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The Damage Done 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, Theater and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Jamie Amos

B.A. Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, 2007

May, 2012

Dedication

To Michael, may we always remain
dressed up in smoke
and yellow wolf skin.

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A Good Dog Buries Its Bone

The first weeks with their dad in the hospital, Ezekiel and Zuriyah make do just like he'd want them to. Ezekiel fixes their food: saltines and cheese, ramen, bag cereal. They bring the paper in each day and set it by Big Joe's chair—just in case—the arms still slick with his grease. *Make do*. Ezekiel repeats this to himself, but he knows that making do has just about run out.

He shakes his brother awake at sunrise. The bus will come in two hours to pick Zuriyah up for the gifted kids summer camp, and it will take Ezekiel that long to get Zuriyah fed and washed up. In the kitchen, Zuriyah lists to one side and rubs his eyes, naked except his underwear, faded and sagging against his high-yellow skin.

"Little man," Ezekiel says, "you want me make you some eggs?"

Zuriyah slumps in a chair and buries his face in his arms. "I want cereal."

Every morning he wants cereal, so many mornings in a row that the bottom of the bag is nothing but sugary dust. "There's no cereal."

Zuriyah shifts deeper into his folded arms. Tufts of tight, wiry curls seem to have sprouted from his head overnight. "You need a haircut," Ezekiel says, and he makes a note to buzz Zuriyah's hair with the clippers.

Ezekiel opens the fridge, and neon-white light floods the kitchen. He can count the items remaining on one hand: half a carton of eggs, some milk, ketchup, a block of cheese, and some pickles his Aunt Honor sends from Kentucky. He pulls the eggs out, and a densely putrid odor knocks him back. Each egg has been smashed inward, edges of shell tainted sewage green.

"What the fuck?" Ezekiel shoves the carton at Zuriyah who shrugs, eyes heavy with sleep.

"I didn't do that," Zuriyah says.

"Man, that's our food!"

Zuriah rises slowly and tries to inch away, but Ezekiel snatches him by his arm before he can get anywhere. Ezekiel hit a growth spurt this year, growing almost as tall as Big Joe, and the way his body has stretched and filled out has made the six years between them seem like a generation.

Zuriah squirms and flops in Ezekiel's grasp. "You're hurting me, Zeke. Lemme go." He jerks left and right, but Ezekiel's fingers cut into the skinny flesh of his arm.

"Tell me what the fuck you were doing."

Rot has bloomed in the kitchen, and Ezekiel gags on it. How can everything keep going so wrong? Ezekiel pulls his shirt over his nose and breathes through his mouth.

"Tell me," he says. "What were you thinking? We're running out of food."

Zuriah stops squirming and plants his feet. He hardens his mouth and glares into Ezekiel. "You ain't Big Joe," he says.

"That's got nothing to do with it."

"You ain't Big Joe." He looks down at Ezekiel's grip then back up, eyes burning. "Let me go."

Ezekiel flings Zuriah into the wall and turns away. He takes the bleach from under the counter and dumps some in a bowl. "You going to scrub this kitchen. Fuck breakfast. You going to scrub the whole thing right now." When Ezekiel turns back to hand the bucket to his brother, Zuriah shakes his head, his mouth a furious fault line. Anger rips at Ezekiel, but the thinness of Zuriah's face stops him. Too many skipped meals since Big Joe fell down with his stroke. "Zuriah, I didn't mean to be yelling."

Zuriah shakes his head again. "I got to get ready," he says. When the bus honks, he sprints through the house, backpack flopping behind him, and he doesn't even tell Ezekiel goodbye.

*

The whirl of Shop'n'Save's automatic doors sound to Ezekiel like science-fiction movies trying to simulate a spaceship. Florescent lights flicker overhead and turn the white checkout girls yellow, veins as green as garden snakes. They flip through magazines and chew on their nails and don't look up as he walks by.

When he was little and Zuriah's mom still lived with them, he snatched a candy bar from the checkout while she wrestled with Zuriah's pumpkin seat and the grocery basket and rooted in her purse for exact change. In the car, Ezekiel tapped his finger on the plastic wrapper while Zuriah's mom sang along with Al Green all the way home.

She discovered the candy as she unbuckled his seatbelt. She told Big Joe the story at dinner in her tinkling laugh. Big Joe's jaw tightened as he glared at his son. He marched Ezekiel all the way back to the grocery store and clamped his shoulder until Ezekiel apologized to a balding, egg-faced old man.

*

Now, Ezekiel starts in the meat section. They can get by longer on ground beef, but the sight of a steak rumbles his stomach. He waits for a woman to pass, the mouth-breathing toddler in her basket staring wide-eyed, lip crusted with snot. Ezekiel backs against the aluminum rail and slips the steak into the waistband of his jeans.

He almost skips to the cereal aisle and finds it empty of other people. He considers the trays of generic, bagged cereal, globby cartoons on the fronts as if a purple blob can convince kids they taste as good as the real stuff in the box. No matter where he puts it, the bag will crinkle as he walks. It occurs to him that he doesn't have to worry about stretching his last twenty-dollar bill. He grins as he jams a box down the front of his pants. The aisle still empty, he swaggers to the next one.

He manages to squeeze a couple ramens in each back pocket and a bag of rice in his sock. Zuriyah will want a Butterfinger, but Ezekiel wants oranges, an entire bag of them, enough to suck the juice and pitch the rind. He thinks he can fit at least a couple inside his T-shirt on top of the cereal box.

Two white parents are arguing near the potatoes and onions, and a kid about six walks alongside the cart with his fingers woven in the wires. As his parents shout, he stares at his shoes as if nothing is happening. Beside them, a fat kid with a wild fire of acne along his face and neck is stacking oranges into an impossibly tall pyramid. When Ezekiel is thinking about shuffling his way back out the door, the kid looks up and smiles as if he's waited all day for someone to meet his eyes. He waves for Ezekiel to come over.

Ezekiel's strut has become more like a limp as the steak slides lower in the seat of his jeans, and the waxy-bright globes of fruit just can't be worth it. "Yeah, man, I'm good," he says.

"No, come 'ere. Look at this." The boy palms another orange and slides it into its notch between two others.

The light flickers, an urgent and sinister hum. Ezekiel sighs and glances at the little boy, but the boy keeps his eyes trained on his sneakers as his parents squawk over him. The mother has gotten so worked up that splotches of red have bled across her neck and chest.

"What you need?" Ezekiel asks the fat kid.

"Look." He points at his tower of oranges.

"Yeah," Ezekiel says.

The fat kid grabs Ezekiel's shoulder and pulls him close. "Look here," he says and points his finger into a dark tunnel in the pyramid's center.

Ezekiel steadies the box of cereal under his sweatshirt and leans over to peer in. "I don't see anything."

The fat boy snorts and grins. "*Look.*"

The lights shift, or the sun has newly slanted through the windows, or Ezekiel has slipped through looking right into seeing, and whatever it is illuminates a small patch of soggy cardboard that pads the bottom of the display. There, trapped by this boy's tower, lies a cockroach as big and ugly as an old man's thumb. Its back glistens with a wet-black sheen, and one of its legs juts out beneath it at a terrible, twitching angle.

Ezekiel steps back. "The fuck is wrong with you?"

The fat boy doesn't look up; he watches the cockroach and shakes his head. "It's dying."

Ezekiel thinks of the first time he took Zuriah to visit their father. Big Joe crumpled beneath a sheet, tubes sprouting from his shriveled body, alien machine clicks punctuating their silence. They looked everywhere but at him: they read the card from people who called him Joey; out the window at a parking lot; at the bleached white of linoleum. Big Joe murmured in his sleep and pulled at tube in his nose, but he didn't once wake up.

The fat kid stacks another orange. "Bet it came all the way from Mexico in a box or something. What's funny is all these people walking around grabbing their oranges. They don't

even know I left this fucking cockroach in here!" The kid laughs and slaps at Ezekiel as if to shake hands.

Ezekiel shoves the fat boy's shoulder and grabs an orange from the pyramid. "You are fucked up. You are really fucked up." Ezekiel holds the orange up to the boy and thrusts it in the front pocket of his jeans. "Say something," he says.

The fat boy shrugs. "I just work here." He goes back to stacking, the pyramid spiraling higher and higher, the dying cockroach nestled inside.

Fucking white boy, building houses for dead bugs. He tugs at his belt, the steak now riding down his leg, and he turns toward the exit to find the shouting mother from earlier staring at him. Up close she looks haggard and mean. She grimaces as if he's hurt her, and her fingers inch toward her purse in the basket. She shakes her head, her mouth yanked farther into that ugly frown.

"I seen you," she says. The little boy, his fingers still curled in the basket wire, finally looks up from the floor. Ezekiel can see it as plain as if the boy spoke it out loud. He can hear the mother's retelling of the moment over and over, reciting it on the phone to all her friends. The nigger stealing right in front of everybody, pushing produce clerks, acting like he ain't got no sense.

Ezekiel backs away from her, back toward the fat boy, into the father walking up behind him. "What's going on?" the father asks.

Ezekiel breaks into a crippled run, pleading with all the groceries to stay tucked in his clothes. He makes it to the bathroom, shoves through the door, and unloads everything he's taken into the trashcan. The manager stops him on the way out, and Ezekiel burns with indignation.

*

At home, no stolen groceries, Ezekiel is starving and out of ideas. He rummages through Zuriah's room, and hidden in his underwear drawer, tangled with a hundred other scraps of paper, he finds the phone number of Zuriah's mom's new boyfriend. Two hours later, Ezekiel watches her roll from the passenger seat of a jacked-up Lincoln like a wave to shore. She is tall, her blonde hair long and wavy like the hippies wore it. His brother's features mimic hers—upturned nose, a serious upper lip over a fleshier bottom one, her whiteness tingeing Zuriah honey-brown, tempering the purple-dark skin of their father.

"This place never changes," she says walking up. She waves to the Lincoln as it drives away, but no one waves back. She looks up and down the block, empty in the summer heat, most everybody inside with window-airs going full blast. She wears a tank top without a bra, her breasts heavy and flat on her chest, the nipples like pebbles at the bottom of a sack. "You just keep getting big," she says.

He doesn't answer, and she smiles and pushes her hair from her face with one fluid movement. "Don't worry," she says. "Big Joe will be fine. Nothing's ever stopped that man from doing shit."

Across the street the Shonda twins squat in their front yard and stare, their redbone faces dirty and scrunched ugly in the sun. Zuriah's mom fingers the air as if playing an instrument, but the twins only glare back at her. "You know those girls?" she asks.

Ezekiel slaps at a funnel of gnats near his head. She can't see it, but Roshonda, the bigger, meaner one, has her middle finger cocked behind her leg, at Ezekiel. She has declared war on him.

"They're brats," he says.

"I knew their mom. They look just like her. It's like the world don't change. I mean, you leave and you change, but it's like the world don't. No, wait. It's the other way around." She shakes her head, and her hair shimmers. "Their mom used to run with yours. They were the badass girls. Beat the shit out of me once."

They stand there, the Shonda twins watching them, gnats humming in the air, until Ezekiel aches with the silence. He has one picture of his mother, a wallet-sized black and white from her senior year of high school. She sits with her chin pulled to her neck, glancing at the camera sideways, shyly. Since Big Joe will never speak about her, Ezekiel's imagined a sweet, soft-spoken woman who made lemonade on Sundays and liked to bake pies. "You never said that before," he says.

She nods and considers him. "Yeah, well, you're older now, aren't you?"

He gets up, his teeth grinding. "Let's go in," he says and leads her to the kitchen where he hoists himself on the countertop and bangs his heels on the cabinets below. He sees Sharon watching him and slides down.

"You know," she says. "Your dad ain't going to like me being in his kitchen."

"I know."

"You probably shouldn't tell him."

"I know."

She studies him, her face concealing whatever she thinks, and then it relaxes into an easy smile that makes Ezekiel want to tell her his secrets.

She pulls a plate from the cabinet behind Ezekiel's head, sits at their kitchen table, and pushes aside a pile of junk mail and bills and letters Ezekiel doesn't know how to respond to.

She pulls a bag of weed from inside her jeans, and Ezekiel notices slivers of dirt under her fingernails. She rolls a joint as straight as a cigarette, lights it, puffs, and finally pulls smoke into her mouth. It rests there like a storm gathering on her tongue. "You want some?" she asks.

Ezekiel takes it and sucks. The end sparks, and a tight-fisted fireball rolls to his chest. He doubles over and hacks and holds the joint out for Sharon to take it.

She laughs. "You need practice."

"I have practice," he says between coughs.

She looks out the window, that acrobatic face now slack with sadness. "You shouldn't know about these things. I want a world where boys don't know the weight of living." She sighs and blows smoke toward the ceiling. "You look just like your father, you know? Your body is all muscle. I can see it. The two of you were made for running out on beautiful women."

Smoke drifts in the room, shifting and curling in the light. He thinks of his father in his armchair, his little black and white TV bleating with baseball announcers, his body weighted with something, always stooping, leaning, drooping. Ezekiel's body feels nothing like that. It feels light as air.

He stands, wavers, a blade of grass in the wind. He opens a cupboard to expose a can of tuna and two cans of kidney beans. "We need food," he says.

"I know, honey. I'm living on the kindness of a man who enjoys my company. You know if I had it—"

Impatient, he cuts her off. "Zuriah said you got a job."

"The world drifts, baby. It gives and it takes. The great cycle of life."

Ezekiel rubs at his eyes. "You ain't listening. We need some food." And then, because he can think of nothing else to say, "You're Zuriah's mother. You can't just let us starve."

"How old are you now?"

"Fourteen."

She presses her lips flat and rolls her eyes up as if adding up the years between her leaving when Zuriah was a baby and now. "Then you are old enough to know about regret, Zeke. And even worse, you're old enough to figure out about things you're supposed to be and things you're just not." She rises and comes to him. She smells like mud and rain-soaked wood and beneath that a salty musk as deep as a man's. "You," she says, "are old enough to know what it's like to hate yourself, yeah?"

Snapped from what feels like a trance, he squirms away from her. "I'm serious, Sharon." He slams the cabinet shut and opens it again as if the sound might wake her, too. "We don't have any food."

She folds her hands into a prayer and closes her eyes. The smell of her has saturated the room. Ezekiel gambled on her sympathies, that nugget of motherhood inside her, certain she'd leave groceries for Zuriah. But if she'd wanted him, she never would've left him here in the first place. Ezekiel has made a tactical error.

"Fine," he says. "I can take care of him."

She moves in front of him again and places her palms on his cheeks. She pulls his face close to hers. He feels as if he might drown in this woman's smell. "You look exactly like your father," she says. "Your granny said you looked like your mother, but now, now you look just like Big Joe, as tall as he is and all."

He remains still and holds his breath.

"You look just like him," she says again. "You'll be a good man just like him, too. Do you know that?"

"No," he says.

As if she has just awoken, she pulls her hands to her lower lip, fingers trembling. Her brow furrows, and she tugs at a raw tag of flesh on her fingernail. "I should go. I'll see what I can do."

"What does that mean?"

She smiles and traces the side of his cheek. "It means I'll figure something out. I always do."

*

She doesn't come back until dark. Zuriyah has long been home from the summer camp and planted in front of the TV in the living room. They haven't eaten dinner yet, and Ezekiel wants to wait for Sharon as long as he can. Despite the unlikelihood, he waits for Sharon to return with all the items from the supermarket that he dumped. He wants her to just *know*. He dreams of the steak frying on the stovetop, only their laughter louder than the sizzle. He wants her to bring back something special to repay Zuriyah for leaving half his sandwich from camp on the counter for Ezekiel to find.

Ezekiel is in Big Joe's bedroom when headlights wash over the walls. He hears a car door slam, keys drop, and Sharon cursing. He meets her at the front door and immediately smells the sheen of alcohol on her skin. Her mouth lifts into a sloppy grin, and she holds up a paper bag and Happy Meal box. "I brought McDonalds! Everybody likes McDonalds." She nudges past Ezekiel and shakes the bag at Zuriyah. "I got you a Happy Meal."

Zuriyah looks at Ezekiel. "What's she doing here?"

"She wants a visit."

Sharon forces a laugh like a balloon leaking air. "Don't you want to see your mom?" Her face slackens as Zuriah turns back to the TV without answering her.

"He's just tired," Ezekiel offers.

Relieved, Sharon sets the Happy Meal and drink on the coffee table next to Zuriah's bare feet. She looks up, waits, and then pats the box. "Eat."

"Let's talk in the kitchen," Ezekiel says.

She wobbles to her feet and follows him. "I got us some cheeseburgers."

The food smells amazing, all that grease and salt, and Ezekiel wants to snatch the bag and run to his room to eat the whole thing. He grabs two cups from the cabinets and dumps ice in both of them. He has enough Kool-aid left to fill their glasses half way.

"I thought you was bringing groceries."

She pulls out two hamburgers, a Big Mac, and two large fries. "I did. I brought this."

He sets the glasses on the table. "Thank you, Sharon. This is good. But we need food for more than today."

Zuriah comes to the kitchen doorway and leans on the trim. "What else she bring?" he asks.

"Baby, you don't want your Happy Meal?"

Ezekiel grabs the Big Mac and hands it to Zuriah. "Bring your cheeseburger. I'll eat it."

Zuriah brings the Happy Meal back to exchange. He says to his mom, "Ezekiel likes cheeseburgers. Not me."

"She knows, Z.," Ezekiel says.

"Big Joe says she's not welcome in the house."

Sharon smiles and looks from one to the other. "Come on, your daddy and me are just fine now. Quit making this more than it is."

Zuriah goes back to the living room, and the volume rises on the TV set.

"Is he always like this?" Sharon asks.

"No."

"Where's Big Joe keep his liquor?"

"He don't drink."

She looks truly disappointed, even more than when Zuriah wouldn't look at her. "Since when?"

Ezekiel shrugs. "Since forever."

She unwraps one of the cheeseburgers and shoves half of it in her mouth. She looks drowned in alcohol, her face bloated. With her mouth full, she says, "You remember that dog you brought home when I lived here?"

Ezekiel can't help but shove half his cheeseburger in his mouth, too. He's straving.

"What dog?"

"It was a pit bull, maybe. Or a Rottweiler. You swore it followed you home from somewhere, but we knew you dragged it with you." She licks at her fingers and laughs. "Your daddy hated animals, but he let you keep that dog. You remember?"

Ezekiel found it in a gas station parking lot. It was a scrawny pit bull puppy with mangy skin, its eyes lolling with hunger. Big Joe flat refused, but he relented when Sharon and Ezekiel were squealing and chasing it around the back yard.

"We named her Pepper," he said. He wanted Sharon to roll a joint again so that the muscles bunched in his shoulders would relax, but he didn't want to ask her.

"And he made you get rid of her, right?"

Pepper got pregnant, her fat stomach flopped in front of her as she lay in the dirt. One Sunday Big Joe pulled him out of bed and shoved his clothes at him and took him to the truck, Pepper already in the back. Got to learn, he said, you take care of things or you lose them. Ezekiel didn't understand at all what he meant.

The whole ride to the farm, Ezekiel cried. He crawled through the cab's back window and clung to Pepper's neck and wailed, and sometimes Pepper howled with him. She didn't jut her neck over the truck's edge. She knew.

Sharon unwraps another burger and this time peels a chunk off and tosses it in her mouth. "That was a farm he took her to. I know that's probably not better, but he didn't just let her go. Those people wanted to take care of her and her puppies. It's because you were too young, and me and him was fighting all the time, and Zuriyah was just a baby. It was better for the dog."

Ezekiel doesn't like her right now, the way she leans toward him and waits, as if she is waiting for him to understand. He needs food for the house. He needs money for the electric bill. He needs to know his dad is going to come home from the hospital and that their lives will be the same. He doesn't need fucking McDonalds and stupid stories about his fucking dog. "It's time for you to go, Sharon. Zuriyah's got to get up for camp in the morning."

Sharon reaches out and holds his wrist. "I'm not going without him."

"Without who?" She's drunk, talking nonsense, and Ezekiel's tired of it.

"I'm taking him with me."

Her meaning descends on him like night, and he snatches his arm back and stands so quickly his chair screeches. "Get out."

"I'm sorry. I am sorry to be doing this to you. I taught you to tie your shoes. Do you remember that? I loved you. But he's my son, and I fucked everything up, and I can't just leave him here, Zeke. You got to understand that. You can't even feed him."

"Zuriah," he calls, but he doesn't know what he wants his brother to do—run? Call the hospital? None of it will do any good—so he says, "Never mind."

"Sit down, Ezekiel. We're talking."

A whine hums in his chest, expanding toward panic, the kind of shrill alarm that comes with being pinned to the ground by someone bigger than you. He clears his throat. "Get out."

"This can be easy. It can." She looks sober now, and he wonders if she faked the drunkenness to disarm him. The redness has drained from her face, even the water-logged eyes, and she looks now more like the dreamy woman in his kitchen earlier that day. "I want this to be easy." She stands, and Ezekiel flinches and hates himself for it. "How old are you?" she asks.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"You're fourteen, baby. Fourteen. Now, I'm sorry you don't have a mom to come help you, but he does. And you're *fourteen*." She picks up the phone receiver. From the living room a deep voice cackles in fits. "We can call the police. See who they think he should go with. Which would land your ass in foster care quick."

He wants to say, *You fucking cunt. You fucking cunt.* But his tongue lays fat in his mouth, useless.

The phone starts to bleat, and she sets it back in its cradle. "We're going to go in there and tell him together. He needs to hear it from you. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Ezekiel looks down at the dirty linoleum. A hole has wormed through the toe of his sneaker. He can't explain it, but this breaks him open. He summons hate and menace to his voice; still, it shakes. "When he gets out of the hospital, he's going to kill you. Just know that."

Sharon pulls her fingers to her mouth again and tugs her nail. "I know it."

They approach Zuriyah as a wall united against him, and Ezekiel sees Zuriyah register this. Sharon turns off the television. "Baby," she says, "Ezekiel and I have been talking."

"I was watching that." Zuriyah shifts on the couch, his skinny legs in a tangle beneath him. He's so small for his age, twig limbs, a washboard of ribs under his shirt. Ezekiel has always watched out for him in the neighborhood, sure the first fight will crack him open and leave his body smeared on the road like a puppy caught under a semi.

Sharon folds her arms across her chest. "It's time to listen, baby. You're going to come stay with me for a while. I got a room with a friend, and he says of course I can bring you there. He's nice, you'll like him, he even let me borrow his car—"

Zuriyah kicks his feet out from under him, smiles, and circles his finger by his ear, and this gesture is so unbearably young that Ezekiel starts crying right then. "She's serious, Z. You got to stay with her. I can't take care of you."

Zuriyah sucks his bottom lip in and blinks at both of them. When his lip pops from his mouth, it trembles. "I ain't going with her."

Ezekiel sits on the couch, but Zuriyah scrambles away. "I ain't going with her. She can't make me. Call Big Joe. Call the hospital."

"Z., please. You got to. She's your mom."

Sharon stands there with her hands together, that stupid smile straining her face. "Come on, sweetie. It won't be bad. As soon as your daddy's out you can come right back, and Ezekiel

can visit any time he wants. I can even come get him. Or, we can come here. Now, what do you want to pack? Ezekiel, where's his shit?"

Zuriah narrows his eyes at Ezekiel and hisses, "Why are you doing this to me?"

Sharon throws Zuriah's clothes in a trash bag. She finds a long-forgotten stuffed bear under a bed and assumes that he will want it later. She even takes a couple pairs of Ezekiel's shorts, oblivious to the difference in size. Finally, she grabs Zuriah's hand and pulls him toward the door, his body leaning all his weight away from her, her other hand wrestling the trash bag. Ezekiel follows them outside and down the walk to the Lincoln. Zuriah has started screaming now, his body heaving with hiccups. He sobs as she folds him in the backseat. As they pull away, Ezekiel can make out his brother's head through the back windshield, and he knows that Zuriah has turned himself around, and Ezekiel floods with shame for what Zuriah sees.

When Big Joe pulled the truck off to the side of the road that day long ago, he made Ezekiel let go of Pepper and climb out the truck first. Ezekiel turned back to call to her, and the dog dropped her head, her lip peeled back to reveal purple gums and sharp teeth. She growled. He's never forgotten that, the way she suddenly recognized him. The way she saw what he'd hidden.

Defensive Wounds

The day they found his sister Hannah's body, Nicholas kept hearing people say *by the lake, defensive wounds, signs of*— but he stopped listening there. A couple of kids had spotted her in a state park, body half submerged in the water, naked. Months later, when Nicholas tried to recall her face, he imagined piss-colored lake water leaking from her twenty-seven stab wounds. After that image faded, he dreamt of her hands—chipped purple nail polish, plastic daisy ring—thrust in front of her, pushing out at nothing but air and knife. Now, a year later, he saw her face everywhere because his mom had plastered it all over town: at the Shop'n'Save, the Handee-Mart, the grimy storefront windows of Gliks and the Hit and Run.

The fliers were how Hannah's boyfriend found Nicholas. He hadn't heard from Ezekiel since she died, but a few months ago, the first letter arrived, and days later another. The letters said that Ezekiel missed her at least as much as Nicholas and his parents did. That he'd been clean four months, which he knew didn't sound like a lot, but it was; four months sober was a lifetime.

Now, the two of them always met behind the liquor store on the way out of town and drove together back toward Cahokia where they'd grown up. Nicholas's family had a farmhouse near there that his granny had owned until she died; it had sat abandoned for years. Their first time there, they built a fire pit and dragged stumps from the woods to sit on, and sometimes they barely spoke a word to the whole time. Ezekiel pulled the car into the gravel drive just as the last of the sun's streaks faded and left a bright, white moon in their place.

“It’s crazy,” Ezekiel said, as they got out of the car, “barely twenty minutes from my house, and it’s straight-up country.”

It was crazy. All of Cahokia’s kids had grown up close enough to the city to imitate city problems: kinking their hands into gang signs or showing heroin around in tinfoil, even if they didn’t know what do with it at first. But on the weekends, everyone Nicholas knew drove into the country. They took a left away from the river and closed their eyes, the city peeling away. Their world could open into a great expanse of nothing but field and sky, one blending into another, seamless in a way that made Nicholas ache.

“Pretty out here, though,” Nicholas said, sitting down on a log near the fire pit they’d dug their first time.

“I guess it is,” Ezekiel answered.

Nicholas’s granny’s house was a small, white Colonial with a collapsing roof. When she was alive, she grew blackberry bushes up chicken wire by the porch and a messy row of sunflowers along the side. Now the house sat empty on a hunk of land his father hoped to sell to developers for “more money than God’s got.”

“Me and Hannah had our rooms in there,” Nicholas said and pointed at the house.

“Looks like it’s going to fall the minute you put a toe in it.”

It was true. The front porch sagged to one side, and the paint had peeled years ago and left dirty white flecks on the wood so that the house looked like a spotted animal slumped in the moonlight. He and Hannah used to talk about taking it from their dad when they grew up, fixing the roof, and living in it together. Hannah wanted a yellow kitchen and a purple living room, and Nicholas wanted to paint the outside a blue so royal it could run for king.

Nicholas fidgeted with some twigs. “We played out here all the time. We’d stay here for a whole summer when we were little.”

They tossed some kindling and sticks in the fire pit, and Nicholas squirted a stream of lighter fluid on top. The fire exploded with a whoosh when Ezekiel dropped a match, but the flames died to a simmer. They sat down, and Ezekiel pulled a bottle of Crown Royal from his back pocket. “It’s like a haunted house in there,” Ezekiel said and pointed at the house.

“What’s that mean?”

Ezekiel handed Nicholas the bottle. “Just what I said.”

“I thought you all couldn’t drink.”

“Who’s ‘you all’?”

“A.A. people.”

“I wasn’t in A.A, fool.” Ezekiel snatched the bottle back, put the cap on, and set it next to him. “Besides, I never had a problem with drinking.”

They sat quietly and listened to insect noise rise in pitch until it seemed too loud to talk again. A curtain flapped through a busted windowpane, and Nicholas figured his Granny had made those curtains, and that made him remember that she’d loved this house.

“I don’t even think my dad comes out here anymore,” Nicholas said.

“Your dad?”

“Yeah. He says it’s a shithole that costs too much to tear down.”

“Your dad has a way with words, for sure.” Ezekiel rubbed his eyes as if trying to relieve a headache. “I been wanting to ask you,” he said finally, “your parents still hate me?”

The question surprised Nicholas. The handful of times they’d met out here they’d talked mostly about Hannah, the way she could trip over flat ground but climb a tree until the

branches ran out. Sometimes they talked about football or school or Ezekiel's job on the barges. But Nicholas didn't want to think about his parents when he didn't have to.

"I don't know what they think. Who cares?"

The truth was that his father hadn't thought Ezekiel capable of stabbing anyone, but his parents shared a mutual and intense need to blame him. The police had arrested Ezekiel a few days after they'd pulled Hannah's body from the lake. The boyfriend, the last one to see her alive, the twenty-three-year-old man with a nineteen-year-old girl and a drug offense already on his record: he was the natural suspect.

They let him go a few days later. Nicholas overheard a detective telling his parents that when they'd slapped the photos of her body on the table, Ezekiel had howled like an animal with its leg caught in a trap. The detective had taken his mom's hand and said, "You have to know, I've never seen anyone scream like that before."

"My dad," Nicholas said, "he thinks you're okay."

Ezekiel laughed. "I'm being serious."

Nicholas pictured the words before he said them, hot smears of orange and red. "He thinks you didn't do it, but maybe you know who did. He thinks you're a fuck-up and a loser. He thinks she didn't do drugs before she met you, which is stupid. He thinks you should've protected her."

Ezekiel pulled a long swallow from the Crown bottle. "That's fair," he said. "Fair enough."

"Why even care what he thinks? It's not like he's father of the year."

"Your dad's right, Nicky. I was around and I loved her, and I was too fucked up to see straight." Ezekiel drained the last of the Crown and tossed the empty bottle in the fire. He

stood and looked up at the stars scattered across the sky. “But we all got shit we got to live with, don’t we?”

*

Nicholas tossed his keys on the kitchen table and handed his mom a bag of groceries and the change from his pocket. He pointed to a fresh stack of fliers on the table. “Where those going?”

“I have a talk in Albers tonight. I need some help. I was going to pay Mikey, but his mom called and said he’s got a fever.”

After they’d found Hannah’s body, his mom had stayed in bed for a month, sleeping or watching *All My Children* with the sound turned off. He and his father wanted to recede like this, to lock themselves away until they could breathe again. But the two of them hadn’t done that. They microwaved box dinners and ate them together without talking. They watched television in the evenings until Nicholas went to his room and his father slept on the couch, a habit that stuck until he moved out for the final time.

Nicholas shook his head. Absolutely not. His mom could run all over the place scaring kids with her speeches about Hannah the Great Victim, but that was her deal, not his.

“I can’t,” Nicholas said.

His mom picked at a black pebble of jelly on the countertop. “You don’t have to stay.”

He remained quiet for so long that she sighed and turned away. He prepared himself to hear that she asked little of him, that he could wash his own clothes, make his own meals. That she was trying to take the horrible thing that had happened and make something good

out of it, and that if he tried, too, he might not be so angry all the time. “Bullshit,” he said without meaning to.

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t know why you keep printing this crap.”

“What crap?”

He stood, skidding the chair across the linoleum. It was useless, hanging those stupid fliers all around the town they’d moved to after Hannah died, when her body was found almost an hour from here. Like his mom didn’t want to know who killed Hannah because then what would she do? “The fliers, Mom. The fliers are crap.”

“Is it the reward? I should offer a bigger one, maybe. It’s just that your dad said the last amount was enough, and he won’t put up any more—”

“It’s not the reward.”

“The picture’s too old? I’ll print a new one.”

“She’s still dead,” he said.

“What?”

“You make her a fucking monster.”

His mom backed to the counter as if he’d slapped her. He waited for her hand to dart out, smack his mouth, the curse word the only one she’d ever heard him say. She cleared her throat but didn’t look up. Her voice came out low and coarse, stripped to the bone. “There’s leftovers in the fridge,” she said. She stormed to her bedroom, slammed the door, and Nicholas knew she sat on the edge of her bed, crying.

He woke up later that evening with a headache that throbbed with his heartbeat. He'd been dreaming of the Hannah he wanted to forget, a snarling bird-like creature that followed him around asking, Why? Why? Why?

In the kitchen, he grabbed orange juice from the fridge and drank out of the carton until cold juice spilled down his chest. Taped to the door was a note from his mother:

Nicholas, call your father. Love you.

He dialed his father's shop and waited while the phone rang. When they put his father on the phone, Nicholas said, "So, what's up?"

"I should ask you that question."

"Why?"

His dad coughed into the receiver. "You have your half saved for the car yet?"

"You know I don't."

"Hmm," his father said. "Your mom says you worked until two a.m. last night."

"Huh." Nicholas leaned on the wall and tapped the back of his head against it. He hoped his father could hear.

"It's not that we don't trust you. You know that." His father cleared his throat.

"Nicholas, I got a letter here at the shop the other day."

Nicholas looked around the kitchen for food. "Yeah, a letter?"

"From Ezekiel."

"Who's Ezekiel?"

"Don't play stupid. He says I have a good son. I should be proud. Have you seen him lately?"

"No."

“Are you sure?”

“I think I would know.”

“Tell your job you can’t close anymore. Your curfew’s eleven now.”

“Eleven?”

“When I was seventeen I had to be home at nine. Eleven. Counts for work, too. Tell your mom I sent her check and to quit bitching about it, will you?”

Nicholas slammed the receiver and stomped to the bathroom. Across the hallway, Hannah’s door hung half open, and Nicholas could see all of the boxes his mom had marked for the Goodwill. She’d told Nicholas that parents only did two things with their grief, and she wasn’t spending the next ten years dusting a shrine to her dead child. But instead of a shrine of Hannah’s things—a cheery lilac comforter and curtains, rock stars leering from the walls—his mom had turned the room into a heap of reward fliers and police reports and mug shots and buried any trace of Hannah inside. Nicholas walked over and slammed the door.

A few hours later he emerged from his room, lured by the heavy smell of bacon frying. He found his mom in the kitchen humming a song he didn’t recognize but that felt familiar. He put his arms around her and stooped so that he could rest his head on her shoulder. She hugged him and squeezed. “Oh, my Nicky, it’s okay.”

Nicholas didn’t understand why he wanted to cry as he hugged her. He hadn’t even cried at Hannah’s funeral. He’d wanted some kind of release, but he felt only a grief as dry and suffocating as swimming through sand, and he had no idea how it would ever end. Now, Nicholas rubbed at his eyes, pulled himself from his mom, and sat down at the table.

“What’s wrong, baby?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“I thought we’d have breakfast for dinner. You hungry?”

He knew she wanted to ask if he’d spoken to his father but didn’t because of the silent agreement among the three of them, another absence that compounded the others until Nicholas felt filled with negative space.

“About today,” he began, “I didn’t mean to—”

But before he could finish, his mom shook her head and waved his words away.

“Let’s eat,” she said.

She set a plate in front of him, pushed his hair behind his ears, and leaned down to kiss the top of his forehead. “I have another talk at a church tonight in New Baden. Come with me. I think if you saw what I did—” She let her voice trail off and slid more bacon onto his plate. “If you saw the kids.”

Nicholas shoved the rest of his pancake into his mouth and looked up at his mom. In the evening light, she looked ready to lie down where she stood.

*

They drove the back roads, slowing to a crawl behind an old tractor and then speeding along the last few miles, no one else on the road. Finally, they pulled into the parking lot of a brick church with a large gymnasium attached to the rear. Nicholas helped his mom carry a box of pamphlets, the projector, and a batch of fliers inside.

He set up her equipment then sat on a low corner of the bleachers and watched about forty kids straggle in. After they settled, the lights clicked off, and Hannah’s face flashed on the projector screen behind his mom. The photo had been taken at their cousin’s wedding a

year and a half before she died. Nicholas recognized his own thin arm, neatly sliced from his body and draped across Hannah's shoulders.

He wanted to remember her like that photograph, flushed from the evening heat and champagne. He needed to forget the girl who moved out a year later. The sharp-boned girl with feral eyes flicking at Nicholas as she begged their parents for a little more money. That girl began to feel like an apparition, a spirit that had peeled Hannah's skin and worn it over its bones. What he thought of as the worst—skinny, cat-eyed Hannah crying at the kitchen table—had only been a bad omen of things to come. That Hannah lurked everywhere he went, and he hated her with a force that could torch a whole city.

Standing at a podium near the front of the gymnasium, his mom cleared her throat and waited until the murmurs fell silent, the kids mesmerized by the ghostly light of his sister on the large screen in front of them.

“This,” she said, “is my daughter.” His mom stood taller with her shoulders back. “She was a normal kid like you. She played volleyball and went to the movies on weekends with her friends.”

He could guess what came next in the show, the story of Hannah his mom told most. It didn't matter that Hannah had stopped playing volleyball in eighth grade or that weekend movies were actually nights with Ezekiel. His mom needed them to believe that Hannah had been just like them, normal kids, and that what happened to her was the same as getting cancer.

His mom looked around the auditorium, her eyes lingering on faces in the crowd before she continued. “But somehow I lost that little girl to a world I didn't even know existed.” The projector clicked, and Hannah's mug shot, taken three months before she died,

flashed on the screen. In this photo, her skin had yellowed and gone waxy, and it stretched over her face, making her cheeks and chin look sharp enough to cut. It was a goblin photograph, the witch living in the woods.

A whisper rolled through the crowd, the kids giddy in the darkness and lured by danger. They laughed nervously, maybe uneasy from the sores on her cheeks. She'd come to the house just before her arrest. She snuck through his bedroom window and lay on the floor and cried. Nicky, please, just ask them for me. He was afraid of her, and disgusted. She twitched and chewed her lips, already cracked in the corners and crusted with blood, and, so she would leave, he went to his parents and asked for the money. He tossed it at her, as afraid of touching her as he would be a leper. She gnawed her cheek as she gathered the bills and stuffed them in her bra, her eyes as flat and dull as coins. You saved my life, Nicky, you don't even know, she'd said.

His mother waited for the whispers to quiet then continued. "The world is a scary place. Unimaginable things wait out there. They can take you as easily as they took my daughter." What she meant, Nicholas knew, was that his mother needed to believe in this possibility the way she needed to believe in a god that would allow her to meet Hannah in heaven. She needed to believe in the myth of Hannah snatched from the safety of their home by invisible sources.

His mom told this story over and over again in which she had done everything she could, insisting it with these fucking lectures and her stupid pamphlets, when in fact none of them had done anything. Both his mom and his father always asking *Who did this? Who did this?* when they all had. They'd all watched her die that year.

*

Nicholas sprinted to a gas station down the road from the church and called his father. His father's new girlfriend, Tammy, answered the phone in that awful country twang of hers.

"What are you doing there?" Nicholas asked.

"Oh. Nicholas. Well, I'm making eggplant, actually. That recipe you liked."

Nicholas could hear her kids in the background, two little girls, arguing about the remote control. "Your kids are there, too?" It had never occurred to Nicholas that Tammy brought her kids over. She never brought them when Nicholas stayed the weekend, and he'd just assumed that his father hadn't even met them.

"Well, yes, the girls are here."

He could picture her smiling on the other end, forcing it into her voice. It made him sick to watch Tammy try so hard to make him like her. She was like those kids at school who'd always eaten lunch alone but suddenly found themselves invited to some shit party that everyone got invited to.

"Is my dad there?"

He heard the receiver scratch while Tammy handed it off, and then his father said, "Everything all right?"

"I'm in New Baden. With Mom." Nicholas slouched against the phone stand. "And, I just, can you come get me?"

His dad didn't say anything, and in the silence Nicholas could hear the familiar tin-can laugh of a TV cartoon, and he could see Hannah on the floor of their granny's house in her pink sweatpants, her ratty bunny stuffed under her chin like a pillow, and he thought if he

closed his eyes and concentrated hard enough, he could feel himself right next to her.

“Please,” he said. “Please, can you come get me?”

“We’re just about to eat, Son. Maybe your mom could bring you on her way home.”

Nicholas dropped the hand that held the receiver and opened his mouth in a silent scream. “Are you serious?” he asked.

“Watch the tone. What’s wrong with you?”

Curse words bubbled inside Nicholas, doubling, trying to arrange into something his father could understand. Nicholas wanted to scream. He wanted to stomp on the ground and flail his arms. But the flow of words clicked off, a snap and then nothing, and he said only, “Fuck this,” before hanging up.

He called Ezekiel next. When Ezekiel agreed to come get him, Nicholas went into the gas station and bought a candy bar and a soda while he slipped two tallboys into the waistband of his jeans. He drank them in the parking lot while he waited. They drove to Nicholas’s granny’s house in silence. Ezekiel asked once if everything was okay, and Nicholas, afraid he might cry, waved the question away. He rolled down the windows and turned the radio up loud enough for the bass to rattle the car and watched the sunset set the fields ablaze.

Nicholas and Ezekiel dragged more sticks and dry cornstalks to their fire pit. Ezekiel squeezed lighter fluid onto the brush, and the fire ignited with a swoosh then simmered to low flames. Nicholas reached for the fifth of Jim Beam Ezekiel had brought and drank until he couldn’t breathe.

“Come on, Nicky, slow your ass down.”

Nicholas drank again, wiped his chin, and grinned. As he shifted on the ground he heard paper crinkle in his back pocket. He pulled out one of the pamphlets from his mom's lecture, Hannah smiling on the front.

Ezekiel scooted to the ground so he could lean back on a log. He grabbed the pamphlet and rubbed his thumb across her face. "I love this picture of her," he said. "She snuck out the window after that wedding. We went out to some friend's house. She didn't get back till almost two the next day. You remember?"

"My dad threw her out after."

"Yeah," he said. "Me and her did all kinds of stupid shit." He folded the flier in half and slipped it into the pocket of his jeans. "I'm going to keep this. The only pictures I have of her—I don't want to see them."

Nicholas looked away. The night felt purposeless. Warm, syrupy liquor sloshed inside him, but he didn't feel any better. Maybe even worse.

"You know," Ezekiel said, "we didn't know it would be like all that in the beginning. You think you're immortal when you're that age. Superman on steroids."

Nicholas grabbed at the bottle and drank again. A sour anger curdled on his tongue.

"It was just fun at first. Getting high, seeing how far we could take things. What happens when it's just a little more. What's it like if you don't sleep for three days, for ten. We just kept pushing. And then one night I look down, and Hannah's on her knees with a flashlight in your granny's house, combing through the rug for some meth she thinks she dropped. We got candles all over the living room and a mattress we brought out here so we had somewhere to stay, and looking down at her, I can see all her bones sticking up around her spine, like she's not even human anymore. Like she's something else. I haven't slept in

a little bit, and I start thinking that we're dead, we've killed ourselves, and this is hell, or whatever, and we don't even get to be together because Hannah isn't Hannah anymore, so that makes me not me."

Nicholas didn't understand what Ezekiel was telling him. "You were here? When were you here?"

Ezekiel looked over at the house and shrugged. "Up until a week before she died. We fought out here, over money, over me being scared of what I saw. I was ready to quit, I think. I can't even explain it. I saw what she turned into, and that made me fucking afraid of what I'd become. She hitched out of here, and I let her go."

"This wasn't your house."

"We didn't have anywhere else to go, Nicky. You know what the worst part is? That thing I saw in your granny's house? That's who I dream about. We were together five years before she died, and it's like all that time doesn't matter. I dream about her at her worst, and I wake up screaming."

Nicholas stood, his head swimming. He could feel that other Hannah scuttle at the edge of the trees, just outside of the light. Not his sister, but the monster chasing them since she died. The Hannah his mother labored to keep alive so she didn't have to confront the loss of her real daughter. The Hannah that chased their father thirty minutes away to squat in a new life with new kids, as if it were as simple as hitting a reset button.

Even Ezekiel. Nicholas had thought Ezekiel understood that together, out in this place, they could resurrect the good memories of her and weave them together to create something substantial enough to bear the weight of their grief. Their stories would overpower that ghoul, and at the same time their guilt, and they wouldn't be saddled with

everything they didn't do. And Nicholas wouldn't have to carry his hatred for the Hannah that had torn his world apart.

"You all right, Nicholas?"

Nicholas snatched up the lighter fluid. "I'm so sick of all of you." He tore at his hair and screamed into the sky, "She was a selfish fucking bitch!" He climbed onto the half-collapsed porch of the house, splinters slicing at his hands as he gripped the rails for balance.

Inside, the house smelled of wet and rot. He pressed his back against the wall and scooted because he couldn't remember exactly where the floor had collapsed into the basement. He trailed lighter fluid as he walked.

Ezekiel called his name from the porch. "What are you doing, man?"

"Fuck you!" Nicholas screamed. "Just fucking fuck you!"

"Nicholas, man, it's okay. What did I say? What do you need?"

Nicholas squeezed the can toward the middle of the room, whipping it all around him. "We're all just pretending. It's like she's not even real anymore. We made her into a monster. She was my fucking sister. I loved her." He threw the can against a window and shattered it. "She did this to all of us." He cried then, and he didn't care at all.

"She was messed up, man. I'm sorry. She was so bad off."

Nicholas grabbed the curtains; they felt coarse between his fingers but thin, as if he could rub right through them. "People lived here. We spent our summers here. And you lived in here with her, shooting up with her. And my mom pretended nothing was wrong, and my dad kept talking about tough love. Fucking tough love." Nicholas dug in his pocket for a lighter. "And me," he said. "I didn't do anything. None of us did anything."

"Nicky, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

“I’m going to burn it down,” Nicholas said.

“Nicky, come on. Come down out of there.”

Nicholas sighed and shook his head.

“I know you heard me,” Ezekiel said.

Just as Ezekiel took a step forward, Nicholas lit the edge of the curtain and tossed it on the floor. Flames leapt up and raced in a trail. Nicholas watched as Ezekiel stomped the fire trails until the heat pushed them both from the house.

Outside, Nicholas waited for an explosion, for great billows of black smoke to burst from the roof, for the windows still left intact to shatter. Instead, smoke leaked from the tops of the side windows; then shadows danced in orange light on the panes. Finally a flame reached through the window, crawled up the side of the house, stretched above the roof and illuminated a liquid-black sky. Nicholas took a breath in, and then another.

Before the Bend

John couldn't stop himself. The moment he spotted Katie at the company Christmas party slipping a few Stags inside her coat, he knew he would try to take her home with him. In line for the bathroom, Katie sneering through clouds of cigarette smoke, he thought he might actually have a chance. So as his boss sloshed his whiskey on the shop's floor and climbed in the driver's seat of an old Buick, John caught Katie's hand and asked if she'd like to go somewhere else, quieter, for a drink, maybe some food, anything but another minute of grease-monkeys and booze.

"Don't you want to hang with the grown-ups?" she asked.

"They don't have nothing going on," he said and grinned, his chin tucked to his chest to avoid the cut of her blue eyes.

Katie flashed the inside pocket of her coat and exposed the gold foil top of a champagne bottle. "I got a whole liquor store in here," she said.

Now, he drives to his apartment, and she chugs a can of Coors she took from the cooler on the way out. He tries to ask about her life as he's been told it's polite to do, but she offers one-word answers and stares out the passenger window. It's worse inside when they get to his place. They drink facing each other in his shoebox kitchen, Katie's eyes on her drink and John's flitting from her hair to her pointed chin to his cabinets and back. He can't tell if she's pretty or just young, because there is a difference, and he never figures it out until they get older and it's too late. All women are young once, but he has only seen a few truly pretty ones. "I got some tequila," he says.

She hands him her glass. "Definitely. This champagne tastes like shit."

“Where you from? Originally, I mean.”

“My mom went to high school here, but she had me in California.” She takes the glass he offers and smiles, wicked and knowing, and her tongue darts out to lick a drop of condensation.

He leans against the counter and stares at all the shit on his fridge. Insurance magnets, Chinese take-out menus. The sad, extraneous stuff of a man who lives alone and on very little.

“I want to go to college out there. I haven’t been back since I was little. But, you know, my mom wants me stay here.” She shrugs, dismissive, as if he too is familiar with this kind of decision.

He drains his glass and sets it on the counter and wipes his hands on the front of his jeans. “What for?” he asks.

“What?”

“College. You’re going to college. What for?”

“Oh, right. I don’t know.” She shrugs again, and in that shrug John senses her certainty about the world and its opportunities waiting like pearls inside oysters for her delicate fingers to pluck.

In high school, John’s counselor called him to his small office that smelled like Vicks Vapo-Rub and asked John about his dreams. John squirmed in that hard plastic chair, dumfounded at such an idea, as if anyone sat around and thought about their dreams, but the counselor leaned forward, pebbles of spit caught in the corners of his mouth, and urged him to try. He thought he would find a job, a practical one, hopefully in the small river town

where his mother lived. But as he told the counselor, his dreams seemed to him like half-deflated balloons.

“You should be a teacher,” John says.

She looks at him and blinks. “Hmm.”

“They make good money.”

“Teachers don’t make any money, John. They’re, like, paid worse than you.”

“No, I mean—” He stops and looks at her, the hard way she stands, like a challenge to the air around her. He has seen many girls stand like this. It is both wounded insecurity and confrontation at the same time. The reason eludes him; they’re all so angry.

He slices limes for their drinks. Katie lifts a wedge to her mouth and inhales, and the delight in her expression conjures his daughter before he can stop himself. Hannah, reading some book, her blonde bangs heavy on the bridge of her nose. Somewhere Linda moves through the house like an apparition, the miracle of laundered clothes and dusted shelves unnoticed by the kids, and, before he moved out, by him.

It was Linda’s decision. She was setting the table, plunking each plate on the dining table as he spoke to her back. He was sorry for staying out so late, helping a friend in need. How could she be so angry about him working on a buddy’s car? How could she always be so god damned angry? From behind, she looked almost exactly as she had in high school. She still wore her hair in a frizzy bob, and her clothes hadn’t changed much either: loose jeans, men’s T-shirts. He thought, briefly, of buying her something else, clingy, silk, like in the catalogues that sat in the shop’s bathroom with the car magazines and *Playboys*. Hannah walked into the dining room then and slumped into a chair.

Linda turned to Hannah and handed her a plate. “Your father’s going to live somewhere else,” she said. “You can see him on the weekends.”

Hannah looked up, first to John then to Linda. She set the book on the table and plodded down the hallway to her room, slamming the door so hard John jumped. Linda turned, arms crossed, and asked John to remove the meat loaf from the oven.

Now, John rummages through his kitchen drawers and asks Katie if she knows how to play Rummy. Katie wanders around the living room, pausing at each object as if it whispers to her. If she finds this place shabby she doesn’t say anything. His first week here he considered it a sanctuary, the second week his punishment. But now, in the wan light of a bare bulb, this place looks desperate and sad in a way he denied each time he came home from work.

“Is Rummy where you want pairs?” she finally says.

“Three of a kind.”

“I don’t really want to play cards.”

John drops the cards back into the drawer. What else? “Do you like board games?”

She stops at his CD case and thumbs through the few CDs he brought with him.

Things he still liked but didn’t leave for Hannah. “What’s your favorite?” Katie asks.

This is a test. A measure of his age, his ability to navigate pop culture. If he answers with a band she has never heard of he has the advantage of sounding knowledgeable about music. He mentally thumbs through his collection and comes up with all the hair metal bands he loved in high school. “You’re my guest. You pick.”

She shrugs and turns her back to him. A braver man would have picked for her.

When the music starts they both sit on the couch, Katie with her feet tucked under her, tequila still in her hands, John at the opposite end. He gets up, returns with the bottle, and refills his glass. This is what you don't expect: the awkward silences, a stinging self-consciousness. You forget, being married so long, the aching quiet of two people unfamiliar to each other. You remember only the raw burning need, a crave so intense you want to claw at a woman's chest and thighs and the world because the hysteria of want is too much to bear. Instead, John sits across from Katie straining toward a conversation.

"Do you like working at the shop?"

She reaches into her purse, a small clam-shaped one with patches of sequins still left on it, like one of his daughter's play purses. "I can smoke?"

His place will smell for days, maybe even his clothes when he picks the kids up tomorrow. Hannah will smell the collar of his shirt when he hugs her, and she will stiffen. She will say, when she is older, that this is the moment she knew. "Sure," he says.

Katie blows a long stream of smoke to the right of her face, but it still clouds the air between them. "It's better than waiting tables. And Ronald is pretty cool." She considers John for a moment. "You should hear his 'Captain Mechanic' voice. He does it for all of you."

"What do you mean?"

"All the shop guys. He does this impression of you."

"What does he say?"

"About you?"

"Yes."

“We mostly talk about the other ones. Like, they all think they know shit about the engines no one else knows, or they cock-strut on the floor when they need to feel important. Stupid ego bullshit. I think about you we just said you look like a Muppet on a bender.”

“A Muppet.”

“Yeah,” she laughs. “You know, like Animal or something. Ronald says, ‘Boy’s strings going to *snap!*’”

He’s worked for Ronald since his junior year of high school. He started out sweeping the shop floor, combing scrap yards for cheap parts. He’d gone to Ronald’s house for Christmases before he married Linda. He’d worked from nothing to one of his lead mechanics. He’d respected Ronald, how he built a business from nothing. And now, turns out, for fuck-all nothing.

She sets her glass down on the matted carpet and scoots closer. “We didn’t mean nothing by it. Don’t get offended.”

The thought of her teasing about to Ronald makes John’s whole body tense. He’d thought their flirtation had been mutual. He’d walked into the office one day, tried to sift through the grease and steel to inhale the powdery smell of her perfume, and asked her for an old invoice to check a mark-up on a part. He could feel her watching him from behind the cabinet as she thumbed through the files.

“Found it,” she said, smiling, an invitation. She handed him the invoice and sat back down in her swivel chair. She picked up a book from her desk and grinned, waiting.

“What you reading?”

“It’s for my English class. Same old bullshit story. Girl loves guy, guy loves some other girl, girl kills herself. You know, I’m sure you read the same shit in high school.”

“Yeah, of course.” He couldn’t remember a single book from high school. He’d carried them around like everyone else, but the stories inside them didn’t stick. Words felt as slippery to him as the affections of Linda even then, as unreliable as the adoration of his children. Words could seem to mean one thing when they really meant another. “But what’s it about?”

“This guy. He doesn’t seem sorry. For sleeping with his best friend’s wife.”

She wore her jeans low so that they exposed a sliver of her skin. When she twisted over to lean on the counter, that crescent of white skin expanded. “He’s probably not,” he said.

After that he began drawing smiley faces on the invoices he returned, then dinosaurs flying airplanes, then robots holding flowers. She drew notes back. Coded messages hidden in stick figures and exchanged between them. He brought her books. Dog-eared copies with ink marks he found at thrift shops, and he let her think that he’d read them first. She read the books and liked them, but she never said why, just that she did, and in that way kept his secret for him.

Katie stands, wobbly. “I have to go to the bathroom.”

When she returns from the dark hallway, she drops her cigarette in her glass and watches him on the couch. He doesn’t feel drunk, just warm. He gets up and grabs her hands. A smile slithers onto her face that has gone slack with all the drinks.

“I always forget you have kids. How old are they?”

“My kids?”

“The picture. In the snow.”

Sledding, last year. Linda packed hot chocolate in thermoses for them, and Nicky tripped, spilling his on the snow. Hannah picked up Nicky's thermos and poured half of her own hot chocolate inside. A small moment, but in it he and Linda felt that they had done everything right. "They're twelve and eight."

Katie grimaces.

"What?"

"Nothing. I'm just—" She leans back and looks up. "I thought they were younger."

This surprises him. They *are* young, a lifetime younger than this girl. But he knows better. Just before he left, Linda was folding laundry on the couch while he watched the game. From the corner of his eye he saw her pick up a flimsy bra, just two cotton triangles and elastic straps.

"What's that?" he asked.

Linda rolled her eyes. "Come on, John. She's almost thirteen."

He tries to look at Katie again, to return to this limbo space that is his home and not his home. But he thinks of Linda leaving the room with the laundry basket, that bra folded neatly inside. He abandoned the football game to find Nicky and take him to his favorite comic book shop. He moved slowly up and down the aisles smearing snake trails in the dust, searching for comics about little boys flying or going on safaris. They picked up Hannah afterwards and got ice cream. Secret ice cream because Linda would have dinner ready by the time they returned.

Linda patted his arm that night after dinner.

"What?"

“You’re a good dad,” she said and laughed. He loved her laugh most, always, the way she swallowed each one halfway through. But that inward and shy quality had changed over the years, intensified, so that John felt as if his wife presented a fortress and pretended it was her face.

“My wife is a really good person,” he says finally, but he doesn’t know why.

Katie shakes her head. “I’m sure she is. Most wives are.”

He knows it’s the mechanical and rehearsed sound of his explanation, as if she expected more from him than the casual dismissal of his own wife. They have navigated entirely within scripts. The subtle flirting, the notes, the books, all scripts. He senses Katie’s anger, acute and pointed where it existed as unfocused before. Linda said to him once when Hannah painted her fingernails black and uglified her face with her mother’s makeup that there are two impulses warring inside every young girl: one that wants to spit and one that wants to be spit on.

Katie unbuttons her blouse and throws it to the ground. Her skirt and underwear next. She straddles him, her small breasts held by the lace of her bra. He finally understands what Linda means. He waits for that initial instant of entry when this girl will gasp as if wounded.

Linda sits on the couch peeling apart the split ends of her hair and listening to the muffled music from behind Hannah’s door. It is different with daughters. They are so much more a part of your own body than sons. It is more difficult watching their sorrows. And, with boys, you know that they will survive, a few broken places, but intact because eventually they will

become men. Linda knows what's coming for Hannah, the soreness of her heart much like the soreness of her body as it begins to transform and betray her.

Linda sips from a warm can of Coors Light she bought at the gas station on a whim. The beer tastes more astringent with each drink. Nicky fell asleep hours ago watching a movie in his room. Linda thinks of calling John. But immediately, she's sick with the thought. She wants to shout, pound her fists, kick the television or his favorite chair. She could call and say *fuck* to him and just hang up after that.

Hannah's door opens and music trails after her. Linda can now hear it is the mixed CD John made her last month. Hannah flops on the couch and rests her head in Linda's lap. She grasps her foot and brings her toe to her mouth to chew the toenail, a habit she's had since she was a toddler.

"Hannah, that's disgusting."

"I'm *sorry*," she says.

But Linda is the one who is sorry. She doesn't know why she can't just let Hannah *be*. Linda is constantly grooming her daughter, bothering her to cut her bangs, to pull up her socks.

Hannah nods toward the beer. "Since when do you drink?"

"Since now."

"That's dumb."

"Hannah."

Hannah stands and looks at Linda for a moment. She sighs. Linda thinks that Hannah is about to scold her as if she is the mother now, but she just walks back to her room without saying anything.

At that age, Linda never knew what to say to her parents either. She couldn't say what she wanted; she was already too polite for that. She just kept a silence inside of her, a constantly renewing rage that grew with each day she spent in the world. She wants to tell Hannah these secrets, all of her secrets, but without telling her. She wants Hannah to understand how this life can wear away the burn. The lulling rhythm of years, like a river eroding its banks, so slowly that no one ever notices.

Hail Mary

Tommy has looked everywhere for Hannah. He checked the park, a couple party houses, Cooter's where the bartender lets her drink even though she's nineteen. He even cruised by her boyfriend's house, slouched low in the driver seat of her purple Sunfire, but Ezekiel wasn't home. It's as if Tommy closed his eyes yesterday at the motel—unable to stay awake another second after four days without sleep—and Hannah vanished, blinked away.

They argued before he passed out. Tommy had his wallet stuffed with fresh roofing money, enough for a few nights in the room and an 8-ball, but he got tired, and so he told her no more, not even gas money. Just no more. Hannah glared, dropped to her knees in front of the nightstand, and cut the last gram into five even lines. Fine, she said and tightened her dollar bill into a straw, but I ain't going to sleep. She changed in that moment, her generous smile of the last few days pared to a flat line as menacing as baring fangs. It's too much, Tommy told her. I'm too tired.

But sleep hadn't helped, his body still sore, worse than the longest day humping shingles up and down a ladder. He could've slept for days had the old man not banged on the door and screamed for Tommy to pay up or get out. He could've slept the summer away. Instead, he woke up to find Hannah gone with all but fifty of his roofing money, her car still in the lot, nothing in that tank but vapors. He'd had to walk fifteen minutes up the frontage road and buy a gas can just to go out and look for her. Now he's got a bad feeling, sick in his gut, like the stretched-out moments in a car crash when you shut your eyes and wait for the impact.

He pulls Hannah's car into the Crystal Palace Gentlemen's Club, a squat, industrial building with no windows where Hannah dances when she's hard up. That's a secret she told Tommy in the motel; even Ezekiel thinks she waits tables, fetches drinks, all her clothes still on. She made Tommy promise never to tell. She told him in that confessional rush of the first huge line, and Tommy said, I'm sorry. Not the right thing, as always.

Tommy parks between a pickup and a van with its mirror duct-taped to the door. At the club entrance, he lights a cigarette and leans on the corrugated metal to prepare his apology. He just wants to go back to the motel, draw the curtains, unsnap her jeans, trace the small swell of her breasts. For four days, this privilege belonged to him, and he had to fuck it up by passing out.

As he stands outside nervously flicking his cigarette, a rusted white Jimmy pulls into the parking lot and stops right in front of him. The windows are tinted too dark for Tommy to see the driver, but he knows the truck. He's seen Hannah riding in the passenger seat a hundred times at least. Ezekiel would pick her up in the ninth grade, Hannah tossing smiles at the rest of them piling on the bus. Tommy stands straight, but before he decides to run, the Jimmy's window rolls down with a labored squeak.

"Sullivan." Ezekiel tips his chin toward the building. "You see Hannah in there?"

Tommy looks at the door and watches the neon sign flicker above: a golden dome and two towers, pink legs severed at the thigh, nothing. "I don't know." His neck and chest burn, and he flushes deeper as he imagines red splotches creeping up his neck.

"You all right?" Ezekiel asks. "You want to get in and cool off a minute?"

"Yeah, no thanks, Zeke. I have to—" Tommy searches the gravel chunks at his feet. They came up together, Tommy playing with Ezekiel's little brother until middle school

when they all picked their lunch tables and assumed their new roles. Tommy the stoner class clown, Zeke the Vice Lord, his brother the smart kid, college track. It's just Zeke, he tells himself. There's no way for him to know that Tommy spent the last four days in a dirty cockroach motel fucking the girl Zeke loves more than anything in the world. But Tommy can think of nothing to say, no task that will get him away from Ezekiel and inside the club, his mind so blank that even a wisp of a lie refuses to gather in his mouth. Tommy, head down, walks to the passenger side of the Jimmy and climbs in.

A gold cross dangles from Ezekiel's rearview mirror, Jesus's crucified body glinting as it catches light. "Since when are you religious?" Tommy asks.

Ezekiel shrugs and reaches between Tommy's legs for the glove compartment, and Tommy's heart clenches. He pulls out a glass pipe and tiny foil envelope. "My dad was a deacon in the church for a while after my mom died. Took me all the time."

Ezekiel holds the pipe out for Tommy. "You can smoke a little if you need to."

Tommy needs. The reptilian part of his brain leaps to life, thrashing inside, and it needs. He heats the meth until vapor swirls in the pipe's belly then pulls that cloud into his lungs, the feeling immediate and atomic. "It's good," Tommy says when his breath catches enough to talk.

"I got some extra if you got money."

He pulls a twenty from the few Hannah left him and hands it to Ezekiel who pinches off a tiny nugget. Tommy drops it in the cellophane of his cigarette pack and slips it in his pocket.

Alert now, Tommy studies Ezekiel. He looks like a recent corpse, bone stretching his skin, his hair, always kept in a tight fade, grown into a patchy Afro.

As if reading his mind, Ezekiel says, "You look like I feel, Sullivan. What you doing here?"

Without thinking, Tommy says, "Picking up my girlfriend."

"Yeah?"

"She doesn't dance."

Ezekiel nods as if he understands something Tommy hasn't said. "Everybody's got to work."

Tommy tries to think of other things to talk about because the truth feels close to the surface, as if it might punch through his mouth—Hannah in that motel bed, on top of Tommy, grinding, hair brushing his chest, her breasts firm as nectarines in his palm, the nipple like a cherry pit. He wants to say, But I love her, too. Or more, I love her more. She picked me, he thinks. For four straight days, she picked me. "I have to go," Tommy says.

"Nah, man. Chill out. Sit with me a minute." Ezekiel reaches under his seat for a leather pouch that he unzips to expose a needle, spoon, and cotton ball. "I'm looking for Hannah."

"I don't know where she is."

Ezekiel cuts his eyes sideways but keeps unpacking. "Yeah, fine. Look, if she's in there, tell her I'm out here, okay? They won't let me in now, banned me. We got in this huge fight a long time ago. We fight too much, Sullivan. Few days ago we got into again it, and I been tracking her down since."

Ezekiel grabs a thermos from the backseat and drops water in the spoon. He flicks the lighter twice and heats the water, taps some powder, and stirs with the plunger of the needle. Tommy looks away while Ezekiel drops a shred of the cotton ball on the spoon, and

when he looks back Ezekiel has hold of his own arm, pumping his fist, the needle between his teeth.

"Ezekiel," Tommy whispers. "Man, that's fucked up—" He stops, the look in Ezekiel's eyes so intense that it silences Tommy, and he watches as Ezekiel slips the needle into his arm, a crimson mushroom cloud exploding into the clear cylinder. It's one of the most arresting shapes and colors that Tommy has ever seen, a rose blooming under water.

Ezekiel pushes the plunger slowly, slips the needle out. He gulps air and pops his jaw, lips climbing all over his teeth, an alternating grimace and frown.

"What the fuck?"

Calmer now but still breathless, he says in a quiet voice, "I'm sorry, man." His chest heaves. "You can hear your heartbeat like a train, so close it could suck you under the tracks. But then you're okay. You survived."

Tommy shakes his head as heat flushes his chest again. It freaks him out, the thought of stabbing his skin, pumping that shit straight in. He doesn't know why, but it's dirtier that way. It makes Tommy sick, as if Ezekiel extracted a rusty saw blade from under his seat and began to sever his arm. "I need to go, Zeke. I got to get my sister."

Zeke looks at Tommy, eyes focused and far away at the same time, as if he sees inside of Tommy and beyond him. Tommy shudders. It's the drugs.

Ezekiel rubs at the mark in the crook of his elbow, a single-toothed snakebite. "Tell Hannah I'm out here. She's here." Ezekiel points past Tommy to where the beat-up van earlier hid Hannah's car from them. "Her car's right there. Tell her I need to talk to her. I have something for her, okay?"

Tommy gets out and jogs toward the club, already planning to slip out the back. He thinks of Hannah in the motel when he told her no more, swooping down like a bird to prey.

*

Tommy's mom rents a house a half-mile from the club, and Tommy walks there, the meth grinding an obsessiveness in him so that every step avoids a crack and his shoes slap the asphalt with precise rhythm. He thinks of Hannah and how the deepest parts of her smell sweet but also sharp like the spice of split wood, and how he could breathe her in the rest of his life and never be full of her. He will tell her this, but slowly, after a night of fucking her, quenching his thirst for her, devouring her until it hurts to come again.

His mom is on the couch watching *Wheel of Fortune* and scraping Neapolitan ice cream from a carton. She's still in her uniform shirt from the trucking company where she runs the dispatch. She doesn't look at all happy to see him.

She goes to the kitchen and gets another spoon and hands it to Tommy. "You need to eat," she says.

"Not hungry."

"And you need a bath."

"You should talk." He immediately regrets this. He means that she wears that stupid uniform shirt even on weekends, the patch with her name on it curling away as if in disgust, her thick-soled work boots busted at the seam. Her dark roots have grown longer than the brassy blonde, and she's been picking at the acne on her chin again.

"Where you been, Tommy? I called all over creation for you. Those roofing men say they haven't seen you in a week." She spoons another glob of ice cream in her open mouth,

and her tongue churns it, and Tommy resists the urge to tell her to chew with her fucking mouth closed.

"I need you to do something for me."

"Tommy, I got no money. You know the fuel pump on my car is busted, and I need a new water heater."

He hates the way she says water. Wor-ter. Worsh. Worshrag. She told him the day he dropped out of the tenth grade that not getting her diploma was her single regret. What about me, he asked, having me at sixteen? He waited for reassurance, but she said only that mothers never regret their children. Mothers, not her. "I don't need money," he says, anger slithering through his buzz.

She shifts away from him, noncommittal, the strain of staying so uninvested all over her face. "What then?"

"I need you to call Hannah's mom for me."

"Hannah?"

"Yes, please."

She goes to the kitchen again and returns with two Budweisers. She hands one to Tommy. "I haven't seen her mom in ten years, since you kids were little."

"Just ask if Hannah's there, please."

"I ain't doing that, Tommy. We were barely friends when we lived on the block. Just friendly."

Tommy sets the unopened beer on the coffee table. "You drink too much." He gets up and goes to the bathroom. The little bump from Ezekiel's truck has flattened and made

him impatient. He crushes the cellophane with his mother's ceramic soap dish, taps some on the counter, and snorts it with a dollar bill.

When he gets back to the living room, *Wheel of Fortune* is running its credits, and his mom flips the channel to the news. A man in cakey makeup walks near a lake, cops squatting on the bank, bright yellow police tape snapping in the wind like streamers.

"Girl got killed," she says.

The corners of her mouth tug down, and instead of looking sad or concerned, if not about Tommy at least about some random girl getting killed like a mother should be, she looks mean, a pudgy, middle-aged woman who hates her life. When he was little, he cried for her at night to keep her from the men in her bedroom who would beat time on the wall with her headboard. He cried for her when she dropped him at his auntie's, his grandma's, anyone who would take him so she could drink and dance, and men could make her feel beautiful.

Her sadness claws at his heart. He doesn't want to think she deserves this. But maybe. Maybe a person doesn't have infinite chances to do better. There could be a set number of bad choices people are allowed to make before they are punished by random car accidents, robberies, loneliness. Tommy pushes his hair back, his fingers lighting trails across his scalp. He wants to laugh and explain all this to his mom, sharp and clear in his brain, so that she can understand that there is still time for her to do something good for once.

"You can be a good mom," he says. "I'm giving you a chance."

She drinks her beer and stares flatly at the television. "I told you not to come here like this. I don't want to see it."

He shakes his head and flings the tenderness he felt for her across the room. "Like what? Told me not to come like what?"

She points the remote at the television. The volume rises, and the noise crowds Tommy's head. The newscaster shouts about a girl found stabbed to death at the lake, the volume so loud his request for information sounds like the man begs for his life.

"Mom," he yells, the whine cutting through the noise.

She looks over, her eyes cold steel. She mouths, "Get out."

"Fuck you," he says. "You ain't a mother."

She withers. Right in front of him. The whole house deflates, one last exhale. She turns back to the news and sips her beer.

*

Tommy met Hannah in the sixth grade at the bus stop. She was small, shorter even than Tommy, long, curly hair a heavy bushel she had to lug around, and Tommy wanted to wrap his hands in it and lift it for her. She had a face as delicate as glass figurines and enough attitude for a girl three times her size. Right away, the boys at the stop cracked jokes and wrestled in the grass to impress her and the girls folded into tight cliques to shut her out. She sat with Tommy that day, and all the way to junior high Tommy could smell the shampoo in her hair, a crisp scent like apples.

On the weekends they walked the railroad tracks, tight-roping the beams. They trekked through woods with a backpack of soda and sandwiches and wound their way up the grassy bluffs. They found a graffiti-covered mausoleum built into the bluff who knew how old, and they could see for miles around, all the way across the river to St. Louis, the Arch a

sentinel. Inside the mausoleum, they lay on the concrete floor and watched the sunset, the dark doorway framing a rectangle of sky streaked pink and orange. Hannah wrote in a bare corner of the ceiling *Hannah + Tommy were here— 9/17/92*.

In the last days of fall, they lay together and talked of parental failures and school humiliations and told each other jokes until their stomachs hurt. Hannah scooted closer to him and wrapped her arm around his and shivered. He leaned into her and kissed her then, nervously tight-lipped, the touch so powerful it felt like an Indian burn to his lips. She smiled sweetly after and pushed a piece of his long hair behind his ears. He was a lion then, and he would've terrorized the world for her.

He wishes he could walk there now, because he is certain that Hannah waits for him. A test: come find me in our place and show me how much you love me.

Instead, he prods the baggie in his pocket as his body starts to sag. His cousin stays just a few blocks from his mom's, and so he heads there with fatigue blooming in his joints.

Tommy knocks, and from behind the door Schaeffer barks, "Who is it?"

"It's me, man."

The door swings open with no one behind it. Tommy walks in and blinks until his eyes adjust to the small globe of candlelight on the coffee table. A girl emerges from the darkness and reclines on the couch.

"My cousin here?" he asks.

The door shuts, and Schaeffer stands behind it. "Tommy," he says and smiles, his upper lip like a grizzled knuckle over yellowed teeth. "What you doing here, man?"

The air is tinged with the wet-rust smell of burned foil. Tommy turns to the girl and says what's up. She stares off toward the kitchen, her jaws clenched as if furious.

"Well, you should sit down. You look tired." Schaeffer gestures to the couch, and the girl gets up without being asked. "I'll be right back," Schaeffer says and disappears down the hallway to his bedroom, the door slamming shut behind him.

The girl perches on the arm of a recliner opposite the couch and leans as far from Tommy as she can without falling. She's pretty with black hair almost to the middle of her back, skin as pale as a full moon. His cousin has always had pretty girls, even more now that he deals. But this baffles Tommy, his cousin a hulking ugly mass, quick-tempered, hard with them in a way that makes Tommy hate girls for preferring cruel men like Schaeffer to nice guys like him. "I'm Tommy," he tells her.

As if he has said nothing, she remains silent, a marble statue in the candlelight.

Tommy leans back and props his feet on the coffee table. "Well, fuck you, then."

Schaeffer returns and sits on the other end of the couch. He opens a drawer in the coffee table and presents a plate with even lines cut across it. "You need a bump, Cuz?" Schaeffer asks.

Tommy knows that his cousin sees his attention leap like metal to a magnet. He swallows away his shame. "I could use a little."

"You got what you owe me?"

Fuck. "I got some of it."

Schaeffer smiles, that lip curling up like a slug from a salt. "He's got some of it," he says to the girl. "Better than what you usually got."

Schaeffer hands the plate to the girl first. When she finishes her line, her head tipped back to expose her long neck, Schaeffer tells her, "Go somewhere." Without looking at either of them, she disappears down the dark hallway.

"So," Schaeffer says.

Tommy takes the plate. Already he feels the tightening inside. The line disappears from the plate, and the world lurches into focus, an intensification of color and form. His heart bangs in his chest, and before he can stop himself he thinks of Hannah on the motel bed, her ass in the air, her opening like he could climb through and live protected inside by her ribs.

Schaeffer takes the plate and sets it back in its hidden drawer. "So," he says again. He lights a cigarette and exhales a long stream of smoke. "Where you been?"

His thoughts tumble in his skull. Hannah the first night, dancing on the motel bed while he broke the nugget into powder. He thought, this is it, she's with me now. "I just been around."

"By yourself?"

"Yeah," Tommy says, but his inflection rises as if he's asked Schaeffer a question.

"Really." Schaeffer gets up and crouches in front of his stereo, an elaborate system of boxes on shelves, huge speakers mounted in the corners of the ceiling.

They sit and bass thumps, volume too low to distinguish one song from another. He gave Schaeffer his last twenty, but hasn't handed over the baggie like normal. He wants to ask about it but can't because asking will feel like begging, and Schaeffer has made Tommy feel all his life like he stands with a heavy boot on Tommy's tail.

Schaeffer lights another cigarette and holds the pack out for Tommy. They smoke, and the silence makes Tommy shake, his knee bouncing. He wants to stand up and pace, that big line thrashing inside, the best line he's had in a long time because Schaeffer won't step on his own stash.

Schaeffer leans forward and takes the plate back out, cigarette between his lips, smoke crawling around his head. Tommy shifts, excited they might do another. But his cousin chops at the drugs with a credit card, crushing it to a fine powder. He says, "You're a mess, Sullivan."

"I'm fine, just tired."

"No, you're a mess. A fuck-up. Always have been. Even when we were kids, you would fuck up everything you touched. You were the kid no one wanted to be around. You fucking embarrassed me. You pissed your pants in the third grade. You know how many motherfuckers I had to tell to leave your stupid ass alone?" Schaeffer says this smiling, like a joke, but Tommy recognizes the threatening growl that always preceded Schaeffer beating Tommy's ass.

"How long you been up, man?" Tommy asks. "How long since you slept?"

"Listen, Cuz. I'm saying that I thought you were a fuck-up. A waste of air. Nobody paid attention to you, like you didn't even *exist*. But it's always the motherfuckers you wouldn't guess, right? Those harmless looking dudes. Who knew you were a fucking psycho."

Tommy knows that everyone stays up too long once in a while. The world can warp into shadows where enemies can lurk, and those long days can start to feel like the carnivals they park at Wal-mart, people screaming even though nothing is wrong. Everything familiar twists when you've gone too long without sleep. "Schaeffer, you okay? How much you been doing?"

Schaeffer leans forward, elbows on knees, that fat lip no longer scrunched into an ugly smile. "Just know that you did this." Schaeffer still chops, harder now, plastic on glass

like rapid gunshots. "I would've never had to do this if you didn't come here. You were stupid for that. You're going to get what's coming to you. Just know that."

Headlights wash over the room and a car door slams shut. Tommy stands and inches to the front door. "Schaeffer, what do you think I did? Who's been by here?"

"You ain't even going to see prison, motherfucker. You going to wish for it, but you ain't seeing it." Schaeffer stares at the tip of his cigarette and rolls it between his thumb and forefinger. "Just cruising around town in her car like you don't even give a fuck. Everyone saw you, dumb shit."

Tommy grips the door handle but doesn't open it yet. It's all just a misunderstanding, someone over here in his cousin's ear. He's positive this whole thing will unknot itself soon. Positive. "Saw me what? What are you talking about?"

Schaeffer stops chopping, but that beat still echoes in the room. "I hope they kill you."

If Tommy is dreaming this, how would he know? The room has a tilted, liquid quality, inky shadows twisting beyond the candlelight. In a dream, everything would smell terrible just like now. Sulfur wrestling the shadows. In a dream, his legs would harden to roots in the carpet, just like now.

A door closes in the kitchen, a click so soft he may have heard nothing.

In the open air he pumps his arms and legs as hard as he can. Before he makes it to the end of the block, someone tackles him, shredding Tommy's cheek on the asphalt. The weight lifts, and he's yanked up by his arm so hard his shoulder pops. "Get the fuck up." He tries but his legs buckle.

Two more men run up, their faces distorted by hoodies and a halo of streetlight. One leans in and grips the collar of Tommy's shirt. Ezekiel's face is wet, eyes swollen. "How

could you?" he says. "She would never hurt anyone!" Ezekiel releases Tommy's T-shirt. In the light of the street lamp, his face transforms into his younger self, sharp cheekbones smoothed into youth, his jaw soft. Ezekiel glances over his shoulder, and when he turns back that boy is gone. He leans in close again. "I hate you. I fucking hate you."

They stomp and kick until the pain is no longer localized to points of impact, instead spreading out as if he burns alive from within. Blood coats his teeth just as his vision recedes into an unknown center where he finds Hannah on the bed in their motel room. He's sorry, really. He could never be what she wanted, no matter how hard he tried. He's afraid if he opens his mouth to tell her this, hot liquid and rocks will tumble out and scare her.

She sits straight-backed and cross-legged, her palms on her knees. She is a form in tension, a taut wire, and Tommy fears what will happen if she lets go.

He's done with all of it, wishing the meth gone for what feels like hours, muscles sore from the bludgeoning insistence of his body to be inside hers. He can already feel the tug of coming down, a sinking, like slipping under hot bath water to drown. He's not ready. He wants to watch the sunrise with her again, and then another, until his eyes burn with being awake and the world releases the mysterious parts it withholds from the sleeping.

He tries to go to her, but the bed recedes further as if caught in a tide. She puts her palm over her heart, and the intensity of her blue eyes sets his world spinning with Hannah perfectly still at its center. Tommy, she says.

Yes, he thinks, yes. Always for you, yes. A blast of light separates them, an ineluctable brightness, the pop of flesh and something wrangled loose beneath. If there is fear, it doesn't touch him. This is what he's lusted after his whole life. They all have. Ezekiel stabbing needles in his arms, Hannah begging for more, his mother crying out as

men filled her with what they were missing. Tommy unfolds in this quiet moment, pushes up, feels as if his spirit can finally soar, a peace untangled from within.

Sun Blind

Archer didn't call me the next day. Or the day after. A week passed and then two. Finally, he showed up on my dock with a sorry smile and a duffel stuffed with costume clothes. Without looking down at him from the top deck of my uncle's old houseboat, I asked, "Who the fuck are you?"

He climbed aboard and hoisted himself up the ladder to the top deck where I sat. "Here," he said, pulling flowers from his sleeve. "I picked these for you from an old woman's yard. She could've had a shotgun or an attack dog. Which means that I risked great peril to bring these to you."

I glanced at the flowers and turned back to the grill. I'd had enough time away from him to run straight through angry right on to indifferent. Fool me once.

A seagull circled above us, and Archer whistled through his teeth, short staccato shrieks. "Little guy's hungry. Or he's faking. Probably just got done eating out the dumpsters." He turns his sloppy grin on me. "How about giving me a chance today? What's one day?"

"I gave you two weeks. Get off my boat."

He craned his neck to peer in the lower level windows. I wished I had washed the dishes this morning or bagged up laundry to take to my uncle's. Not that Archer lived much better, but the soiled, cluttered mess of the houseboat had gone rancid with a loneliness I wanted to hide.

"Come on," he said, hand out. "Let's get out of here."

We drove the hour and a half from Islamorada to Key West in a borrowed car. He rolled the window down and stuck his elbow out, and his body unwound in the driver's seat with the relaxation of a man familiar with the open road.

"We're going to make a killing," he said. The ocean whipped by like ribbon unraveling in the wind. Archer pointed to the bag in the back seat. "Go ahead," he said. "They all belonged to my assistant." I'd seen pictures of her. She was a pretty girl with Bozo-red hair that pouted until the crowd parted with their dollars. She ditched the boardwalks for New York, and last Archer heard she was stripping and calling it burlesque. "Call it whatever she wants," he said. "She's still shaking her tits for money." When I untangled a pair of fishnets, Archer whistled and said again, "We're going to make a killing."

The boardwalks were hot and teeming with pale families steering their children through the crowds. They had the wide-open faces of people who believe that nothing bad could happen in destinations so beautiful. Pelicans plodded alongside the tourists like toddlers still unsure of their legs.

The real performers had already set up, and small crowds clustered around them. We passed a pretty boy dressed as a pirate, his small body already compact with the muscles of a man. He lay on his back on a bed of nails and coached a little girl onto his stomach. An older man looked on, maybe the boy's father, stone-faced, nose cocked at a painful angle. The man held completely still and watched the crowd with predatory eyes.

We found a clear space toward the end of the pier next to a pair of overflowing garbage cans. "We'll have to fight the gulls, but once I light the sword on fire we should be fine."

"Archer, I don't think I can—"

He palmed his forehead. "Oh, right! Don't worry. You sashay around like a showgirl and shove your moneybox in people's faces. And smile. That's very important. Tourists don't like to give money to people they know are unhappy. It's a life principle. Think about the homeless guys who beg by the highways. No one ever gives them money."

"I don't think I want to do this."

He grimaced. "You think you don't because you're afraid. That's a good sign, actually. Performance anxiety. In the business, we say bend over and take it. Or we say break a leg. Either way, you need to get changed in that bathroom over there and come back ready to smile." He pointed to a concrete building painted the soft peach of a conch shell. "And the more skin you show the better."

The bathroom was small, only two stalls. A few fat palmetto bugs had croaked belly-up on the bare floor and a whole mess of insect carcasses clogged the screen of the only window. I peeled off my jeans and sifted through the bag. I chose a cape I could hug around my shoulders and, beneath that, a leather corset embroidered with two dragons braiding their tongues in my cleavage.

Archer hunched over his sword and polished it with the corner of his jacket. He looked up and grinned wide enough to expose the gold cap over his left canine, something he was always careful not to do.

"What?" I said.

"Nothing." He shaded his eyes. "You were born a showgirl. I bet you used to prance around your living room like Vanna White."

Across the ocean, a thumbnail sailboat drifted in the clouds. When we were kids, my best friend and I used to steal travel magazines from the Shop'n'Save. We slid them in the

waist of our jeans and down our pant legs and strutted out of the store, daring anyone to say something to us. We hung beach pictures all over Hannah's room. We dreamed of our adult lives down here. No jobs or husbands or ambitions. Just miles of sandy beaches as white as the soul.

I pulled the cape tighter. "You have money to make, remember?"

Archer cleared his throat. "Money, money, money, mon-*nay*!" He handed me a box wrapped in red paper. "Okay, just walk like you're turning letters on *Wheel of Fortune* and hold the box in front of you. Don't push it at them. Make them want to come to you. Your job is all about seducing the audience."

"What's yours?"

"Trying not to kill myself."

Archer turned on his carnival voice, a taunting bark like a bully on a playground. A Midwestern family stopped a few feet away. I could sense my own geographic DNA within the broad, flat planes of their faces, the thickness of their stomach and hips. The family attracted a few others, and eventually Archer had enough people to get his sword.

Until then I had watched him like everyone else. He ignited in front of the crowd, his shoulders back, head high. He unfolded another inch and a half like a grasshopper who unsnapped those backward knees and finally stood up.

He called out to the crowds and brandished his sword, a heavy slab of steel sharpened to a menacing point. He was right. I could feel them all pressing into us, their attention pulling them like a magnetized needle dropped in oil, Archer their true North.

He climbed onto the pier's railing, his big feet flopped over the sides. He held the sword above him, and chatter swirled among the crowd. After most of them had dropped

dollar bills into the box, Archer tipped his head back to expose the pale skin of his throat. He hoisted the sword above him so that the tip appeared to rest on his tongue. I wanted to call out. I didn't care how many times he'd said he knew what he was doing. The stupidity of shoving this sword down his insides infuriated me. I stepped forward. Archer pushed the sword down, inch by inch. His throat constricted and relaxed, constricted and relaxed.

I set the box down. I watched as people in the crowd clutched their throats. A plane traced the clear blue sky, trailing a banner that read, *Big Juice's Gentlemen's Club where everything's easy!* Archer had told me that the crowds lined up to see if he'd slit his own throat, and I hadn't believed him. But as I looked at each face, tight with expectation, I could see it—they were hungry. I was, too. Archer had gathered us here, like church, to witness his courage in the face of death, and my gratitude for that overwhelmed me.

*

My Uncle Sal lived a short walk from my dock, up through a patch of sticker bushes, squat palms, and spindly pines. I could see straight into his kitchen if I stood on my tiptoes on my top deck. We could keep an eye on each other that way.

I banged on his sliding glass door and set up the bottle of rum and my CDs on the patio table. The sun throbbed overhead and bleached all the color out of the concrete walls that lined Sal's back yard. He came out and slid the door shut behind him, his big, one-eyed tomcat slipping out between his legs.

"Damn cat. Keep telling him he's got the good life."

I mixed us a rum and Coke while Sal made two piles of my CDs. When he finished, he pushed the Dead, the Stones, and CCR toward me. "Here, play these. I don't know what that other shit is."

"That's because you're an old man."

"That I am, kid."

I put the Stones in and pushed play, and a low, reverberating bass crackled from Sal's old stereo.

"Took a bunch of Germans out this morning," he said. "Told me on the phone they wanted to dive, but we get out there, and they was wanting to chase sharks."

"Bet you loved that."

"Not to look at either. To take home like a bunch of trophies. It's the way with tourists. They all want to come here and act like bad asses. Ain't like you get out on a boat and suddenly you ain't you, kid. Don't work like that."

"Were they scared?"

Sal grunted and sipped his rum. I followed his eyes to the little patch of woods between us. He'd gotten a great deal on this place back in the 70s when he was young, but he said all the time how he didn't think it through. That patch blocked his view of the canal, and the canal led out into the ocean about a half-mile away. So instead of feeling the expansive joy of living in an island paradise, Sal felt only like he lived in a humid, landlocked Florida swamp with a yard of sand and sticker bushes. He said it seemed about right to him.

"Where you been?" he asked. "I ain't seen your lights on."

I scooted lower in my chair and sipped. "No where. Around. I met a friend."

Sal grabbed a pack of chew from his shirt pocket and popped a pinch in his mouth.

"Finally."

"He works the boardwalks. He's a magician."

A line of worry knitted between his eyebrows. "That goofy magic guy always at the marina? Mr. Rabbit in a Hat? You could do better than that."

"He's funny. I like him."

"Can't trust guys like that. Escape artists."

"Island's full of those," I said and instantly regretted it.

Sal grunted again and spit sideways.

"I didn't mean that."

"I know you didn't." He rubbed at his eyes. "It's been a long time, kid."

In that way, Sal was my hero all growing up, as wrong as that seems. To me, Sal had kicked off the life he never wanted with a woman he never loved to live his dreams in the Keys. I'd shown his postcards to Hannah our very first day as best friends in third grade. Together, we'd dreamed of our lives in this place: palm trees, gold bikinis, and sunshine. While Sal's wife cried on our couch with my mother, Hannah and I conjured a life with Sal adrift in the ocean waves.

But since I'd arrived, the pictures didn't match. The beaches were white, ocean water clear to the bottom, but Sal and I both seemed sad and hollowed out, not escapees.

Sal and I sat quietly together for a while as the sun slid into the sea and the stars rose up from the waters, bright with salt. I'd wasted a whole day again. Grieving was like trying to pull to water to myself and hold it. Whole days disappeared, and still I felt no different. I dreamt of home, of Hannah, of my mother. In the worst moments, I would wake with a

sharp expectation that Hannah was about to walk in the door of our apartment back in St. Louis.

Sal shook his head as if clearing out sleep. "You know what, kid," he said. "It's a borrowed life. Dress it anyway you like. You turn around, you realize nothing you got belongs to you because you been dicking around for the past twenty years. It's a borrowed life you eventually got to give back."

"What a shame."

"That it is."

"No. This should've been a fun day. We should've caught and grilled fish."

"A day passes like any other."

"No," I said. "That's not true." But I couldn't think of why. Maybe he and I had come for the wrong reasons and now resented the German tourists who came to feel like gods tossing spears into the ocean while we crawled along the shore.

*

I started with the back end of butter knives, the serrated edges held between my thumb and forefinger, my head tilted back, chin toward the leaky roof of my boat. I sat cross-legged on the floor between the table and kitchen cabinets, the narrow strip of carpet muddy with filth. In the murkiest dawn light, glints and shimmers, I closed my eyes, the houseboat tight around me. Archer told me once that he practiced for hours. "You mean your gag reflex, like puking?"

"No," he said. "Meditation. Mind control."

The first time, I studied my breathing, a round, soft ball of light that expanded and dimmed with each breath. The slow steady rhythms of being alive. I watched this ball until the sun crawled into the ocean and twilight rippled in the sky. When night came, I tilted my head back and traced my fingertips along my throat. The skin felt thin and papery, there like a lizard's. I held the butter knife above me and pressed it to my tongue. The knife slid down through the viscous walls of my throat. That first time, my body revolted and heaved from my guts upward, and the knife clanged against the cabinets while I hunched over, coughing.

I thought of Archer's sword. I wanted to feel everyone in that crowd suck air and lean to me as I slipped steel down my throat.

Once when we were kids, Hannah and I packed a suitcase full of her favorite toys, some Kool-aid packets from the kitchen, and a towel we would share as a blanket. We left a note for her mother. We headed into the woods behind Hannah's neighborhood, a few acres of tangled forest once slated for development but later abandoned. The construction crews had left huge concrete pipes for the sewers back there that Hannah and I decided we could live in.

By nightfall I cried from the chill. Lonely howls echoed through the trees. Hannah grew impatient and threatened to leave me there if I didn't grow up. I sucked at a packet of Kool-aid, bitter and sweet. Hannah stepped out of our pipe into the moonlight and stripped naked, her skin lunar white, and strutted through the tall grass. We are not afraid, Joey, she said. Say it. We are not afraid.

As the houseboat's swollen wood croaked, I breathed deep and slipped the knife down my throat again and again until I retched into the kitchen sink next to a slimy pile of dishes.

By the third week, I could keep the butter knife down and breathe through the fear of being alive. I moved on to the back end of a wooden spoon.

*

Archer started doing two nights a week at the marina bar for free well drinks and tips. While all the old boatmen nursed cans of Busch and talked about that day's haul of tourists and fish, Archer told jokes and brandished his sword and juggled any small objects that the drinkers threw at him. It was a good gig, and Archer seemed happy despite the dim lighting and vinegary smell. I worked the box and got to keep ten percent of what we made. Each time I painted on my showgirl smile and slid on my fishnets, I felt like Hannah, as if I were pulling her skin over mine. I would be, I told myself, wild and brave.

I set the box on my hip and let it bounce with my walk. The old fishermen seemed to like this, but instead of dollar bills, they dropped quarters in and grinned. Don't spend it all in one place.

"They're a tough crowd," Archer said.

I set the box down on a stool and peered inside. Maybe twenty dollars. I ran my finger along the dust of silver in Archer's hair. His tuxedo had worn satiny at the cuffs, frayed at the collar. Something about the way he hunched over his glass of whiskey summoned a need in me to spit on my fingers and wipe down his cowlick. "They loved you. They just don't know how to show it."

He slumped lower and huffed. "When I was a kid, I wanted to drive a train. They used to pass behind our back yard. Drove my mom crazy, but I loved them. They looked like dinosaurs or something to me."

I kissed the back of his head. Hannah and I had never dreamed of jobs; we dreamed of adventures. Hitching out to California to dive off the piers. Bus rides up to New York to sleep on the streets. They were Hannah's dreams though. Eventually I was content to march behind her into the darkness with nothing but a lighter, a pack of cigarettes and her bad attitude. By the time we turned fifteen, I believed she could get us out of anything.

"It's not so bad," I told Archer. "You're just having a bad night."

He nodded and sipped his whiskey. "What do you want to drink?"

I shook my head and fingered the two hearts on a chain around my neck. The night felt hot and velvety, a luscious purple pressing in until I couldn't breathe. I could see where it was headed from two miles up the road, and I didn't want to spend it in my bunk, drunk and crying. "No, thank you," I said.

Archer wiped his palm down his face and revealed a new one taut with his showman's grin. "I've never had one of those. Martha, a No-thank-you for the beautiful lady." Martha frowned and slid a beer toward me. She didn't like the showmen. Most of the locals didn't.

I picked at a fleck of varnish that had pried loose from the bar's wood. "Why'd you come here?"

He leaned against the bar and stared at a few old men nursing their draft beers. "Need the money."

"No, the island. Why'd you come to the island?"

"I don't know," he said. "To work the boardwalks."

"Why not somewhere else?"

He grabbed my hand and held his palm to it. "So small." He kissed my fingertip and my hand in his. "It seemed like no one would ever be sad here. Or lonely. Like we'd all take

boat rides and fish and lounge around on the beach, and I thought the boardwalks paid good enough to live on."

"Oh," I said.

Archer kissed my fingers. "Don't be like that."

"I'm not."

"No, I mean, don't. We're having a good time tonight. We'll go back to my place. I can make you some pasta."

"I should check on Sal."

Archer absently flicked an ace of spades in and out of his shirtsleeve. A woman giggled in the corner, her skirt too short for her age. The man next to her slid his finger under her skirt and whispered in her ear. I'd spent my entire life never thinking of the future. What if it ended up like that?

"Don't check on Sal."

"I'm tired."

"I didn't want to go to jail again. I'd gotten picked up for theft, and my dad wouldn't let me come home. My mom didn't want to look at me. I remember I walked to the river and sat on it and watched the water, and I knew that if I stayed around there was no other end for me. So, I packed my shit and went to New Orleans. I saw all those dudes on the street, people throwing money at them, and I was like, I can do that. No problem. Good enough?"

I leaned into him. "Why did you go to jail?"

"No. Now you. Why did you come here?"

I sipped at my beer, let the acrid taste rest on the back of my tongue. I should have changed my name. Josephine, Josy, Jo. But who thinks these things through? I left two

weeks after Hannah's face had appeared on the news. I couldn't take watching the coverage mutate. Hannah had gone from a sweet-faced, teenage girl to a drug addict with the discovery of one mug shot. People started to talk, as if anyone ever deserved what happened to her. The morning I left, I paused outside my car, keys in hand. A hot, lazy wind kicked at the wet heat and pushed it over my skin. In that moment—a thought without origin or intention—I could see my car falling through a painfully blue sky into the Mississippi River as I crossed the bridge into St. Louis.

It's actually easy to disappear, to wipe away an old life like skimming water from your skin. It's easy, if you really try.

A light flickered overhead and blinked off, shrouding Archer and me in a rippling, shadowy light. "I wanted a new life," I said. "Let's go."

*

Sal and I took his jon boat to a sandbar so far out we could no longer see land. I'd wrapped a couple sandwiches in foil, and Sal had brought a few bottles of wine. The white sand was clear and smooth, rippled in patches just above the shoreline, and a few ragged hunks of driftwood had embedded into it. All around us, a crisp blue sky faded into calm waters.

"It's beautiful here."

Sal poured our wine into paper cups and squatted on a piece of driftwood. "Prettiest place in the ocean. I been coming here since I was young and handsome."

"You were never young and handsome."

Sal grinned. Years in the sun had baked him to cracked earth, and a life wrestling wet rope had twisted his knuckles into gnarled tree bark. Everything about Sal told me that we went back to the earth when it was over.

Sal pointed to the ocean. "Over there somebody sunk their boat. Best fishing you'll find around here."

We baited our hooks with live shrimp, jamming them through their shiny black eyes so that they wouldn't slip off once they hit the water. We climbed back in our boat and dropped anchor just a few yards off the sandbar. The shipwreck had flipped in the water and landed on a rock so that the fish could swim under and within it. Thick waves of silver darted and zigzagged, a few splashes of color zipping past. It seemed as if the moment we dropped our lines we pulled another trout and dropped it in the net tied to the side of the boat.

"We should do this every day," I said.

We emptied one wine bottle and then another. Thin, wispy clouds streaked the sky and plumped enough to cast shadows across us. Out here, open like this, it seemed possible that I would work that sword into my stomach. I imagined myself cross-legged on the sand, a few tiny crabs spider-crawling up my legs, and the sword gleaming in the sunlight as it slipped down my throat. My drunk started to lift me up and push me into that blue, blue sky.

Sal put his boot longways on a fish to pull the hook from its mouth. It bucked, its body slick with scales and ocean water and its mouth working in a terrible gnaw. Without looking up, he said, "Your mama wrote me. Which, you know, is unusual."

I kept my line steady. I hadn't pulled in another fish for a bit, and I suspected my shrimp had worked his way free. I hated jamming that hook through its head, feeling the pop of breaking through delicate shell, and so I did it carelessly and sometimes without looking. "I'm thinking about going to San Francisco with Archer. We think we can make more money out there."

"Well," Sal said, "you did just up and leave without telling her. I would imagine she's pretty pissed off about that. I mean, I would be."

Hot anger flashed through me, and my tongue started working before I could help it. "You should talk."

Sal kept his head down as he baited his hook with a new shrimp as gray as dead flesh. "She says you had a friend die. You didn't tell me that."

I touched the hearts at my neck, the jagged, zigzagged edges that separated them in two. She gave me mine for Christmas. Watch, she said, and placed them together to form one whole heart. *Best friends forever.* "I want to go back to shore."

Sal sat down. His face had that sagging look he got when he drank too much in the sun. "We're just talking."

I stood, the boat bobbing in the water. "Take me back."

"Sit down, kid. We're just talking. We're having a conversation." Sal shaded his eyes and looked up in the sky. "Might rain."

I sat down. I was no longer sure what we were talking about. I knew only my anger, as hot and oppressive as the houseboat at midday. "You're supposed to be on my side," I said weakly.

"I am, kiddo. I am on your side. I'm just asking if you're okay. You know, you can't outrun your life from up there. You can't just pretend it ain't there. People are worried about you."

I put my head down and ground my teeth, my fists trembling at my sides. "You," I whispered. "You out of everyone."

Sal clipped his pole to the boat's edge and leaned over to put his hand on my knee. "There ain't a day goes by I don't think about them and what I did. Not one single day. There is no such thing as starting over, Joey. Every day builds on the next. You can't just come down here and make something new with yourself. Trust me on that. I know better than anyone."

I felt the hot tears on my cheeks before I knew I was crying, and crying in front of Sal made me angrier, boiled with it until everything else evaporated out. "Take me back, Sal. I mean it."

Sal leaned back and sighed. A small wind kicked up ocean spray at us. "I've sent my boys a present on their birthdays and on Christmas every year for the past twenty-two years. Even though I don't know a thing about them. I would walk all over this island looking for the right thing to send for weeks. I couldn't send shells or anything that reminded them of where I went and what I did. I could never find the right thing. Never. I don't even know who they are now. Not even if I passed them on the street."

"You came here and you drove boats and you had a good life, Sal. That's what you did."

"Oh, kiddo. You always have to live with what happens and what you've done. It's always that way."

I pulled my knees to my chin and buried my face in the them. "If you don't take me back right fucking now, I'm going to jump out of this boat and swim."

Sal ruffled my hair. "Okay, what you say. We ain't got to mention it no more."

*

Archer and I walked back to my dock, our arms linked and feet unsteady. We'd drunk until Martha cut us off, squandering the night's earnings, and because of that we felt the small joy of purging the day while anticipating a fresh start tomorrow. We would be better people, better lovers and friends and daughters and sons. "I'm going to call my mother," I told Archer. "First thing in the morning."

At the gate Archer pulled me to him, and the stars spun into a halo above me. A fish skidded across the water, a sword in the moonlight. The briny taste of saltwater polluted the air.

"What would you like to do tonight?" Archer asked.

"I say terrible things when I'm mad."

Archer palmed the small of my back. "We all do, Jo. It's being hurt, not mad."

"I should have had a plan. I never have a plan."

I led Archer along the trail that sloped up to Sal's backyard. He cried out a few times as sharp palm fronds sprung at his face when I let them go. "Hold on to me," I said, our feet uncertain in the sand. Sal's living room light lit his back patio a dull yellow so that the concrete seemed ancient and crumbling.

I pressed my face to his sliding glass doors to peer inside. Sal and I had an understanding. I had never asked to go in his house, not even the week that I arrived. He'd met me at the driveway, a soft drizzle all around us, and led me back to the houseboat. He said only, Your mother's going to be pissed. In return, I never asked him why he abandoned his wife and two children, why he didn't tell my mother he was leaving. Because I knew. They say we can't go home again, but we never end up anywhere new either. We spend all of our lives dragging our dead around by chains.

Archer slid his hands into my pockets and whispered. "He's fine. Let's go."

"Wait."

Sal was asleep in his armchair. His head tipped back, mouth open, in his lap a big book that looked old and leathery. I didn't think he'd kept anything from his old life. My mother told me that Sal had left with only the family car, an extra shirt, and a bottle of expensive Scotch he'd bought the day their father died. This album looked old, the edges worn dark and shiny from the grease of his fingers. He'd scattered other photographs on the end table next to him, wallet-sized ones. I touched the heart on my neck.

"We should go," I said.

"I know, that's what I've been telling you."

We held hands and fumbled our way back down to the dock. I lit up a couple of candles and poured us two glasses of rum. The ice cubes clinked in the quiet as we faced each other, Archer leaning against my sink, me on the dining table.

"I want to show you something," I said. I smiled.

Archer grinned too and wiped the sweat from his brow that had collected in beads. He leaned over my sink and shoved a window open, cool night air rushing in.

"Sit down," I said.

He scooted into the booth and set his glass on the table and waited, his face sloppy and mashed up in a drunken smile.

I moved my toaster and a few plates and hoisted myself on the counter. "Can you see me? Should I turn on a light."

"I can see you, baby."

I pulled a long breadknife from the strainer and tipped my head back. I thought of Archer's throat that day on the beach, as delicate as the belly of a fish. His vulnerability gleaming in the sunlight, his bravery turning it to strength.

"What are you doing?"

I flipped the knife upside down and held the handle between my thumb and forefinger. I pressed the blade to my tongue and tasted its cold, metallic flavor, so much like blood. Three days before Hannah died we'd hitched out to Centerville to buy some coke. She'd scammed Walgreens for a bag of needles by using her little girl voice to explain about her diabetic grandmother. But I got distracted. A lanky boy with homemade tattoos started flirting with me, and I told Hannah to go on without me. It's hard to see how you can get so fucked up. Just a week or so after that, they found Hannah's body in the state park, naked and pale with red knife wounds all over her.

"Joey, what the hell are you doing?"

I let the knife slip to the back of my tongue. I could see the moon in the window behind me, a pregnant, white-bellied moon. I breathed evenly through my nose. I felt powerful in those moments as if I was mastering something I couldn't understand. I wanted Archer to see me like this. The way I had seen him on the boardwalks, all those faces leering at him, equal parts worship him and wanting him to gut himself right there. I wanted Archer to feel that way about me. I willed my body to obey me, and this made me feel as if I could part the sea if I wanted. That I could move on if I wanted.

I heard Archer shifting on the vinyl bench covers and felt him wrench the knife from my grasp. He tossed it across the room and pulled me to him; he shushed me and stroked the

back of my head as if he'd caught me with a gun to my temple. "You don't have to do that, Joey. Whatever it is, you don't have to do that."

I pulled away and wiped at my tears.

"It's a trick sword, Joey. I use a trick sword. Everybody does."

"A trick sword."

He held my hand to his and traced my fingers. "It retracts, piece by piece."

I felt suddenly heavy with too much alcohol. "A trick sword?"

"Come on. Let's go to bed."

He pulled me into the dark cabin that never dried and always smelled like mushrooms. We fell asleep naked and sweaty, sealed to each other. I would explain everything in the morning. I would be better and braver, the world new, as ready for the day as a lizard basking in the sun. I fell asleep, the boat knocking against the dock, wondering if all of paradise is molded out of regret.

The Damage Done

Ezekiel parks his Tahoe and trudges up the stairs to the apartment Lashonda shares with her sister, Ro, a two-bedroom nothing on the second story of a rat complex. The door opens after one knock, and Ro is planted behind it, her face pinched as tight as a stitched wound.

“Lashonda here?” When Ro doesn’t respond, he tries, “I came to see the girls.”

“You missed Shauna’s birthday.” Ro licks her lips—her tell—and Ezekiel knows her heart pounds as hard as his.

“I brought a card. And some money.”

She holds her hand out, and Ezekiel thinks of clasping it to his heart. *I’m sorry, Ro. Please tell Lashonda I’m trying.* He takes the card from the inside pocket of his jacket and sets it in her hand. He can feel the years of misunderstanding and resentment passed between him and Lashonda now filter through Ro.

“I just want to ask about Thanksgiving. Look, I told my dad—”

“I don’t give a fuck what you told your dad. Always you. You, you, you. Well, fuck *you.*”

Before Ezekiel can spit one word back, Ro slams the door.

In the parking lot, he hugs his coat around his neck and closes his eyes to still the world like his counselor taught him. Count to ten, a hundred if you need it, until the world quiets and you can breathe again. Ezekiel opens his eyes and looks around the complexes, four squat buildings that surround the gravel lot like prison walls. Across the lot, a white man stares at him from a porch, blinking like a dog awaiting command. The man is about Ezekiel’s age, scrawny as a reed, greasy blonde hair to his shoulders. His face unsettles

Ezekiel, something about it damaged in a way that makes Ezekiel feel as if he's seen too much blood.

"How's it going?" Ezekiel asks.

The man taps an uneven beat on the arm of his metal lawn chair but doesn't speak.

"You doing all right?" Ezekiel tries again.

The man smiles. The left side of his face snags on a pink scar that runs from his hairline to his jaw. He shakes his head as if Ezekiel has offended him. "Ezekiel James, you know me."

"Yeah, man, I'm sorry. I don't."

"Lashonda said you come over sometimes, but not as much as you should. I live here." He attempts to point toward the window behind him, but his left arm catches at the shoulder, and he pulls it back to his chest like a kitten he wants to protect.

"Who are you?"

The man drops his head. His feet are bare, but he wears a hooded parka and gloves. He could be any crazy begging change on the street. The sun shifts and winks off the man's folding lawn chair, and then it smacks Ezekiel, a memory as vast and violent as an ocean wave to drown him.

Ezekiel fumbles with his keys, almost dropping them in the gravel dust, and even though he knows Tommy Sullivan *can't* climb off his porch after him, panic clangs in Ezekiel's chest so that his hands shake and he actually feels as if he might cry, until finally his truck starts, and he peels out of the lot.

*

That weekend, Ezekiel drives to his brother's house an hour away. He finds his brother upstairs where he keeps an office. A storage room for debate trophies, law degree, and leather-bound books, things that have always seemed to Ezekiel equally out of place in his brother's life. The smaller details betray the room's purpose: a small refrigerator, a blanket and pillow, a television set across from the leather couch. Ezekiel can imagine him hiding up here away from his noisy family, still new and overwhelming enough to make him foolishly question his choices.

"I should've called," Ezekiel says after they clasp hands. "I know Melinda likes to lock up her purse."

Zuriah rolls his eyes and pulls a box from his desk's bottom drawer; inside cigars lie as neat as men stacked head to foot. "Take one," he says. "You see my baby girl downstairs?"

"Just the boys."

"She's walking. Just today. She actually got up and walked."

Ezekiel sinks into the couch leather. His oldest, Miesha, walked for him. Lashonda had to work the nightshift, and Miesha had the flu. He spent all night walking that girl around, cleaning puke off his shirt, singing every song he knew in his best Al Green voice. Finally, at dawn, exhausted and out of ideas, Ezekiel set her down on the floor and collapsed onto the couch, defeated. He wanted to sneak down the street for a bump, just to make it through. He had half convinced himself that Miesha would be fine when she stopped crying, stood up, and wobbled a few steps toward him. How badly he wishes he could say that the moment changed him.

Ezekiel picks up a football from its silver, three-pronged holder and traces his thumb over the laces. "Where'd you get this?"

Zuriah grins. "Got it from a client. Signed by the whole 2000 Rams."

"You don't even like football."

"I like it enough." He props his feet on the desk.

"I went to see Lashonda today."

"Good. So, the girls are coming then."

"I don't know."

"You know Dad thinks they're coming."

Dad. They never called him that, not even as a little boys. Lashonda remarked once how it seemed sad, Ezekiel's mom dead, Zuriah's gone, and Big Joe insisting on his name as if he wasn't their parent either. Ezekiel had pulled her to him then, but only to make her quiet.

Ezekiel shakes his head. "Ro's still playing warden."

"I've been telling you forever, you've got to draw papers up. Otherwise, she's just going to do whatever Ro tells her. She can move those girls wherever the hell she wants, and you don't get to say a word about it. I don't know why you won't listen to me on this."

One. Two. Three. Four. "It's not that easy."

"You're paying child support, aren't you? You said you were, Ezekiel. You know you can't have any legal rights until you contribute financially to your children. That's the way it works in this state. You want them to track you down and garnish your wages? When you just got this job?"

"Tommy Sullivan lives in her complex. I saw him today. He's jacked up, Zuriyah. His face looks like it's got a bad zipper up the back or something. And he's not right. I could see it in his eyes. I mean—" Ezekiel shakes his head again to disperse Tommy's face, that open and trusting smile. *You know me.* "He's not right."

Zuriyah's face has fallen, all the boyish charm drained until it is as flat and impersonal as the plaques hanging on his walls. This is probably his courtroom face, the one he shows the judges and jurors and the companies he serves. It's the kind of scary face boys have when they run the streets, but submerged beneath the placid face of a man who wants something from you and will do anything to get it.

"Who's Tommy Sullivan?" Zuriyah asks.

"Don't play."

"Zeke, that was all a long time ago. You need to be worrying about getting your life straight."

"He knew who I was."

"We were kids." Zuriyah takes a cigar from the box and lights it with a Zippo engraved with his initials. He puffs a few times until the cigar's tip glows red. "I mean, you just don't know when you're that young. How long life is and what it means. What's at stake. We can't spend the rest of our lives feeling sorry because we messed up once. We're different people now. Those people no longer even *exist*."

"Seems like we're sitting right here."

Zuriyah rolls the cigar ash on the edge of the ashtray. "You're not listening. You never listen. We are not those kids anymore. I have a family. You're clean. You were fucked up then, and we did what we thought was right."

"I have a family, too."

"You know what I mean."

"He's got brain damage, Zuriyah. How the fuck is that not our fault?"

Zuriyah stabs his cigar into the ashtray. Ezekiel wants to smoke a cigarette but knows his brother won't let him—Melinda hates the smell.

"Look, Zeke, come downstairs and eat some dinner. I don't want to hear his name again. Stay away from him. Tell Lashonda to stay away from him, too." He sits up straighter and clasps his hands on his desk. "Or I'll tell her. I'm drawing those papers up. This shit is ridiculous. You're thirty-eight years old. When do you think life starts?"

*

They eat pork steaks with mashed potatoes and gravy. Melinda sets a plate for Ezekiel, but the moment Zuriyah has turned his back, she crosses her arm and glares at him as he sits. She answers his questions when he asks about teaching, but she doesn't ask any in return. The boys put him at ease; they jostle one another under the table and compete for Ezekiel's approval, which he is all too happy to give. It's the boys and their fidgeting energies that send Ezekiel back to Lashonda's house to put things right.

He rehearses his speech all the way there. *I'll do better, get my shit together, we can be a family again.* But he can sense the hesitation in his own thoughts. How do you ever know if this is what you want or what you are supposed to want? If these things are the same? Either way, it makes no difference to Lashonda.

He pulls into the lot and shuts his truck off. A little boy comes out of the apartment above Tommy Sullivan's and lets the screen door slap its frame. He can't be more than three

years old, still in a dingy, bloated diaper. He plops down on the balcony and kicks his legs through the rails. A woman comes out, her hair a snake's nest, her jaw grinding while her tongue works over her lips. She drops a blanket down for the boy, looks around the parking lot, and goes back inside. Anger rumbles in Ezekiel, that woman leaving her kid on the porch like that. Ezekiel grabs the truck's door handle when a knock startles him.

"You came to visit," Tommy Sullivan says.

"Don't walk up on people's cars like that. What's wrong with you?"

Tommy frowns, and immediately Ezekiel is sorry. Close up, in the light, Tommy's skin puckers at his hairline, small incisions along scar tissue still the burning pink of trauma. "I'm sorry, man. I think you got me mistaken."

Tommy leans on the truck's door and looks around the lot. "Lashonda's not here."

Ezekiel scoots lower in his seat. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I see her in the mornings. She says hi when it's a good morning and good morning when it's not." He shrugs and smiles. "I want some McDonalds. You take me to get some?"

"Go on, man. Get out of here."

Tommy limps around Ezekiel's truck, a swish-and-drag on the left side, and Ezekiel can't make himself start the truck and pull away. Tommy tugs on the passenger door but lets the handle snap back.

"Man," Ezekiel says. "I don't even know you."

Tommy gets the door open, backs in his seat, and lifts his left leg over the floorboard. "Quit playing around, Ezekiel. I been sitting there all day waiting for you to come by. I knew you would. And just when I was getting hungry." Tommy bangs the dashboard. "It's a good day today."

At the drive-thru, Tommy changes his mind three times. He wants chicken nuggets, then a sundae, then a double cheeseburger with extra mayonnaise. They don't discuss it, but when they reach the window, Ezekiel pulls out his wallet.

A couple of teenage girls push a stroller in the crosswalk in front of them. "I bet that baby's cold," Tommy says.

They park the truck and eat in silence. Ezekiel watches Tommy out of the corner of his eye. He eats with his right hand and smooths the paper down with the back of his left, the fingers curled like a dried talon.

Tommy licks the cheese off the waxed wrapper and tosses it in the empty bag. "You like movies?"

"Not really."

"I like them. I've seen," he pauses, rolls his eyes upward, "probably fifty movies this month. Probably more than anyone else. I don't go to the theater though. It's too far away, and I don't have a car."

They stop at Family Video on the way home. Tommy heads for the horror section and picks a DVD with a terrified and bloody girl on the cover. TVs all over the store show a cartoon car smashing itself into a brick wall over and over, each time unscathed. Tommy looks at the DVD then back at Ezekiel. "You seen this one?"

He's never understood horror movies. People scaring the shit out of themselves with monsters and vampires and serial killers dressed up like women. As if there wasn't real shit in this world to be afraid of. "Nah, man. I haven't."

Tommy sets the DVD back on its metal rack and nods. "You like comedies," he says. "I remember."

“You remember what?” Can he be fucking with him? And if he is, how long can he keep it up? Ezekiel has thought many times over the years how badly he would want revenge if it were him. He would need someone to pay.

“Yeah. Your dad used to let us use his movie card when he was at work.” Tommy cocks his head. “All the time, Ezekiel.”

Zuriah liked comedies. The dumber the better. Fart jokes, stand-up, no plot, didn't matter. Zuriah was a kid who could laugh. All those years living a chemical life has made it difficult for Ezekiel to remember. But here in the buzzing florescent lights of this video store, Ezekiel suspects that Tommy slept over with Zuriah at least once, maybe more, and they must have watched a comedy together. That this memory has shaken itself loose inside Tommy, confused and mismatched, unsettles Ezekiel.

"I do," he says. "I like comedies."

They pick an old one with Richard Pryor, and somehow this cements an unspoken decision to watch the movie together. "We should get popcorn," Tommy says. Ezekiel nods and grabs a couple Reese's, too. In line, Tommy puts his good hand on Ezekiel's shoulder and says, "I'm glad you came by. I knew you would."

On the night Ro comes to see him, Ezekiel's making macaroni and cheese in his tiny kitchen and listening to a few men on the street below argue over the Superbowl outcome of teams twenty years apart. He should close his windows to cut the chill in his efficiency apartment, but the men keep him company, and occasionally he offers his opinion to an empty room.

When he opens the door, Ro barges past him and looks around his empty apartment.

"Where am I supposed to sit?"

"What are you doing here?"

Ro pulls a metal folding chair from the kitchen area and gestures for Ezekiel to sit on his bed. It occurs to him to throw her out, but he doesn't. That's something a different Ezekiel might have done, and it pains him to think that Ro probably expects this.

"You want something to eat?"

Ro glances at the pot of noodles on the little stove and says, "That ain't even food."

"I haven't had a chance to get to the store. Lashonda come with you?"

Ro takes in the bare walls, the cloud of grime on the wall near his bed where his pillow rubs, the matted carpet. She leans back in her chair and crosses her ankle on her knee.

"I came to see how you're living."

"Well, here it is. The high life."

"Where you working?"

"What do you want, Ro? You come to gloat that I live like shit? Tell me I deserve all this? Do it and get out."

Ro leans forward and puts her hand on his arm. Her fingers are slender like Lashonda's, birdlike on this big woman. "I came to make a deal."

"A deal?"

"Your brother called Lashonda talking all his lawyer bullshit. You have him call my house again and scare the shit out of my sister, and I'll cut his dick off myself. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"He called Lashonda?"

"Don't play stupid."

"I told him to stay out of it, Ro. Last thing I want is my little brother in my business."

"He used to be such a sweet kid."

"We all did."

Ro gets up and goes to his kitchen on the far wall. She opens a few cabinets until she finds the glasses. She comes back with two glasses of water and hands one to him.

"What's the deal?"

"The girls miss you. Asking about you all the time. It's driving Lashonda crazy, and now your brother's got her thinking she's headed to court. No money for a lawyer." Ro raises her eyebrows at Ezekiel.

"We're not going to court."

"Don't matter. I'm offering you a chance to pick your sorry ass up after all these years and do the right thing. We can start with Thanksgiving. You come to my house, act like you got some sense, and you can start coming to see the kids every weekend. But you don't take them yet. You ain't earned that."

It's ugly seeing her like this. He'd watched out for her in the neighborhood when they were kids. He made sure the boys knew to let her walk from the bus stop to her house without messing with her. She made it through junior high because he told every boy in their neighborhood that he would slit the fucking throat of anyone who so much as yelled at her.

"I'm clean, Ro. I've *been* clean. Who are you to tell me I can't take my kids? You ain't even in this."

"My house, my rules."

"You need to leave. I'm serious. Get the fuck out." He stands, walks to the door, and opens it.

"Sit your ass back down and think about what I'm saying to you."

"Get out, Ro."

Ro crosses her arms and plants both feet. "Why don't you think about someone other than your own sorry ass for once? I'm offering you a chance to see your kids. A chance you don't even deserve after all the times you've fucked up. I need to remind you about leaving Miesha alone so you could buy drugs, asshole? Or about getting your ass locked up for a year? What, you think people just fucking forget?"

"You're in my house."

"I don't give a fuck. You're lucky I'm even giving you this. I take care of those kids, Ezekiel. You ain't a father. You're a fucking junkie. You always going to be a junkie."

Before he can start counting, a white light pierces his vision, and he's filled with a fury as hot and ugly as the scar on Tommy's face. He grabs Ro's collar, the other hand cupped over her mouth, and he watches her kick at the air as he drags her to his porch and tosses her down his stairs. She tumbles to the bottom, her back jarring against the metal rails, her legs still kicking like a cat in water. When she finally hits the bottom, all the old men on the crates run over while Ro lies at the bottom and glares.

*

The truth is, besides his daughters, Ezekiel has loved only one other person in his entire life, and he lost her just a few days before his twenty-second birthday. He'd been sitting in his friend's living room, waiting for someone to show with a teenager of coke, when Hannah's face flashed on the evening news. Her head was tilted up, blonde hair a tangled mess of curls

piled on her head, and her mouth open as if she might call out to him. The picture was a good one and clearly taken a year or so before she and Ezekiel had started using regularly.

The picture flashed to Frank Holten State Park, yellow tape draped along the shore of a lake edged with scum. Someone had stripped Hannah naked and stabbed her to death, and the police had no leads.

Ezekiel screamed for Zuriah who came in from the back room. He screamed again and again, that moment like the agony of childbirth he thought mothers must forget in order to make love again.

Another friend led them to Tommy Sullivan, although Ezekiel had heard about Tommy and Hannah in some shit motel by the highway, and even though it broke him open to think of Hannah fucking someone else, he knew once Tommy's supply ran out, Hannah would, too, and she and Ezekiel could work out whatever stupid fight they'd had over nothing. The kind of things people think every day. I'll apologize tomorrow, quit drugs tomorrow, take my kids to the park tomorrow, but tomorrow is always here, along with yesterday, all the time.

The heart heals. Ezekiel learned that. Lashonda comforted him in those first few years, and then Miesha was born, and right behind her Shauna. And even if he couldn't quite keep himself clean, there were long stretches where he woke up in the morning and felt like a real man with a real family and a real life. Except that Tommy's flesh would never leave him. Without trying, he could conjure the feel of fist meeting bone, a lot like striking wood buried in wet ground.

Tommy's mom told people that for three months he couldn't use the left side of his body. Ezekiel used to lie awake at night, train calls arcing through the darkness, and he

would hold his left side as still as he could and try to imagine what it must feel like to have his body refuse him.

Of course, Tommy Sullivan didn't kill Hannah.

Before the sun rises, Ezekiel bangs on Tommy's door. A light clicks on, and Tommy appears in a rumpled T-shirt and sweatpants. He rubs his fingers along the scar, his eyes swollen.

"What are you doing here, Ezekiel?"

"I need you to go somewhere with me."

Tommy sighs. "I'm so tired. We can watch movies later."

Ezekiel grabs the sleeve of Tommy's left arm. Tommy snatches it back and pulls it close to his chest and, for the first time Ezekiel has seen, glares at him with an eye that surely wishes death. "Don't," he says.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't touch my arm."

The arm has pulled in close to him and tucked itself near his ribcage, the claw rigid as if clutching the head of a cane. His scar beats in the sunlight, the skin there a grisly pink, and that side of his face pulled taut as if an internal fault line had cracked through the surface to expose the shifting, volatile plates beneath. "Come with me," Ezekiel says. "Please. We can stop for doughnuts. Just please. I need to show you something."

Tommy's quiet on the drive, but Ezekiel can't stop talking. They pass the drive-in, and he tells Tommy about the first time he got laid there. He tells him it's the last of its kind in the Midwest, and that money problems will probably close the place in a few years.

He glides past the old K-mart and out of town toward Centreville where he knows that Tommy once lived in a trailer with a man named JoJo who cooked meth and eventually blew himself up. Past the rundown strip mall, the old hardware store, and the Hardees where Jackson Miller shot his girlfriend on New Years Eve when they were all still in high school. Still, Tommy stays quiet.

Ezekiel parks the truck near the cemetery's entrance as he has done once a year since Hannah died. No one keeps the grounds anymore except family members, and brittle weeds rot on tombstones littered with faded ribbons and plastic flowers. The place lacks any of the false cheer of other cemeteries that try to look more like parks than cities of the dead.

As they walk to the hill's crest, Ezekiel thinks of the last time Lashonda threw him out. She found a tinfoil pouch inside his cell phone case, a place he thought she'd never look. This sent her stomping through the house, tearing undershirts from his dresser and shoes from his closet. She found the leather pouch where he kept his works, the syringe still dotted with dried blood. He never remembered hitting her, just the rage of the moment, everything spinning out of his control. How little power he exerted in the world. Over himself.

Hannah's family never bought her a headstone, and so Ezekiel stops in front of a bronze plate set in the ground. He pushes dead grass with his boot so they can read her name. "I have to explain something to you, Tommy. I need to. I've fucked up so many things."

Tommy stares at the plate. "We should go. We shouldn't be here."

"I just need a minute."

Tommy looks. His lower lip trembles in the cold. "I don't know who that is,"

Tommy says. "I can walk home. My mom's probably coming over soon."

Ezekiel squats and brushes dirt off the plate. "You remember her."

Tommy shakes his head. He looks out over the graveyard, that arm tucked tight. "I don't know anyone with that name."

"You remember her. I know you do. You remembered me."

Tommy's face crumples, and he buries his face in his sleeve. "I don't remember anything. I swear I don't remember anything."

"Fucking look at me, Tommy. I know you do. Tell me. Tell me what you remember."

"I'm not going to tell anyone."

"Tell me what you remember."

Tommy wipes his face, and Ezekiel feels as if he might throw up there in the grass.

Tommy's face is red with crying, that ugly scar seeming to throb with his heartbeat.

"I loved her," Tommy says.

"You what?"

"I loved her. Since I was little. Her mom knew my mom, and I loved her. But she loved someone else." He closes his eyes, and snow has started to fall and lands on his shoulders and in his hair before it melts. The sun has abandoned them, the dawn sky a dismal gray of factory smog; it may never come up.

"Who did she love?"

Tommy shakes his head.

“I thought you killed her, Tommy. Everyone did. You had her car. Why did you have her car?”

"I miss my mom."

"Do you understand? You had her car.”

"She doesn't come as much as I said she did. She sends a woman I don't know to bring me groceries. I miss her."

"Do you remember what I did? I'm saying I'm sorry to you.”

Tommy steps back. "It's okay, Ezekiel. It's okay."

"What's okay?"

Tommy steps back again. "It's okay. I'm sorry you're upset. I don't know why you're upset.”

"Oh, God. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to.” Ezekiel starts to cry, shame cracking open.

Tommy turns away and walks back to the car, an eerie blue infusing the sky, snow drifting around him and disappearing before it hits the ground.

Ezekiel wipes his face. “It's not, Tommy. Nothing is okay.”

*

Lashonda doesn't answer the phone no matter how many times Ezekiel calls Ro's house. If he calls her work, she hangs up as soon as she gets to the phone. He misses the girls. His memories warp, and he starts to feel as if he lived with them more often than not, and this makes the loss of them more acute, the mortal ache of an organ shutting down.

As many times as he rings Lashonda and prays she'll answer, his brother calls him and leaves him messages. Where is Ezekiel? What is he supposed to tell Melinda and *Dad*? In the final call, as Ezekiel sits in Lashonda's parking lot, Zuriah says that he should never have expected more. He's tired of being disappointed. *You always find a way to ruin the holidays, don't you?*

There's no making up for not bringing the girls to Thanksgiving dinner. There's no making up for shoving Ro down the stairs. For taking the rest of Tommy's life and leaving him to rot in this apartment complex, half his body shriveled and useless. He can't take back the nine months after Shauna was born that he didn't see his daughters because he sat in jail for robbery. All the stealing, the lying, the drugs, the fights. As far back as the fight with Hannah that sent her back to the city to find drugs on her own. He didn't protect her or his daughters or his brother. And Tommy. He'd almost killed him.

Ro will not forgive him. He knows this. Lashonda maybe, after a long time, but Ro, never. Ro's had a hard life. She's survived with grudges as hard as rock chipped to a point and brandished as a spear. The anger and hatred that he has always inflicted inward, Ro projects to the world so that it fears her. Ezekiel understands this.

People could fill up on shame, even choke on it, so that the body felt more like a skin worn over all the awful things a person's done.

But the world can offer redemption, too. He walks up the stairs to Ro's apartment, and inside he can hear the glittery laughs of his daughters and adult voices talking over them and a television's canned laughter. He shifts the groceries to one side and knocks. In Group, his counselor started each session with the Serenity Prayer and told them that they could not

undo their pasts. Ezekiel is sure it's more complex than that. Pasts can't be undone, but maybe men can. Fresh starts, lives remade.

He looks over toward Tommy's building, and Tommy pulls his curtain back and waves, his apartment dark behind him, on Thanksgiving. He knocks on Ro's door again, smiling. He imagines them all together at the dining table, the oven warm with Lashonda's pies, a turkey brown and glistening on the table. He'll invite Tommy up to eat with them. It can be this way. It can. Ezekiel turns back to Tommy's window, his smile falling a little, knocking and knocking on Ro's door, waiting for someone to answer.

Vita

Jamie Amos grew up in a working-class suburb of St. Louis, Missouri, and received her Bachelor's Degree in sociology from Southern Illinois University in 2007. While a student in the Master of Fine Arts Program at the University of New Orleans, her work won the Ernest J. Svenson Award for fiction and received Honorable Mention in *Glimmer Train's* Short Story Award for New Writers and the Orlando Prize in Fiction. In 2010, she was awarded the LAM Fellowship to attend A Room of Her Own Retreat in Ghost Ranch, New Mexico. She has been the Associate Editor and Associate Nonfiction Editor of *Bayou Magazine*. She currently lives in New Orleans where there is always a parade to ignore so that the writing gets done.