

THEY DON'T KNOW US HERE

by

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[1]

She is breathing in my ear and when I open my eyes the sun is eight degrees lower in the sky. I am sitting in a heavy wooden chair, rough upholstery rubbing the backs of my elbows when I lean back, looking out through barred windows at the horizon, or what I can make of it through the screen and the trees. I hear a tomcat wailing from the cat farm, our name for the feral colony that's been growing along the side of the building for the past five years at least, although we can never see it too close. We are Ward 12, we are maximum security we never touch the ground. My knuckles hug an unlit Newport, fingers tapping the arm of the chair. Three walls of the porch are covered in single-hung windows but I'm keeping watch through the ones in the center, facing away from our ward like I do every day as the sun slowly falls.

When the sun dips again I lift my cigarette to Henry, who takes his time with the lighter as usual, sliding it up in his hand with his thumb before striking down on the wheel, spinning the wheel until it hits the flint and catches the flammable gas in its spark and that lovely flame spikes high above the lighter, high but never high enough. Henry takes his time so I take mine too, moving the tip of my cigarette into the path of the flame, letting it soak into my eye sockets, breaking down at the pressure building in my temples. I turn the cigarette in the flame so every bit of the circle is evenly chewed through before I pull it away.

The sun splits itself in half behind a dead tree. Soon it will be in pieces, shattered on the horizon. Soon it will be gone. My eyes shift between the sun and the tip of my cigarette, the compromise with every inhale that the glow grows while the time I have left

with it shrinks. The dull glow of the embers can never completely remove it, the pressure and the build behind it, but it's all I have in here.

The sun is in its final degrees above the horizon and I have to watch it, know how to time the shutting of my eyelids perfectly to burn the biggest imprint of its last rays on them, how to open my eyes just enough to see that bright end of my cigarette and trick my brain, even just for a second, into believing the embers are a sun and the sun hasn't set and the dark isn't coming. Then keep going like this, sucking in and closing my eyes to press the heat against them, until the breathing slows or the shaking subsides or I need another cigarette. Sometimes Abe will light me two.

Lightning bugs are dancing outside the window, which means I've been here another winter at least, and now it's summer. The sky should be black but it's orange in spots it's sick with pollution. The bugs light up the air, their little bulbs so small, iridescent, a yellow-green pop and then it's gone. I can see their black backs striped with fire as they cross the spotlights fixed to the brick walls outside and if I press my ear to the glass I can almost hear the whirr of their hurried wings. My eyes tug as I follow the path of their light, left then up, right then down, my eyes dance with them.

Winnie is beautiful in the moonlight, her white dress blowing wide and blue in the night air. She turns back to me where I stand in the bedroom we share, her red hair streaming out and up. I can see her smile from across the room, her hands cling to each other and grab at the goose bumps on her arms as the breeze chills her.

Come here, I say, moving toward her. Her hair is so red and I touch it, knot it between my fingers, pressing my body against her. Some strands are liquid gold in the pale light and I take them into my mouth, hair like fire, her hair is burning in my mouth.

I shift against her, my hands on her thighs. The dress is so thin I can see her nipples brushing hard against the fabric, her belly button, the v of her crotch, and I'm pulling her dress up, kissing the skin tight across her belly and down to the deeper red stripe of hair, breathing in her scent. My hands circle her, tracing up her back until I feel the end of her long hair, tug, her head pulled back, milky throat exposed in a long moan as I kneel at her feet.

David! the high voice bellows in my ear and, again, Look at the lights, David! McQueen yells, standing on tiptoe, his thick lips grazing my ear. He falls back on his heels, pokes at my rib cage with a dirty finger.

I have eyes, McQueen, I say, but I'm faking exasperation, his excitement always lifts me out. McQueen jams his grubby index finger in between my bones, harder now and he's giggling. His shirt is too long, too close to his knees and the sleeves are rolled up, exposing his short, meaty arms. He has three digital watches stacked in a row on his wrist and a huge gold-plated ring on his middle finger.

I know I can get McQueen to say anything I want and it's one of our favorite activities or at least mine so I belt out, This is just ridiculous, knowing what comes next.

McQueen's lips peel back in a grin and he lifts his arm higher, poking me in the chest now. You're ridiculous! he squeals triumphantly, his voice carrying across the space of the porch and through the open door behind us into the common room, to where the nurses sit in their glass station. David did you hear me? One nurse turns to us for a second but it would take a lot more than yelling to get her out of her seat. I don't say anything, egg him on. David! You're! Ree! Dick! You! Luss! McQueen whoops,

straining with every syllable so by the time he's finished his face is level with mine, impossible, he's a foot shorter than I am.

I look into his velvet brown eyes his milk chocolate face and laugh and he laughs louder and the sound builds against the brick walls of the porch until a couple of veggies on the couch in the common room join in without knowing why and soon the whole ward is buzzing. I follow McQueen away from the windows. His thumbs are hooked in the belt loops of his long jean shorts, hiking them up around his calves to exaggerate his stride.

We slam the door behind us into the common room fluorescence. Morgan is pacing in the hall, his lips moving without making a sound. The veggies have stopped laughing, most gone away into sleep or themselves, but McQueen heads for the ones with the smiles on their faces, poking them in the shoulders to see if he can get them back into it.

But Morgan's had enough and he isn't lazy like the nurses, doesn't mind spoiling the fun. He turns away from his paces in the hall, slides up behind McQueen and clamps his hands down on McQueen's squat shoulders. Morgan paces constantly and while the rest of us have gone a little soft, his body is still as solid as the day they brought him in fifteen years ago. Morgan could kill anyone on the ward but he won't now and we know it's not just the meds, he's changed.

Okay, Morgan croons into McQueen's ear, Okay, okay, okay. Morgan's face looks stern all the time, his lips a horizontal line below his bushy moustache, gold wire-rimmed glasses. He always tucks his shirts in even at night. Morgan looks at me over the top of McQueen's head and McQueen shrinks back down to his normal size. Nobody

ever told Morgan's eyes about the rest of his face. They twinkle like he knows the dirtiest secret about you but he wouldn't ever tell it, he loves you anyway. I still wouldn't cross him.

I leave McQueen standing by the windows and take a seat beside Charlie, picking my newspaper up off the couch where I left it and cracking it open to the page I've worried thin with thumb prints. It is July in Washington, DC and Mayor Fenty is ruining the city. I scan the page for changes but the headline remains the same, calls us by name: St. E's to Become Smoke-Free in August, and I can't look. Fenty smiles up at me in pixels, pale and sick, teeth spaced loose in his naked head. His skull is the color and texture of pool hall chalk, his grin false and wide and should be the opposite, should be tight and closed and hiding those awful teeth. My bowels shift just looking at him, I can't take whatever he has to say.

I am hiding, sitting up in bed with my sheets over my head, sitting up in the center of the bed with the sheets tucked into the sides of the bed and stretched tight over the top of my head. My hair is crushing down over my forehead and into my ears and I rub my head against the sheet as I bend down over the comic book between my knees, my legs forming a diamond shape on the bed. I'm rocking toward the pages and away, mouthing the words printed there as my eyes examine the line drawings, boxed and gridded across the pages. I stare at the bright images, the sound effects grabbing at my eyes Pow! and Thwack! as Spider-Man crusades across the page. I mouth these words louder, Pow! Swish! thrusting my flashlight into the corners of the sheets, pushing against them.

I hear footsteps in the hall and I pause, shut the light off quick, falling onto my back. My head is still covered, bare feet pushing against the glossy pages, pushing them

into the corners of my sheets where the beam of my flashlight had just rested. The footsteps are getting nearer, the door creaking open and I hold myself as still as I can but the sheet is breathing with my chest. The steps creak across the threshold and into my room and above my head and the hands rip the covers from my head faster than I can clutch them.

My father's face is stern and he says, What did I tell you about reading after lights out? He is tightening his face up on purpose, his mouth a straight thin line, the muscles in his jaw rigid. I cover my face with my hands while he searches in the sheets for the book but when he tickles my feet I can't help giggling. He holds the comic book in one hand, my foot in the other and I'm kicking out but he's still managing to tickle me. Oh, this is funny? he asks, Staying up all night is funny? Spider-Man drops to the floor as he reaches in with both hands to tackle my ribs and I'm howling for him to stop.

When he does, he picks Spider-Man back up, thumbing through it. You know, this looks interesting. I think I'll keep reading it, he says, turning toward the door.

No, no, I beg, Bring it back please! and he chuckles, sits down on the bed beside me and turns my flashlight back on as we huddle over the pages together.

An older nurse shakes me from my place on the couch, Bedtime, David, and I hear the head nurse lowing the same from the door to the nurses' station. Bodies groan across the tile floor, shuffling toward the narrow hall to our narrow rooms to be tucked in, locked in for the night. As I stand my bones creak and shake and the nurse reaches for my elbow but I wave her away with a grin, No need for that, little lady, I'm at peak performance.

Abe follows me with his keys once I've joined the shuffle to my room, Morgan behind him and sleepbound for the room past mine which Abe will unlock after he takes care of me. I follow the men past the glass walls of the nurse's station, past the nurse who stands on the seam of the open doorway that divides the common room from the hall, dispensing our nighttime medications from a tray at her elbows, and into the hall, looking first right toward the door that leads off the ward and Henry who guards it then back to the left to our rooms lined up neat along the hall.

A few of us have already been tucked in for the night. Some can be seen through open doors brushing tooth after tooth, waiting to be locked in. Max is already sitting on his bed when we pass his room, the one before mine, gesturing unfocusedly as he talks to another aide. Abe places a hand on my shoulder, turning me to the right and in through the door to my room and it isn't necessary, I would have gone anyway, but he's gentle and I let him.

How was the weather today? he asks me like he asks every night when he's here to lock me in and I slide back, prop my elbows on the cold edge of the sink, tell him the weather was a little cloudy. If any of the others, the aides or the nurses or especially Doctor Lindor, asked me about the weather they'd want my answer to match the outside but we don't get to go out there, not much point in that really.

What Abe means is the weather in my head, the kind of storms that roll in and out between my ears. Sometimes they match the day but more often the weather inside is more ephemeral, the wind rushing in all fierce on a normal day or the sun flashing through a raincloud that couldn't be found outside.

Partly cloudy's okay, right? he says, We all need a little cover sometimes. I nod.

The room is hot and I feel myself nodding off, can't sleep during class because when I get home, Winnie will ask me what I learned tonight, and she'll know right away if I don't. There's also the matter of failing the tests, which I can't do or I won't be able to graduate. Won't be the one in charge of redesigning houses or neighborhoods or whole towns across the state of Maryland.

I reach my hand under my seat and pinch the skin on my leg behind the knee, grab it and pull it away from whatever lies beneath until it stings and my eyes water. The man at the front of the room is pacing in front of his desk, pacing and talking and pausing to punctuate his speech with the thrust of an index finger.

He leans back against the desk, pushing the palms of his hands into the edge of it. There is a grass stain smudged below the knee of his pants. I dive back in, hear him ask, What conditions are necessary for mold to grow? The classroom is quiet and he scans our faces, repeats the question, In a typical construction site, what conditions would you find are necessary for mold to grow?

I see the answer in my head and my hand is in the air and he's calling on me, I'm saying, Water, spores and a food source, and he's nodding and asking another question, Do any building materials support the growth of mold when they're wet? and my hand is up again, and he's calling on me again and I'm saying, Yes, and, Virtually any construction material, including things like aluminum and steel and glass, and he's nodding again, and adding, That's why it's important to meet proper design requirements on a job site, and I'm back in it, and Winnie will be proud and I'll get my diploma and build her everything her heart desires.

Have a good night now, Abe instructs, clicking the light off and the door shut rather than slamming it like the others. I move to the chair by the tiny window covered in chicken wire, unbutton my shirt and shrug out the arms, unzip and let the waist fall, unfold a pair of baggy pants like doctors' scrubs that serve as pajamas, or regular pants on the days when we piss ourselves. I wash my face in the small sink, under the glow from the spotlights screwed into the brick wall outside, assessing the hair on top. Still black but the white is edging in at the temples and the in-between of my nine o'clock shadow. My fingers greet the crows' lines in the hollow corners of my eyes then push hard, rubbing out their depth. I shut my eyes, rubbing the terrycloth square all over, before turning away to sit on the edge of my narrow bed, at the foot of the bed.

The yard is dark but if I watch close enough the lightning bugs will dance across my blurred window. The cats are still out there, prowling around in the dark they're not afraid of it. Not locked into a six by eight foot rectangle with a bed, chair, and sink bolted to the floor where their things are searched every morning and the books get locked up at night.

When I'm tired of looking for them, the cats and the lightning bugs, I lie back on the bed, push my feet under the sheet and pull it up to my chest, face the wall. I will my eyes to close but they stay open, fixed on the wall, a wash of muted orange from the lights outside broken up into hexagons bordered in black from the chicken wire.

The windows are down and Winnie's red hair is loose, blowing around the car and across her bare arms. In this light, with the sun high above us, her hair shines a thousand shades of fire. I'm at the wheel and Winnie has the map in her hand even

though I told her I know the way. I've known this place for years, I say, The old man who started it has been coming to Sam's every Sunday since before I was born.

You know where you're going, she smiles, But I don't. Her eyes are big and wonderful and they tear mine away from the road. I want to stare and never stop staring but she blinks and my foot is on the gas pedal, we continue on. We hit the last corner and the field is covered in them, sunflowers as high as our heads a mile across and deep.

I park in front of the convenience store and we hold hands as we race across the road toward the edge of the field. Winnie buries her nose in the first flower she touches, fat honeybees vying for her space. I stand back a bit, look for a way in and slide into the first row, Come on, I call back to her. She follows my steps and we're running with our bodies turned on edge, one shoulder ahead of the other.

It's darker in here, harder to see the field above the tops of the flowers, but all the petals are lit up gold in the sun, translucent against a perfect blue sky and I stop. I hold onto both of Winnie's hands and kiss her cheeks and her nose and her lips and she is kissing me back, she tastes so sweet. I thread my fingers in her hair, feel the sun on our heads radiating off the heads of the sunflowers all around us and know that this, right here, is heaven.

[2]

Morning checks! I hear the punctuated knocks, the aide's voice outside my room. His dark face is pressed to the rectangular window in the door. I swing my legs off the cot. My pants are bunched up around my knees, the grey hairs growing in on my pale white calves a surprise in the early morning light. I have to get to the door before he unlocks it from the outside, keys jangling wild and serious. Keep control over the small things or end up strung out on the couches, no better than the veggies.

Come on in my friend! I spread my arms, indicating the bed, the sink, my small window with the chicken wire strung between its panes to keep us from bolting or, more likely, from sticking our heads through the glass. Abe marches in, feet swinging like golf clubs, and so I can joke a little. Can I offer you anything? I wasn't expecting a guest but I think I have a cheese cart lying around here somewhere, I say, furrowing my brow as Abe throws the left side of my mattress to the ceiling, flicking a gloved hand deep into the corners before moving to the sink.

We're trusting you with the mirror, man, don't give me that shit, Abe sounds serious but the corner of his mouth curls up, which means I'm in the clear. If that mirror had been made of real glass maybe I'd be impressed.

I'm awake now so I slide down the hall in my old man slippers to the common room, rap on the window and push my tongue past my lips at the nurses, not wagging it, careful not to waggle it around because I'm not a pervert. There's a new nurse on duty today, she's in a skirt and I mouth, Hello there young beauty, but she doesn't understand, her tight eyebrows angle up and she looks to the others quietly, asking, but she's been caught. She's new in every sense of the word. Another nurse wraps a heavy arm around

the new one's shoulders and I move on, I'll get her name later when she's not surrounded by the hippos.

It's early and most of the others won't be out until the food is ready. Henry's on the porch waiting for me so I drag a chair out with me and pull the pack of Newports from my back pocket. The air before dawn is sharper here, still humid in Anacostia not like out in the country where there might be dew on the grass some mornings, even in summer. My skin crawls from the sting of it on my ankles, tiny goosebumps reaching as far as my fingers. I keep my eyes on the pack and not the deep of the sky fanning blue with the approaching dawn. I have to wave the cigarette in front of Henry twice before he catches on with a grunt and then it's so quick, he's slicing the air with the flame and barely soaking the tip of my cigarette with it before the light is out. At least I can chain-smoke under Henry's watchful gaze until sunrise, keeping my eye on the cigarette's steady glow.

Winnie's studio is one hundred feet behind the house, and I can see it from our bedroom window. The red barn sits up higher than the house, raised up on a little hill in the back of our property, and looks black in the pale light, the grass below frosted and blue. There is a light on inside that warms the pre-dawn air and I know Winnie is in there, painting. Her place in the bed beside me is cold, the pale yellow covers twisted away from me in the familiar j-shaped curve and I know she's been gone for a while. I pull my robe on over my long underwear, over my bare chest, and lean against the windowsill, looking out across the back yard to the barn, watching Winnie's body flash across the undressed window.

Inside, Winnie flits from left to right, from paints to canvas, her brush angled up in her hand, slicing across to cover the canvas in cadmium red mixed with yellow ochre, viridian green, French ultramarine blue. I watch her as I watch the sky growing pale, glowing pink, heating up. It is perfect, her hair and the sky, the way the barn looks up on the hill as the world lights up. I move to the stairs and descend to the kitchen, check the percolator Winnie left on the stove. Winnie's brewed a pot already, and left some for me, but she turned off the burner and it's cold now. The coffee inside looks weak. I pull out the metal filter, heavy and dripping, wash it under the cold tap, pushing the wire bristles of the brush through the small holes to dislodge used coffee grounds. I empty the pot, swish around some hot water and then fill it back up with cold, laying the filter in place and heaping in new grounds.

I pull a long kitchen match from its sleeve, turn on the stovetop and smell the gas, light the match, hold it to the burner and watch it catch. Gas burns blue, an electric, restless color and I shift my gaze outside, to the east and the hill and the rising sun. Without Winnie in it, the house is silent. The pop of the percolator startles me and I smile, check the color and pour a big mug for myself, one for Winnie. The sun inches up in degrees, turning the curtains transparent. I shut off the burner quickly, avoiding the anger in its sick blue flame. The screen door squeaks on its hinges then bangs behind me as I carry the cups across the lawn, crunching across the grass to the studio.

The air in the barn smells like wood shavings, fresh and curled in the corners of the rooms, the floor a graveyard for a crippled John Deere tractor, beetle boxes, extra rolls of carpeting, a rusty grill. Upstairs is open, light, perfect. Winnie is hidden behind her easel, a milky arm flirting with the edges of the stretched canvas. She smells the

coffee before she sees me, calls out to me, Davie! And she's up, parting from the easel, tripping lightly across the plank floor to me in her bare feet. She takes the cup in both hands and her lips are at my cheek and she kisses me, hard, pressing her lips into the stubble on my cheek. My beautiful man, she says, Up at dawn just to see me work. She smiles and the skin around her blue eyes crinkles.

I ask, Are you finished? taking a step around her to see the canvas.

She blocks me, No, no! Not yet, you can't see it yet! her palm against my stomach.

I wrap my arms around her, careful not to spill the coffee. In her ear, close enough to make it rumble, I ask, Come back to bed for a little while? I know the answer, know she's still working and I shouldn't distract her but I keep my face there by her ear for a moment, close enough to her body that her red hair is the only thing I can see, it fills my vision. While the sun is shining and our bodies are so close, almost dancing in the early dawn light, the world doesn't seem so impossible.

I can hear the nurses in their glass room slurping coffee and throwing words toward one another. We can't drink coffee in St. Elizabeths, the caffeine mixes with our meds and makes us crazier, even decaf isn't allowed because of the trace amounts. I know we'd all be a little more sane if we could drink the stuff like we used to. Maybe we'd have fewer veggies that way. No sugar, no caffeine, no additives, that means no soda, no French fries, no ketchup, special peanut butter only that McQueen hates and no candy for Charlie. We get to break the rules on our birthdays. On our birthdays, we get to choose one thing off the list and eat it all day. Charlie's birthday is next Saturday and

he's been talking about Sour Patch Kids all week but I think that's a poor choice, nobody can eat them all day, his mouth would cave in from acid erosion.

Out of sight, keys jangle in the door to the ward and Doctor Lindor strides around the corner to check the morning clipboards. He is tall and his shoulders stoop like a vulture, his eyes fierce as a vulture's too. Some others patients are awake now, shuffling around the common room, but he heads straight for the new nurse, shipwrecked in the nurses' station while the other nurses are getting the veggies ready for the day. He extends his hands toward her, asking for the clipboards that she isn't producing quickly enough, bony fingers flapping her along faster.

I edge my chair closer to the picture windows dividing the porch from the common room, there to let the nurses watch us on the porch from their station if they cared to look. I angle my chair to keep one eye on the brightening sky, one ear to the conversation. Didn't know, I swear, the new nurse hesitates.

That's no excuse, he returns. The skin under his chin is loose and lined and flaps when he talks. You went through training. Now we all know you can't apply it. The nurse's face clouds and she opens her mouth to speak but Doctor Lindor isn't done, You'd better learn fast around here, that's all I can say. Get it together! he warns, borrowing Morgan's favorite line. The psychiatrist turns then, the soles of his boots sharp on the tile, marking his departure.

The door to the ward clicks behind the doctor as the new nurse stumbles out of the nurses' station and collapses into a chair, her skirt riding up above her knees. As I stare at her calves, I can see her, in my mind. They're firm from daily runs around the tidal basin. She's just moved to Washington, DC from a midwestern town, taken an apartment

in the southeast quadrant of the city for the cheap rent and its proximity to her work without checking the crime rate. When she walks to the Metro station, men call to her from lawn chairs on concrete patios or the barred windows of their apartments. Once, a man pinches her ass as she passes him. They tell her to leave but their eyes ask her to stay.

I stamp my spent cigarette out in the ashtray, turn my gaze back to the new nurse. Her dark legs glisten. She's overwhelmed and stretched a little thin. Eyes closed, she can't see the men looking at her, Hamilton wheeling in closer, eyes trained on the gap between her legs where her skirt ends.

Susan's timing is uncanny. She barrels her way onto the ward, sniffing like a bloodhound. Before the new nurse has opened her eyes Susan sends Hamilton and his chair into the corner with one great push, hulking her girth between the men's eyes and the nurse's legs. Amrita, honey, what did I tell you about our dress code? Susan lows. Amrita—a name!—stands, pulling her skirt down as far over her knees as she can. Come with me, we'll find you some pants, Susan shepherds her toward the locked supply closet but I hear her hiss under her breath, Ever show up to my ward again in a skirt and you're out of here. Amrita looks like she's choking back vomit or tears. I give her a month, two tops. Her legs are too shiny for government work.

My toes dig into the sand and I push my heels down as hard as I can, trying to touch the plastic bottom, my hands gripping the edge as I push. A plastic dump truck rests just out of my reach and I say it, Truck! as my mother watches, laughing. She takes the truck into her firm grip and rests it in my hands. My fingers lock around the wide hollow back of the truck and I pick up the plastic shovel, hurl sand into its mouth.

That's not how you do it! the little girl shouts, her mouth a raw O of consternation, her hair a fuzzy crown atop her head. She grabs the wheels of my truck with chubby fingers and tugs, gently, until I let go of the toy. She pushes the truck's wheels into the sand and she takes my hands and places them on the lip of the truck's bed and pulls down with her hands on mine until the truck's bed gives and swings down toward the sand. Then she backs the truck up against a hill of sand until the sand collapses into the truck's mouth. She takes my hands and places them at the top of the angle of the truck bed and pushes them down until the bed clicks back horizontal.

I shake my head and peer into the half-filled bed and say, No! I shake my hands from hers and pick up the toy shovel and dig and pour the contents of the shovel into the bed as her mouth returns to its circular form and I say, Watch! and fill the truck's mouth until sand pours from its mouth and I say, Vroom! as the truck zooms to the dump site because trucks have to say vroom or they can't move and then I tuck my fingers under the lip of the bed at the top and pull up until all the sand falls on the dump site and I say, Yes! and look up and the little girl is crying now and I smile at her oval mouth as she howls and I giggle and repeat, Yes!

My mother is there and she stands at my side between me and the little girl. The little girl's sister is touching the little girl's face while it's howling and my mother is saying, Shh! Shh! and I stop giggling but she still says it and I know she means them and not me and I walk up to the little girl with sand on my hands and hold them in front of her face and I say, Sand, and I say, See? and I smile until her face smiles and I hold my hands out until she touches them and I feel my chest rise when she smiles.

My mother walks to me and touches my hair with her fingertips and pulls my head back against her belly and says, My good boy, and says, Time to go now, Davie. I pull my hands away from the little girl's slowly and turn my head up to look at my mother, my eyes watching the curve of her hair as it moves across her shoulders lit up like fire in the dusky sunlight. I push away from her belly and gather my toys and hand some to her and wait for her to put them in the canvas bag on her shoulder and hold my hand out straight toward hers and wait for her to brush the grains of sand from my fingers even the stubborn ones before she'll hold one of my small hands in her strong one.

The loudspeaker crackles and I smell the burning meat before Susan announces it, Breakfast time! The worst meal of the day, Abe is heating up plates in the small cafeteria by the elevator room, in the dirty little oven that hasn't been cleaned since I got here which means ten years at least.

We all line up in the common room, we have to wait until everyone is in line before we can move. Susan has some trouble getting Clarence up from the couch, he's a sometime veggie and today is a bad one, that awful tongue lolling around in his toothless mouth. We wait for her to march us forward but it's slow going. Hamilton is pushing his chair into the back of Charlie's legs and Charlie is crying as usual and Amrita just watches, she's no help, what did they teach her in training? Finally she pokes a finger out at Charlie, Hey, boy, hey, stop that crying.

Before her finger can touch Charlie's skin, Susan swats it away, You'll want to go wash your hands now, she's stern, Or you go around catching tuberculosis for fun? We start walking, cattle following Susan, while Amrita disappears.

Max is walking behind me, talking about Hollywood actresses as usual. He is tall, looms over me and he's thick as a tree trunk. Wild red hair angles up from his skull, a match to the patchy beard he's been growing. His nose sits askew on his face, has been broken too many times. And that Winona Ryder, he says, God, she made me wanna fuck her. He's talking about Girl, Interrupted but it's always like this. His mind is still fast and he asks, You think if she'd done it in DC, she'd have ended up in here?

The actress got caught shoplifting a handful of years ago, it was all over the news, she even made it on Oprah. Maybe, I say, You never know. Henry holds the door to the ward wide open and as we pass through it, I feel a little more free.

What a trip, Max continues, Walk in to find Winona Ryder here to greet me. That'd be wild. Max is young and he's pure and he doesn't belong in this place. He was on the outside just two years ago. When he first got here, he talked to Clarence about female psychotics for two hours before realizing Clarence wouldn't know a woman any more if her pussy slapped him in the face, and even if he did he hasn't really paid attention to a movie since before Max was born.

The actresses are always these weak pixies, sweethearts with fucked up brains and big gorgeous dark circles under their eyes that remind Max of the girls he knew before he killed his buddy and landed himself in here. I know what they're really like, the women in here. They'd rather bite your penis off than suck it. In my view, if you can keep those visions alive in here, well that's a beautiful thing. Not that I've seen half the movies Max talks about. We have a television in the common room but it's never set to anything special, don't want the veggies getting upset, we have to watch something soothing, so the nurses turn on Oprah and leave it on all hours of the day. If anyone tries to change it,

one of the hippos wakes up a veggie and he starts crying and then she says, Oh, see, it's upset him, I guess we should turn it back, shouldn't we? And then an aide stands behind you until you say, Yes, ma'am.

Abe greets us with a sharp wave of his tongs from behind the spread as we file into the cafeteria. I'm moving down the line now, watching Abe scrape eggs and chicken sausage off the metal trays, dump them onto our plates. At the end of the line, I fill a cup of orange juice to the brim hoping the natural sugars will get to me before the morning pills kick in.

Did you see her tits, though? Max asks.

He knows the answer, has asked me before, so I give him what he wants to hear, Like butter, man.

Max's voice is low and when he laughs everything rumbles, building up slow. Like jelly! He corrects, wiggling a sugar-free fruit cup under my chin. Did I ever tell you about the time in Dupont, he asks, With the fountain?

Max grew up in Maryland like me, another rural hick just like me but he got out young, moved to the district, set up camp near the circle before it really got gentrified. Max has told me everything already but I like to let him talk, everybody likes to hear him, so I say, No, want to tell me about it?

[3]

Max's green eyes get all glinty and he launches right in, Well you may not know this but there are tunnels under this city, and there's this big mess of it up near Dupont Circle we called the underground. I guess there used to be a streetcar station under there but no one uses streetcars anymore, right?

I'm nodding, all positive reinforcement. I choose my place at one of the three long plastic folding tables, ready to be gathered and moved out of the way in case of a social function between the max security wards, though what kind of social function might occur between five dozen overmedicated men I'd like to know. I have to sit facing the windows, always facing the windows so I can see outside, the light and the sun, and Max is sitting next to me, his hair a bright halo in the sunlight.

Max continues, I knew a guy who drove a Metro bus who'd snagged a set of keys that would open up pretty much any station at night. There were a couple of keys that didn't fit anywhere so he started hunting around for closed stations and entrances. That's how he found the underground. After that, we all went down there to score. Meth heads, scag hags, even your garden-variety cokehead.

By now, half the table is deep into Max's story, reliving their old times, too. Morgan is nodding, Clarence's tongue is sealed firmly inside his head so he's either concentrating hard or dead. In here, nobody can touch you for what you've done out there, you're already paying for it.

Max considers his audience and gets louder, launching right in, One night after we've been getting into it, we come up out of the tunnels above S Street, right where you can see the whole circle laid out in front of you. It's four in the morning, the city's dead

besides a couple of the real down and out sleeping in the park. My boys want to go to strip club and I'm not feeling it. But I'm walking down to the circle alone when I spy this knockout dancing in the fountain, tits all pushed out.

Aw, you can't fool us with that shit, Clarence gums, his eyes open wider than I've seen them in days.

I swear to you, she's got this dress on and she's soaking wet, the fabric's sticking to her body, Max continues.

Did you get in there, Max? Hamilton crows, Go on get in there. Hamilton is seated at the other end of the table and by now the whole ward is listening, even some of the veggies have perked up.

Max puts up a hand, he rules this court, As I get closer, this dime is looking right at me, pouring water over her head as she stands there swaying in the fountain. She calls out to me, so what can I do? I walk toward her. Next thing I know, she's got me in the fountain with her, I'm grabbing those tits and before I know it her dress is off.

A chorus of, Aw, shit! rings the room like wildfire. Abe's listening in from his seat by the door. Charlie's rocking in his chair, he's grinning at Max, his fingers forming a circle in the air like he's jerking it off. Hamilton's in a frenzy, Did you fuck her?

Max can't contain it any more, he stands up, continues, Before I know, she's got her mouth around my dick.

Fuck her, Max, Fuck her! Hamilton yells.

Max is thrusting against the table, spurred on by Hamilton's enthusiasm. I turn her around, get her right down into the fountain, he says. She's on her hands and knees

and I'm balls deep into her, but that girl's screaming loud enough to wake the junkies so I push her head underwater til I finish.

The violence is what gets him, sends him too far. Morgan lets out a yell, hurls his plastic knife across the table at Charlie. Its precision nicks the side of his face and clatters into the window behind him. Abe is up and running, his forearms clamped around Morgan's armpits. Charlie is wailing and some of the others are banging on the table with their fists, More! We want more! they're not ready to give it up yet.

The nurses set off the alarm and so fast, Henry's alert, prowling the hall with his stick, he can turn mean in a second. He says, Alright boys, playtime is over. Into your rooms, let's move. Aides arrive from unseen wards, lift us one by one and deposit us into our rooms, click the doors locked behind us. We all cheer when Max is led down the hall, still strutting, still proud.

And then silence. I don't know if Max's story is true or just something he uses to get through the nights here at St. E's. In here, they put a chemical in the water so we can't get hard. It runs through the pipes, impossible to avoid in our food, in our baths, so we drink it anyway. Max's stories help everyone out some, remembering women and life, how things were before the now. After a while, it's tough to even imagine any more, unless you're dreaming. At least Max still has that.

I'm passing from the kitchen to my bedroom when my mom says, It's on the news. I find her sitting up close to the television like little kids do in the movies. I sit down on the couch behind her, regard the half of the screen not covered by her hair. We both know about it already since her sister called to tell her about it, they get their news earlier in Ohio, but she sucks her teeth just the same when Dad's face appears above the

word: WANTED. They've dug up an old mug shot for the occasion, one from when I was really young, judging from the length of his brown hair snaking wild above his brow, his beard barely grey. His shoulders hunch into the corners of the photo and it's the one where they caught him in a sneeze because he looks meaner than a Doberman.

The anchorman with the comb over tells us Peter Whelan broke out of Patuxent Institution after an incident at around 5:30 AM that left two other inmates in serious but stable condition, with no guards reporting injury or knowledge of the altercation as it arose. My vision starts to blur as the anchorman details my father's laundry list of offences. I choose to focus on the speckled gold carpet loops instead while my mom looks perfectly content to stare into the pixels of the man's deep blue, offensively caring eyes. He pauses dramatically before adding that the police are offering a reward for information on his whereabouts, which doesn't seem likely since they're running a severely outdated photo of a man who just broke out of a high-security prison with no sustained injuries.

When the program ends, I stand up and walk to the front door, bolting it shut. I do the same in the back, even though that door hasn't been locked since we've lived here. Then I walk to my room, leaving my mother crumpled on the floor, watching for just one more glimpse of her ex-husband.

I've been locked in my room for what feels like hours, no word since the ward erupted at breakfast. No one is coming around, no doctor to check my meds or poke a finger up my ass, no aide or nurse to tell me to hop to it! to lunch or group therapy or socialization. It's Max's fault for riling us all up like that, Morgan's for acting on it, but I feel like blaming Amrita so I do.

I need to stretch my legs, need to walk around the ward and not think about how many times I could smack my head against the wall before it would bleed. Even on max security we're not used to this level of confinement, not knowing why or for how long, except for maybe the regulars to solitary like Eric. He's the best spades player on the ward, sharp as a tack but he slips and slips often. He used to be in medium security, but he got moved up when he couldn't stop the violence and now he'll probably never get back down.

I'm up and pacing and I think I can hear Morgan pacing in the next room, see his stern face, barrel chest accentuated by the perfectly tucked-in shirt pirouetting around his room. On the third pass past my window I notice them outside, Ward 6, the women's ward, out for their daily exercise. None of the women in St. E's are maximum security because women are not a danger to the earth.

I stop to watch them, their bodies moving like crustaceans across the grass, I can almost see them underwater. A young one, round and dark, breaks away from the group and walks to the cat farm. Alone, she drops her pants and pisses in a water bowl. By the time the nurse sees her, she's standing, pants hooked in her fists. Instead of pulling them up quick she lets go and takes off running with them around her ankles. Of course, she trips and falls, swinging out at the nurse with both legs locked together. The nurse has her inside in under a minute. If only she'd pulled up her pants, she might have made it. If only Max had been watching, but he never looks out his window.

I check the door, still locked. Edge my chin left, right, left against the glass then lie down on my bed, on my back, face pointed at my own chest, watching the rise and fall and concentrating on keeping the room on straight. I fish the rubber band out of my

pocket, contraband, not sure where it's from but it's mine now. I stretch the thick pink band out as far as it will go, ease it shut, do this again. I wind the rubber around my finger, tighter, tighter until the finger is purple, blood caught in the tip.

Keys crunch in the door and the band flies to my pocket before Abe walks in, Time for group, he says, which means we've missed lunch now. I don't like the way he says it like it's normal. I look at his face and it's not time to be funny, he's still shook up from this morning, like they always are whenever they have to decide what to do about us.

Abe's voice is gruff and he hoists me to my feet before I can tell him I'm compliant, can stand on my own, and we're doing the plank walk to the common room. The couches and card tables are cleared to the sides, television off. Everyone's seated in a circle and I can see the tops of their heads, it's strange seeing them all this way, some bald and shiny, some sprouting kinks of white hair, black hair, Max's red hair. Only Doctor Lindor's is well combed, sweeping down in a silver grey curtain from a part at the side of his head. I group his white skin with mine, with Max's, with one of the oldest veggies slumped in his chair, eyes rolled back in his skull, witness to an entirely different scene. Our white skin places us, on the ward, matches the psychiatrist's while everyone else's matches the aides, the nurses, in shades. Heads swivel and eyes glue to my face as I walk in with Abe's help.

Doctor Lindor points to the chair beside his as if to say, You are wasting my time, and I sit. Why am I last to arrive, why didn't Abe get me earlier? My tongue has gone dry inside my mouth and I can't speak, want to say I'm sorry, that I don't know what happened, but no one thinks to tell him so I sit mute as group session starts. Who here

has had violent feelings in the past week? Doctor Lindor inquires in a dead voice and Morgan's hand is in the air. He looks beat but they didn't splint him, if it had been any of us the docs would have us in restraints until dinner, solitary until tomorrow at least.

McQueen hasn't heard the question, he's wiggling in his chair, bouncing so hard his ass separates from the seat making the plastic cushion smack and squeak. Doctor Lindor? he asks, his hand is in the air and he waves it, excited.

The doctor pretends not to hear, asks his question again, waits for a different response. Clarence is slumped in his seat, his giant tongue flapping across his chin, a big shiny string of saliva inching toward the front of his confection-colored cardigan, a present from his great-granddaughter. Hamilton's eyes are fixed on the doctor and he's mumbling under his breath, light caramel fingers tapping hard on the arms of his wheelchair. Max is deep in a hushed conversation with Eric, who has now taken to wearing a taqiyah everywhere. Their lips move in unfamiliar ways. I look around the circle at the faces and they blend together. We're not doing anything out of the ordinary, really, but seeing us all pressed together, all in one spot, always makes us look crazy.

My head is throbbing, I'm pushing my fingers hard into my temples, working the skin, pressing into bone but it's not helping. I am here and I am solid, I tell myself. I am safe in my office, my legs tucked under the desk, feet flat on the ground. Memos paper the white frame of my computer, which lies dormant as usual, my preference to let a disorganized heap of papers collect on its surface rather than actually engage the robot inside.

I wanted an office without windows, a cave where I could be left undisturbed by the shifting light to draft and plan, but it isn't working, has been getting worse, and

earlier. It's almost sunset now but the feeling has been gripping me all day. Winnie asks me to see a doctor but I can't, know I have to handle this on my own.

My hand shakes as it drops from my face, I pull open the drawer in the center of my desk and finger the silver lighter inside. A knock, and as my eyes open, a young girl's head cranes around the edge of my door. Professor? the girl searches my face.

Come in, I say, And David is fine. I close the drawer, pass my hand over my face, How can I help?

The girl tugs her straight hair down over her forehead as she enters. You said something in class? she fidgets, You said we could sign up for a site visit? I place her in the second row of my history of world architecture class. A bright girl, but self-conscious.

Sure, Molly, I say and her eyes light up. I'm slightly impressed I've gotten it right. I give her more. I'm going to oversee a burnout in Camden, why don't you come with me? I scribble some words down on the back of my card, hand it to her. I'll see you out, I say, my hand in my coat pocket, palming my lighter, shaking. She's delighted, eyes fixed on the card as she leaves my office. I need to get outside. My eyes are on her hair, searching for red, as I follow her into the hall.

Doctor Lindor asks, When is the last time you had inappropriate thoughts? The room is unmoved, save for Charlie, his lips break open as he stares at the doctor with his big great happy eyes, his soft eyes. Charlie, can you start us off? the doctor asks.

Charlie looks down, mumbles shyly, This morning, he clears his throat and continues, I did this morning when I woke up, sir. Our eyes all catch on Charlie for a second, then move away. I wonder what he'd been thinking about, this morning. I know

what Doctor Lindor expects but I'm not sure Charlie does, he doesn't always remember the words right and the doctor didn't explain it this time.

Doctor Lindor writes on his clipboard, then directs another question at Charlie, What methods did you use to deter them? The doctor is staring at Charlie's face, his white-blue eyes hovering above silver reading glasses, drilling into Charlie's.

The happy glow in Charlie's eyes falters, the swollen head behind them struggling to form an answer, a hand resting on each thigh, palms up, his hands open and close as he thinks. His mouth opens and finally he speaks, I thought about something else?

Clarence wags his tongue. The doctor leans back in his chair, bracing against its back and pushing it as far as it will go. He closes his eyes, collects his thoughts, and says, You know, I think Charlie has the right idea here. But what do we always talk about? Deep breaths in, full breaths out. Concentrate on the positive and block out the negative thoughts. There is no reason you can't control it before it even happens.

It can't be right, that breathing could magically change our thoughts. We know what Charlie thinks about, what he's said, that he woke up dreaming about the new nurse's tits, or raping Max in the shower, or stabbing Doctor Lindor, and how lucky he is that he can still think like that, how stupid it sounds for the doctor to say we can control unproductive thoughts before they even happen. Before Charlie's started he was asleep. But no one questions Doctor Lindor, so Charlie just nods his sweet face and stays quiet, and I don't say a word otherwise.

Just remember, each of you is on a very specific regimen of drug therapy, the doctor assures us, We will monitor you, but you also have to learn to monitor yourselves. A veggie across the circle can't keep both of his eyes facing forward, by the time he gets

one locked on Doctor Lindor the other has fallen out of position. The doctor puts his hands on his thighs and pushes up from the chair, If something doesn't feel right, come to us. We'll get it fixed, he finishes, flashing a toothy grin, even more false from the dead grey one in the front.

I am digging in the dirt in the back yard with a stick, pulling worms out of the ground as I see them. One pushes its snout to the surface, its pink and blue body wrinkling as it moves, and when most of it is exposed I pluck it from the dirt, place it on my palm and watch it squirm around. This one has a sock around it, which George from school says means the worm has been cut in half before because worms can grow new bodies and if they get cut in half they'll just regrow into two new worms.

I move the worms into a pile as I find them but I keep having to reform the pile as they inch away or back down into the dirt. I put this worm on the top of the pile and watch it buddy up to another one with a sock, think maybe they were a single worm once. While I'm guarding the pile for deserters I hear the back door squeak and soon my father's shoes appear in the dirt next to my knee. I look up, shading the sun with my hand, and smile, keep poking at the dirt and the worms. He regards me for a while, watching the proceedings, then asks, Wanna learn how to make a fire, David?

He's loaded down with broken pieces of wood in one arm, newsprint and kitchen matches in the other. He walks to the firepit and lays his hand on the logs already set up to look like a teepee. This is the frame, he says, patting the logs, and I stay behind him because I'm not allowed to touch it. It's not the kind you crawl in, Mom would say. Dad always sets it back up like this with new ones, after they burn the old logs down.

He hands me a sheet of newsprint, says, Ball it up and throw it under, Davie. You have to give it a good twist, here, he says, showing me how to throw it so it lands inside the teepee. After newsprint dusts the bottom of the pit he crouches down, pulls me down with him. We have to build the kindling, he says, balancing sticks from the newsprint to the logs.

When we're finished and the inside of the teepee looks like a game of pick-up sticks he opens the box of matches, places it in my hands. He shows me, guiding my hand softly against the striking surface. Now push harder and faster, he says, Go. I do it and the match catches, building into a flame. I can feel the heat on my fingers and I wrinkle up my face. Now hold it on there, he says, Careful. The flame jumps to the newsprint and I let go of the match, watch the flame spread across the crumpled sheets. He blows on the flames to make them grow. I watch them eat from newsprint to pick-up sticks to teepee.

By the time we've cleared the lawn of any sticks and twigs the fire is substantial. We warm our fingers by it, even though it's summer. My dad says, Watch this, as he pokes one of the last long sticks into the flames, pulls out a husk of newsprint covered in flames, and plops it on the lawn, watching it chomp into its new meal of grass and weeds. When it starts to jump he steps on it with the bottom of his work boot. The fire dies but it leaves a black hole in the lawn where it grazed.

I'm on a couch with one of the veggies, nodding in and out with Oprah. The sun edges toward the horizon, every four minutes a degree closer. Max and Eric are playing spades while Charlie watches, their voices ebb and flow depending on who has the lead. McQueen is bouncing around from the table to the TV to Morgan pacing in the hall, he

never settles down. When the loudspeaker crackles, Dinnertime, we line up for the main event. I'm lucky to be near the head, lucky to be near Morgan who does not push with his wheelchair against the back of my legs like Hamilton or leave slick pools of saliva on my shoulders like Clarence.

Our stomachs are rumbling, going without lunch, but my sights are set on the dinner ahead, for the energy we'll consume and not just the kind in our food. In the cafeteria, lifers in maximum security can rub elbows with the young fools who'll be back on the streets tomorrow. Can let the newly admitted on the women's ward cut ahead of us in line, even if it never does us any good. Can ask for their names and try and make a pass at a flirt, but never for long, we need to get back before sunset. In the summer, the sun doesn't set until after dinner, I always have to hurry us along to get back to the ward in time.

In line, Morgan looks a little too serious so I tell him he has nothing to worry about. He's usually calm and I'm not uncomfortable, not after this morning. What's for dinner, do you think? I ask. His gaze shifts to me and he says, This is only the beginning, but his lips aren't moving, he smiles, and I think I misheard him maybe. I smile back and say, Bet it's meatloaf, and pat him on the back a little. Bet it's meatloaf, Morgan. He looks away.

[4]

Walter leads us off the ward, he always brings us down to dinner. The light is different in the hall, brighter, more exciting. The walls are just as narrow, just as covered with ochre tiles but the pace quickens out here, turning midway down the hall toward the door Walter unlocks to the elevator room. Inside, Walter turns the key to unlock the button and pushes the down button, the only button. We are maximum security and therefore a danger to the earth. The button lights up, the doors open, and we pack into the elevator like sardines, smelling like sardines and even looking like sardines in our reflections in the shiny metal walls of the elevator. We begin the slow descent when Morgan decides to hock a loogie. I know it's coming by the way his face gets all screwed up, glasses almost falling off as he works his nose in concentration.

Walter is looking the other way assessing nail scratch damage to the elevator door and the nurses are chatting about manicures and permanents, although probably not, more like penis sizes and who got caught trying to masturbate on the ward last night. When Morgan lets it go, his phlegm hits the wall of the elevator hard and spit flies into Charlie's face. Charlie starts crying, he's crying and laughing at the same time because he's not stupid, he knows it's funny, but getting a man's mucous in your eye isn't really a laughing matter.

Walter's hand edges toward the emergency stop, but a nurse touches his arm, a finger to her lips. If they take Morgan back to the ward then we all have to go back and nobody wants that. She pulls a Starburst candy from her pocket, unwrapping it and feeding it to Charlie who's a great shining baby and quickly won over by the contraband sugar. For now, the issue is resolved. I look into Morgan's face, trying to figure out

what's different, what went wrong, but he stares straight ahead. I wonder if they tweaked his meds in his last one-on-one.

The unaddressed phlegm slides down the wall like a meteor and we watch its progress as the elevator jolts to a halt at basement level. The nurses herd us out and Walter unlocks the door to the hall. Amrita bursts out, We are your shepherds! trying to make a joke because she is the newest nurse. I'm at the back of the line now and I can't see what's ahead but I can smell the nascent waft of meat from down the hall. Ward 2 emerges from the stairwell, they can walk down because they're on the second floor and only low security.

Max! an aide from four shouts ahead to us. The aide is young like Max and he plays spades with us sometimes. His hair is cropped close and he's dressed in a short-sleeved olive button down, it's always about ninety degrees on Ward 4. When he reaches Max the two men start to clown around, first it's him swiping Max's side, then Max grabbing at the pens tucked into his shirt pocket, pretending to jab him with them. The aide laughs, feigning a seizure, throwing his head back and extending his tongue out far past his lips. His eyes roll in his skull, the whites a bright pop against his skin as he flexes. Susan whacks Max on the head, grabbing the pens and shoving them back into the aide's pocket. What did I tell you about playing around with him? she asks the aide, shutting them both up. They'd both forgotten about obedience.

I am in my room, lying flat on my back on my bed with my eyes closed feeling the sun scatter across my face, across my arms, across my chest. I am warm and I am happy and I am doing absolutely nothing. My mother is in the kitchen, moving things around and making them clang. Eyes closed, I hear a car door slam, Daddy! and I hop

off the bed, run to the door and twist the big knob, twist hard with both hands but I can do it now, on my own, and when I pull hard enough the door swings in toward my body and I can get out into the hall.

I hear his big work boots and I hear his voice rumble. I hear him on the front steps and then I hear him on the carpet and then I hear him in the kitchen, hear him up close to my mother, hear the gummy pop of the refrigerator's seal breaking, door swinging, glasses clinking. I hear the sharp crunch and release of the bottle opener, the quick toss of metal against counter, slow chug of liquid moving from bottle to lips to throat to esophagus to stomach. Hear a muffled question, high and tender, hear the gravel in his voice as he answers. The gravel is my favorite and I pad in footie pajamas along the hall carpet toward him, arms ready to hug ready to clasp, legs ready to be swept off the ground and swung.

As I move closer, my knees stop bending, my feet stop lifting on their own and I have to force them forward, force myself into the frame of the kitchen. My mother's voice crunches against the gravel in his. I see my father in the glow of the still-open fridge, my mother hidden behind his swollen back the familiar muscles that bulge under his work shirt.

I hear the gravel and he says, Say it again, Marie, and then a louder, You're drunk, Peter, from the small shape of her. I just got outta work, Marie, he says, slamming the fridge shut, Fucking climb off me, and she starts swinging her fists at him until he's backed up against the counter, each punch of hers connecting to his chest with a dull thud. With each one he says, I love you, Marie. I watch my father's head hang and I'm

hunching my shoulders toward the carpet trying to get closer to the carpet trying to hide in the carpet I want to be three millimeters tall.

Nothing is ever easy, we move along. Max slides in next to Morgan and their heads bend in conversation as we fold into the cafeteria. Rows of tables align with benches, no chairs so no fights and no congregating and no making your own groups. To the left along the wall a long row of metal trays heated by Bunsen burners display the night's selection. Walter and the nurses slip away and we are free, we can make it on our own. We stand in line by the trays. Large women holding large spatulas stand behind the trays that hold the long rolls of meat. Cut a slice, slap it on your plate. Would you like gravy with that? and the tomato sauce descends.

What is this stuff? Max asks, holding his plate at both edges. The meat slides a bit in its grease and the sauce and is almost lost to the ground. We had it last Tuesday.

William is next to him and he shouts, What you have there is meatloaf, my boy! and we're off to find an empty table, weaving through full ones past the low functions on Ward 3 and into seats sandwiched between another maximum security ward and Ward 6, the women's ward. I sit across from Charlie and his sweet baby face blocks the back of the nearest crustacean but my eyes stick on one further away and she sneers, baring her teeth, tearing into the meat.

They let us use forks here but no knives so I use mine like a knife, turn it on its side and cut the pulpy meat, swirl it in the sauce. Charlie has three green beans balanced on his fork, his mouth is open waiting for the fork and I watch, I am caught, I hope they all make it in. He raises the fork, his eyes are nearly closed, he's anticipating it too. Just

as they reach his mouth one rolls and starts to fall but he bites down fast and they're all in, all caught between his lips his teeth and we're happy, we're triumphant.

I mash my potatoes in the grease from the meat and I'm content to watch the others, feel something like pride while I watch them. Hamilton backs his chair into the stiff spine of a slim new admit and William is reading Corinthians and Max is talking about sex and McQueen pokes me in the ribs with a forkful of mashed potatoes and everything is right, here, everything is fine for a moment.

I turn to see if Morgan is enjoying the scene, and if he could please pass the salt but he is gone, his tray is gone, it's not right without him there. I stand up, search for his muscled back or a flash of his glasses in the crowd but a crustacean is eyeing me from the next table. She lifts her fork, loaded with potatoes, and pulls the tines back with her finger. I sit down.

William picks up his head, regards me for a moment, then reads aloud from the pages, For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. When he finishes, he lifts his head back up and cocks it to the side at me, eyes twinkling. William does this from time to time, reads his passages, and I do my part to ignore him.

I walk past the crustaceans to the right side of the room where the conveyor belt takes our food to be washed. For a second I think maybe Morgan climbed up onto the belt without anyone noticing and rode it all the way into the kitchen and I peer in, stick my head in where the belt disappears and try to look for him in there, in the depths of the kitchen, but I don't see anyone. A throat clears behind me and when I turn I'm facing a giant lady in a pink and white striped cafeteria uniform, white hat perched on her

enormous head. Git your ass out of there! she barks at me, What you think you doing in there? Git where you belong! shooin me with both hands. I wonder why it's too much to ask to see a pretty girl's face, just once, somewhere in this building as I shuffle to my table.

When I get back, Morgan is still gone and everyone else is finishing their last forkfuls of meatloaf, mashed potatoes, green beans, pushing their chairs back and forgetting their trays. The meal is over, we stand up and form a line at the door, we are the last in line, we are Ward 12.

Standing in the hall we're in line with our backs to the wall and Walter is counting us, he's counting us and coming up short and McQueen is shuffling his feet, we're all getting restless. I check the clock, eighteen minutes to sunset and I can't see it from here, need to get back to the ward.

When we wait like this we have to stand shoulder to shoulder with our hands clasped behind our backs against the gold tile walls. I'm craning my neck, rocking my wrists against the wall behind me to get a better look, trying to see back into the cafeteria because Morgan must still be in there, by the tray depository or under a table or by the empty buffet, where I would be, by the open flames, but the burners have been turned off now and there's no reason to stand near them, no reason to stay behind. It's time to get in the elevator, get to the fifth floor and I'm checking my time, not long until sunset now. The aides have checked the bathrooms, the men's room and the women's room, the kitchen staff says they haven't seen anyone either. I'm not even sure if they know it's Morgan who's gone missing, nobody's saying his name they just keep counting us.

Most of the other wards have left by now, counted up and herded into the elevator room or up the stairwell and off to evening checks and bed. The women's ward stumbles a little when an aide finds a fork peeking out from the oldest woman's waistband and they all have to be patted down, one of the women is moaning but they don't find anything, and even they're on their way to the elevator room before us.

Some men are yawning. Up on the ceiling, a fluorescent strip light flickers behind its frosted plastic cover. As I watch, it clicks off then twitches back to life, electricity surging along its length in dim waves like a stunned animal. A low buzzing noise attaches to the light's efforts, getting louder with its success. I'm focused on this light, the buzzing building up loud in my ears until it stops, flickers off. I want the light to come back, I want to see it strong and hot.

I'm caught at the door for a second and I have to take deep breaths to force the air into my lungs, force myself to go through the door into the science lab. I haven't been to class in six months and technically, I'm trespassing on private property although I can still see my name on a pair of goggles on a peg, fixed there with the lab coat, my lab coat, no one has bothered to move. The room is empty, it's past three o'clock. I know where they keep the kitchen matches, the tall wooden ones used to start the burners so we don't burn our hands, so we don't burn down the building. I open the cabinet under one of the tables, reach my hand in and fish them out, shove them down inside my sweatshirt.

I hear the chemistry teacher's voice out in the hall, he's talking with a woman, her heels click on the laminate. They could come in, could see me standing here, could ask me what's inside my sweatshirt. I grab my goggles, my lab coat, and jump onto the window ledge, swing my legs through the open window and run across the lawn, out to

the street, my feet pounding on the pavement, the plastic goggles whipping against my arm, my leg, with every stride. I don't stop until I'm six blocks away and almost home.

I stand on the loose cinder path in the yard in front of our house, put on the plastic goggles, the lab coat, and stand looking at the house, hardly my house any more. The lawn, if you can call it that, is overgrown, weeds waving up high as summer approaches, evidence of my stepfather Jerry's ambitions as man of the house. The foundation exposed and raised slightly, four steps, also cinder, lead to a screen door that flaps and billows without any breeze. The house is concentrated on its first floor, with a dormer upstairs, the converted loft where I live. The screen door bangs behind me and I climb the narrow stairs into my bedroom, open the window that looks out over the junkyard growing in the back and light the first match, scratching the heavy tip against the striking surface on the side of the box. I watch the sparks catch and pop, engulfing the head of the match in bright light and I stare at this light, let it burn into my retinas. The burn of a kitchen match is slow and I watch the flame's bright progress up the match as it chews the wood and spits it out, black and withered in its wake.

I light match after match as the sun, locked in its path, drops toward the horizon. As one match burns down toward my fingers I shake it out, fling it into the yard next door, no one ever goes outside there, and light another. On my sixth match I hear the stutter of the screen door downstairs, the heavy tread of Jerry's feet and the high pitch of my mother's voice. This is how it always is with the man my mother's married. The only sounds I ever hear from him are the noises his body makes when they hit surfaces, his feet on the ground, his ass on the reclining chair, his mouth on the beer bottle, his palm against my mother's face. I hurry to hide the matches under my mattress and pull a

text from my stack of old schoolbooks. Jerry won't come up here but my mother will, and soon. If she finds me with the matches, she'll tell Jerry, and then Jerry will hit her.

Walter pulls me away from the wall and we're moving, shuffling toward the elevator room and I'm looking for Morgan, looking everywhere I can with my eyes but I don't see him, his black hair his black moustache his black skin, the gold wire-rimmed glasses or the faded Bugs Bunny t-shirt tucked into his strong slim waist, his jeans, belted in. Walter is standing right next to me and I ask, Did you find him? Did you find Morgan?

His face furrows, and for a second he looks like he's holding a giant coated pill in his mouth or a chrysalis and for the life of him he can't let it out. I wait. His lips part, No. The noise barely escapes between his locked teeth, the two rows shut tight. His gaze is trained on the wall, his eyes don't meet mine. After shutting the door to the elevator room behind us, Walter strides stiff to the head of the line, punches the up button for the elevator.

I look around at the other men but they don't seem to notice a thing. Max is showing Charlie the smooth curve of a stretched out penny his mother sent him from the Baltimore Harbor. That's right, yup, he responds to Charlie, When she put it in it was just a regular, well you know your average penny, and she turned this crank and it went all flat and see here? he asks, You see this design? That's a Maryland blue crab. Charlie looks up at Max in wonder, a smile playing at the dimples in his round cheeks. You know how you can tell? Max continues, Look there. You see that skinny flap there, looks like a butter knife? That makes him a male. If he were a girl that flap? It'd look like a spade. Only you can't harvest girl crabs, not really, or at least you're not supposed to.

Some people make she-crab soup just like you might make turtle soup but I have to ask myself, what's the point? Charlie's eyes have glazed over a bit, and he shifts his focus from Max's face back to the penny in front of him, watching as Max rubs it between his fingers, flipping it between his thumb and index finger over and over and over. After a while Max puts the penny carefully back into his pants pocket, but Charlie's gaze is still fixed on his hand.

I can feel Morgan's missing body in the space around mine in the elevator. I swing my arms out around my body and touch nothing. I put my hands in my pockets and feel their threadbare seams then stick my elbows out as far as they'll go. The nurses aren't looking and nobody tells me to stop.

When we're back on the ward I signal Abe, hurry to the porch, only a minute to spare. A new pack of Newports is buried deep in the cloth pocket at my hip and I dig in, pull off the cellophane as fast as I can. Max savors this part, the unwrapping, but I'm jonesing for the flame. The sun's about to go and it has to be lit by then. After I tap the pack and pull out a jack, Abe flicks his bic for me. In here, I can't light my own cigarettes, can't see the flame alone, can never look into a match's sun for more than a second before an aide, usually Henry, shuts it off just for a laugh.

The flame sparks loud and I inhale as the tip flares, spikes red, charring the white paper black in rings. The flame is out as fast as it came but the image burns in my brain if I close my eyes quick. Close my eyes and keep them closed, as long as I can bear, as long as it takes for the sun to disappear. The light at the tip of the cigarette gets brighter as the dark descends, morphs into a campfire, a burning stove, suck in hard enough and I

get a forest fire. There is a kind of magic at this time of day, a magic that satiates, but only if the rules are followed.

[5]

I sit back in my chair, feet propped against the metal sill, enjoying the silence this time of day affords, the minute's freedom from the crowd inside, close my eyes again, savoring the bright edge as it hits my lungs. When the cigarette burns to the filter I stamp it out, stand up and open the door from the porch back to the common room, making sure it closes behind me. The door has to stay closed in the summer because of the humidity that beats in through the screen windows, can't overheat the veggies.

The men are all arranged in their positions on the couches so I sit in the chair by the phone, right outside the nurses' station, and watch William shuffle down the hall to his room, retrieve the deck of cards Morgan lent him the night before. He goes to Morgan's room, takes a step in before realizing Morgan's not there, and hesitates. Then on to the common room, his wide, open face oscillating to accommodate the whole room. William's long teeth don't quite fit inside his mouth and so his lips always seem to be stretched, pulled back over them, barely enough room for the gums. He smacks his lips on his way to the porch, checking just in case although Morgan doesn't go out there, not really, not ever. The bathroom is unoccupied and we're not allowed in the nurse's station, no room in the storage closet.

William's mouth is open and he's working at the pink flesh of his cheek, biting down hard with his oversized teeth. He turns to McQueen, whispers. McQueen yelps, dashes full speed through the hall looking into every room, turning his round head back and forth like a flashlight until he reaches the end, scoots back doing the same thing. He's mouthing something to William and then the words, Morgan is gone! come through too loud, the whole ward hears and finally takes notice.

I wonder how many sedatives they're giving us if it takes a full hour to realize one of the twenty men on this ward, men we see every day, isn't here any more. Now the men are looking around, squinting and sweeping their eyes around the room as if he could be hiding in a corner. Clarence picks up a couch cushion and peers at its backside, then at the space left behind on the couch. He puts the cushion back on upside-down, zipper to the sky, pushes a veggie out of the way and starts on the next cushion. The veggie sways and then tips over, smacking his gums, one ear pressed into the couch, the other turned up, blinking, to the ceiling. Another veggie lets out a sound that starts low and loose, spikes as the hippos surround him. David, what is this? Max asks at my side, Where's Morgan gone? The others can hear it in his words and I can't help them now, can't change it.

I watch as Max walks out onto the porch. I stand and thumb the pack of cigarettes in my back pocket, their form distorting the shape of my left ass cheek, a white ring cleaved into the fabric. Out on the porch, I pull out two cigarettes, slide up next to Max and hand him one before he can ask. Max isn't a real addict, just an imitator. He holds his cigarettes like an amateur, all crouched up high at the base between his index and middle finger, like he's seen in the movies. Max stands right next to me and I watch the glow from his cigarette and mine in the reflection on the window, our bodies like ghosts, the tips of our cigarettes flaring as we inhale the smoke, the air, into our lungs.

Winnie is holding my hand as we stand behind our house, looking up the hill at the old barn that is now gone. Gone because it doesn't look the same, not because it really is. Gone because its guts have been torn out, gone because there are spaces in the walls where spaces never were before, gone because a second floor has been built

halfway between floor and ceiling. Gone because we've broken ground on the construction of the studio she's dreamed of, gone because she's close to touching that dream.

I turn to Winnie. Her face is turned up to the barn or the studio, whichever she sees, and her lips are parted and her long red hair coils down her back, spiraling until it splits at the ends. She looks at the barn that is not yet a studio with anticipation and she turns her head, catches my eyes and pulls me by my fingers up the hill. Our legs pump the air cool and sweet and I can feel every muscle moving, can feel my joints and my bones and my blood as we run up the hill.

Winnie breaks away from me at the hollow frame and rushes into the blackness but I pause, running my hand along the wood and noting the changes, the leveled edge of the narrowed doorway, modified to fit just us and not the animals, the heavy planks of wood still raw in their new position, not yet sanded or painted. I look inside and the darkness is stifling, black, impossibly thick. I want to follow Winnie in but I don't know how, I can't force my legs to lift, can't seem to push them through the door and in after her.

I call out her name, Winnie, the sound thin and weak with a curve at the end like I'm asking. I feel weak but I don't want to so I force myself to take a step forward, force my eyes open, ignore the nagging pressure building in my brain, tell myself I don't need the flame that I can handle the dark that it's just Winnie, and the dark can't hear me. I step over the threshold with both feet and hear, Bang! and Winnie giggling and I see a flash of her red hair and head toward it, shapes emerging as my eyes gradually adjust.

What was that? I ask, arms stretched out to her like a toddler. But she only giggles and my hands are in her hair. She takes my hands in hers and says, Come on! and tugs me forward, her steps sure. She walks me forward until my feet hit the base of the new staircase and she's pulling me up, step by step we're climbing up to the new floor and into the moonlight pouring in through the blank windowless squares framed by wood. I watch her hair a dark purple in the glow, watch it enflame as she spins and we're dancing. We're dancing and her face is old and lined and my hands are cracked and spotted brown, the skin paper thin on my hands on her arms and I pull back, look at her face with the lines and my hands on her shoulders with their spots and I stumble back. She's dancing so seductive and her mouth opens and she reaches a smooth white hand to my face and says, You look like you've seen a ghost, David.

We stand next to each other, Max and I, watching our phantom selves and the hurried movements of the other patients in the common room behind us. Our cigarettes have gone out. Morgan is still missing and now it's time for bed and the aides and the nurses are trying to calm everyone down, trying to talk over the noise so loud we can almost hear them out here on the porch. The door opens behind us and when we turn, Henry tells us to Come inside, please, gentlemen. I wonder if we're going to be sent to bed now, or if we'll have to gather around as they explain that Morgan is exactly where they want him to be and we shouldn't worry about it in the slightest, then I hedge my bets on the former.

Crossing into the common room is like crossing into Mexico. The aides are staring me down, watching for funny business but I am a tourist here, I don't speak the language. By recruiting McQueen, Clarence has managed to tear the cushions from

every available couch. Charlie is singing, he's singing and he's running up and down the hall, hopped up on the sugar from the Starburst the nurses gave him to calm him down in the elevator. The chairs have been stacked in one corner and my eyes follow William as he carries potted plants, one after the other, over to this corner, placing them on the unsteady surface. The night nurses watch safe in their station as the aides circle a group of men who break apart the second they move away to gather more.

Henry marches into the crowd, scattering men to his left and his right. He opens his mouth to speak only after he's reached the center of the common room. As you have noticed, he begins, As you all have noticed, Morgan will not be spending the night on the ward. The men shuffle, McQueen places the cushion in his hands back on the couch. Henry continues, But don't be alarmed, we have him and he will be dealt with.

The idea being that he tried to escape, and they found him. As they find everyone. I join in as we all hang our heads, the correct response. I don't believe Henry, don't think Morgan has been found, and I start to let myself think about his escape, how beautiful it would be to see him take off up that hill, past the guard stations and the electric gates, out into Southeast, out into Anacostia, not stopping until the Potomac. Henry marches us to our rooms, locks us in for the night but I can still hear men whispering into the walls of their rooms, whispering about escapes and freedom, lowered security and weekend visits and release, the big hopes and dreams we try to keep out every day, that the meds are usually good at keeping out. I listen at my wall for a while to the hum of the other men's voices, not hearing the words exactly but the tone, the excitement, the wonder and I fall asleep like this, sitting up in bed with my ear against the wall, with hope on my lips.

Winnie's hands brush against my stomach under the sheet as she turns over and she wakes herself up with the touch, her eyes sapphires smoldering into mine. Her dark eyes under the sheets push against mine, her hands moving up my chest with her body as she slides on top of me, fitting her hips on top of mine, her knees sliding down to grip my narrow thighs and press into the sheet.

She arches her ribs up onto mine pressing them into my chest, her arms sliding up past the sides of my head as her mouth descends on mine. She tastes sweet in the predawn air, like breast milk. I pull the sheet down away from us and touch her hips with my fingertips, tracing shapes across the width of them, feeling the baby soft hairs against the pads of my fingers.

She's flat against me then lifting, her hair sweeping over her face long and tangled brushing against my chest. My hips against hers and up, I brush my lips against her hair, take her hair into my mouth and suck the dry strands until they drip wet and dark against my chest. She slides the curtain of her hair away from her face, traces the tips of it against my chest and neck. Her neck her arms her hands are pale as peeled eggs in the darkened bedroom, her palms pink against my chest against my hands and around them as she whispers the secrets into my fingers.

I push my face into her hair and say, You are heaven, my teeth smiling against the red strands, sliding them between top and bottom teeth until they grate and crunch and I feel content.

I open my eyes and there is a stale taste on my lips, a sour feeling that spreads thick around my tongue, spreading to my gums and pushing down my throat. The thick grey light of morning in summer curves its fat edges into my room through the chicken

wire and I feel exhausted. The ward is too cold when I wake before morning checks. I listen to the determined thunk of the water droplets when they tiptoe to the edge of the faucet, hold their breath and leap into the porcelain bowl. My ankles ache with the weight of a dozen cinder blocks. Morgan is back and I can feel his defeat on the air.

I close my eyes and twist my ankles until they stop aching, the leaky faucet a metronome keeping my breathing steady. Keep my breath steady and pull my calves up slowly toward the backs of my thighs, hurl my torso forward in one fluid movement, but more like a few jerky spasms because I am not spry like I used to be, I am aging in this hollow space, aging faster every day. I need to use my arms a little to keep myself upright, I thrust them out from my torso ahead of my knees until I'm sitting comfortably, swing my legs off the edge of the bed and onto the cool tile, then stand, using all my muscles to grow tall and straight.

The mirror chops me up, cutting me off at the head and waist, morphing me into a floating torso skinny and loose in my cotton t-shirt. The fabric tightens across my chest as my lungs expand, sags as I exhale. My arms are thickest at the elbows. I curl my hands into fists and watch for changes in the musculature of my arms that don't come. Step toward the mirror and reach for the toothbrush standing in the cup by the sink. It's attached to the wall by a string so they'd notice if I tried to use the edge of my bed frame to shape it into something that stabs.

The veins in my hands are growing fatter every day, pushing out from my skin. Soon they will be wider than my fingers, as wide as the thickness of my hand, greenish and sick and undesirable. I spit the excess toothpaste into the sink, run the water until it disappears and listen as the toothbrush clinks against its plastic cup. I pull off my t-shirt,

smelling of the sweat of the night, and throw it toward the bag of laundry by the door. I roll deodorant under my arms and the hairs there clump with the thick fluid. I stretch out the band of my underwear with my thumbs and step out of them, pull a fresh pair off the shelf, a fresh shirt from the pile, zip up a pair of khaki pants.

I twist the doorknob a little and find I'm not locked in so I push the door open, steal out into the hall. Abe sits slumped in a chair by the door to the ward and I nod, but his eyes are closed. My slippers make small soft noises along the floor and I tread more slowly, my feet sinking into the foam bottom of the slippers with every step.

I thumb the pack of cigarettes in my back pocket as I step across the threshold into the common room, sliding my slippers forward toward the door to the porch, checking for Henry and trying not to look at the sky. The sky is grey, still shrugging off its traces of night, and I hurry back to Abe's broken figure, clear my throat until his eyes flutter. His hand doesn't reach automatically for his lighter, does not make any movement toward his pocket as he looks up at me and so I pull my pack from my back pocket, wave it toward his face to remind him of our routine.

Abe frowns, regards me before he stands and walks ahead of me to the porch. He digs the lighter from his pocket and extends it toward me, like he's going to let me take it. I stare at it for a few seconds too long, wondering if he remembers the rules, what he's thinking, before I reach my cigarette out to meet it, let him burn the paper, watch the orange glow at the tip deepen, brighten as it moves away, as he slides his thumb off the catch. I try to take my time with it but soon the cigarette is burning up the filter and I can't hold onto it any more.

My cheek rests on the cool formica counter. My break has started but I don't want to go out into the rain, don't want to have to slump in the corner under the short lip of roof and sneak cigarettes while I avoid the sky. No sun today but Winnie's hair and the way it swings across the back of her uniform when she serves plates to Table 3 fielding quips about her figure from Doctor Abbott at the corner booth.

When she's done, she slides behind the counter, filling up the coffee mugs before anyone can even ask. I'm sitting at the end, by the cash register, and when she reaches me she pauses, brushes my hair smooth with her fingers, asks me what's wrong.

I don't know, I say, Nothing, but she can tell it's not just the break or the sky it's the routine of it. It isn't right for you, is it? she asks, This life. She sighs, What does my Davie want to do with himself? And she's right, this is temporary, was supposed to be temporary. This life here, at Sam's, would never be the end of the line for us, we weren't like Mom and Jerry.

So smart in here, she says, tracing my temple with her finger, So serious. What if you went back to school? she asks, and I scoff. What are you waiting for? I look around at the diner, or what I can see of it from where my head rests on the counter. The dusty windows, the country people, and she's right, this isn't what we wanted, what I wanted, but it's too late for anything else.

Hey, she says, taking my hand in hers, You can do it, hmm. She pushes her eyes into mine and I'm deep in them. We can do it, she says, rubbing the back of my hand with the pad of her thumb, We can do anything together.

Can you hear me, man? I feel Abe's hand on my shoulder, shaking vigorously, I'm just trying to be straight with you, he says, searching my eyes with his own, brown and bloodshot from overuse.

The sky is a pink warning and I am confused, I can't remember what he's said, don't think he's said anything at all but I want to believe him.

You might want to smoke another jack, is all I'm saying. Could be a while before your next one, I mean, he holds the lighter in his outstretched hand, One for the road, is all I'm saying.

He looks a little worried, holding the lighter like that, like I might be a predatory animal ready to strike and I can't figure out whether to take the lighter from his hand first or ask him, Why?

His eyes widen and he hands me my own copy of the Post, folds it back on itself and gestures to the lower right corner of the cover, where the mayor's face beams from the colored newsprint. I scan the words, Mayor's Bill Passed, Smoke-Free Public Health Facilities in the District Declared, scan my eyes down to the list of hospitals and see ours right there near the top, St. Elizabeths.

My hands shake as I read, the pressure building behind my eyes, radiating out. It's gonna be a long journey but I know you can quit, man, Abe adds encouragingly, it won't be that bad.

I fold the paper and drop it below my chair, take a deep breath in and remember to exhale. When Abe extends the lighter I don't hesitate this time. He holds back a little on the release but I know he'll be good for it, I pluck it from his fingers.

For a while, I sit with the bit of smooth coated blue plastic resting in my palm. Eventually my thumb heads for the grooved metal wheel and I touch it, press my skin against it until the grooves bite into the swirls of my fingerprint, press and turn until the wheel grates slow around its axel, until tiny sparks spit from the lighter's belly blue and peach and white. The metal top is hot from the friction and the spark and I rest my thumb there, feel it pulse into my finger feel the power of it feel the heat growing inside me. I lift my thumb and scratch down hard along the length of the wheel until it catches, until the flame emerges from the hole in the belly, until the fire pours, straightens up tall, calms. It dips at me and I dip back, my eyes glued to the flame I cannot look away I hold my breath I stare and stare and take it into me.

I feel a body shift next to mine and come closer and the flame drops, it goes out. I look up at Abe's face, force my lips to curve up and he says, You savor it, but he doesn't mean the flame he means the cigarette and he points at what he means and I know what he means so I have to pretend.

I lift the pack from where it sits between my legs where it's nestled, reach in and pull one out slow, push and spark. I place the cigarette between my lips slowly, bring the

lighter close to my face and cup my free hand around its flame, relishing the warmth and its glow against my fingers. I bring the flame to the tip of the cigarette and light it slow like an amateur, light part and then stop, pull it away, light it again and keep the flame high as I inhale until I can't fake it any more, until my temples want to burst until my lungs might burst until my eyes eat up the flame and the sun peeks its head above the horizon. I shut off the flame, hold the lighter in my palm, tuck it in tight, close my eyes and exhale.

The hot metal radiates against the skin of my palm. The image of the flame and the sun that burned into my retinas projects onto the back of my eyelids. I exhale, open my eyes, sit and watch the sun's continual rise, smoke my last cigarette slowly.

Winnie stands by the sink, the tiny hairs on her shoulders and arms lit up gold in the afternoon sun streaming in through the windows. Her shoulders are hunched, her palms flat against the counter, the bone and musculature of her back under its case of skin exposed and shifting in the glow. That fat push of red hair is piled on top of her head and sparking bright in the sun, one lock dangling reckless maroon down her back. She is beautiful and she lowers her head into the sink and she heaves, her stomach muscles contracting and her mouth opening. The vomit pours out. I watch as she does this again and again and she is sobbing and her back is beautiful, delicate and beautiful.

I take a step toward her and my hand stretches toward her back and she coughs and spits and says, Don't, and her voice is a shattered mirror and I take a shard and squeeze it in my palm and continue toward her.

It's okay, I tell her, because I know it will be, know she'll stop vomiting soon and she will still be beautiful for a very long time whether she loves me then or not.

She turns her head over her shoulder to look at me and her lips look wet and perfect and she curls the top one up until her teeth show. She says, Don't even think about following me right now, and wipes the back of her hand across her mouth and rinses her hand under the faucet and dries her hand on the towel and throws the towel on the counter and slides her body past me carefully without touching an inch of me. I stand by the sink and place my palms flat against the counter and stare out at the sun. I try to imagine not lighting a match and not worrying about the sun and I try to imagine that my head isn't pounding and that my brain doesn't sometimes feel like a surgeon has sawed off my skull and left my brain exposed to the air but it's no use.

I pull the matchbox from my back pocket and stare at the sun and finger a match and try to keep my head still keep my face still but I can't. I flip the matchbox over so the striking strip shows and I close my eyes and I open them and I stare at the sun but it's no use, the sun is always dropping and my hands are already at work fumbling with a match, turning it to face the strip on the box then pushing the match hard and quick across it. The flame bursts open from the head of the match and the pressure in my brain peaks and splits open to course through my body and into my fingertips and out through the match in waves and my body heaves and my head clears as I stare into the flame as it bites along the short length of wood toward my fingers.

When the flame reaches my fingers I throw the match into the sink but my body still trembles from the breaking pressure. I pull out another match, strike it against the box, watch it flare hot and stare until the light burns green inside my eyelids when I close them. I walk around the house with my eyes closed searching for Winnie.

Susan's voice is on the loudspeaker calling everyone to breakfast and when I open my eyes, Abe is gone. I feel for the lighter in my palm but all that is left is the print of its oval base stamped into my skin and a faint warm feeling like seeing a campfire in the distance. My knees creak and then pop as I stand up straight, my hands against the back of my chair as I watch the others lining up inside and I shuffle in my slippers to the door, pull it open, join the line.

Max slides in next to me as we slide toward the cafeteria through the doors of our ward and out and he's cutting in line but no one notices, he folds into me his lips at my ear, Morgan. My lungs pause and I look along the line to its head, back down to the tail but catch no sign of the gold wire-rimmed glasses or his bushy moustache, no sign of his shiny skull or the girth of his bicep or the open, grinning face or the hawk-like eyes. There is no Morgan.

Where? I ask, but Max just shrugs, checks the line himself, his head ducking back and forth, he slouches his shoulders. Morgan isn't here.

The line is quiet as we pass into the little cafeteria for breakfast and I wonder if it was real, what Abe said or if I had been dreaming, wonder if anyone will care.

Breakfast is pancakes and a sugar-free maple syrup that drips slow onto the cakes, running down them like lava. Sausage patties like coins or miniature pancakes slap down onto our plates from the metal tongs and I gulp my orange juice, fill it up again before I sit.

Max is at my side but I know there won't be stories today and I sit quietly, remembering to smile toward McQueen whenever he smacks a patty on his forehead so it

sticks or pokes his tongue through a corner of pancake and wags it at me from his place across the table.

As we begin to really dig in a man I don't know walks in behind Henry with a cardboard box in one hand, a friendly wave in the other. The smile on his face twitches a bit at the edges but for an outsider, he's relatively calm. He stands at the head of the table as Henry talks about laws and authority, eases into telling us about Mayor Fenty in a way we can digest as easy as pancakes, or sausage patties, or crummy syrup, the kind of talk that lodges in our throats and settles in our stomachs and proves harder to pass than a wedge of cheese.

Henry's speech reeks with rehearsal and he tells us, Sometimes we have to do things to help us that feel painful. Things that will make us healthier don't always feel good at first. Some of the men look at each other, lines from their pillows and sheets still crossing their faces with sleep, unaware of what is lurking, what I know is hidden in that cardboard box.

This is for our benefit as well as yours, Henry adds, The mayor wants us all to be healthy and live long lives and he wants to do anything he can to make Washington, D.C. a better place. That's why we're all going to do this and why none of us are going to complain, he adds, holding my gaze.

The man swings the lid off the cardboard box, reaches his free hand in and begins handing nicotine patches around to every patient. Rest assured, you'll be given enough to quit, his voice shakes. We want y'all to start on the patches now, all of y'all and we'll assess where y'all are individually later.

Then they make us each pick up the square in front of us, make us peel back the clear sticky film the beige square like a square of the doctor's skin and apply the patch Slap! to our arms each of us slapping the square, each with our heads craned our chins tucked over our shoulders to smooth out the patch and make sure it's stuck.

Mine bunches a little at the corner and a line forms, raises up, folds on itself. I push the crease in, rub it but it sticks and I look around, pressure building in my temples. The patch is too dark for my pale skin, too light for everyone else's. McQueen's is a bright square field on the landscape of his tricep and he flexes it a little, makes it dance, and laughs, his sleeve rolled up, it's dancing and he's laughing. McQueen hasn't touched a cigarette in all the years he's been here so he can joke, even still would probably make a joke.

We're all caught up with our patches, ours and theirs and I turn to ask Abe if he'll have to wear the patches too of if it's just for us, just for the patients, already knowing the answer and as I turn Morgan walks into the room, shuffles in with the thin white cotton of a lunatic come up from the sick bay, his arms at his sides, mouth a straight black thread.

The ward is hushed as Morgan takes a seat at the head of the table. He puts his hands in his head, his elbows on the table, while Abe makes a plate for him, heaping the plate with sausage and pancakes and placing the plate against Morgan's elbows. I can see the edge of Morgan's patch already fixed to his solid arm as he locks his hands behind his head, breathing in the scent of the warm meal with his eyes closed, the lenses on his glasses fogging up from the heat of it. We watch as he lowers his head his neck his arms his hands down to the plate, opens his mouth and takes a sticky bite out of the top layer of pancakes, eyes closed, chewing with syrup dripping from his nose and

cheeks. He lowers his head and snaps up a sausage patty, chewing it down in one bite with eyes closed as Henry and Abe and the man with the empty cardboard box and we all watch.

I stand with my back to the sun, surveying the perimeter of the foundation where the parking garage will sit within the earth's crust. The pit is cut evenly, hyper-straight, the kind of cut that can only be made slowly, and by hand, with a finishing trowel. A man with a jitterbug pushes the tiny wires down into the gravel like a giant's egg slicer. In this world, machines haven't taken over the tedious tasks yet.

I hear a flurry of cries from the outer zone and lift my head to see yellow hats rushing toward the place where I left the foreman talking with my students. When I get there, the foreman is being shunted up and down by a sledgehammer and one of the students, the smallest one, is walking toward him with her eyes open, no goggles on just mousy hair tucked under a hardhat, debris and shards of the paved road spraying at her face.

The foreman shouts, Get her out of here! because the machine takes time to power down and that's time he doesn't have. Another worker rushes forward, he has a hardhat on and he gets in front of the girl, pushing her backward but she continues forward, planting one foot in front of the other, fighting him all the way, so steady that two men have to grab her, lifting her back by her armpits.

They've pulled her back and led her over to a bench by the Port-a-Potties by the time I get in close. I stand in front of them, peer into the girl's wide eyes, which are shaking back and forth like they've come loose at the edges. When they arrive, one medic looks into her eyes and says, Get her down! and they all lay her down and then he

says, It's coming, she hasn't had it yet, and I look around at the others, wondering what he means.

After she is lowered to the ground a power surges through her and she goes stiff, her belly rises and she's shaking, teeth clamped down hard. Her eyes are closed but I can see white under the lids. A few seconds and her body eases up. The medic asks, Did you know this woman is epileptic? I watch her small, hard body press down into the ground. After a minute, her eyes flutter open and focus. The medic asks her what her name is and she replies, Molly Beech, and the medic looks at me and I nod. I hold my hands out to her as she struggles to her feet. She braces her palms against them and grips the edges with her skinny fingers.

Abe walks us back to the common room. The walk takes longer than usual, all of us lined up and shuffling. I'm following Morgan, my feet matched to his. He turns his head to the painted tiles on the wall. There is long strand of syrup still clinging to his mustache that no one will wipe away. When we reach the common room, I get to the couch quicker than the veggies, take a spot by the television taking up as much space as I can so they can't sit one down too close to me. I focus on Oprah's hair and not Morgan's mustache, on her coral blouse her gut her paunch below the brown skirt doing its best to conceal it, her voice in my head but noise.

Hamilton wheels up slow behind me and rams the arm of his chair into my elbow, parks his chair half in my line of vision and spins his eyes in their sockets and chants, Oprah, Oprah, I'm gonna poke ya. Amrita the new nurse is here again today, in pants today, and Hamilton, determined to get her to come over, doesn't lock his wheels so he's

constantly wheeling forward, pushing back, wheeling forward, pushing back in time with his mantra.

I'm trying to maintain focus but Hamilton's voice is inside my head and I'm staring at his black and white afro, his cracked hands on the wheels, his gnarled legs concealed in coffee colored slacks, his wicked face. Oprah's laugh behind Hamilton is uncontrolled. Amrita's shoes squeak on the floor tiled a mustard color like snot, same as the walls, and I can't pick up my arms they're sliding down on the fake leather sliding past my thighs.

Amrita stands beside Hamilton's chair and grabs hold of its back. Pull it, she says, pointing, and he leers, I can't. He struggles with the lock on his chair and she says, Make sure it's tight. He struggles and says, I can't Miss Nurse I can't do it. Could you help me?

She reaches down to get it, reaches down so her firm ass arcs in the air and her back arches like a cat and Hamilton's hand reaches out and smacks it, smacks her ass hard like he's paying for it, and Amrita shrieks and Susan is there and Henry is there and Abe is there and she shrieks and steps back and Henry twists Hamilton's arm and pushes his chair hard past the nurses' station until Hamilton disappears down the hall and Abe turns to me and says, The doctor wants to see you, stares at me while my palms sweat. My arms and legs are shaking I'm a part of the couch and will be forever.

Fire! Fire! I sit on my bed and the smoke billows low through the room, lifting my feet up to the bed as I howl as the smoke pushes at my bed and my face and my lungs, I can smell it in my nose. I call out, Fire! Fire! watch it rising hot and high toward my

ceiling coating the room and pushing further at the walls at my posters and my comic books and the curtains and my bed.

My mother is banging on the door and I can hear her voice down low by the smoke, down low and coughing. She says, We need to get outside, and, The doorknob is too hot don't touch it, and, Can you climb out the window, but I'm frozen on my bed.

A man in a mask appears at the window, clear plastic over his eyes and nose and a big round honeycomb where the mouth should go and I scream. He pushes gloved hands against the base of my window and motions and I jump back off the bed. Hot salt runs down my face in streaks and the glass shatters across my bed. The man's gloves sweep the corners of the window before his muffled voice says, I've come to get you out. He stretches his arms toward me and says, Please, and says, I want to help you, and I slowly walk back to the bed and he asks, Are your shoes on? and I show him and he says, Be careful, and, The glass. My mother isn't shouting any more. I pull myself back onto the bed and stand on it, walking to him with my arms out until he grabs them in his hands, pulling me through the frame. He cradles me in his arms and thumps down the ladder.

He sets me down on my feet but I clutch at his arms with my hands as he tries to climb back up the ladder. He points a gloved hand behind me and I let go reluctantly with one hand, turn and see my mother. I let go completely and run to her, burying my face in her stomach and breathing hard, her hands tight in my hair.

A cluster of men in blue uniforms with stars on their chests stand on our front lawn. One walks toward us. His feet move fast but his body is slow, a notepad in his hand and a pen clutched in his fingers. His mustache is bushy and it moves as he asks, Are you okay? and, How many people were inside? and, How did the fire begin?

My mother repeats my father's name in soft tones. The policeman asks, Did he make it out of the house? and, Do you know where your husband is? and, Where is Peter Whelan now? and my mother starts to cry as the policeman scribbles on his notebook. I bury my face in my mother's hip. I hear noises that aren't the crackling of beams or the popping of glass from inside the house and pull my head free as the front door blasts open and my father charges out with the fireman behind him zigging and zagging across the lawn. The fireman overtakes him, enveloping my father's body on the ground. The policemen swarm him and hold his hands behind his back and put them into cuffs. I can't hear anything but their lips move. They stand my father up and push him into the back of a car and I can't hear anything over my mother's sobs, only feel her arm around my back her hand gripping my arm so tight.

Doctor Lindor is standing in front of me where I sit on the couch. I follow the creased line at the front center of his trousers, from its inception at the cuff to where it trails off near the belt, a clean vertical swoop I trace on loop, up one leg, down the next, up the right, down the left. The pleats bend as he lowers his face to mine, the white-orange reflection of artificial light on his lenses blocking his eyes. He opens his mouth, exposing his large teeth, shiny except for the dead one below his thin lips.

The others in the common room are talking, they're laughing and talking and a group is playing spades around a table while the veggies watch Oprah. Max places his fingers on the square nicotine patch, runs his fingers along the edge of the adhesive and picks absentmindedly at the sticky material below. Morgan sits with him in the corner, one white pant leg folded over the other, talking in a low but excited voice. He looks

more like himself but his fingers are twitching in his lap, he's fidgeting, his legs crossing and uncrossing.

The doctor places an outstretched hand onto my shoulder and digs his fingers in, repeating, Let's go to my office now, David. I think it's time for us to get squared away on a few things. I try to look into his eyes beneath the glasses while my legs straighten up and stand. Then the doctor turns and I follow his thin back, the white coat, out of the common room. Henry is stationed in the hall, watching us from the corner as we cross the threshold of the ward and walk the five steps to his office, one of five identical offices set up in five identical spaces, one on each floor.

Doctor Lindor leads me in and gestures toward the chair nearest the door, facing his desk. He clicks the door shut and slides his legs under his side of the desk, touching his fingers to each other and regarding me over their tips. How are you, David? he asks, removing his glasses to clean them on his coat, his blue eyes bright in the heavy noon light.

I follow the path of the light, admiring the considerably larger, cage-free window in the wall furthest from the door. No cage for the doctor but still bars.

The cats are roaming out on the grounds, moving slow in the summer heat. I watch a fat calico lying flat on her side, licking her tattered coat. The grass is barely formed and cats roll in plots of dirt like pigs, kicking up clouds of dust with their small heels. Out there, the cats don't have bars to hold them in. In here, the bars are everywhere.

[7]

The doctor clears his throat and when I turn back, I can still see his eyes piercing ghostly through the lenses. How are you, David? he asks again.

Fine, I answer, Just fine, my voice controlled. I know what's coming next. I am here because the doctor wants to talk to me about smoking, is here to tell me that we're all becoming non-smokers and without really understanding why he knows I'm the most likely to fail, the one who will need the most patches and the most counseling and the most the most the most.

You've heard about the transition, he says, and when he speaks it is not a question but a statement closed as death. I am the least medicated person on the ward and I want to keep it that way. I keep my breathing even, fix my eyes on his clean white coat, the crisp blue shirt that lifts as he inhales, drops as he sighs. My file is in his hands and he flips through the pages, but I know what they say, I'm on a pair of the green bars, a yellow and a purple, the blue eggs for emergencies.

The doctor looks up at me, Now the patches we've given out aren't going to affect your medications in the slightest. But I'm going to be honest with you, David, he says, and when he says this I draw back a little in the chair because he won't, The problem here is, these patches are fairly weak. They'll work for some lighter smokers like your friend Max and they'll work on some of the more disabled patients who've had less access to nicotine, but in your case, these patches simply will not be enough.

Doctor Lindor stretches his arms back, leaning back in the chair and clasping his arms behind his neck. His cheeks puff with air, removing all traces of the lines that usually crease them. He exhales loudly. The gentle bobbing of his arms held above the

back of the chair frames the lowest tier of his diplomas and I read the Latin for what feels like the thousandth time, Magna Cum Laude at Georgetown Medical, wonder for the thousandth time why the good doctor ever ended up here.

I clear my throat, sit on my hands in case they start to shake. I'm not sure what you have in mind, Doctor, but I can't feel this patch kicking in at all. The doctor is still nodding slowly in his chair so I continue, And I've been thinking, perhaps it would be best for me to just proceed with smoking as usual.

The doctor's laugh starts deep inside of him, shaking hah hah hah out into the corners of the room. I reach my hand to my arm, push up the sleeve and dig my nail under the clear film of the patch, pulling up slowly. The doctor's voice stops me, quiet and firm, You know it won't be that easy, David.

My hands are shaking but it doesn't matter now. I hold them, palms facing up, on my knees. My temples are pounding too hot, the pressure in my temples and forehead building. Couldn't we give it a try, at least? I ask and my voice is pleading, didn't want that tone but it's here.

The doctor thumbs through my file. I wouldn't worry too much about the process of quitting, he says, and his voice is quick and firm, You'll have no problem if we put you on something stronger. Nothing about your life will really change.

I press my fingers into my temples, my elbows grating on my knees as I pitch forward. His hands are on his thighs below the desk, rubbing down to his knees and back up. The doctor sighs, Keep focused on the positive aspects. Still pushing his hands into his thighs he stands up, rising to his full height behind the desk.

I push myself up, open my mouth to call out, but smoke is filling the room fast and I can't see anything. I can't see my hands on the desk, everything is grey and smoke sharp in my mouth. I can't see the fire, only see the smoke. My knee bangs into the corner of my desk hard and I stumble, catching my weight on the arm of the chair, propelling myself toward the door.

There is so much smoke billowing in from the hall, pushing in hard and fast and swamping me with tight, curling licks that constrict my lungs as I try to breathe. The taste is black and sharp in my mouth and I cry out but it comes out in a croak, my throat too dry too full for words, and I'm down, sitting down and groping but I can't get any air, can't hold it in, my eyes full of water, ready to put out the fire.

The murky grey blurs and I close my eyes and hear a knock at the open door. I say, Get out of here! I think, Save yourself! I shake my head. It pounds from the smoke and the smoke fills my lungs and I'll never breathe again. Then hands on my shoulders and delicate. I am shocked about the angel until I realize it's just a dream projected by my decaying nervous system as it shuts down.

The space in front of my eyelids grows darker as the projection hovers closer and my lungs clear. I want to look at her, feel certain that I want to see the angel and I open my eyes. I'm sitting in my office and the smoke is gone. Molly is standing in front of me, her blue eyes close to mine and her brown hair wisping against my forehead, her hands small and warm on my shaking shoulders, pressing down to stop them. I focus on her face and she pronounces my name, asks, Are you okay? I lean up and kiss her, my lips parting her lips, and she kisses me back, lets me curl my tongue into her mouth. Our

eyes are closed and my hand is in her hair, her hands pushing down on my shoulders and she tastes sharp and she is not an angel and she is nothing like Winnie.

Abe rests his hand on my back as his other hand circles my arm, pulls me up to stand, Come on now, David. The doctor is gone but his door is open and we move through it, out into the hall. Once we reach the common room Abe takes his hand away. I can still feel him walking behind me, feel him at my back. I step forward into the common room, find my paper sitting in the chair in the corner by the largest potted plant and pick it up, sit down quick, my face behind the leaves.

My fingers curl tight around the handle of the door as I sit in the back of the cop car, my wrists cut raw from worrying the edge of the metal handcuffs against my skin. I can hear the wail of the fire engine echoing in my ears, only not just my ears but the ears of anyone walking or standing or breathing or living within a one mile radius. A cop mutters to me through the open window about keeping me overnight until he can find my parents.

This isn't my first time riding in the back of a cop car and if I can get my hands to stop shaking, I will calm down. I turn away from the window, blocking out the silhouette of the policeman, the quickly sinking sun behind him. I close my eyes and keep them closed until he stops talking, moves away. I feel the sun's last rays on my upturned face and breathe. The policeman opens his door on the driver's side and when he sits, the weight of his body makes the car dip and then bounce. Then the glass window is sliding up, cutting off those last rays before the sun sinks beneath the horizon, and he is telling me to listen and open my eyes or he'll come back there and open them for me.

I picture the blaze as it progressed, a small ball of orange set in the back of the shop licking so fast across the weathered boards, building into angry red flames that hurled themselves through the cracked and busted windows of the old store, more black smoke than I could have ever imagined from the tiny shop, smoke that hung in the air and hurt my eyes while I sat watching, scraping my bare calves against the concrete.

At the police station, a man in a tight uniform and a neck built like sausage links asks me if I intended to set the fire, Why did you sit idle as the store went up in smoke and flames? Why didn't you call 911 or run far away? It looks very suspicious, is all, he says, peering down at me over the bulk of his belly not unkindly. His kindness makes me feel more brutal.

Have you ever heard of shock? I push the words through gritted teeth.

Are you claiming that you were in shock? He asks, and I pause, knowing that when the medic at the scene asked me questions to determine whether my mental and physical faculties were intact I had already replied No and Yes to indicate that I was not, but also knowing that a symptom of shock might well be answering questions incorrectly with a flat affect just as I had.

I plead the fifth, backtrack, quoting something I'd heard on television that kept a criminal from talking to the police that only causes my officer to laugh until his belly shakes.

Then you'll be silent for a long while, he says, hooking his fingers into his belt and hoisting his pants higher and tighter against his yawning belly. If we can't get ahold of your parents, you'll be spending the night locked up here, that's a guarantee.

If you see my father, I'd be impressed, I say, scraping my fingers against the scabby skin of my knee. My laces are untied, caked brown with dirt against the clean white floor. I feel a pang of embarrassment.

The police officer sits down and says, If you tell me where you live, and promise not to get into any more trouble, I'll drop you off at home and leave it up to luck whether or not your mother notices you've been driven home by an officer of the law.

She won't notice, I growl. She won't even be home. When I close my eyelids, the letters from her note burn against them. They say she had to work a double, tell me breakfast is warm in the oven and that I can play outside. They warn me not to wander all over town again or she'll stop leaving me home alone, though she'd been doing it for as long as I can remember, or at least since my father went away.

I glare at the officer but push my chair back and stand up all the same, knowing he's giving me the easy way out because he pities me, my young body and my running nose and maybe even my dirt-caked shoelaces. I really work it up and put my hand in his after he holds the door open for me, counting myself lucky that he never ran my name through the system like he threatened to do when I first arrived, not sure what he might find below my name or my father's and how it would compare to the truth.

The newspaper is open on my lap turning my khakis black and dirty and I look up, peer over its edge and watch as the doctor moves around inside the nurses' station. He touches Amrita's back as she bends to hand him a clipboard, pulls his body up tall when she looks at him, eyes crinkling. He's assessing her, appraising her and she's not coming up short this time, she's smiling and he's healthy and virile and sane and he has every right. When he winks her dark cheeks flame pink.

Their fingers touch as she extends the clipboard to his outstretched hand. He turns, pushing the glass panel of the door to the nurses' station open, glancing at the clipboard then walking to William where he sits in front of the television, Bible open but forgotten in his lap while he mouths along with Oprah's guest. Doctor Lindor stands in front of the television until William focuses on him. The doctor's mouth moves until he nods, and then William is standing up, and the doctor is touching William on the back and guiding him, his own feet moving with purpose at pace with William's shuffle, out of the common room and into the hall where the two men disappear from view.

I sit in the corner and flip through the pages of the newspaper without focusing on any of them, not the mayor standing with a cow in northern Virginia, the photograph of a man getting beaten by children inside of the Chinatown metro station or the artist's rendition of a man who stabbed another man through the lungs a few weeks ago while hurling racial and homophobic slurs into his face.

My fingers touch the patch on my arm, under the sleeve of my shirt, pick at the edge running my finger across the gummy surface of it. I try not to think about smoking, try not to think about flames while I do this. My hands shake and the pages of the newsprint flutter. I try to fold the newspaper with sharp creases and fail, succeed only in throwing the pile of pages next to me like a slob or an imbecile, the pages scattered around me like blankets around a veggie. I close my eyes as the pressure builds in my temples, as I try to steady everything but the building is on fire, great sweeps of flames and smoke billowing from the windows, the windows cracking and the flames licking at their frames, the red bricks turning black with soot and not a fire truck in sight. I curl my fingers into carved circles around the round metal arms of the chair.

Her body zips into the bag with one sharp tug, Zip! and the teeth eat her up, eating up her pale skin and red hair blooming. Black bag on the gurney and the pulling and then disappearing into two metal doors banged shut. The barn's remains smolder, the air colder the further I move away from it. My throat is charcoal, the words don't come. The men are large and loud. Their vehicles are large and loud. I push her name from my lips in puffs of smoke, Winnie, the syllables muted against the sounds of the siren as her body pulls away from mine into the night.

A man with a star on his chest lumbers to me, blue buttons stretched tight over swinging stomach. I am on my knees where she lay in the grass, when she was mine and not theirs, my hands in the grass the stalks strands of her hair. My nose in the grass sage and vanilla, breathe in deeper, steak juice. Breathe again and it's gone.

You'll be coming with us, the officer says and gruff, they're all gruff so gruff do they ever get tired of it. My hands circle in the grass, stop behind my back where I feel the cord zip tight against my wrists, feel the fleshy hands as they pull, standing me up and leading me toward the noise. He pushes my head into the car and I turn to them one last time, the house and the barn or what was the barn, I'm not sure how to see it now.

The new nurse's face is against mine and she's breathing hot into my face and her hands are on my arms and my arms are shaking. My arms are in the air because Amrita the new nurse is pulling me up and she's saying, Why don't you lie down for a little while, and she's leading me across the floor but I can't feel my feet to shake and my head is pounding. I lick my lips because I need to feel something and I need to stop shaking and I need a woman who loves me to tuck me into bed and smooth my hair back off my forehead and she's the closest thing I might get to that so I follow.

She leads me by the arms past the veggies on their couches and into the hall where Henry sits staring and past the telephone where Clarence flaps his lips and tongue against the receiver, conversing in a language only he and his three-year-old granddaughter can understand and he is there, in the basement of the George Washington Hospital, raping that nurse and he is there, having a tea party with his granddaughter. My shaking slows a little as we near my room and I want to ask Amrita to smooth my hair across my forehead, believe she will if I ask her nicely.

She's got me next to my bed and she's asking me whether to pull the sheets back or if I just feel like sleeping on top and she is in a hotel turning down guests' beds for them while they stand by watching her in silk pajamas and warm slippers, their faces so content. I want to touch her face and tell her she's an angel but my hands are shaking and my voice won't come and she might scream anyway so I just nod when she pulls the sheet back and looks at me and I shuffle my way to the side of the bed and climb in slowly and she smooths the covers back over me and tucks them in.

I look up at her pleading but she's looking out the window at something down on the lawn and I wonder if she's seen the cats yet, and I want to show them to her and when we go, I want to wear nice clothes that match and she'll have on a red polka dot dress and her legs will be shiny and she won't work for the government. Amrita walks to the window and tries to yank it up, but there is no latch and no way to do that, and she strains and looks at the wire and presses her hand to the glass and closes her eyes. She lets her shoulders sag for just a second before she pulls herself up and crosses the room to the open door with her eyes already out in the hall and she has forgotten me, she is gone.

I grip the edge of my sheet with hands that hardly shake at all, really, and close my eyes. She has left the door open but I don't know if it's for me or because of me and I can hear the men in the common room, hear McQueen's voice ringing out, Go fish! and I wonder if they're playing or if he just wants to say it and I want to be playing cards with him, wish I weren't shaking wish I could be out in the common room with the men talking to Morgan about the mayor or scheming with Max about how we're going to sneak cigarettes but instead I'm here, tucked poorly into bed by a nurse with shiny legs and china doll eyes. I want to get up and go back to the common room and do these things but I don't, I just close my eyes and tell myself I'll stay like this for a few minutes, until I'm sure I've stopped shaking.

The phone rings at home. I'm home because I'm don't go to school anymore, never going to school anymore. I answer it and it's my mother and she needs me to bring her the keys to Jerry's truck and an extra apron. I'm too tired, so tired of asking questions, I just hop off my bed and onto my bike with the things she needs. The ride to Sam's diner only takes about ten minutes so I go slow and look up at the changing leaves, some green edged in the first sign of yellow, some a burnished gold, others red like a burn. They flick behind my head so fast as I stare up and pedal, the apron around my neck like a cape, the keys hooked in my pocket.

When I get to Sam's I throw my bike down in the dirt by the side of the diner, don't bother with a lock because no one bothers with a lock in this town, and enter through the kitchen. I want to see Jerry, look him in the face catch his mood before I talk to my mother, but he's not there and she's the first person I see, racing to the window from the front with a new order to shout to the line cook who's taken Jerry's place and

scooping her hands under plates to bring out to happy customers. When she sees me through the window, she drops the plates down on the counter and runs through the swinging door into the kitchen to me, hugs me, saying, Thank you, baby. She sees my expression, adds, You know how he gets. Her hair is rough in front of her face, the red strands turning to ash and as she brushes the strands out of her eyes I see the bruise he's left, on her temple this time. She repeats, You know how he gets, and then takes off her dirty apron, smooths on the new one.

Do you have a minute, Davie? she asks, The new girl, well she's a doll but she broke the register and I can't for the life of me figure out how to open that damn thing back up and neither could Jerry. We've been picking change out of the tip jar all day, thank God for that, she says, leading me through the kitchen door and out past the soda taps, the industrial milkshake maker Jerry installed last year and the rows and rows of dirty cups and dishes stacked in crates under the counter to be brought back to the kitchen to be washed by hand at the end of the shift because the dishwasher quit a week ago and then on to the register at the end of the counter.

I begin to work on the register, punching in codes, and she hangs around, says, We could really use you around here, you know, Davie. I wouldn't ask you to wash the dishes, but we could really use a busser these days. I look up as I work the tray and see her, the new girl, setting my mother's plates down at the front window. The customers are smiling up at her, nodding, and her back is turned to me and her long red hair sweeps down over her slim back, lit up at the edges by the light coming in from the window. Her arms are pale and she turns to me and her eyes are blue. That's Winnie, my mother says,

and the lock on the tray clicks and the register pops open and I can't take my eyes off her
and I say, What time do you want me to start?

I rise from the bed before my eyes have even opened. I want to go back out there, want to walk into the common room and see McQueen and Charlie, to laugh and not have to think. I search for a smile to join them with. I jam my feet into my slippers and splash water on my sagging face, even pull the covers up tight over my mattress before I walk down the hall. Abe is sitting in his chair and he waves to me, says, You made it just in time for lunch, and I peek my head around into the common room, see them all lined up and Susan counting.

Amrita at the back of the line shouts, David's here! and Susan flinches from the volume. When I walk toward her to get in line, last in line behind the veggies, Amrita touches my hand and says, I was just coming to get you, but she hadn't remembered, her body's stiff from Susan counting and coming up short, the discomfort rising like bile in her throat at the thought of another one gone. Morgan is standing in line ahead of the veggies but hanging back, forgotten in the strangeness of the day and the news and the gummy patch that's catching on the hairs on my arm and I want to go to him, to push ahead of the veggies to sit by him at lunch and hear about his night.

We shuffle into the hall and into the small cafeteria on our floor between Ward 12 and Ward 11 and I see the men on Ward 10 shuffling back through their door, their aides hurrying them along as we round the corner their lunch finished as ours begins. The men ahead of me mutter. I smell the salty hot of fried fish.

A veggie ahead of me stops clear in his tracks and the line buckles and sags but Amrita is silent behind me, her head turned up to the fiberboard tiles on the drop ceiling, large and soft enough to hold a pencil if you grabbed one from the doctor and thrust your

arm up high. I glance at her again but she isn't moving, isn't looking so I slide past the veggies rooted in the hall and up behind Morgan.

Before I can even open my mouth Morgan turns, his eyes round orbs in his head, the dark smooth irises obscured by the glare on his lenses. His mouth twists to the side as it opens and he regards me that way before saying, Send in the cart before I sleep it, but he shakes his head, the words aren't right and we both know it. I shake my head back and wait, I know the right ones will come but he just turns around. An aide fixes his plate along the line so he doesn't have to hold it and I'm picking up a plate, piling it high with fish and tomatoes and tartar sauce and walking.

I follow Morgan to the tables because I know he'll find the words and when he sits down, I sit next to him. McQueen is across from him and he's already picked up the fish in his hands, he has grease all over his fingers and he's chewing hard, a huge grin taped to his face. Fried fish is his favorite and his plate is heaping, hasn't even bothered with utensils. He puts the fish down long enough to smile at Morgan and he says, What up, son! and laughs so his whole belly shakes.

When Morgan doesn't answer McQueen lets out a huge, Hey hey hey! His smile reaches across his whole face, pieces of fish caught between his teeth. I nudge Morgan with my elbow and wave my fork at McQueen and Morgan's mouth opens but nothing comes out. McQueen's smile disappears as he shifts his gaze away from Morgan's, his eyes on me.

I cut off a big flake of fish with my fork and bring it up to my mouth, crunching down on the batter and tasting the white fish steam on my tongue. The fork clicks against

my teeth as it exits my mouth and I tap my teeth a little harder, clicking the fork against the edges, feeling the vibrations.

Morgan raises his fork above his hand and holds it there taut, his gaze flipping between tines of fork and back of hand, the skin on his knuckles spread thin. I reach my hand out, hold his wrist with my fingers and force his hand down and away until his fork clatters dull against the plastic tabletop. Morgan's eyes rise to meet mine, cradle mine, and when his mouth opens he says, It was heaven.

I'm half awake and naked on Winnie's bed. She is regarding me from behind her drawing pad, has ordered me to stay still upon waking. I have to pee but her face looks so stern and radiant that I'm doing my best not to shift around on the sheets. The sun is warm against my side and my ass and except for the occasional twinge in my bladder I'm content. I smile and sigh and she tells me to behave, slaps me with the side of a pencil.

Grumpy artist, I tease her, screwing up my nose.

She laughs, doesn't take her eyes off the page and agrees, Oh yes, you have to lie on your side like one of Modigliani's reclining nudes. Life is very rough.

I try to cover a smile while she scowls. They were whores, I grumble into the pillow, You just wanted to get me naked, too.

Her mouth turns up slightly at the corners while her eyes run across my body. You already were naked, idiot, she says, scratching her pencil across the page in short lines and then brushing them out with her eraser, using the edge of her pinkie to hurry the shavings away.

I try to shift my bladder imperceptibly and she hits me with the pencil again, bending forward in her chair, her toes curled on the frame of the bed where she's propped

her feet. She's naked too, and I watch her breasts swing away from her body slightly as she bends forward.

It makes me so sad when you call me an idiot, I say, And anyway, I've been doing all this modeling on a full bladder. I push out my lower lip as far as it can go, and it's as easy as that.

Poor baby! she throws the drawing pad and pencil aside on the bed and crawls to me, kissing my ears and my eyelids and my neck. My poor baby! she says, wrapping her body around mine in her warm bed.

Morgan cups the palm of his other hand over the back of my hand where it's holding his wrist pressed into the plastic tabletop and repeats, It was heaven, says it quiet.

McQueen's smiling across the table and I let go of his wrist and slide my hands off the table between my legs and smile back shaky and ask, to be sure, Where?

Morgan breathes in through his nose fast and rattling and lets it out and says, I touched heaven. I saw the tunnel in the basement and I got in and crawled on my hands and knees. I could see myself reflected back by heaven and I crawled until the tunnel opened into darkness. Then I walked and walked until I could see I faced a wall and in the wall was heaven. I searched for the mouth and I climbed in and touched its teeth and its tongue with both hands. It closed its mouth and started to move so I curled up in heaven's throat and waited.

Sweet Charlie is quiet next to McQueen and he starts to nod, smiling understanding. You saw the carp, Charlie says, quiet as anything and we strain to hear him, I've seen it too, his voice is confident and soft. I try to remember when Charlie got in here but I can't, he's always been here. Spider-walk the straw from the cup to the

mouth, he continues, Cradle the teeth to part them. Climb in and stay still see heaven, his voice low as a premonition.

Morgan smiles back in recognition but his lips are pulled in tight. He tells us, Heaven took me halfway to the Potomac before they caught it and pulled me out.

My plate is cold and I push it from me, press my palms to the creased plastic table and push up, dump my trash and take my plate to the pushcart sliding it on. I picture the straw, picture the pipe, picture the mouth and the teeth and the tongue and the throat of heaven. My hands are still and calm. They could be right.

Henry nods to me as I leave the cart and I stand, first in line, as the men gather behind me. They strain behind me and I am the dam their bodies press against, I keep them in so powerful. Henry makes the signal with his finger and we walk forward through the door when he opens it, shuffling into the hall to the door to Ward 12.

Inside I walk down the hall, to the left through the common room and out onto the porch feeling the sun sticky humid against the glass. I push the windows up on the right side and watch through the bars for the cats. Watch the side of the red brick building until a bulky tabby curls around from the back with two black kittens behind her, their thin fuzz of fur lit up brown in the high sun. A few of the black and white shorthairs and the fat calico are rolling in the patchy grass and a swarm close to twenty pushes warm body against warm body to reach the bowls filled with dry food that lean against the small shed.

I turn my gaze back to the tabby leading her kittens toward the bowl, watch as a muscular grey tomcat hisses in her face, his legs spread wide and the fur on his back standing on end everywhere it isn't matted down. Her voice contorts into a low growl,

her throat pulsing in rhythm with the noise her voice guttural in my ears in my mind. The kittens arch their little bodies and curl their little tails and back up hiding behind the tabby as she swipes once at the tomcat's face. The tomcat erupts in a flurry and the tabby bites him hard on the nose. He goes down, body low, backing up faster than the kittens, shame in his eyes his bloodied nose.

The tomcat backtracks behind the shed and the tabby and her kittens continue forward, the tabby nudging her kittens sidelong into the group surrounding the bowls and in, swatting her tail gently at the other cats to make room for her litter. I watch until the kittens dip their faces into the first bowl, their teacup ears bending and genuflecting toward the bowl's rim.

The cats scatter as low security walks out onto the grounds for their daily exercise. Their round bodies swim in the heat. A balding man with outsized clothes, the hem of his pants trailing on the ground, fishes a cigarette from his pocket and lights it, sucking in his cheeks as he inhales. Smoke trails up to the window I can smell it. I smell his calm face as it catches flame. He combusts, blazing on the lawn. It takes too long for the hose to reach him. The dry grass sparks, the fire tumbling across to the cats' shed, the whole lawn and the people on it and this building and the ward going up in a flash.

I can see the glow of his cigarette when I squint my eyes. An aide rushes forward, arms flapping, pinches the cigarette from his lips and crushes it on the ground. Stamp stamp. The patient's face is red and he faces the aide as the aide continues to yell. I try to pick the crushed cigarette out against the grass and the dirt. My temples push hard against my skull and throb, my eyes throb. The aide leads the patient back toward

the front of the building and they disappear around its edge. I keep searching back and forth along the ground for the spent flame.

I sit back down and close my eyes. The night is coming but the flame won't be the night is coming but the flame won't be the night is coming. The flame won't be. My head is pounding. I sit with my elbows resting on my knees and tuck my head into my hands. The pressure builds and I let it until I can't stop the shaking. Until Abe is standing beside me shouting, Fire! Fire! except it's not shouting I hear but croaking and I know it's me but I can't stop for anything, just, Fire! Fire! with my hands on my head and my temples bruised and pounding and the hot salt on my cheeks and the dry feeling in my throat I'll never get the air into my lungs again.

I am sitting on the floor in my room, a lit match in one hand, the other passing above it. I can feel the heat against my palm. The flame shudders as I pass it over and back, over and back. My hand gets closer to the flame, the tip of the flame licking at my palm. My hand lowers to touch it, to pass through it, back and forth, back and forth, until a circle of dark smoke grows from the center of my palm.

I can hear my mother through the thin wall, the low sobs catching in her throat like wool. I hold my hand steady above the flame. Her sobs sound like choking, she has to know I can hear her. I wonder if she's forgotten me or just wants to forget or if she hates me now too because she says I am a part of him. I hold my hand steady above the flame.

The sobs cut off. When she calls out to me I pull my hand away, hoist my body up and run to the trashcan in the corner of the room, throwing the match in. The flame catches on dirty tissues, used band-aids, an apple core, burns up the stray hairs and the

letter whose address she messed up and I put both hands inside the metal can above the flames as they grow, until they lick at my hands and I sweat inside my superman pajamas. I hold my hands inside the can until I think my cape my drawers my chest will spontaneously combust. The smoke rises and the fuzzy hair on my hands and arms begins to crackle and she flings open the door and screams and screams and picks me up, hoists me into the sink and says Stay, pulling the fire extinguisher from the cabinet below the sink and running from the room. I hear a rushing shh then shh then shhshh and then her feet along the hall. She grabs my arms at the wrists and turns my palms to her face and sucks all of the air into her mouth between her teeth and asks, Why, Davie? running the kitchen towels under cool water and placing them against my palms, wrapping them around my hands until they throb.

She carries me to my bed and draws the shades, putting her head on the pillow beside me and whispering, It's okay, in my ear until tears run hot down her face. She pulls *The Secret Garden* from the shelf and begins to read and I close my eyes finally, the soft murmur of her voice and *Misselthwaite Manor* and the moors everywhere inside my head filling all the spaces until I fall asleep.

McQueen chops my arm with the edge of his hand. I turn into his grinning face and the pressure inside my head shrinks a little. Abe is gone. McQueen sings, What's new pussycat, and smiles wide but he sees something inside my eyes and stops, says, This is not the end, pulling up his sleeve to show his patch. He rips off the patch, throws it on the floor. He reaches out and edges his fingernail under my patch and he rips it off fast and throws that one on the ground too. He mouths the word, Free, opening his eyes as wide as he can. He flaps his arms and sticks out his tongue and rolls his eyes and says,

Free. I can't help smiling as he dances around the porch. When he holds out his hands I take them and he pulls me to my feet and swings me around the room.

We're circling wide and without control. The windows spin and swim but I focus on McQueen's face, his mouth open wide and his tongue peeking out and his eyes like slits and his ears happy as he spins and spins and spins.

Dizzy I see Max at the door. Spin, Max, spin, Max, spin, Max. Soon the bodies press behind him at the door and the windows between the common room and the porch. We aren't stopping and McQueen's feet are moving faster, his circles wider, until my hands start to slip and he's holding my fingers and then my fingertips and then nothing. I feel nothing for a long time and I sail back, sailing backward until I crash against the wall and down to the ground, and McQueen is in the plant by the door. Max picks me up from the floor laughing. I'm panting. The room is spinning. I stagger to the door, then quick to the bathroom and in and shut the door as hard as I can without a lock.

I turn the light switch up and the lights on the ceiling tremble hot and fluorescent. The tile floor is clean in the center and I stand there, don't look at the grimy trails radiating from the center or sweeping in piles behind the toilet or pushing deep against the cabinets. Look at the mirror and watch my face appear there. Lift my trembling fingers up to my eyes and pull the lids down, stick my fingers in and watch as the whites turn pink and raw, watch the irises flush with green.

I wipe my fingers on my shirt, unzip my pants and reach my fingers in through the slit in my boxers, pull out my penis and hold on as the sound of the liquid from my urethra hitting the liquid in the bowl thrums through my brain. I shake the drops off after I stop, fit myself back into my pants and zip.

I step back to the sink and turn on the faucet and run my fingers and hands and wrists under the cold water and watch the water coursing over my hands. The echo of my piss hitting the bowl rings in my ears. I wonder if I could do what Morgan did without turning back, without getting caught, and I am on heaven's tongue, heaven closes her mouth and rises up with me tucked inside until I'm safe, out of Anacostia, never looking back.

The patio door bangs open and I turn to see Winnie, home from work, waiting tables all day at Sam's. Her pink and white striped uniform hugs her body and she twists to ease the door as it closes. Rough day? I ask, catching her knotted hair as she releases it from its tight bun, red sheets spilling between my fingers as she moves past me. Her apron is slung over her arm, stained and yearning for bleach.

You could say that, she sighs over her shoulder, unfurling her apron to reveal a smattering of ketchup stains, an unidentifiable green blotch and the smacked imprint of a raw ribeye. Following my gaze she says, And you can have three guesses who did that.

I don't need three guesses. Jerry, I say. My mother's husband is an asshole. I beg, Just quit, we'll manage. My refrain when she walks in the door but she never does.

She disappears into the laundry room to throw bleach on the stains and when she's done, I follow her up the stairs. The soles of Winnie's white shoes break overhead, gum and grass flashing as she swishes up. Our old farmhouse is drafty but the beamed ceilings wrap me up tight as I pass below.

I sit by the window as Winnie takes off her shoes then pulls slowly at the white stockings, starting up high and then shimmying them down her thighs. She extends a foot behind her to pull the material away from her toes, leaving the stockings bunched on

the floor like a snake's shed skin. Next comes the dress, zipped down from the back but I can't move to help I am caught in her legs, translucent in the warm afternoon light, a transit map of slim veins below the surface.

David, you're staring! Winnie's teeth giggle in the mirror and I'm caught but I don't care, I jump from my perch in the chair right onto her legs, smoother and whiter than the stockings she puts on for six dollars an hour. Don't! she thrashes, Please! You're tickling me! Her protests are weak with my mouth on her thigh and she smells like sage and vanilla, a slight hint of steak juice. I fill my arms with her, bring her to bed, I can't wait. The old bed shakes, clipping the wall with its hard wood frame in rhythm with us.

My cheek is cold against the bathroom floor, my arms tucked tight around my body my hands gripping bones. There is a buzzing noise loud in my ears. I open my eyes. A ball of dark hair is twisted in the corner under the sink. The doorknob rattles and the door opens. My palms press against the tile. Arms lift me, moving me into the common room and past the nurse's station where the new nurse looks at me with dull, wide eyes and then on to the hall and off the ward through the door back into Doctor Lindor's office.

I rub my cheek with my fingertips and feel where the tile pressed into it, feel the edges of the raised skin. Wait and sit until the door bangs open for Doctor Lindor in his white coat blowing wide his eyes sharp as darts into mine. He stands in front of my chair, tilts my face up to his and looks in hard. What's the matter, David? he asks, his voice clear and calm. My throat is dry, it feels thick like wool and I can't swallow but I hold his gaze until he lets go of my chin, sits behind his desk and waves the aide in the corner away.

The doctor sighs. I pick lint from the crease of my pants. The lint is running down my pants and onto the rug and radiating out to form pools in the corners of the room. I rub my feet against the carpet until big balls of lint pour out of the soles of my shoes and run into the rivers of lint cutting grooves like canyons toward the walls. We have to talk, the doctor says, In order for me to know what's wrong. In order for me to proceed, we have to talk, he sighs. In order to talk we have to proceed. More medications proceed from talk. After increased talk proceeds dosage. I grip the edges of the chair as

the doctor slips into a groove under his desk. Medications increase speed. Talk dosage after proceed.

I reach for her but she's gone and I am here, building and waiting. Her side of the bed is cold, fitted sheet still wrinkled from the space of her, the depression that fits her body and not mine, not like the one on my side, big enough for either of us.

When I think about her hair and the space she leaves behind when she's gone my fingers move and twitch. They wrestle with the sheets, pulling them back across my stomach and then my legs. I slide my feet into slippers, my legs into pants and fumble for the matches I hide on the underside of the mattress, my fingers itching to strike. The matches slide into my pocket even though she's not here.

My feet smack the steps as I descend to the first floor, looking for things to burn. Tonight wants a lot of wood. I need to make a fire big enough to force all this out. The kitchen chairs aren't big enough, the couch and bed frame too heavy, the woodpile depleted. I race through the rooms of our house, searching. My eyes jam on the red barn high on the hill, her easel framed in the top left window, the solid beechwood, the high height of it making a fantastic blaze.

I pull my coat on over my flannel and bare chest, walk into the damp garage and search for the hidden carton of lighter fluid, the aluminum sides of the can giving way beneath the pressure of my fingers, Ding Bang, the can sings. The moon behind the barn gives it the dark, slick look of fresh blood pooling on its plank walls. My slippers mush in the dewy grass of spring, the night passing slowly. As I approach, I pull the box of matches from my pocket, striking the first and thrusting it ahead of me as my arm extends, shaking, into the dark hole of the barn. My left foot climbs over the threshold,

careful to look only inside the circle of light spreading on the barn floor. Match light swerves in darkness and I have to be careful, it is a light that floods the urgent spaces but leaves the rest impenetrable.

My vision grazes the floor and up but snags on the black spaces beyond the flame's reach no matter what I tell my eyes. My hand shakes and the flame sputters and drops, righting itself on the ground and rolling. The flame slides along the floor, picking along the smoothed wood, igniting small shavings as it rolls and I want the whole barn up in a blaze, crave it.

The lighter fluid sloshes inside its metal container. It needs to be loose on the ground, I need to give it that life. I flick open the plastic top to expose the small hole from which it all will pour, angle the can down and squeeze it until the liquid squirts out in a steady stream across the floor. My feet carry me across the room and back, back to the door and back out into the night as I flick fire onto the fluid.

I sit back on the hill, watching the bright heat trace the path my feet took moments ago, a shaky line across the low rooms. The flames grow, churning at the floor, breaking from the fluid and curving. The shaking in my hands subsides as the fire eats the walls, munching up toward the ceiling. The pressure in my skull is receding slowly, taking pieces with it as smoke billows from the open door, around windows, through the flat planes of the walls. The warmth of the blaze licks at my face and I smile, closing my eyes to sear the image of the flames against the insides of my eyes.

When I open them, the smoke has already risen through the floor to the second story and out. The flames ascend the stairs. I can feel them licking at the floor, her floor, gathering toward the easel and up, up, tearing at the edges. I watch the windows on the

second story now, waiting for the flames. As the smoke pours out, the flames rush up, I feel calm. My body relaxes and I lean into the grass as it starts to wither with tight heat.

In the second window on the second story, I see a flash of red, the red of hair and not flames. The flash of pale body and not smoke as she thrusts up the window. Her mouth is a jagged O, sharp against the shimmering night, and I wonder if she's really there or if the vision is just dying, a memory of her in the window fading from view. I watch the shape, the beautiful shape of her as she pulls up the window and screams.

It is the sound of her that shakes me, higher than the crackling blaze or the groaning wood. The sound that rattles in my ears and sends needles down my spine. The sound that starts my hands shaking, and my knees, and my guts. I stand up too quick and my head rushes forward, spots dance before my eyes. I call out before they clear, Winnie! I rub my eyes, check the window but she's gone. Winnie?

I stand and watch and start to think it was all an illusion when her head thrusts out at the next window. I call to her, and her voice is so loud above the fire, so clear, begging me to get her out. Jump, Winnie! I plead with her, just jump, but she disappears back into the room and I lose her, I've lost her. I hear it before I see her, before she thrusts her head from the window. Her head not the red of hair but the red of flames, her head a pillar of flames that engulf her. When her body crumples, my knees give out, heaving onto the wet grass on my knees and my palms, my stomach pushing everything, doing it again and again. When the police arrive, they find me like this.

The doctor's hand extends toward mine, the pale blue pill a robin's egg cupped in his palm. The lines in his hand are deep, curving past the pill and around the edges of his hand. I pluck the pill from his fingers, hold it up to the light from the window and look

for signs of life inside, the little bird curled in its shell. My mouth opens and I fit the pill in, close my lips tight and bite down hard, chewing the shell and the bird before I swallow, Doctor Lindor looking on, his flared eyes saying, No.

The cracked shell lodges in the pink spaces of my mouth and my gums, but I swallow the bird whole with its baby skin and trace of feathers. One gulp and it's gone, the gritty shell tight against the walls of my mouth not moving. I'm searching for water at the edges. The doctor fumbles with my fingers, detaching them from his pockets before he fills a cup from the pitcher at his desk, forces the waxy paper between my lips.

Swallow, he instructs me and I do it quickly, the jagged shell particles slicing at my throat as they travel down to my stomach. He stands me up, his hand gripping my arm. I'm stiff, my bones are cracking but I keep moving through the door, down the hall, onto the ward. He whispers to Henry who takes me, propels me to my room. In the common room Morgan's wire rims wink knowingly.

In my room Henry tells me, Don't worry, we'll be back, his voice grates and low and when he shuts the door I hear it click, hear the lock clicking into the door, bolting me into my room. I stand at the sink, eyes in the eyes in the mirror and the room peels back around me, my skin curling back exposing the black char underneath. The walls peel back revealing black, and my bed, and my sink, and the floor. I reach my finger into the ash at my cheek, push it down along the bone, watching flakes fall from my face to the ground.

The door knocks and opens and the new nurse steps in. I'm back, she says, but she wasn't here before. The new nurse stands by the door and doesn't move, watching my face as I rip off a piece and bring the crackling skin to my lips, bite down on the

crunch and chew slow until I swallow. She pulls a cup from the pocket in her pants and opens the cold tap, the water running fast into the cup. She braces the cup against my lips, tilting until I swallow then pulling it away. She stands close now, close enough to touch close enough to smear the skin on her pants. I tear another piece off and slip the hunk into my mouth, chew, chew.

The nurse stares into my face and I stare back, rip, slip, chew, rip, slip, chew. Skin drips from her nose onto her lips. I see it setting in her eyes and I need the flame, need to push it out. My hands start to shake and the dead skin crunches in my mouth. Her face drips onto her neck. The floor is a river and I am the bank of the river and she is the sun setting on my hair, setting my hair on fire. I watch it burn in the mirror, the choppy flames shooting from my head until they're not flames, and her skin isn't oozing, and my skin isn't flaking, and I'm not eating it, there is no cup and she's not the sun, and I'm not the bank of a river and my hair isn't the forest. I flick the trees from my scalp onto the floor, brush them off dusting the floor with the trees. I smile up at her and try to sit still as she walks over to the door slow and pushes it open and says, Maybe a little rest, huh, David? locking the door behind her. I lie down on the hard mattress and stare at the cracks in the wall willing them not to peel back and give me their ashes.

My geography book is open, my face close to the page. I pick up an M&M from the pile on the looped carpet, add it to the line marching across the 49th parallel. I feel my mother's body swing around the open door frame. Take out the trash, she asks like she asks every Thursday night. A small request in a small house, empty the trash from the bathroom into the kitchen trashcan, walk the kitchen trash out to the curb. Her head is angled down to where I sit on the floor and she taps her foot until I make eye contact. I

drink in one more second of the tiny map of Idaho, the state line squiggling north then straight up up up to the 49th parallel, and I wonder how the line got like that, like ants marching a crooked path. When I pull my eyes up from the page she is staring down at me from the door, smiling a little but stern, and she repeats, Time to take out the trash, Davie.

I say, Ok, but run to the window first to check to see if it's safe. The sun has been going down earlier every day and it has to be checked before I can go. Look! only a sliver of heat left. My eyes are glued to it, I can't shut my eyes. It's too late, I see it disappear. Eyes closed I can still feel my eyeballs expanding my brain pushing out from the pressure, like a surgeon opening my forehead up to the sky. Before the pressure starts to spiral I have to find a flame, my fingers tingle with the need to light a match and I shove my hands in my back pockets, searching. One left.

Over the kitchen sink, strike! strike! and release as I gaze into that glow, heat building up tall like a mitre, smoke released skyward in wisps from its pointed tip. Don't stare right into the blue-edged center or you'll feel your soul rattle, eaten up like the painful red burn of spent wood fading black. I concentrate on the bright white edges, where the sun lives, as the flame sways and bites its way up the stick. I am calm.

Matches from Sam's are the worst, they nip at your fingers in seconds, only a few to go so savor it, get ready. Trash, hun, the voice and the hand, unexpected, smack between my shoulder blades standing my hair on end. The match drops, a slurring tttzzz and a breath of smoke as it pops in a bit of water collected in the sink. Have to do it over, and no matches here. The pressure builds desperate in the hollows next to my eyes and I turn, pushing her away, Get it yourself, I say, adding a word I learned at school, Bitch.

It's too hard, my voice and my hand but I can't control it and she steps back, half squaring, a jarring crunch as her knuckles connect with the bridge of my nose. I feel the electricity of her skin and bones before they hit, spotting across my eyes with the charge.

The smell of iron is too close to my brain. The slow trickle builds, coursing a path to my mouth, lapping around the edges and dripping down my chin. I can't see the blood as it leaves my nose, can only feel its steep descent down my face and stare at the dark wet splashes as they smack the tile floor. The pain is manageable but there's an uncomfortable tingling in my nose like an unrealized sneeze that digs at my brain. Some blood escapes into my open mouth with the humid air I suck in as I try to keep the wet sting from reaching my eyes. The lungs mistake it for oxygen.

I stand glued with my bloodied nose, mother crying, apologizing, banging the cabinet doors under my legs as she searches for paper towels. I watch as a red drop blooms on the back of her starched pink and white uniform and if I tell her, she'll have to change before work. Her face surfaces, she's cupping at my face with her hands, kissing my forehead my mother's lips wet on my skin. Her words bore into me, I'm so sorry honey, Mommy didn't mean it, Mommy was mad, but her eyes look fractured.

Someone is knocking and I'm on the ceiling but I can't move to blink. The light through the window is getting softer, dimmer. I call out but I can't hear myself. The lock clicks, the door opens, Abe is standing above me shaking me my skull rattles the bed moves. He stands me upright, my eyes and my body and his face. His lips pull back and he says, You look much better now. My tongue is so thick it's impossible. I push it out and wag it.

My feet are cogs and he pushes me down the hall on them, they catch in every dip, gathering the mucous caught in the grooves between the tiles, in it and then out but I'm moving forward and the new nurse has her best face on as she stands me in line for dinner, bends down to lock me in so I don't dip on the slick floor of the common room.

I reach down to pat her hair where it lies flat in braids against her head, pat until it glows red, smoldering. I pull my hand away and watch as flames lick her scalp before she smooths them with her dark hand and they disappear. I need the flame, need it fast but it's nowhere. My thumb slides against forefinger, the quick thrust of a lighter's metal wheel. The friction pushes into my fingers and tingles, travels up until my whole body is filled with lightning bugs zipping fast. They glow inside against the edges of my skin.

The nurse unlocks me and I move forward, melting into the tiles as the other men shuffle through the open door and into the narrow hall and right, into the elevator room where the lonely button glows and then goes out and we're in. In the elevator my rubber legs pool on the ground. The elevator stops on B for basement and I have to wade through the melt to get out, leaving them behind as I push out into the hall.

My muscles ache from the strain of following the men from the hall into the cafeteria. I follow men, men follow me, the faces swim. The cafeteria swims in front of me. I am underwater, stiff legs walking along the seabed. The crustaceans are out there, somewhere, and I try to focus my eyes, push my hair back, swim forward, stay with the group, my ward, we are maximum the earth and therefore a danger to security.

The trays approach on their pedestals silver and smelling. I breathe in heavy and smell chicken, feel something cold bump into my hands and grip the plate with both hands, try to hold it out level, wait for the thump of food and measure the weight, continue down the line. Wilted cabbage, a voice yells in my ear, What else is new? The voice is young and it punches my shoulder, the voice or a fist and I name it Max.

Chicken skin, I exhale and smoke trails from my mouth. My voice is flat, Max's face swims into view. Rubber shoes! I say, pointing at my feet.

He's nodding, We should, he says, Fucking lousy dump. He speaks over the top of my head, William! Did you hear what David said?

A voice booms like trees behind me, right into me, That's my man! and my arms are shaking, my face hurts, the men slide out of focus. It is getting dark. My plate slips a little against something creased and the wire glasses are against my face, pushing my chicken back onto my plate. I'm in the eyes and Morgan's arm spins me around, guiding me, Take a step! and then, Thatta boy, and I'm moving and the plate is steady. My feet move along until my shins bump the bench and over and I'm seated.

Morgan sits beside me and he's spreading on my lap and we're chewing. The men pile on either side of us and across, plates heaped and steaming. Voices loud I can't follow. My knees shake and my hands and the fork and I can't chew, can't get the meat down. The smell is too much. Morgan says, Concentrate on the tongue, and when I do, everything slows. My shaking hand quiets enough for me to grasp the fork, to take a bite, hear the conversation in slips.

That's not the salt!

I told her that would happen if she did that.

No, no, no, Oprah was not a man.

How did you stomach it?

The men slide back into focus as they talk and I weave them whole, patch up the missing parts, their bodies dark and moveable. I breathe deep, concentrating on lips and opening mouths, concentrating on my own tongue moving around as I chew. The pressure in my head subsides a little and I feel a finger against my shoulder and turn, and there's McQueen all solid, smiling with every tooth.

How's that arm, David? he asks and he's taking off my patch and we're dancing.

I poke my arm and feel rubber and say, That arm feels okay, but I can't recognize my own voice, just hear the other men carrying on about potatoes and shower privileges, but McQueen's nodding and I know, I repeat, That arm's alright. I try to stretch my lips up, keep the swimming back, focus on my tongue and McQueen's and keep thinking about the words.

Then McQueen says, I knew we could do it without those stinking patches! but his tongue starts to bulge and his lips and his face puff wide and red and I'm losing my grasp on it.

I concentrate hard and turn my head far enough to see Morgan. His face is charred black and cracking, crumbling fast and I'm scooping up the pieces, fitting them back to his face, my hands cupping into the cavities where his cheeks had been and he's trying to talk but he's just breaking. His hands come up pushing against my wrists and my chest but his face is falling and I have to move my hands faster to scoop up the

pieces, to fit them back in. The humming of the others buzzes loud in my ears. My hands are black from the ashes.

My hands are black from the ashes and I need them clean, need my hands to be clean. I wipe them on my pants, smearing them black in long streaks, then turn my palms over to check but they're still covered, do it again and check and they're still covered, wipe, check, wipe, check, the ashes multiply. My head is pounding, I need the flames, need to see them and feel them, need to soak my hands in them.

I'm still rubbing my hands hard and I watch as Morgan takes my wrists in his hands, brings his charred lips closer to my face and says, Breathe, but it isn't helping, I can't move my arms I need the light, need to see it need to feel it. His hands aren't helping. When I move my wrists, he closes them tighter like a straightjacket.

I'm at my mother's home, sitting in a chair on the new porch Jerry built looking out over the rolls of farmland extending fat into the distance. I can hear her voice inside and Winnie's voice, and I can hear Jerry tapping his feet on the linoleum in the kitchen behind me, tapping his fingers, his beer bottle, on the table. I squeeze my eyes tight, stretching the moment out as the pressure builds in my head, my fingers twitching. The insides of my eyelids spike orange, red veins, just a few minutes left. The matchbook lies still in my lap, no more than a scrap of cardboard, a slice of flint, a single staple breaking the plain face. Not like the old ones from Sam's diner printed up in red the text a white lasso scrawl, back when restaurants gave them out like mints. Just a plain grey face staring back at me.

I pick it off my lap, thumbing the soft fur of the cardboard, short flecks of pulp and wear. Crack the cover, flip it back, feel the perfect rows of stiff paper and

phosphorous. My eyes open and I'm counting slowly down from ten as I watch the sun crawl to touch the land and hunch below it. A sliver of red and I'm breaking off a match, sliding it along the striking surface in a quick move that traps the match inside and I can feel it catch. The sliver hovers on the horizon and the match ignites, ghosting blue then a bright bold yellow, bolder than the sun at noon.

The pressure recedes, a calming wave breaking over and over again in my mind. It is easy when there is no panic, when I'm ready, no rush and fumble, the tension sent away in rolls. More intense when there is fumbling, panic, more power in those moments a build a build a build and then release but not worth it, it shouldn't be worth it.

Eyes steady on the flame, the small heat licking at my nose as I hold it in close to my face, the sky still a murky phase of blue, the bright face gone for the day. A match in my fingers and I'm prepared for that cloak of night. The wind catches in my hair and I let my head fall back, savor it. Smell the crush of wheat and sage and I'm caught up in the notes, my eyes closed again but not afraid this time.

Davie, I hear her yell, the screen door sharp against its frame like the crack of an axe, jolts down your spine just the same. Where's my boy? I try to keep the rhythm, the deep breaths, but they can't compete, I start to miss him. I open my eyes. The stick is charred, the light is out, a faint trickle threading skyward from the tip.

We're up and moving, pushing away from the bench following the crustaceans toward the doors. We pass the trays, scraped clean of food. The women are closing the lids, turning off the burners for the night and I crouch and watch a flame slide sick and low, its orange tips vanishing into blue. Morgan's fingers are still tight on my wrists, he

keeps me moving. When we get upstairs the sun will be high in the sky and not low, not setting behind the trees like a bird with its wings clipped.

As we walk, Max slides in closer to a crustacean covered in maroon scrubs and grey sweatpants. The pants are stained with grass juice and Max bends down, gets close to licking them before an older crustacean bumps him out of the way. McQueen flaps his hands in worry, as if to distract Walter and the other aides from a possible commotion, but Max leaves the women alone for tonight.

We make it to the stairs before the lights go out in the cafeteria. The lights in the hallway flicker as we walk. I don't want to look back, resist looking into the dark room and concentrate on the lights ahead, the biggest one ahead on the porch when we get back to the ward, the summer sun that will still be high enough in the sky if we keep moving. Walter counts us up and this time he doesn't come up short. The elevator is slow but when it arrives we pack on, William singing hymns and Amrita joining in and Walter covering his ears.

Once we're back on the ward and Walter has clicked the lock behind us Morgan lets go of my wrists. I fumble with my back pocket, push my hand in and run my index finger along the line where the pack used to sit but it's gone. Walk to the porch and rest my palms on the sill, watch the sun slip a few degrees in the sky until the crown of trees overtakes it, the sky left blank. I check the clocks and wait for its return. I strain for another glimpse of the glow, train my eye between the trees to where it should appear, where it should be now in the sky but nothing comes.

I look for Abe, but he's not even on the porch, no need to be here waiting for our signal with his lighter. Two crows land on the grass below and stand with their mouths

open. One lifts its leg and scratches its head like a dog. I pull over a chair, scraping it across the floor while Charlie watches from inside the common room. Settle in to wait.

Orange threads line the sky behind the trees but no burst of light, nothing sparks. I stare at the familiar place in the sky but nothing pushes back at me. My hands shake, wetting my pants in spots of perspiration. Geese pass in their pattern. There is a rumble beneath my feet, a break, another rumble, clouds rushing in. I run my thumb between my fore and middle fingers, rubbing where the cigarette was, where it would have been.

Max pushes the door open from the common room and stands beside me, picks at the edge of his patch, still attached taut to skin. He sees me eyeing his fingers, the mangled edge and he says, These don't kick in too quick, hey. I've been craving one all day. When I look back at the sky, it is a deeper, rain-heavy shade of blue.

I sit down on the hard earth, grass frosty on my pants, near the far edge of the property past our house, past the crest of the hill where the barn sits, a black silhouette against deep blue sky. Dawn is breaking in a few meager hours but I've woken with the dark closing in on me and I have to fix it, fast. The small heap in front of me, a gathering of cotton shirts, the bags of horse feed, the kitchen chair, bales of hay from the barn, all covered in gasoline, begging for the flame. The long kitchen match in my hands so sturdy, so easy to take it almost feels honest. I strike the match against the gummy edge of one trainer and watch the spark and flush so bright in the dark, its beauty almost worth the pain spiking in my head. I'm yearning for the point of inception, the moment when these ordinary objects give birth to flame. I light the match and throw it in, the light is fast and hard and licks up the fabric, the wood, the food, in what feels like one breath. I

sit before the blaze and stare into its center where it warms me up from inside my belly. The tension leaves my head in waves and I'll sit here until it's all gone.

David! I hear Winnie calling from the house, the edge of the barn. Her face appears on the other side of the blaze, long and drawn. She holds her hands to her eyes as if to push the tears back in, Is this necessary, David? I have to know.

I don't know what to say to steady her, it's the first time she's seen me this bad. Usually it doesn't happen when I'm with her, I feel calmer, but tonight it hasn't been enough to see her sleeping next to me, not enough to bury my face in her red hair and think of dawn, I can't keep it at bay.

What can I say? I'm sorry. It is.

The window frame rumbles beneath my palms. The sky is deep and black, the yard and the trees swallowed up where the lights on the side of the building don't hit. The moan starts low, but it feels good and I keep going, louder. My arms are shaking, and my legs, and I can't hold onto it. Max is standing beside me, trying to pat my arm but the side of his face is badly burned.

I feel arms pressing in around my body but the bodies are all burned and I can't hold them, can't hold onto their faces or see them and I'm screaming now, screaming into Max's scorched face as the arms pull at me, until the arms stand me up and move me backward through the doors and out into the common room, all the eyes swimming in front of me and the burned bodies carrying me into the hall, down the hall and toward the door to the ward. I'm kicking my legs but they're crumbling, their cracked bodies sweep me up and they are carrying me, we travel together into the elevator room.

A few bodies tug me toward the stairs but the rest keep me back, shouting at those who would pull me, pushing the down button, the only button. The elevator car arrives, bell dings, doors jag open and I'm pushed in, bodies pressed against the walls. The dark fumes of the charred bodies are suffocating me. We jolt into the descent, the box humming on its wires. The faces pressed to mine are unrecognizable. When I try to yank my arms away from theirs they hold tighter. Then slowing down, then doors opening, then spilling out onto sick bay, white beds tight in their steel frames lined up in rows against the white walls, stark against the black caverns of the windows. The bodies carry me onto a bed and cover me all over with their arms covered in soot, blackening the bed with their dust until it is stained and limp, until I am stained and limp.

My hands grip the podium, words slipping from my mouth like snakes and curling around the faces in the seats in front of me. I don't think about the words, automatic as I click through the slides on the projector. Gaudi's churches drip down the white stretch of screen, curving and tripping across the eyes. My lips curl back around my teeth and I click, continuing on through the slides to his unfinished cathedral, getting in closer, building up speed as the images drip faster, harder to keep up.

I feel the thud before I hear it, hear the crack of her head against the desk, Molly's body slumped on the floor the chairs scraping back to crowd before my voice even stops. Her slender body convulses under the metal legs and before I can stop, I'm fitting my arms under her body, scooping her toward me and lifting, her body shaking as the aisle clears in front of me. Her body jumps and heaves as I walk under the heavy columns and along the paved path and across the fresh cut grass. I pull open my car door, lay her

down gently in the back seat. In the driver's seat my foot pushes the gas pedal down, my fingers gripping the wheel my knuckles bone stretched under skin.

I drive out of the campus and turn left, right, right a few miles going nowhere before I remember the steps and pull over. I open the back door and watch her, pull a blanket from the trunk and cover her, give her space until the seizing has stopped. The backseat is too cramped but I don't want to move her again. The red sky drips like Gaudí's churches and I lean against the car, watch the planes cross above me. Her small nails dig into my leg.

I ask her the necessary questions, Who are you? Who am I? How do you feel? Do you know what happened? Do you know where you are? impossible questions for anyone. After, her arms wrap around my neck and I lift her onto the hood of the car, climb on with her and watch the sun fall, her short skirt climbing up tan thighs my hand climbing up tan thighs my hand flicking open the silver lighter. A cigarette dangling from my lips as I watch the flame. She watches me inhale the smoke spilling over her face like oil. I breathe the smoke into her lungs and kiss her lips, her wilted brown hair in my hands.

I am propped in a bed, my legs covered in white blankets. There are beds on either side of me, a whole row of beds with no one in them. Someone under the bed is holding my wrists. If I move my hands, the person under the bed grips me tighter. A nurse nudges a cup to my lips and asks me to drink. I sip until all the liquid is gone, until the nurse is gone. After she leaves, the room grows darker. The crickets rub their legs together and patches of moonlight appear on the beds and the floor. I stare at the wall until it opens into shadows of the past. Their bodies shift in the air, so thin against the

walls washed in blue. Most swim away, but Winnie's gets closer, her face so young, her hair so red. She opens her mouth and I dive in.