession of bridesmaids in long, green dresses appear, like a chain of pearly-skinned mermaids returning to the sea. Wedding guests take off their shoes and follow to the water.

The crowd parts when the bride appears. She wears a blue dress and has seashells in her hair. The groom waits for her at the ocean's edge, with seaweed and driftwood shifting at his feet. Sean wonders what makes people decide the way they do, to marry on the beach at sunset, dressed in the colors of water. People clap and shout when the groom sweeps the bride into his arms and kisses her.

Sean finds his way out of the crowd, but a girl runs toward him, three or four years old, in a pink dress. She bends down and pets the dog.

"Puppy," she says. Her large cheeks are freckled.

"Runaway child," Sean says.

A bridesmaid walks over to retrieve the child, and she smiles at him. They move with the rest of the wedding guests toward a yellow house on the beach. Sean crashes the party on a candlelit patio for a free meal. Tables are covered in white linen and large blue lilies. No one stops him, and he feels invisible, blurring into the festive commotion. He takes a glass of wine from one of the tables and watches the dancers. He doesn't drink but swirls the wine and walks into the house through the open back door. The dog follows him. Inside the kitchen, quiet and empty, he puts the wine on the counter and picks up the telephone hanging on the wall. He calls his childhood house. He sits on the floor, leans on his backpack and listens to the operator tell him the number's been disconnected.

The dog sits in Sean's lap and licks his face. Sean's too tired to move him. He's been holding his breath for so long, and the wedding music wants him to let it out. He remembers the night his mother left. His father's favorite record played in the back yard. Sean woke from his room and went downstairs to the kitchen door. Stepping out barefoot on the cool, thick grass, he looked up at the jaundiced moon then crouched behind a metal drum when he saw his father dancing in a small clearing, a wooden peg fastened to his thigh. His eyes were closed, and a cigarette dangled from his mouth. His mother sat on the grass in a pale dress, knees pressed against her chest.

His father stopped in front of her and extended his hand. "Baby, do you wanna dance?" he slurred. His voice sounded so kind that Sean thought it was an imposter.

She wiped her eyes. Knuckle pressed on her mouth, his mother dragged her thumb across her bottom lip. "No, thank you," she replied.

His father danced alone in circles, limping away from her, while she stayed on the grass, with her long hair flowing down. Under the dim orange glow of the mosquito lantern, she looked like a girl watching a foolish old man.

In the kitchen, Sean listens to the dial tone beating through his chest. He hangs up the receiver and calls Nathan. If only the cabinet had a phone, then he could reach him. He imagines Nathan sleeping inside and wants to be there with him. Even if it's a lost place, at least they would be together and Sean wouldn't have to thirst alone like this forever.

Surgery

I was in love with you. With the winter sunlight streaming through the window, you stood in front of me and pushed down your jeans and threw off your shirt. You slid off your underwear and unhooked your bra. You didn't care if all of Williamsburg saw.

Exhaling deeply, you said, "The doctor says there's going to be two scars. One across my right breast, and a wide V below my belly button."

I nodded and tried to think about anything else. But you made me follow your hand as you traced the path of incision, and I felt how my pain would mirror yours.

"Beth. You are a beautiful woman," I said, helplessly. Because that was what I thought women loved to hear. Because you really were.

"Thank you, David," you replied.

The camera was on the tripod. I measured the light and time for exposure.

“Ready?” I asked.

Arms straight down, you pursed your lips, the way you did for pictures. Rock-a-Billy Greta Garbo. You narrowed your sultry eyes. “Ready,” you said.

The camera shutter opened and closed, the light in and out.

“I want you to come closer,” you said.

I took the camera off the tripod and adored you through the lens, even the lines you hated that deepened near your eyes and mouth when you smiled. But as I circled you and caught the light falling over your freckled shoulder, I thought of Teresa and her olive skin and Cleopatra face. I wondered if you could smell her on me because I could everywhere, all over me.

I wound the shutter and lowered the camera. “How do you feel?” I asked.

“Good.”

You smiled again, and I took another picture. I moved down to your pastel white breasts with blooming, pink areolas. Your delicate veins traveled from your chest to stomach. You covered your right breast, the one to be operated on, the one to be removed, and you let your hand drop.

“Closer,” you said.

Two years ago, you had finally caught me in bed with another woman. You told all our friends, and everyone treated me like I was bottom ash. But I didn’t change, not even when you got your diagnosis. I was the first one you called. That day, two months ago, I lounged in Union Square with Teresa, a Julliard student whom I had just met. She liked to practice her viola while barefoot in the grass, and I lay on her blanket and watched her fingers move. Rosin dust sweetened the air.

But you crying on the phone turned the music to a knife, and I left Teresa and followed your voice across the bridge to your apartment where you wept in your bathtub. I hadn't seen you since you had kicked me out, but I came back because you asked me to. I went with you to all your doctor appointments, did all the grocery shopping and walked your pit bull, Angel, who kept eating garbage on the street because he resented that I held his leash. Angel was a monster who pissed on everything and bit at my ankles, but you loved him because he had been a shivering, scared puppy when you found him, sniffing coat sleeves in an outdoor flea market. You named him Angel because he had a crest of white hair on his head, while the rest of him was the color of coal.

I tried to take care of everything for you. I held you when you needed, swept the wood floors, prepared your gluten-free meals and washed the dishes. You forgave me, but I still saw Teresa at night and didn't tell you about it. Even if you knew, you never said anything.

Through my viewfinder, your eyes glowed a smoky, green fire, and I saw everything I wanted in them, disappearing from me. The light shifted in the room and made your skin translucent. You started to cry, and it made me sick. I brought the camera down.

"Want to stop?" I asked. The pictures were your idea, but I felt like I was taking advantage of you.

You shook your head. Short blonde curls fell in your face, and I brushed them aside.

"Everything's going to be okay," I said.

You looked at me, as if pleading, but you were too strong to beg ever.

"Closer," you said again.

I stepped toward you, camera between us, paranoid that you could see my intoxication from last night, pagoda orange sheets and rosewood candles that burned until the early morning.

“Put your hand here,” you said.

I took a picture of my dark hand holding your egg-cream breast. Your soft, gossamer skin wasn't unfamiliar, but the pain came fast. A deep incision beneath my ribs. I took my hand away.

You held my wrist. “Kiss me,” you said.

I kissed your forehead.

“Kiss me for real,” you said.

My lips touched yours, and you slipped in your tongue, the first time since I'd moved back in. I pressed you against a wall, wanting to devour you. You were ready. Angel tugged at my jeans and barked, always protective of you. You grabbed my shirt and kissed me harder. The incision pushed up from my ribs to chest and lungs. I was surprised that our fire could return so quickly. I kissed your neck and each breast softly and slid my fingers down your body as the confusion of our relationship returned. I was still in love with you, but I resisted getting too close. After seven years, I thought I finally understood the culprit: you were dying. Maybe I'd always known in the place where people know things they can't admit. It was the reason why you loved me so intensely, without reservation, while I rationed love for longer distances.

The first time we had met, I had collided with you in the university darkroom. Your elbow had jabbed my stomach. “Shit!” you yelled. You'd been the one who hit me, but that didn't stop you from being angry. “Didn't you hear me say, *Walking on the right!*” Spit sprinkled on my face. I could feel your heat. We were that close.

“I thought it was *my* right,” I replied.

“Why?” you shouted. “Hey, man! Don't touch me!”

“I'm just checking to see where you are so I can walk *around* you.”

You hit me again, this time on purpose. “I'm right here,” you said.

I fell back but laughed when I could breathe again. I would like you, I could tell. Later, when we met in the fluorescent hallway, I couldn't take my eyes off of you. I couldn't believe that we'd been in the same arts program for three years and living just a few blocks away from each other and I never noticed you before. I found out you were taking pictures of the condemned sugar refinery near the East River and followed you there. You joked that you had picked up another stray.

Last picture. The aboveground train shook the apartment, and the living room went light and dark and light again. I put the camera on the tripod and took off my clothes. I set the timer and stood beside you, and we waited for the shutter.

The dog growled, and you laughed. "Angel, you're such an asshole," you said and caressed his halo head.

Even from my measured distance, the incision continued through me, cutting under my lungs and dislodging my heart. You were afraid that after the surgery I wouldn't look at you in the same way, but it turns out that I love you more.

The first thing after your funeral I cleaned your apartment. On my knees, I scrubbed the gray kitchen floor and discovered it was white underneath. I doused a rag with bleach and rubbed each tile and blackened groove until it shined and my fingers burned, and I imagined you in the doorway, laughing at me. Why are you trying so hard, I heard you say. Your voice went in and out like static. My eyes were swollen from crying. I pushed the rag past your ghostly feet to the living room. I hit each crevice and shelf and tried to erase every mark and print. The harder I

kneaded, the louder your voice grew. David, you shouted. Don't you dare bleach my hardwood floors! I kept scrubbing. When I was done, I looked at your walls and noticed the cracks creeping to the ceiling. I decided to repaint and went to the hardware store with Angel straggling behind. He kept searching for you, even though I told him that you were gone.

The dog hated the paint fumes and hid under your bed while I bulldozed the pain with the stereo. I painted until I couldn't lift my arms. You haunted the curtains of the window and watched me. Your pale mouth moved, but I turned up the music when you approached with palms open in the air. I closed my eyes and lay in the glistening, white room and listened to the radio scream.

Eleven years from the day we collided in the darkness, I'm still in love with you. The apartment stays pretty much bare, except for a futon mattress that I brought over from my studio, some pillows, my cameras and gear, and the pictures I took of you before the surgery. They were for you, but I'm the one who looks at them now. I wish that I could see my handprints on your skin.

Angel stands beside me in the apartment doorway and waits. He doesn't bite anymore and saves his piss for the trees and parking meters on Berry Street. He won't let me out of his sight. I don't know if it's healthy for a dog to be so obsessed with a human being, but I'm not stressing over it. Recovery hasn't been easy for either of us. Even now, I get scared of waking up in the morning and stepping outside and not knowing what to do without you. But I know I have to walk Angel, and I take him along the river, and we stare at the sugar refinery. And I realize

when I catch the wind in my mouth that you aren't gone, but the fear of being close to you is, the fear of loving you. You're here, everywhere, all over me.

Sunlight floods the tree-lined street, and I stand under the shade while Angel digs in the dirt like a country dog. From a distance I think I see you. I recognize your stride. It happens to me all the time. I think I see you, and I'm ready with all my words and plans to make the past right. But as the woman approaches, it's just a trick of light. She looks nothing like you. She isn't you.

For so long you were the only one who loved me, and now I don't know where to turn. But I don't add you in anymore. I stand in your empty place and what I thought was loss renews itself as love. I try to explain it to our friends when they ask if I miss you. I miss you, but you're not gone. They think I'm talking about memories, but I mean the feeling I get on my walks with Angel, like when the sunlight showers through the oak trees in the park. I stand under the thick, green canopy, waiting for Angel and watching caterpillars eat leaves, and these little holes appear as the worms break through with their persistent tufts of breath. And as I watch this, I feel it happening to me, too, endless holes of light filling me until I am complete.

VITA

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