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Immersion

by

Angela Hamilton

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Creative Writing

University of Memphis

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For John. Next time I'll write you a love story. I just wasn't ready yet.

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“I hate love, she thought, as if this were the answer, I hate loving and being loved, I hate it. And her disturbed and seething mind received the shock of comfort from this sudden collapse of an old painful structure of distorted images and misconceptions.”

-Katherine Anne Porter

The Third Principle

The women at Renaissance did not talk about getting their periods, but I knew that all of my roommates were menstruating. Jane went to the bathroom with something rolled up in the sleeve of her tunic right after we got back from our group encounter sessions; Margot followed behind her, hiding her tampon in a fist behind her back. My mother and my sister Ellen complained every month about cramps and tiredness, and my mother sometimes told me that she could smell me, the blood and the lining through my underwear and clothes, so I would not have been uncomfortable talking about it with them. I talked about my period in middle school bathrooms with girls I barely knew and leaning on the counter with Diane at the diner where I worked before I came to the center. We talked about days and flow and discomfort. Diane was grateful that she was not pregnant, I always knew that I was not. I had never been ashamed of my period before, but I put a maxi pad in my pants pocket while the other three were reading from Ohan's book, something we were encouraged to do nightly. But here we were told that gender did not matter. Both men and women could achieve momentum, and gender distinction was strongly discouraged. We were all referred to as Renners.

In case one of the other women saw, I waited five minutes before I got up to go to the bathroom. Margot looked up from their book, printed on copy paper and held together with a plastic spine, and smiled. Most days she shared her meals with me. We all ate together in the dining hall, and she usually claimed she was not hungry. Oppositely, Jane did not register my movement. It was not, Margot told me, that she disliked me, but that she and their former roommate, Sheri, had been close. They came to live at the center together from a nameless place in Illinois. I came from a nameless place, too, and I wished that they would let me tell them that.

Jane leveled up quickly. She was a three and had not even been in sessions for a year. Margot and Daley had both newly become twos and I was a one. I wanted to ask Jane about how I should study and what I should say in group or in my elder interview on Thursdays because I had been there for three months, and no one had noticed me.

The core principle of Renascence is written on page one of Ohan's book: *We are not bodies. We are momentum wrapped in skin, and therefore that skin does not matter. In order to transform we must be in a state of continuous forward motion. The past does not define us, neither do societal tropes, what our parents taught us, or anything outside these teachings.* He met with everyone on Wednesday nights in the auditorium. We sat on wooden bleachers and Ohan talked about the importance of a genderless existence. Renners were not men or women, but energy. At one meeting he called Amy onto the small platform in the front that served as a stage and yelled at her for keeping a tube of lipstick in her desk drawer. He pulled the lipstick out of his pocket and threw it squarely in Amy's face. She cried while we loudly repeated the chant five times and then Ohan hugged her because at Renascence we believe in forgiveness for ourselves and others. That night, when I could hear Jane and Margot and Daley sleeping, I moved the picture of Ellen and I in Easter dresses from my desk to under my mattress, though I'm sure they check there, too.

I was halfway down the hall, the maxi pad scrunching in my jeans pocket, when I heard someone say, "Will you wait for me?" Daley ran to catch up with me, her yellow tunic ballooned behind her with the excited force of their movement. She was eighteen, one year younger than me, and still moved with the childlike excitement I lost after the fourth night in a row eating bagged popcorn for dinner because I did not know how to turn on the stove. Daley slept on the bunk underneath me and giggled a lot, which made me like her even though I did not know her

that well. "I have to go to the bathroom, too." I opened the swinging door and she pushed in past me.

The bathroom had white tile floors and a line of stalls. There was a second section where the showers were. It reminded me of a pool locker room. There was a community pool by our apartment. The summer when I was eight, my mother was obsessed with getting a tan. She had been watching *Baywatch* in syndication and thought that if her skin was a little darker, she could pass for Pamela Anderson. Even though my mother was pretty, I thought the only resemblance she had to her was the blonde hair. She found a red bathing suit at Walmart, but she could not afford a boob job. Submerging myself in the deep end, smelling constantly like chlorine, eating 86 cent ice cream bars for lunch every day, that was my favorite summer. The bathroom at the center smelled like lemon-scented soap scum remover and constantly had plastic sandal prints in ant trails across the floors.

It was the only place where our womaness was acknowledged because Ohan wanted to avoid a lawsuit. I did not think it mattered much, since this was the first time that I had actually been in the bathroom with another person. Normally, we waited, sometimes in line, for the others to finish. I did not understand this because the stalls and the shower curtains covered everything up, but Jane once said that seeing another person naked, observing them at their most personal, could derail our momentum. Maybe that was something the level twos learned.

Maybe I was too new to the center, but I did not mind that Daley was in the bathroom with me. I went into a stall, while she went into another three stalls away. I heard her unzip her pants and pee. She heard me peel back my blood-soaked maxi pad and replace it with the fresh one from my pocket. In public bathrooms I had always avoided being heard, peed or changed my pad when one of the air dryers were going, but there, I listened for what Daley was doing and I

wanted her to hear me. The toilet flushed and I knew that she was finished, but she did not leave the stall. I was about to flush and go and wash my hands when I heard, “I think I’m pregnant.”

The second principle embraced at Renascence was celibacy. We are discouraged from having sex with each other because during sexual acts partners can accidentally take each other’s momentum. We refrain from sex to protect our forward propulsion. Margot once told me that she struggles with this, she finds both Sam and Daniel from our encounter sessions attractive and sometimes imagine fucking them. It is not really a problem for me. We are also not supposed to masturbate, which I find harder, sometimes I do it in the shower, but I think that others do too.

“How do you know?”

“I’m supposed to have my period right now, just like all of you, but I don’t.”

Diane thought she was pregnant a few months before I stopped working at the diner. She could not stand her boyfriend, Carl, and was saving up the money to leave him. She told me that she did not want to be attached to him forever and started researching abortion clinics on her phone, I told her that she probably was not pregnant. I did not know if that was true or not, but I knew that was what she wanted to hear.

“That doesn’t mean that you’re pregnant. You’re probably not.”

I opened up the door to my stall and hearing mine, she did the same. We both walked over to the sinks and started washing our hands. We took soap out of the same dispenser. It was broken and some of the pink liquid dripped onto the floor. With the water running she said, “If I am, they’ll make me leave, but I don’t want to.”

“Do you have anywhere else to go?”

“No. I’m kind of scared.”

I had never thought that I was pregnant before and I didn't know what else to say. Ellen was ten years older than me. Before she left home, whenever I was upset she would tell me to picture the clouds, wispy and floating even though they were full. She would take me outside on blue sky days so we could watch the wind move them by. Even though I didn't know how, I tried to move Daley's fear. "You don't have anything to be scared of. You'll get your period if you just focus your momentum forward." At Renascence, that was the most comforting thing I could say.

*

Daley had not been back to the room for three days before I worked up the courage to ask where she was. Jane and Margot and I did not see each other during the day because each level had a different duty. Every morning, Jane left in the twelve-passenger van with the other level threes for local recruitment. They all wore clean, red tunics and carried satchels with reading materials inside. Jane braided her hair tightly to look more androgynist. She had long eye lashes and full lips and often complained about looking too feminine. Whenever Margot mentioned that she should cut their hair off, she never answered. Margot worked in the garden with the other twos, protecting themselves with sun hats and SPF 45. I cleaned the bathrooms.

It was Wednesday and we were waiting in our room between dinner and Ohan's lecture. The word is more potent after we have digested. "Daley is in the infirmary," Margot said.

"She fell down the stairs and sprained her wrist," Jane followed up.

"Can I go and see her?"

"Why? Daley will be fine. She 'll be back in the room in a couple of days."

"I just thought it would be nice."

The music started to play over the loudspeakers. It was strophic. The same notes on the piano and bursts on the xylophone. It was supposed to be calming. In the moment, gathering up my copy of Ohan's book, the music seemed to go through my eyes, nostrils, and mouth, directly into my brain, and I felt better, like maybe Jane was right, I was overreacting about Daley.

Renascencians tumbled out of their rooms in fours. The center was shaped liked the top of a beehive, a set of circular rings laid inside each other, connected by small hallways that we had to wind through as we walked towards the middle. In the third ring, the purple, blue, and green tunics of the level fours, five, and sixes began to intermingle with our yellow, orange, and red. Seeing the color palate expand always gave me a surge of energy. In that moment, being so close to other people, I felt my full momentum and no longer had to work to keep up with Margot's long legs. The auditorium was in the smallest ring, along with Ohan's apartment. I had never seen it, but there were rumors that he had a skylight and a coy pond next to his bed. When he yelled at Amy, I imagined him accidentally stepping in it, scaring the fish with his loafers. It made me feel more relaxed. I did not like to watch other people get hurt.

Winding through the rings at a natural pace, we bottlenecked at the doors of the auditorium. Jane pushed past the large group of blue and purple tunics in front of and I lost her. I grabbed onto Margot's wrist and let her guide me into the large, open room because we always sat next to each other. Besides the wooden bleachers there was a wooden stage at the front. It stood about three feet off the ground and was handcrafted. A level five once told me that Ohan had built it himself, but he did not seem very good with their hands. The elders were good at talking and making us feel safe. There was never any dirt on the off-white carpet in the auditorium, as if someone came in after every lecture and relayed it. The carpet in the apartment I grew up in had holes in it where the fibers had been worn away, and in my bedroom there was a

large brown stain in the corner that I told myself was spaghetti sauce, but I think that someone liked to pee there. I had the urge to take off my shoes and walk on it with my bare feet, but Margot pulled me towards the empty front row of the bleachers on the far left-hand side, laughing as we pushed past the large group.

Level sevens had mastered all the principles of Renascence. There were ten of them. They wore gold tunics and sat in folding chairs at the back of the stage during the lecture. We called them the elders, anything we had to tell Ohan, we said to them, maybe they passed it on and maybe they did not, but they always told us that we would be heard. Before the Wednesday meeting started, they all stood at the front and greeted us. Even though I was not supposed to, during my first lecture I noticed that eight of them were men, but I like to think that I am past seeing that now. The one with the gray moustache was leaned over the stage listening to Jane. When she stopped, the elder nodded and walked into the wings. Jane went to the middle bleacher and sat with the level threes she canvased with that week.

There was a large gray clock on the wall behind the stage. In its center were two gold footprints, the Renascence logo, and a reminder of the importance of forward movement. As the hands clicked to eight o'clock, members finished their stories and stopped shifting their bodies back and forth until the only noise left was the natural resonation of people's last words passing through the air and echoing off the large dome top of the auditorium. The music had stopped and everyone was inside. The elders sat. The one with the moustache's face had relaxed and I think he was looking directly at me. We all waited, knowing what would happen next.

Ohan was not a mystic. The members sitting on the bleachers on the righthand side saw him first and started cheering. I screeched before I even saw him. The whole room was audible, we had all been turned up. As always, he was shoeless. He wore a white button-down and black

jean, the uniform of a man once married to a 90's supermodel and I pictured Pam Anderson next to him in a red bathing suit. My whole body surged when I saw him, I figured it was my momentum. I thought that maybe I was finally ready to move on to level two and turned to admire the sleeve of Margot's orange tunic.

Wednesdays began with chanting and meditation. Without speaking, Ohan motioned us down to the floor. The assigned level fives pushed the bleachers back into the corners so they would be out of our way. We stood by color in rows. It reminded me of the gym class scene from the 1970's sex ed video we watched in eighth grade health class with Mrs. McMann. I heard once that she got a stipend for teaching us about vaginal penetration, the ovulation cycle, and gonorrhea, which made sense to me because she always seemed uncomfortable, especially when we had to look at pictures. She had two kids in college and needed the money.

Ohan put his hand on the shoulder of one of the elders who breathed in deeply before intoning the mantra, "Gah, gah, gah," in forceful, breathy spurts that slowly cleared out his lungs. The first row joined in the elder's breath and expulsion, then the second and the third, until the entire room was spitting out *gah*. When I was taught how to chant in my encounter sessions, my elder, Maurice, told me that it served two purposes, to expel my negative feelings, leaving me clear for my purpose, and to rev up my momentum so that I could move forward. The auditorium has a golden dome so the *gahs* of every member would catch in it, clearing the obstacles to meditation.

Chanting lasted anywhere from fifteen to twenty minutes depending on how much negativity we had inside us. Ohan could see the *gahs*. These terrible thoughts and feelings materialized in front of him. He told us during a lecture that they were black and pointy, like sea urchins. Then he brought up a group of level fours and had them chant directly at him for ten

minutes. While they did, he looked pained as if they were hurting him with their words, and when he could no longer stand it, he yelled for them to stop. After he recovered, Ohan took off his shirt. His chest was covered in small red circles, as if he had been poked over and over again with small spikes.

Usually, chanting was difficult for me. I felt the negative things, but I could not spit them out. *Gah* was not a strong enough word for me. Maurice told me that at some point, it would just be natural, I would be able to expel anything that I wanted to if I practiced. Sometimes I worked on it in the shower, but I could never move past level one. In the auditorium, I made my voice so loud that I could not hear the intonations of the red tunics behind me or off to the sides. I thought that if Ohan could hear me, I could deceive him into believing that I had no more negativity inside of me. I screamed, but no one looked at me.

“Now.” When we chant, we are supposed to be completely inside our own bodies, but really we were all waiting for Ohan. Without thought, I began to run. We all did. Straight lines, circles, hexagonal shapes, zig zags, we all moved around the room, our voices silenced, but our feet clomping on the floor, resonate into the dome, the drag of our toes on the carpet. The colored tunics intermix at varying speeds, someone in a purple one ran into me, shoulder to shoulder, but I did not register their face, this happens every time. I still had a bruise from where someone poked me in the ribs with their elbow two weeks ago. Sometimes we compare our injuries in the dining hall, the proof that we have mastered Ohan’s mobile meditation practice, we were so connected with our own momentum that we did not register being hurt.

I do not know how long the mediation lasts. While I am in it, I am breathless and I want to stop, but when it is finished, I want to keep running. Maurice says that I should focus on running towards something, that for level sixes and level sevens the auditorium dissolves and is

replaced with their future, that while they are meditating they do not register the other Renners in the room. I just made sure to avoid the bleachers.

“Enough.” Again, Ohan’s voice rebounded against the chaos and as it registered, members dropped to the floor, lying flat on their backs or on their sides, resting their heads on their outstretched arms, heaving, trying to suck in as much air as possible before other people breathed it in. Some people fell on top of each other. One of the green tunics had collapsed on my legs, but I barely registered that they were there. I was thinking about a time with Ellen when we competed to see who could hold their breath underwater the longest, and how she let me win even though her lungs were bigger. I knew that this was wrong because my mind was supposed to be blank, but even then, I was aware of the dark space between my eyes, which was still something.

“Great work,” Ohan has a small microphone hooked onto his ear, “Move back to your seats.”

It took effort, but we all started to get up. I waited for the green tunic to roll off of me before I pushed myself up to a seated position. My legs felt numb, so I had to tell my brain to move them. There is a place between energized and exhausted, where you feel fulfilled and tired at the exact same time, like they are layered over top of each other. This is how I felt as I stood, and I did not think that I could make it back to my spot on the bleachers, already pulled back into place, but then Margot grabbed my hand and led me back to the same bench we had sat on before.

“How many of you feel like you’re a real representation of Renascence...Like you’re always moving forward...Like you are in your future.” Members clapped and hollered. A few of the blue tunics were met with laughter as they lightheartedly stood up and raised their hands.

“Now, how many of you feel like impostors? You’re imitating those around you, waiting to figure out your own motion. Scared you’ll never get there...Scared to be found out.” At first, no one moved, unclear of the purpose of the exercise. I thought about Amy’s mauve colored lips. “Level sixes? Have any of you ever felt like fakes, even after all your work, all your motion? I feel certain that you have.” With hesitation, several green tunics raised their hands. Then the people of the bleachers around them followed until there were extended arms peppered throughout the auditorium. I wanted to hold up my hand, too, but Jane looking at me from the next set of bleachers made me too nervous. “We all struggle. It’s okay, you wouldn’t have joined us if you didn’t. Today, I want to call someone up who I’ve heard has been having a rough time adjusting. She’s been trying so hard, but it’s just not happening. And you know what? I think that everyone here at the center knows what that feels like.” Audible agreement waved across the crowd, but I also noticed dread in the lower levels. We were often the ones called up on stage during Ohan’s lectures. The fours, fives, and sixes mentioned to us that without his individualized attention they would not have been able to futurize. They all said that they were grateful for his guidance. Diane once told me that gratitude comes after getting yourself out of a bad situation. She was grateful not to be pregnant with Carl’s baby. “Sara,” Ohan said, “can you come up to the stage. We should talk.”

I was thinking about sea urchins when Margot pushed on my arm. To encourage a selected person, Renascencians touch them on the shoulder. As I got up, I felt the hands of the people in the row behind me. A level six came over to walk me up, there was a small gray stain on his green tunic, something left over from dinner. At the center we were encouraged to be clean, pick pieces of lint up from the floor, shower regularly, brush our hair. For a moment I thought that if I called him out, he could take my place in front of everyone, but in our last group

encounter, Maurice had told me to stop focusing so much on others. He placed his hand on my shoulder and guided me to the front of the auditorium.

When we got to the stairs, the green tunic peeled away from me. Maurice was at the top, holding out his hand, which I grabbed as I ascended the three small steps. He embraced me when I got up on the stage, but I knew it was for show because he had never touched me before. Uneasy, I did not extend my arms around him, but stayed straight with my hands at my sides. At the last second, I leaned my chin towards his shoulder because I thought I should reciprocate. Maurice walked me to the middle of the stage, directly facing Ohan.

I felt heat from his body and I thought that he would give me a suntan. We had never been this close before. His skin reminded me of my mother's, smooth because of an exacting combination of creams and serums. She used sample sizes, but I figured that he had full bottles in his medicine cabinet. He must have sensed that I wanted to touch him because he lifted my hand and put it on his cheek. We both smiled and for a moment I forgot where I was. Ohan did not seem like he should be attractive. He was an inch or so shorter than me, and bony, but I could see the ridge of his bicep as he grabbed my arm and what Margot said about Sam and Daniel suddenly made sense.

“Sara,” Ohan released me and stepped back. I knew that he was going to ask me a question I did not like, and I was not sure how I would answer. “Why are you here? Why are you at the center?”

“Jane and Todd came into the diner where I worked. They told me about Renascence and about finding my future and asked me if I wanted to come live here.”

“And you did?”

“Yes.”

“But there must be more to it than that.” He ramped up, but I still did not understand where he was going. “Did you tell anyone you were coming?”

“Diane, the other waitress I worked with, and my boss when I quit.”

“No one else?”

“No.”

Ohan turned away from me and faced the bleachers. “I learned about Sara today. And what I learned was that no one has cared about her for a very long time.” He looked back at me, “Isn’t that right?” This was my lipstick moment, and I did not know how to answer. “Sara has been abandoned, used, stolen from, lied to, but she still cannot move forward. She holds on to all of the bad things that happened. All of the people who hurt her.” He was frenzied and loud, so that the microphone reverberated with his voice. No one else was talking. No one else was moving. I stood still. They had asked me questions about my mother when I first came to the center, and I told them that she had moved to California to work as a lifeguard. Ohan walked back to the middle of the stage and stood in front of me. “I saw you today, Renner. I watched you. You have no momentum.”

I braced myself. This was where he would get angry. Where he would shake or hit me. I had seen him do it to other members. They always seemed grateful when it was over. Maybe I would, too.

Ohan grabbed me by the shoulders and spun me a quarter turn so that I was facing everyone. The bleachers, filled in with rainbow-colored tunics reminded me of the beta fish my mother brought home for Ellen and I. Red and blue, they lived in one aquarium with a plastic barrier down the center so they would not kill each other. Ohan was behind me, still holding on, he spoke into my ear, but everyone could hear him, “You need to move on.” He said quietly at

first, but as he repeated it, “You need to move on. You need to move on,” his voice got louder. I don’t know how many times he said it or when I started to cry, but I knew that everyone was watching me. I could feel all of their colors inside of me. “Now chant!” I closed my eyes and I *gahed*. I started to feel the negativity move from my spine to my stomach and out my throat with the incantation. I *gahed* until there was nothing left, and when I stopped everyone clapped, Ohan turned me around and hugged me. When he pulled back, I saw the small red dots on his chest.

*

Margot kept bringing up the lecture. She brought me a flower from the garden and told me that I had done a good job. At breakfast, someone in a blue tunic came over to our table to congratulate me on my forward movement and thought that it would not be long until I was called up to level two. I did not see her do it, but I think that Jane unmade my bed, but if she had found the picture of my mother, she definitely would have confronted me about it. All day people were looking at me which gave me a feeling of accomplishment.

We were sitting around the room. Daley was not supposed to leave the infirmary for two more days. I wanted to ask Maurice if I could go visit her, but Jane told me that I should not because she was still recovering. She was reviewing the new recruitment script while Margot and I were reading. Level twos focused on the third principle, openness to what you encounter as you move forward, but I was reading ahead in preparation. Someone knocked. We were not allowed to socialize in our rooms and were not used to having visitors. Margot and I waited for so long that Jane huffed before getting up from her desk and answering it. Maurice stood at the door.

“Good evening. Hello.” Maurice usually had a kind, but confident presence. He believed fully in the teachings of Renascence and followed them rigidly. In encounter he told us that the only way he knew how to be our teacher was to be our example. But in the doorway, he seemed

less sure. Maybe he was not used to seeing his students outside the confines of the encounter space or maybe he had forgotten how small the lower-level rooms were. He shuffled, his gold tunic trying to follow him like the dorsal fin of a beta fish, “Sara, Renner, Ohan wants to meet with you.”

That Hall and Oates song, *Sarah, Smile* was playing from a small speaker when I walked into Ohan’s room. I knew it because my mother used to play it after she got upset with me to say she was sorry. When Maurice left me by the door, he told me that it was my choice to go through, which seemed strange to me because Ohan had called me here. I asked him if he thought that this was forward motion and he said that it was, though a part of me thought he did not believe what he was saying. The door was like most of the others in the building, gray and sturdy, like no noise can be heard when it’s closed, but Ohan’s was different than any other room in the center. There was no coy pond, but the space was covered in furniture. There was a glossy desk in the corner with a computer and a gold pencil holder. Thinking I was alone, I walked around it and saw a framed picture of Ohan and all ten elders. They were young and smiling, wearing jeans and t-shirts. I took in their closeness, the way their bodies bent towards each other, I had never thought of them as friends before.

There was a sitting area with four orange leather chairs facing a small wooden coffee table and a rug underneath, calling to the fact that it was its own separate area. There was a large dresser and a vanity with a backlit mirror, all carefully placed, each so perfectly arranged that I thought, *yes, that definitely goes there*. The walls and the linens were muted beiges and tans. No colors anywhere. I picked up a wool pillow from the sitting area and hugged it to my chest. There was a calmness in Ohan’s room, like everything stood still. The focal point was a king size bed in the exact middle of the room. The linens matched the colorlessness of everything else and

the legs were wooden, but the headboard had clearly been made just for him. It was gilded, there were lights built into the ceiling directly above the rectangular frame, so it shimmered as I walked around it. Inside there was a gold clock with gold hands and lines marking the hours instead of numbers. I was never good at telling time. I would think that my mother was late picking me up, but she always told me that I read the clock wrong, so Ellen bought me a digital watch, but I just ended up counting the hours she had been gone.

Ohan appeared. I am sure it was from a closet or the bathroom, but it felt he had been hiding, disguised as a wall hanging or a drawer, until he thought it was the right time to reveal himself. He walked right up to me, closer than when we had been on stage together and took the pillow out of my arms and dropped in on the floor. I think that someone else in this situation would have said that they felt exposed, but I didn't. I was searching for the same warmth I had felt the night before. I wanted to be there. He grabbed my hands and we swayed back and forth. I laughed when he made direct eye contact.

The song ended, but he did not let go right away. "I thought you would like that one."

"I did...I do."

"Well, Sara, I think I understand you better than you understand yourself." I did not think that was true, but I told him that he probably did.

He walked over to the sitting area, and I followed him. He waited for me to choose a chair and then sat in the one right next to me. It was not from any sort of prudishness, but I realized I had never been alone with a man before. I had seen couples in the diner do this, sit on the same side of a booth so that their legs would touch without them having to talk about it. There was something forced in this seating arrangement, like they had to prove to the world that they were attracted to each other. I liked to wait on couples who sat across from each other more

because I thought that they were the ones who were really in love. I wondered if I was in love with Ohan.

We sat for a long time, more than an hour, talking. He told me that he had started Renaissance because when he discovered his momentum at a high school basketball game, he knew that it was something he could share with other people. He knew he could make them happy. He asked me to tell him about a time I was happy, and I told him about the last time I saw Ellen. We drove five hours to the ocean, got our feet wet, ate hamburgers, and drove five hours back without my mother knowing. She left the next day with a suitcase. He thanked me for telling him about Ellen, and for a moment I believed that until then he had not known that she existed. Then he said something about a gift for a gift and he took a small golden box off the coffee table. Inside were twenty or so gold chains wrapped in rings and stacked on top of each other. He unraveled the necklace and held it up for me to see. There was a charm on the end, a pair of feet. I had seen other members wearing it, I had seen one on Daley, but it was not something that everyone got. Ohan made a motion for me to turn around and I put my back towards him. His arm lightly grazed my shoulders as he clasped the necklace around me. I felt it click into place and I touched the charm without realizing what I was doing. When I turned back around, he told me that it looked beautiful. Now I know that the necklace is cheaply made. It is only plated in gold and if it is overworn, the feet are prone to scratches and dents.

“Why do you think I asked you to my room?”

“To talk about leveling up.”

“So, you want to move to the next level?”

“I do. And after last night, I think I’m really ready.”

“Sara, I think that you’re really, he paused in a deliberate way that made me think that he was making fun of me, “ready, too...I thought that you could spend the night with me. Do you know what I mean when I say that?”

“I think so.”

“You could spend the night tonight and then tomorrow you and I can talk to Maurice about you becoming a level two. How does that sound?”

“What about the principles?”

“I’m not too concerned. I know how devoted you are. Before last night I wasn’t sure about you, but after what happened on that stage, I think that you can easily achieve level seven.” I thought about what Jane would do if she were here instead of me and I lifted my arms up so he could pull the red tunic over my head.

The next morning, I got permission from Ohan to go visit Daley. I walked to the infirmary directly from his room. I was bleeding a lot, so I felt grateful for the maxi pad in my front jeans pocket. Daley was in a long white tunic tucked under a white blanket in a hospital bed. When I was recruited, Todd told me that the center was so great because it was self-contained, that we did not need anything from the outside world, I guess that meant hospital beds, too. Daley smiled when she saw me. We grabbed hands and held them for a long time. She looked like her skin had been bleached by too much chlorine, but when I asked her how she felt she said she were fine. We noticed each other’s necklaces but did not say anything about them. Daley started to cough. She sat up straight and pulled off the covers to try and get it to stop. I got her the cup of water from her bedside table and handed it to her. I could see the bruising on her stomach through the thin tunic.

Daley finally stopped coughing and handed the cup back to me, “Are you really okay?”

“Yes,” she said, “Now I get to stay.”

It Felt Valuable to Be Noticed

Vivian knew the waitress was upset. There were no signs. No wet eyes or emotional outpourings, but she had a waxy film of dried sadness on her skin. It had leaked out of her pores and molded to her arms like wrist guards and elbow pads. The sadness weighted her down. Her shoulders and her hair, with its outdated curls and hair sprayed bangs, were heavy, and Vivian wondered how she managed to carry herself around. Her name tag said Renata.

It was three in the morning and the other people in the diner, an elderly couple, silent except for the clanking of long handled spoons on glass, shared an ice cream sundae, one other waitress stood by the door holding a laminated menu in case someone else walked in, and a cook who shouted too loudly through the heated pass shelf, didn't seem to notice the unusual dullness of Renata's skin as she cleaned used dishes off a nearby booth. The florescent lighting accentuated its vomitus green color, making it look more putrid. As Renata walked into the kitchen carrying three water glasses in the palm of her left hand, Vivian was sickened by the melancholy smell emanating from her. She pushed a plate of cheese fries across the table, too nauseated to eat. The cook yelled, "Someone get this cold food out the window. It's dead."

Renata came back through the swinging doors carrying a freshly made pot of coffee. Making her way to Vivian's table, she lifted her cup up by the handle. As she poured, some of the sadness flaked off her index finger and landed on the rim. She lingered by the table even after she had filled the mug. Vivian had an open face. It was malleable, without any definitive angles, and because of its shapelessness, people, strangers, often told her things. The man at the liquor store revealed that the reason he had put his hand up her shirt was because he was unbearably lonely. Her boss reported he could not stop picturing her naked, but only during working hours.

It was not strange to her that Renata stood by the table, shifting back and forth on the balls of her feet while steam rose from the coffee pot like hands grabbing at air, attempting to say something. Vivian opened her eyes wider in order to appear less tired, and she tilted her chin up so that her left ear was closer to Renata's mouth. Listening, she found, was all about positioning the body so that it appeared open, ready to take in the words, the sentences, the problems, anything to get rid of the nausea that rushed at her with even the slightest movement from the waitress.

When she was fourteen years old, Vivian went to live in her grandmother's retirement community. The elderly, she found, were not short of ailments. When Mrs. Wantanabe fell in the bathroom and cut her forehead so deeply that she needed stitches, Vivian woke up with a cut above her eye the morning after bringing her the Miyabi and ikebana arrangement her grandmother had sent as *omoiyari*. The gash seemed to be a coincidence, like she had cut herself in her sleep, and disappeared hours after she had first noticed it. It was the same with the limp and persistent cough that mimicked Mrs. Johnson's lung congestion. Yet midway through the summer, when she helped Mr. Hernández onto the petite, white shuttle bus for his chemotherapy treatment, Vivian developed a tumor on the right side of her stomach. The cancer lasted for a week. It made her shallow and tired, like she could not keep up with her own body as it walked from the recreation center back to the tiny bungalow where she lived. Her grandmother thought it might be better to avoid public places during the winter.

Empathy crowded Vivian. She could feel other people's happiness run its fingers over her elbows and their fear poke her in the gut. Their anguish pushed its way inside her mouth and dripped down her throat and into her stomach, which was what caused her queasiness. In Japan, her grandmother told her, after people ate in restaurants, they would stack their plates and empty

cups, pile their fish bones and other inedibles, and wipe down the table with a wet cloth. Vivian had always understood that she was supposed to put other people before herself. She piled the full cup of coffee on top of the plate of coagulated cheese fries and gestured for Renata to sit down.

Renata did not cry, but she began to leak from her fingertips onto the vinyl seat of the booth where she had placed her hands. He had been detained. Her boyfriend, Antonio. And Renata did not know if he would ever come back. She did not know when they would come for her. To Vivian, fear smelled like citrus, it stung her nose and the back of her throat like when lemon juice seeped into a hang nail. It was covering the vile stench of the sadness now, and she wished that she had kept her coffee mug. Listening, really hearing someone, made her drowsy.

Vivian had fallen asleep with her head resting on the Formica table. She didn't remember drifting off, or Renata leaving, but when she opened her eyes, she was completely alone in the dining room. She lifted her head and realized that her left ear had fallen off. It lay, surrounded by the interlocking boomerangs that decorated the tabletop, and Vivian thought that it had never really been hers anyway, but belonged to her grandmother and Ms. Johnson and everyone else she had ever listened to.

She tried to stick the ear back on her head, but as soon as she let go of the lost extremity it fell between the seat cushions. She scrambled to find it, and when she picked it up again it was covered in hamburger bun crumbs. With the ear crammed into her palm, she left the restaurant and walked out into the parking lot. Renata, who had popped out from the kitchen, thanked her again and waved.

A light rain left a sheen on the asphalt, but she could not hear it. Opening the trunk, she removed the lid to one of the plastic tubs inside. After submerging her hand deep into the

container and moving its contents around like dough, she found the small sewing kit. Sitting in the driver's seat, she used gray thread to attach the ear back to her head. It did not hurt. She looked at herself in the review mirror as she did, she wondered why the ear had fallen off. A teacher at school once told her that she was too nice. Not kind or compassionate, but nice, like an antelope allowing a lion to eat a leg that was still attached to its body. She told Vivian that she had no fight.

*

Vivian was avoiding her apartment. She had not been to work in over a month and had no money for rent. Her landlord left every afternoon for several hours and she would sneak inside to take a shower and stream cooking competitions on her phone using WI-FI she stole from the neighbor. For now, she was in her car in the parking lot of a soon to be busy shopping plaza, half asleep on a pink and white accent pillow that had not softened in twenty years.

Whenever her grandmother cleaned Vivian's room in her apartment at the retirement community, she would remove one thing. A shirt that was not quite used, a photograph of a famous actor or landscape she had cut from a magazine and throw them in the wastebasket in the bathroom or put them in a plastic bag to give to charity, as if Vivian did not exist. It was because her grandmother had what they called the Forgetting. She would remember a street in Hokkaido where she saw a woman carved entirely out of ice and how she tried to touch her outreaching hand, but broke it off instead, chunks of ice sliding under the sleeve of her new, red jacket. And she remembered the man at the restaurant in 1983 who paid for her coffee when she realized her wallet was still at home in the purse she had used the night before, and how his smile seemed a little off. She would shake when she recalled that he followed her for six blocks until she got lost in the newly opened shopping center with three levels. Vivian eventually became indifferent to

the Forgetting. She bought new shirts and cut out new magazine clippings, she made her grandmother tea and sat with her until she remembered again.

She felt the woman's discomfort before she heard the tap on the window, like a drop in atmospheric pressure that decreased the density of her sternum and caused her stomach to tighten. Before she opened her eyes, Vivian thought that someone was sitting on her chest, suffocating her so that she could not breathe. Half extended in the back seat, she pushed herself into an upright position and actualized the woman outside the rear driver's side door for the first time. Her hair was matted to the left side of her head and the color, a burnt auburn, looked as if it had come from a box and was distributed unevenly and without care, some strands were dark and others her natural white. The woman was wearing ill-fitting sweatpants that had clearly been handed down and a tie-in-the-back hospital gown. Vivian assumed that she had dressed herself. Her eyes remained blank, but waves of discomfort emanated from her body like sonar, as if she were a bat or a whale trying to communicate on the wrong frequency. She finally noticed that Vivian was looking directly at her and knocked again. This time harder and with her whole fist.

Vivian's stomach drew in tighter still and seemed to shrink down to nothing. With all of the anxiety passing into her, she could not imagine ever eating again. The air inside the car was slowly dissipating and she found herself rubbing her throat in order to open up her larynx, but she did not want to roll down the window. Her own apprehension was mixed in with the woman's and she quickly touched the thread on her ear to make sure that it was still tightly sewn on.

The woman pressed her face against the window and smiled so that her teeth touched the glass. They were crooked, but none of them were missing. She put her hand up against the door and stroked it as if she were trying to touch Vivian. This caused her to back up because she did

not want to lose another part of her body, she wanted to forget about the ear and what had happened the night before. She figured that if she stopped talking to people all together that she could stay whole, make it through the day with all of her limbs, but the air was being replaced with smoggy worry and she had to gulp for the last bit of it. Vivian knew that if she did not roll down the window, she would suffocate.

The air from the parking lot poured through the growing crack. Vivian felt it on her face and tried to suck it in slowly through her teeth. The woman tracked her recovery and when she seemed like she could actually breathe again, she stuck the top half of her body through the window. Almost like Renata's melancholy, particles of confusion were stuck on the woman's face. The apples of her cheeks were covered in a purplish plaster and the saliva that collected in the corners of her mouth were gold, as if a small child had given her a makeover. Vivian's nasal passages opened fully, and she was feeling almost normal. The worry smelled like freshly washed sheets.

"I don't know who I am." The woman, corporeal, missing something in her face, just stared at her.

"I don't either."

"You should call me, Dolly. I think that's a nickname I had one time. But either way, I like it. I'm going to call you Helen. You look like a Helen to me. Where are we, Helen?"

"A parking lot."

"Well that doesn't sound very interesting, does it? I thought when I escaped, I would at least go somewhere exciting."

Maneuvering the woman back through the hole, Vivian opened the door and got out of the car. Before she realized it, the woman was holding her hand. Their fingers were not cupped

around each other, but interlocked, as if they had known each other before that day, before five minutes ago. Dolly's worry transferred to her. The small particles of pressured anxiety moved through each of her fingers and up into her palm, she twitched to stop the sensation from moving into her wrist. The thought of being misplaced overwhelmed her and for a second she forgot who she was. Inside her head there was an abyss where her whole self had been. When she let go of Dolly's hand, she understood what it was like to be completely erased.

"I want to go home, Helen." The old woman studied Vivian's face so intently that it seemed as if she was transforming her into another person, actually making her a Helen, or someone she had known before. The stare was so deep that Vivian looked down. That was when she noticed the medical bracelet with the emergency contact number in red.

It was not difficult to lead the woman through the parking lot and up to one of the recently opened stores. One of the employees, wearing a striped shirt and polka dot pants in a way that convinced Vivian they were supposed to go together, was putting a SALE sign on the sidewalk out front. Entire store *50% off*. Using the store phone, she called the number on the bracelet. The old woman was still holding on to Vivian's hand.

Within thirty minutes a small, white bus had come to pick her up. This was not the first time she had run away, but the orderly told Vivian that they could not figure out how Melissa, which was her actual name, made it through all of the locked doors, but she knew that when no one was watching you, it was easy to disappear. When she got back to car she crawled into the back seat. As she put her hand underneath the tough pink and white pillow, she felt it detach from the rest of her body.

*

Vivian concealed the stump inside her coat pocket as she moved through the aisles of Sew Much, a chain craft store with tubs of artificial flowers out front. The store was aggregate, Do-It-Yourself jewelry kits hung on removable metal hooks and there was a large cardboard box of clearance holiday items, glittery shamrocks were piled in with tinsel reindeer and light up ghosts, there were shelves of acrylic paint and unopened picture frames. Yet nothing was clearly marked. Each aisle had so many things, Vivian could not find what she was looking for, so she drifted between them, passing the same doll making kit over and over. It had a plastic head, blonde hair, and an appropriately sized smile, floating in a clear wrapper, that was supposed to be stuffed and stitched to the cloth body hidden behind it. There were hooks where the body fastened to the head. She took one of the packages off the shelf with the hand that was still attached. Turning the box from the front to the side, she thought about how easy it was to assemble the little plastic girl.

Vivian thought about Renata and Antonio, and about Dolly or Melissa, and she wondered if she had really helped them at all. Even after she listened to them, about them, impressed on them in some way, she had not really changed anything. She was still hiding her handless arm in her coat pocket. Vivian realized that what was happening to her was not normal. She should not be falling apart. The tears were so sudden that all she thought about was covering her face.

The woman was reshelving returned items, moving from row to row, placing unwanted merchandise back in place, but even as the cart moved closer, Vivian did not realize she was there until the woman was touching her shoulder. Her name, Abilene, was written in permanent marker on the front of her red smock.

“You alright?” Her voice was spongy and self-assured. It put Vivian instantly at ease.

“Yeah. I just can’t find the thread.” She put her arm back in her coat pocket, but she knew that Abilene had seen.

“I can take you.” Abandoning the cart, she turned, expecting Vivian to follow her, her braids knocking into each other from the momentum. She wore an old t-shirt and purple leggings, and she reminded Vivian of her grandmother before the Forgetting. She smelled, actually smelled, like milk and honey. Abilene did not ask about the stump.

The thread was in the back of the store. Displayed in a spectrum from red to violet, she never appreciated the beauty of order, of how, if organized, the colors seemed to meld seamlessly into one another, complimented each other, even maroon and teal, which, until that moment she never would have placed together. Her eyes were like spotlights, illuminating the different types of thread as she scanned them, and each color she looked at reflected on the skin of her still-attached hand. Vivian’s nails turned burnt orange and then midnight blue.

“Pick one,” Abilene gestured to the thread, “Whatever color you like best.”

When she could not choose, Abilene put a spool of emerald green and a pack of needles in her hand. The thread warmed her up, it gave her a witchy hue. She stood with the thread in her hand for a few seconds letting it heat up the entire right side of her body.

Abilene approached her again, “Can I help you?”

Vivian handed her the needles and thread, and then reached into her purse and pulled out the hand, “It needs to be sewn back on. Can you sew?”

“I can.”

She removed one needle from the package and unwound the spool, then took scissors from the shelf, cut the string and tied it off before hanging them back on the hook. Gingerly, she put the thread through the eye and motioned for Vivian to sit down. With both women on the

floor, Abilene took Vivian's hand from her and without trepidation, stuck the needle through the skin, pulling the green thread through. Then she reached for Vivian's arm and pulled it over her crossed legs towards her chest. As if repairing a shirt, she pushed the needle into her wrist, and the thread came through. Vivian watched as she methodically stitched a zigzag pattern until her hand was reattached to her body.

*

Vivian wanted to cut off her own hand. Exchange it for a clean one after she helped her grandmother use the bathroom, or when Mr. Ozark, who was allergic, had gotten stung by a bee and it swelled to twice its normal size after the nurse's aide used the EpiPen on him. As she walked into the courtyard of her apartment complex, she wondered if she had somehow brought this on herself, like she had willed herself to fall apart piece by piece, with no blood or fluid, just detachable bones.

Her boss, Henry, was sitting on the edge of the derelict water fountain in the center of the courtyard. The stones, the same ones that lined the pathway to the front door, were crumbling, whole pieces of limestone had been removed by hand and stacked next to the basin. Water no longer spouted through the small metal cylinder in the middle of the pool, but murky, green rain from the previous night's storm churned around in the bottom half inch. Vivian knew what it was like to collect discarded things. Her grandmother's Oiran doll collection was wrapped in tissue paper and stored in a long, plastic tub under her bed. When he stood up, he did not approach her at first, but she still felt his fingers on her arm. She pulled up her coat and his handprint was on her skin. She felt his mouth on her neck and instinctively rubbed the spit off on her shirt collar.

His hands were in his pants pockets, and she tried to turn around and leave, pretending that they had not noticed each other, but he called out for her to wait and trotted towards her as if

he were crossing a street full of stopped cars. Before he was near her, she could feel his body blocking her, his hips against hers, but she did not want to be stopped. She started to run, just fast enough that she would beat him through the gate, let him fumble with the handle while she got back in her car and drove away. When she thought she would make it, her foot fell off. It remained motionless, with her shoe and her sock on the stone walkway, and when she tried to put it down again, her ankle hit, and she fell solidly on the ground.

Vivian turned over; Henry was holding her foot in his hand. He tried to loop his arms through hers, to help her back up, her own foot close to her face, but she pushed him off. She did not want him to touch her.

He stumbled backwards, seeing her naked ankle, realizing that he was not just holding her shoe, “What’s going on?”

They were in his office. The door was shut, like normal, it was midmorning, and there were people around. Vivian could hear pieces of conversations as people walked down the hallway. They talked about expense reports and video conferences, television show cliff hangers and funny memes. She could not hear their steps, because of the carpet. All the lights were on.

Henry had her in his office several times a week. Not to critique her work, but to talk to her about his wife or the kickball league he thought made him more active or his general unhappiness. She had overheard some women talking about her between bathroom stalls. An affair. Inappropriate noises. Sex in his ergonomic chair with her on top. Vivian assumed that everyone thought this, but they never actually had sex. Henry had only ever touched her once before that day. He had grabbed a small chunk of her hair and ran his fingers through it several times. When she went back to her desk she cut off the strands and threw them in the garbage.

That day, she could tell, was different. Henry had a charge, electric pluses that Vivian could see flaring from his palms, his knees caps, even his cheekbones. The office, a generically painted square, seemed unable to hold him. She knew that she should have left then, when his eyes looked as if they could power streetlights, but she did not. Already petite and inconsequential, she stayed and rested her back against the wall, looking more vulnerable than she intended.

He rose from his desk, pausing at the corner to ask how she was, he had never cared about her before, so when the wave of insincerity blew onto her face like a sideways rain, it was not surprising, but it did make her body tense up. Henry stood in front of her. He relaxed his shoulders and tried to have an easy way about him, but she knew, like when she had the same cut as Ms. Wantanabe, that she could not stop this from happening either. He put his hand down the front of her pants. They were olive green and oversized, so he did not have to unbutton them. He touched her on the softest part of herself, rubbed his finger in a rough circular motion, bits of underwear and hair getting caught underneath his fingernail. It was as if he learned to do this in some How-To manual or talking with his male friends. After twenty or so circles, he reached his hand underneath her underwear and stuck the finger inside her. He pressed hard and his desire went up through like the sharp point of a pair of scissors. There was blood

Then he reached for her hand. She retracted, but he pulled it towards him. Vivian had wanted to cut off her own hand before. He gave her short, breathy instructions, as if what was happening really was sexy, really was lustful. His voice justified his actions. Then she was holding on to him, her own hand moving up and down. With the two of them grabbing on to each other, it looked as if they both wanted to be there. If someone had walked in, it would have seemed to them that Vivian wanted to be there. But she did not. She stared down at her olive-

colored pants, Henry's arm sticking out of them as if she had absorbed him. Which she had. A part of him would stay with her forever, even as she lost pieces of herself, he would not go away. When he finished, he did not look at her just pulled his hand away and wiped in with a tissue from the corner of his desk.

Now, she was on the damp walkway, water seeping through her long coat, and Henry was standing above her with her foot in her shoe and her shoe in his hand, and she froze again, the only thing in her mind was a pair of jeans her grandmother had thrown away. The ones that had been her favorite the summer that she was fourteen.

"I came to check on you. Why haven't you been at work?" he noticed, for the first time, where Abilene had reattached her hand back to her wrist, the emerald green thread peeking through the arm of the coat, "What happened there? Are you hurt?" She thought he might try to hug her and the thought of him touching her again made her want to lose every part of her body. His caring infuriated her.

Before he could grab her, she screeched, the sound pressure level of which made Henry retract his hand. Vivian shrieked again, gutturally, and the decibels from her own noise propelled her up from the ground and forward. Her footless leg outstretched, she grabbed her shoe from him, and screamed at him once more, this time her mouth was almost touching his. He just stood there, his back hunched over, as she tittered over to the fountain. She sat down, took out the rest of the green thread and began to stitch her foot back to her body while it was still inside the shoe.

*

Vivian did not usually visit the diner two nights in a row, but there was a small part of her that thought Henry might have followed her even though he was gone from her apartment before she had stitched herself up. Renata was working again. The waxy film was gone from her skin,

but there was still worry in her eyes. She gave Vivian a half smile every time she passed her and brought her a plate of cheese fries on the house.

In the booth directly across from her, there were two teenage girls opening packets of pink artificial sweetener and laughing as they dumped the contents onto each other's half-eaten cheeseburgers. Both had purposeful rips in their clothing and thick eyeliner that had runoff onto their lids and sockets. It seemed to Vivian that no one missed them. The girls had clearly been somewhere before the diner, small permanent marker Xs were rubbing off their right hands, and that they had no uncertainties about staying out all night. One of the girls, blue hair dye fading, was using her straw to suck up the soda from her own glass and then releasing it into the other girl's water, while she, with an arm full of plastic, gold bracelets, noticed the thread, first around Vivian's wrist and then her ankle. As a way of appeasing her even further, Vivian pulled her hair back and revealed to the girl her repaired ear as well.

No one had ever been curious about Vivian before. It felt valuable to be noticed. Unexpectedly, the girl slid out of the booth her bracelets clanking together, walked over to Vivian's table and sat down across from her. She did not speak at first, but Vivian could sense her wanting to say something, so she waited, looking at her. The girl with the blue hair followed a few minutes later, and gently shoved her until she moved over. They were both staring at the green thread the Abilene had stitched into her earlier that day.

"Is that holding you together," the girl with the blue hair finally blurted out.

"It is."

"Can you do it to us?" The girl with the bracelet looked almost courageous as she spoke.

Vivian took the thread and a pair of small scissors from her purse. She cut off two thin strands and the girls readied themselves by resting their hands, the same ones that had the X's,

palm up on the table. Using both her hands, Vivian tied the thread around one girl's wrist and then the other, finishing the knots off with bows.

Fierce Love

When I was thirteen, I was in love with Shaun Cassidy. So were most of the girls I knew, we all had posters of him on the wall, torn out from the middle of magazines we had slipped into grocery carts for our mothers to buy unknowingly. We hung them up in our direct eyeline with clear pieces of tape over the corners, which meant the poster would be wrecked when we decided to take it down, and for most of my friends that was fine, they moved quickly from Shaun to Leif, and when they were a bit older, to Tom Cruise and Andrew McCarthy, but I was never like that. I always stuck with things. I wrote Shaun letters for years, telling him that I liked his music and that my favorite thing to eat was buttered noodles in the sun. At first, I just got back autographed photos and stock letters clearly written by some second level publicist, but even as Shaun's popularity waned, I wrote him, until one day he actually wrote me back, a letter in scratchy handwriting that described the hazardous nature of fame. He ended the letter by telling me never to trust anyone who could gain something from my *personhood*, and signed the letter, *Love, Shaun*. I liked that word, *personhood*, it made me remember that I was alive. I framed the letter and kept it by my bedside well into adulthood, and even though it is in a box somewhere now, I still consider it to be one of my most prized possessions. Shaun would later go to produce the television show *New Amsterdam*.

The buzzer always startled me. Henry tells me that I startle too easily, but I think it is perfectly fine to dislike loud noises. Jim waved me through from the booth, I smiled and held up my hand as I passed through the doorway. His uniform was misbuttoned and his holster sagged. He gave me the *I can't believe you're doing this look* that I got so frequently from people when they learned about my situation. The guards called me as a repeater because I was there every

Wednesday. No one escorted me to the visitation room anymore. The sound of my heels clicking against the green linoleum resonated as I moved down the hallway.

The first letter I wrote Henry was an impulse. I saw him on Channel 8 while I was at Woo Palace waiting for Mu Shu Pork and miso, sitting in one of the extra chairs they stacked in the corner with my work clothes still on and my purse in my lap. Muriel ran the cash register, and she was moving quickly between answering the phones and going back to the kitchen to get orders. Above her was one of those visual menus, unappetizing photos of the popular menu items, the General Tao's an unnatural orange and the Peking Duck an unstructured blob. There was a fire at Woo Palace several years later. Muriel collected the insurance money and never reopened. I heard she moved to Las Vegas.

I had this thing I did then when I ate Chinese food, I would try to pick out single grains of rice with a pair of chopsticks because I thought that it would help improve my focus, which had been waning since I failed to get the promotion to senior editor at the magazine where I worked. It was aimed at teenage girls, and Dan, the managing editor told me that I wasn't youthful enough and that I should try being less serious in the office. I bought a pair of neon pink tights to wear under my black dress, which he told me I looked sexy in. So I was eating Chinese takeout more frequently then and Woo Palace always had the television on as a way to subdue people when ten minutes for a to-go order turned into fifteen or twenty. I have always been okay with waiting.

When I saw him, handcuffed and being led into a police station, I thought he belonged on a Tiger Beat cover. His whole name, Henry Charles Gates, was projected at the bottom of the screen, and right before they brought him inside, he looked directly at the camera and smiled. It

was a smile, not a smirk, it did not dare the detectives to find evidence of his crimes, it was an *I'll get through this* smile, and when I saw it, I knew that he was innocent.

I got the idea to write him a letter after I saw a segment on Channel 8. Henry on trial and lots of women in the area were sending him love letters and pictures of themselves in their underwear. I dismissed them as ridiculous at first, but on the day I was fired from the magazine, I wrote Henry to tell him how upset I was. I figured he more than anyone would understand what it was like to have people make assumptions about you. Dan told me that I had trouble getting into the mind of a teenager, that their likes and dislike, their values, alluded me, but I knew exactly what it was like to claw at unattainable beauty and desire an undying love. Later, Dan would be front and center in the #metoo movement after the woman he hired to replace me claimed he harassed and victimized her during her years at the magazine. The letter was on Mrs. John L. Strong stationary hand-engraved with three pink asters on top:

Dear Henry,

I hope that this letter finds you well, especially given your circumstances. I'm not sure about your feelings on the subject, but I think we often look at other people and think that we know them. I saw another woman on the street today. It was two o'clock in the afternoon and there weren't that many people around, so she could tell that I was looking at her. Though I didn't mean to, I think I made her uncomfortable because she tried to hide her face. She was wearing Christian Lacroix, so I figured she had a pretty nice life, but really, I don't know anything about her other than she owns one expensive dress. I've been watching your story on the news, and I guess what I'm trying to say is that I would like to know you in a way that no one else does.

Sincerely,

Christina Davenport

When I was finished the letter, I went into the bathroom and grabbed *Fierce Love*, an Easter egg pink shade of lipstick I'd bought that day at the makeup counter of Meier & Frank. I applied it, careful to color the exact shape of my lips before I pressed them to the page in a very real kiss.

Sagano Valley was a maximum-security prison forty-five minutes from the nearest town, so there were not many visitors on the average Wednesday. The lights in the visitation room were tinted yellow, when I walked in there was another woman already sitting at one of the round tables, her skin jaundice. I quickly pulled the compact out of my purse and double checked that my face looked alright. I rubbed the corners of my mouth and ran my index finger underneath my eye to get any loose mascara before sitting down across the room from. I took the paperwork and the container with the piece of cake out of my purse.

“You celebrating somebody’s birthday?” the woman asked me. She was wearing jeans and a pair of sandals which I felt drew attention to my white lace dress.

“Who are you here for?”

“Oh, my son. I used to come see him once a month, but I got a new job and it’s been hard to get here. I try, but I have to switch shifts with someone when I wanna come. It’s been about four months this time.”

“I’m sorry about that. It seems difficult.”

“What about you? Who you here to see?”

“Henry. Henry Gates.”

“The serial killer? Yeah, he’s the one that sewed his victim’s lips together, right? Did they ever figure out if he did it before or after they died? You his lawyer or something?”

“There was no real evidence, you know. No DNA or fingerprints. One of the neighbors told the police that they saw a man who looked like Henry coming out of Nancy Meyers house.”

I turned away from the woman and waited for the guards to bring in Henry and readjusted the paperwork. There was a small bouquet in my purse, but I was embarrassed to take it out before Henry came. We had agreed that I should be nearby, so I had moved into a one-bedroom in Barstow.

I corresponded with Henry for almost two years before we met in person. I was surprised when I found the letter from him in my mailbox, almost having forgotten that I had written him. He had been convicted and Channel 8 was covering a string of disappearances in Antelope Valley. During the trial, Melissa Downs spoke to the mother of one of the victims. Maria Alvarez clutched a framed photograph of her daughter the entire time she was being interviewed. She told the reporter that Valentina was studying to be a nurse, she did translation at the senior center and loved to sing karaoke. When Melissa asked what she would say to Henry Charles Gates if she ever saw him Maria said, "Because of you, Valentina has no future. She will not do anything else; she will not be anything else. She will only be remembered for this." Afterwards, I wondered what I would be remembered for.

I put the letter on the counter. I wanted to make sure that what I was feeling was more than curiosity. When Henry's mugshot was on the front page of the newspaper, I cut it out and put it in a 4x6 gold frame and left it by the bed. I went in to look at it, sat on the edge of the mattress with my feet on the floor. His hair was wild. There was a crease above his left eyelid and he had a crooked tooth. Tried to imagine what would happen if he were there with me. I thought about his wide mouth covering mine, his tongue slipping inside mine. I was wearing the neon pink tights again and I figured that he would lift up my skirt and roll them down, so that's what I did. I lay back and put my hands where I thought his would go, one on my chest and the other between my legs. His hands seemed knobby to me, and strong, so I pressed hard against myself

still pretending it was him touching me. The picture was propped up on the nightstand and I stared at while I came. Henry Charles Gates was a force. After, I unsealed the envelope with a letter opener. Henry had written me a short note on a torn off piece of legal pad that said:

Dear Christine.

Thank you for your letter. I enjoyed it more than I enjoy most. Here's the test, then. What did you think about me the first time you saw me on television?

Yours Truly,

HCG

The guards were taking longer than usual to bring Henry. The woman and her son were sitting on the same bench, purposely talking low so I would not hear. The benches were the kind that were bolted into both the table and the floor. The prison did this to prevent violence, but I never felt unsafe here. The first time I came to see him, he made me a cloth bouquet of flowers from torn strips of old pillowcases and wire. When he handed them to me, I could not remember the last time someone had made something for me. I took the real bouquet out of my purse and set it next to the cake because I was tired of waiting.

The buzzer sounded again, and I looked up from the small pile I had made on the table. Henry was led into by his usual escorts, Dave and Saul, but today the prison chaplain followed closely behind them. The blue button-down I had sent over for him to wear was looser in the shoulders than I thought. He must have lost some weight, but he would still look good in pictures. The guards undid Henry's handcuffs and then backed into the corner to wait until we were finished, while the chaplain hovered close by waiting for us to be ready.

I rose and walked around the table to him. His lawyers had him cut his hair short for court, but now it was longer than the newspaper clipping, almost down to his collarbone. I ran my fingers through it as he embraced me, squeezed my ribs harder than he should have. Normally this was the only time we got to touch each other during our visits, so I had a hard time letting go. He pulled back just a little and smiled. Henry was always happy to see me.

“Hey, Darlin, what did you bring me this time?” His voice was low and drawn out, easily identifiable.

“Cake, but it’s your favorite, carrot cake with cream cheese frosting.”

“Sorry, honey, you must have read that about me somewhere. My favorite kind of cake is chocolate.”

“That’s okay. I’ll just bring you a piece of chocolate next time. Carrot cake is my favorite anyway.”

“You do look pretty, though. Did you get a new dress?”

The dress was from Mervyn’s, ivory satin overlaid with lace florets, it had sleeves. Melissa Downs wanted me to describe it in detail when she interviewed me the night before “I did. I wanted to look nice. I hope we can take a photo when we’re done. I brought a camera.”

“I think we can do that.”

“Good. I want one of us for the house.”

“You ready?” he asked.

In one of the letters I wrote to Shaun Cassidy, I told him that I wanted to marry him on a cliff that overlooked the ocean, but to be with Henry I settled for the visitation room in a prison. We sat down on the bench with the chaplain across from us. The woman and her son were staring at us. Several weeks later I would see her on Dateline dressed in a gray suit and her make

up professionally done talking about how she witnessed Henry and I's marriage. I clutched on to my bouquet of flowers because that was what I had seen other brides do. When the chaplain asked for the rings, I had to dig for them in my purse. While I was looking, Henry laughed and said, "You really did think of everything." When he asked me if I took this man to be my husband, I said I do. When he pronounced us, I leaned over and waited for Henry to kiss me, but our mouths little more than connected. Still, I had to take my thumb and wipe *Fierce Love* from his bottom lip. Later, he would tell me public displays of affection embarrass him. Afterwards, Dave and Saul shared the cake with me.

*

Melissa Downs was the only female reporter for the Channel 8 news at the time of the trial, she would write later in her memoir, after she had gotten the syndicated talk show and the pre-decorated apartment, that her approach had been to bring women's issues *with a twist* to her viewer who she often thought of as other young women like her, women who wanted to be excited by something. She wore a white blouse and a suede skirt that fell mid-calf. It was the most professional outfit I had ever seen.

During our interview she asked me how I could marry a convicted murder, and I told her that, "No one knows him like I do." At that time, I still believed his innocence, that the shoe prints found at several of the crime scenes did not belong to him and that his confession was coerced, all of the things he repeated back to me during my weekly trips to the prison. Though I never did need his reassurance. During my first trip, the prison was crowded. It was the Wednesday before Easter and whole families had come to see their incarcerated loved ones. I think he planned it that way in case I wasn't what he expected. When Dave and Saul weren't

looking, Henry reached up and touched my lips and said, “I bet you you’re the kind of person who would do anything for me.”

After the wedding, I took the film to be developed before I went back to the apartment. I took off my dress and hung it up so it would not wrinkle. Combing through the photo, the only usable picture I found was one where Henry was staring directly at the camera, but I was looking off as if someone had just called my name. The rest were blurry or one of us had our eyes closed. I riffled through my packed boxes until I found the frame with Henry’s mugshot inside. I did not remove the clipping but put the new photo over top of it before displaying it on my bedside table. Henry would die in prison fifteen years later. I would stop visiting him and he would get a new girlfriend. After the interview, Melissa Downs told me that Henry had kept correspondence with several women during that first year, and that I was not the only one who went to visit him. He was buried in Barstow and every Wednesday I would put flowers on his grave.

Climate Change

The school district's fourth grade unit on climate change focused mainly on erratic weather patterns. In first grade the students learned about the melting polar ice caps and were shown, with parent permission, a photograph of an emaciated polar bear floating away from land on a chunk of broken ice. She always knew when Mrs. Davis taught that particular lesson because she could hear the tears through their common classroom wall. In third grade, Ms. Gordon taught that rising temperatures were killing whole colonies of ants. She put in a request to take the students to a sauna, so they could feel what it was like to live in extreme heat, but the paperwork had been denied by the principal because it did not align with state standards. Ms. Harrison, though, could never think of the right visual aid to explain extreme weather.

Two years before she had built a model of Westerville inside a fish tank and filled it with five gallons of water, drowning the houses and the small figurines, but her students just laughed when the buildings came unglued and rose to the surface. The previous year she had filled her entire classroom with packing peanuts, trying to simulate tremendous snowfall, but once Douglas Hines belly-flopped into one of the piles, it did not take long for the other students to do the same. Mr. Nelson had to help her dig children out of the Styrofoam for almost thirty minutes.

Despite all of Mr. Nelson's help, Ms. Harrison believed that she was a terrible teacher. Since the beginning of the school year two months before she had been consumed with the idea of getting better, but this just left her frazzled and purposeless. Paul (Mr. Nelson) had only been charged with mentoring her for her first two years at Westerville Elementary, but even now she found herself crossing the hall to his room to ask him if her lesson plan was alright or if he had a suggestion for teaching students how to compare and contrast. During which time the children

were usually left unattended. No matter what she tried, more testing, less testing, interactive games, songs, harsh criticism, or Rice Crispy Treat Fridays, her fourth graders still had not learned anything, which she of course blamed herself for. So when, without reason, the town started flooding and the stairs to the school building completely submerged in water, it was understandable that Ms. Harrison barely noticed the rain. Her classroom was, after all, on the second floor.

She was surprised to find her students collecting at the window, genuinely scared, instead of solving the equation $\frac{3}{4} + \frac{1}{4}$ on the green handouts she had come in early to photocopy that morning. Walking over to the cluster of children, she gently pushed her way through them, but she could not see what was happening without pressing her entire body against the window. Leaning in she left a handprint on the glass. The children moved closer to her without realizing what they were doing. Their shoulders grazed her waist and when she lowered one of her arms, they softly competed to hold on to her fingers.

Water bumped into the hundred-year-old brick, and then retracted, it would have to find another way inside. Water had already overtaken the houses in the neighborhood behind the school, where she knew Jenny Sanchez lived, and water filled up the inside of a bus that had been left with some of its windows open, and water overtook the playground, sloshing up over the pebbles, almost reaching the tips of the swings. It was fast moving, engulfing everything in front of it and to its sides, and though she tried to stop the images from coming into her mind, all Ms. Harrison could see was Ester Green and Miles Townsend and the rest of her students floating away from her. Then she tried to convince herself, *The water will go away eventually. It can't stay where it's not supposed to*, suppressing her own fear, because the teacher was not

supposed to be afraid. They all stayed staring at for longer than they should have. Jenny Sanchez commented on how mesmerizing it was, a vocabulary word from last week's list.

"Let's sit back down," Ms. Harrison told the students after the bus had filled up completely. None of them protested but turned and moved slowly towards their assigned seats. They shifted as a large group, each one peeling off when they reached their desk, avoiding each other's eyes because seeing their own fear reflected back would remind them that they had not taken the lessons on climate change seriously and had not believed, until this moment, that they were in any kind of danger. She followed closely behind them, providing comfort with a hand placed on a student's shoulder or on the top of their head. Daniel Billings remained with his pinky around hers until they reached the front of the classroom.

Administration had trained her on how to protect children from fires and active shooters, but she had no knowledge, beyond elementary school science, of how to save them from a building that was systematically filling with water. She wondered if she should call their parents, but instead got out the packs of fruit snacks she kept in the storage closet for emergencies and began to hand them out, walking past each desk, dropping the small green packages without any real thought about what she was doing. When she was done, she told the children that they could eat, then sat down herself. Her desk was immovable and missing a drawer, inherited from the last fourth grade teacher, who had retired after thirty-three years in the classroom. On her first day, the principal told her that they had considered other, more qualified applicants for the position, but that she, more than any other candidate, seemed to be the only one willing to uphold the traditions of Karl G. Simmons Elementary. Traditions included honoring A+ students in a quarterly assembly in the auditorium and maintaining a boys-will-be-boys approach to recess.

The water consumed the playground while Ms. Harrison waited for the principal to make an announcement over the loudspeaker about what to do next.

But there was no announcement. Daniel had finished his fruit snacks, and without thinking, he stood up and hovered at the front of her desk. On a normal day, she would have asked him to sit back down, and he would have followed her instructions because that was the kind of student he was. Daniel was one of the children she never worried about, he listened and made mostly 85s. But now, Ms. Harrison watched him pace anxiously back and forth and realized that she could do nothing to put him at ease. She evaluated herself and realized that she was feeling anxious, too. Leaving the other students silently eating and Daniel pressing down on the stapler and then watching it pop back up, she went to get some guidance from Mr. Nelson.

The hallway was noiseless except for the clicking of Ms. Harrison's reasonably heeled shoes. During her evaluation at the end of last school year, the principal suggested that she try to dress more professionally. "So the students will respect you more," he said. She did not really understand what he meant, so she decided to wear more skirts that year, ones that fell below her knees. The light above Mr. Nelson's room was flickering and she worried that it was waterlogged. After a quick knock, she entered the room before anyone answered.

All his students were working on a math assignment, placing greater and less than signs between numbers and she thought that this was a testament to what a good teacher he was. As her mentor, Mr. Nelson observed her lessons when his students went to music class and gave her handwritten feedback torn from the yellow legal pad where he made all his notes, the older ones flipped over the binding, and he came to her room every afternoon after dismissal to help her plan the next day's lesson. He was ten years older than her with a wife and house they had fixed up themselves, but he said they had been together for so long that she was used to him working

with other teachers, used to him coming home late. The house was in the same direction the water had come from and was probably gone by now. His wife had not been at the ceremony that spring when Mr. Nelson won the award for Teacher of the Year, so Ms. Harrison clapped extra loud with her hands above her head.

Mr. Nelson put his hand on her arm, “Are you okay?” Maybe it was his floppy hair or his unassuming gauntness, but he always appeared to her like he genuinely cared.

Tensing up she said, “You saw what’s going on outside, didn’t you?” remembering as she did that he could always sense when she was off. During morning duty, she used to joke that he was telepathic and laugh loudly enough for Mrs. Davis to give them a dirty look.

“I’m sure it’s all going to be fine. They’ll send boats,” he laughed, “But for now, have your students been able to identify the main idea? Did you use the handout I emailed to you last week?”

“You’re not worried about this? Have you talked to anyone?”

“No, but I think there’s an evacuation plan in the Emergencies Binder. You could always consult that,” he dismissed her when she did not want to talk about teaching, “Ms. Harrison, you know you’re not supposed to be here.” This was not the advice that Mr. Nelson would have given her during the previous school year, but now, she figured, he was taking a tough love approach. He knew that she wanted to be a better teacher and part of that was honing her instincts.

When she reentered the hallway she saw, Mrs. Davis, a veteran teacher two years away from retirement, and Ms. Gordon talking in the hallway, their classroom doors open, their bodies close and their conversation muted so that Ms. Harrison could not make out what they were saying.

Opening her own door, she called over, “Do either of you know what’s happening? Did anyone from the office call you?”

“Why?” Mrs. Davis said, “Mr. Nelson didn’t have any ideas.”

Shutting the door to the classroom behind her, Mrs. Harrison went back to the window. Water had reached the first floor. She saw Mr. Tyne, the P.E. teacher, crawl out a window, his lean, athletic body dropped into what she thought seemed like cold water, and Ms. Harrison's body relaxed. She was glad to see someone doing something to save them. Mr. Tyne waded at first, sloshed slowly through the rushing water. She knew that he was strong because he was pushing against a current. When the water got too deep, he lay out flat and started to swim freestyle, just like he taught the students during their swimming unit in the pool attached to the middle school next door. At first his pace was quick. He made it easily to the playground, now completely submerged except for the spires on the top of several of the wooden structures, but she could see him tire as he passed the spot where the bus was. He turned to the right and began to side stroke. Between the school and the neighborhood behind it, there was a road, the one that the parents used to drop of their children in the morning and pick them up in the afternoon. Most days, Ms. Harrison was excited to see cars backed up at the stop sign, waiting, because it meant something was beginning or something was ending. She often used milestones like this to keep herself going because coming into work had gotten increasingly more difficult over the last few months. By the time Mr. Tyne had reached the road, or at least where she thought it should be, he was floating on his back. She left the window to check on the students. She put a hand on their shoulders or their heads, went back into the cabinet and pulled out a coloring book, also for emergencies. The pages were scientifically themed, they had solar systems and rock formations, she avoided the pages that had anything to do with water, including one about condensation, as

she ripped them out and gave them to the students, who, without being asked, went quietly and individually to the box of crayons on the counter and selected the colors they wanted. When she went back over to the window, she saw Mr. Tyne gasping for breath before he was pulled completely under. *He made it pretty far*, she thought to herself before going to guide Daniel back to his seat.

With the children all coloring, Ms. Harrison went into the bottom drawer of her desk. Pulling back a stack of file folders, she found the red plastic Emergencies Binder under a thick manual about effective teaching. Placing it on top of her desk, she drew her finger down the tabs, scanning for the one she wanted. There was protocol for a fire and a tornado, for school shooters and overly aggressive parents, but there was nothing about what to do in case of a flood. Frustrated, she flipped to the tornado section to see if there was anything helpful, but the orange cardstock sheet said to push the desks as far away from the windows as possible and crouch underneath them until the storm dies down and it was safe for someone to come rescue them. Ms. Harrison did not think that this pertained to her current situation.

She closed the binder and saw Daniel standing in front of her desk again. She did not know how long he had been staring at her, but she had the notion that he was looking at her the way a grown man would, and this made her feel uncomfortable. The rest of the children were still coloring, moving only to noiselessly swap neon carrot for unmellow yellow. Leaving Daniel to remove the pencils and pens from the cup she used as a holder, Ms. Harrison grabbed a sheet of stickers from the top drawer and began to snake through the rows putting smiling suns and potted plants with sunglasses on the corner of every student's paper, even if they had colored outside the lines. When she returned to the desk, Daniel had made her a small bouquet, yellow, blue, and green highlighters bound together with a rubber band.

Handing it to her he said, “You’re very pretty, Ms. Harrison.”

Hesitating, but ultimately deciding that she did not want to hurt the young boy’s ego, she reached out for the highlighters before asking, “Daniel, will you please go over to the window and see how high the water is.”

The little boy turned and walked across the classroom. To get the best angle, he put his forehead on the glass. When he came back, he told her that the water was just below their classroom window. She thanked him and asked him to join the others coloring before going back out into the hallway.

Ms. Harrison and Ms. Gordon started teaching the same year. They were both new to Westerville and on Fridays they would go out for happy hour margaritas, frozen strawberry, and chips and guacamole as a reward for making it through another week. Ms. Gordon complained about how the children would not stop crawling all over her, saying that she would need back surgery before she was thirty. Her students wrote her notes telling her that they loved her and on teacher’s day, they always came armed with flowers, candy, and coffee mugs bought by their parents, who also appreciated her. Ms. Gordon was not a terrible teacher.

She knocked on Ms. Gordon’s door and waited for her to answer. Instead, a bewildered looking third grader with wet pant legs and wet hair opened the door. He did not greet her but left her in the doorway once his duty was complete. Even from outside the classroom, Ms. Harrison could tell that none of the children were in their seats. Walking in she saw that Ms. Gordon and her collection of twenty-five students were by the windows.

Water had started leaking into the room. There was a one-inch layer on the floor and Ms. Harrison’s shoes were wet. Westerville Elementary was an old, sinking building, lower in the back than in the front, which explained why Ms. Gordon’s room had been breached first.

Hopefully, the school board would allocate funds for repairs when they set the budget for next year. An assortment of colored pencils were dumped out on one of the desks and the teacher was using the bucket to gather up water. Some of the students were next to her, letting the water pour into their desk caddies. Other receptacles, the plastic bin where students were supposed to turn in their assignments and the boxes where students stored their math books, were already filled and lined up neatly on a counter. The children that were not at the window were inside the storage closet and cleaning out the teacher desk looking for anything that would hold water.

“Ms. Gordon,” Ms. Harrison called from the front of the room, but failed to get the other teacher’s attention, “Ms. Gordon,” she said louder, and the other woman turned around. Her hair was pulled back in a clip, but wisps had fallen out the front and were dripping. The arms of her cranberry turtleneck were soaked, she gave one of the bigger students the bucket to put on the counter and instructed the others to keep going before sloshing over to where Ms. Harrison stood. “What are we supposed to do?”

She scoffed, shrugged her shoulders, pieces of wet hair were sticking to her round cheeks, “You always want help, don’t you? We’re all drowning, but you expect to be saved.”

When they found out about her and Paul’s relationship, there was a petition from the rest of the female teachers demanding she be fired. The thing was, Ms. Gordon already knew that they were fucking. Several margaritas in, Ms. Harrison had admitted the affair and, equally drunk, she asked if they ever messed around during school hours. Just once, backstage in the auditorium during an assembly about the importance of telling the truth. But when the principal had presented her with a photocopy of the petition (as requested by her union rep), she saw Ms. Gordon’s name directly under Mrs. Davis’s. The water was getting higher and one of the

students called Ms. Gordon. She dumped out one of the drawers from her desk and carried it to the back to the window because she was a good teacher.

When she got back to her own room, the students had abandoned their coloring pages and were all standing by the window again. “Daniel,” she called back to them, “Where’s the water now?”

Forgetting who they were, several of them told her that it had reached the window. Water seeped down the wall. Ms. Harrison went into the supply closet and found the small toolbox she kept in case of emergencies and inside it, a Phillip’s head screwdriver. She turned over one of the student desks and began unscrewing the legs. Making her way quickly through all four screws, she peeled off the top and called over the closest student. She handed Jenny Sanchez the piece of rectangular fiberboard before turning over the next desk and repeating the process.

After she had taken all of the desks apart, she walked back to the window and opened it. Water rushed in, soaking her patchwork skirt and button down and she cried out from the cold. The room was starting to fill up. Most of the students were screaming about how she should not have done that, but she ignored them, one of her go-to teaching strategies. Ms. Harrison grabbed Daniel’s hand and pulled him close to her. Then, hugging his body, she lifted him up on the windowsill. She instructed him to lay the desk top flat in the water and sit on his knees as if he were on a boogie board. Strangely enough, he was not scared, but seemed to be enjoying the physical contact from her, and Ms. Harrison could not help but notice that he and Mr. Nelson were the same thickness around. This was a test, she kept a grip on him until she knew that he would float, so when she saw that her idea worked, she leaned in and gave Daniel a kiss on the cheek before pushing him off.

Ms. Harrison called up the next student and the next, until there was a line of fourth graders floating away from the school. She was tempted to cross the hall to tell Paul about her desk idea, but she thought that he would just claim it as his own. They would all find their own way out. Instead, she positioned herself at the edge of the window with Molly Grangers desktop because she was absent that day. Pressing herself away from the frame, the little rectangle bobbed a bit before she found her balance. The water rolled over itself and the rain had died down, Ms. Harrison thought she should bring her students to the middle school swimming pool the next year to teach them about extreme weather. When she was asked how she got the idea to take the desks apart she said, "I thought that was what a good teacher would do."

Development

1.

Theresa wanted a house that no one else had lived in, so eight months ago they sat in the developer's office, choosing laminate for the countertops and hardware for the cabinets, each fixture so minutely different in his passing scrutiny, that Graham automatically defaulted to whatever she wanted. For him, this was how to be a good husband, to avoid fighting about the things he did not care about, but to agree instead, because he did, even after fifteen years of marriage, still like Theresa's smile.

They were part of the first wave, five new houses in the middle of Queen Valley Road that still smelled like cut wood and paint. The Thompsons across the street had come out to their driveway to watch the moving truck unload, their yard still coated in a green sticky spray that would somehow grow into grass. They had kids Astrid and Ben's age, and so did the Millers and the Paddocks. On either side of these houses were twenty-five unbuilt lots marked off by neon orange tape wrapped around wooden spikes, deterrents for anyone who wanted to walk around on something that did not belong to them.

The developer had only offered four options for floor plans, so it made sense that of the five houses, at least one would be repeated. The Prices had the only single-level home on the street and the Paddocks had decided to put their bedroom at the front of the house instead of upstairs, but the Thompson house directly across the street was a mirror image of Graham and Theresa's, so when he looked out the window to check on Ben as he barreled past the house in a game of space warriors with Owen Miller or to survey the cars full of potential second wave buyers, he saw his own home in replica and every time it made him wish that he had chosen

some part of his house, the gray vinyl siding or the sump pump or the bedroom doors, because maybe then he could have found a part of himself there. Instead, he just waited for the grass to take root.

2.

Astrid read books from the free public library, a one-story converted house with five rooms. She picked red or purple hardbacks or books with a ghost floating above a bed or a severed hand on the cover. Their old house had been walking distance from the library, and the bus used to drop her off there three days a week, but now Graham drove her there on Thursdays.

The cover of the book she was currently reading had a drawing of a man with an extra eye on the cover. It was open and in the middle of his forehead. His arms were raised. There were lines above him that seemed to signify a connection between his eye and the air, the ability to see something otherworldly. After three days of carrying that book under her arm, she announced that she would no longer ride in the car.

Astrid told the family she had a premonition that morning while she played in the woods behind their house, but instead of calling it playing she told them that she was collecting leaves to dry and mount. She had a premonition, she said. Not a dream, she clarified when Graham asked her, but a vision of herself riding in the car. She was sitting in the backseat, but she did not know who was driving or who else was there. What she remembered was the connection. The car drifting over the solid yellow line and colliding with one coming from the opposite direction. She heard the sound of metal scraping against metal and saw the broken window glass in her hair. Astrid said that she didn't know if she died, but she felt herself being flung from the car and landing on the concrete because a friend at school had told her that the law didn't require

backseat passengers to be buckled in. The problem was that she said this in a twelve-year-old way, all hand gestures and whine, because she had no other means of expressing things yet, even serious ones, even ones that really did scare her, and so Theresa responded by telling her that the day camp she would be going to every Monday and Wednesday during July was too far to walk, and that she would be fine if she just remembered to put on her seat belt.

Theresa would tell Graham later on that night that he needed to look more closely at the covers of the books Astrid checked out of the library because reading them, even when it was still light out, sitting in the front yard on the one patch of grass that had grown in, had put some sort of fear in her, but Graham had noticed the change in their daughter even before the premonitions. Astrid was losing her girlness, becoming more aware of her annoying personality traits (talking without commas or periods) and her morphing features (her nose and her knees had grown faster than the rest of her body), and with this awareness she was forfeited some of her luster.

Even in the fall, before the moving boxes and her birthday, she would tell ghost stories, at the dinner table and in the hallway upstairs, to anyone who would listen. Most of them were from the books she read, but some she made up herself. She would do the voices, unknowing that she should be embarrassed about this, but now the attentiveness of herself as a person, as a future woman, was finding its way into her body and it was making her more afraid to be in the world. Maybe Theresa did not see it because she had gone through this change herself, too, and so it seemed natural to her. Riding home from the library the Thursday before, Graham asked Astrid if she was okay. When she said that she was fine, he started to wonder if she was turning into her own ghost story, if she could even see herself in the mirror.

3.

During her shifts at D'Agostino's, she wore her hair braided in one thick strand that she would flip over her opposite shoulder when she carried a tray, a homocercal tail that she used for balance. He tried to think of her name, picture her gold-plated name tag with the black, block script in which every letter capital, but all he could think of was Lisa, which he knew was not right.

Now, at the bar, her hair was loose, but Graham could tell that she had worked that night because there was a thin line around her head where the ponytail holder had been. He learned to braid Astrid's hair when Theresa started working the overnight shift at the hospital. She did not complain, but he knew that he pulled her hair too tight whenever she let out a small hiss of breath, trying to work through the pain. Lisa self-consciously smoothed the line while she stood close by the stage listening to the band. That was why he was there too, a friend of his from work, Mike, was the bassist, so he came by himself early and sat at the bar to watch them fumble through the complex chords and rhythm changes of popular songs from the radio. She seemed to really love the way they played, the blue and red lights reflecting in her hair as she moved to the music, her smile intensifying with the loudness, but he could only focus on what was wrong.

As he drank his third beer, he felt himself glance over at Lisa. He looked at her for longer than he should, dance and laugh with one of her friends or push up the sleeves on her jean jacket when she got too hot. When she went to the bathroom, she slid in between people, dodged elbows, and had her foot stepped on. He scanned the room to see if anyone caught him staring. He knew he should not be, but he watched her to see if anything bad would happen because if

she fell down or got a nosebleed, he could pick her up or bring her a stack of napkins. Graham thought that Lisa was fragile, the type of person who needed to be taken care of.

The bar was full. It was the first really warm day of summer, and someone had propped open the front door to try and let the stagnate air escape, the music from Mike's band poured out into the parking lot, but the body heat stayed inside. Graham did not take off his jacket, though, because his wallet and keys were in the pockets. When he tried to talk to a couple that came up to the bar for a drink, he was feeling heavy and his question about the last song being a good one came out lethargic. The woman looked at him, cocked up her eyebrow in slow motion in the same way Theresa did when she was displeased with him.

Outside, Graham leaned against the door of his car and let the metal cool his body off, he felt his boots sink into the gravel parking lot. During their trip to last year's county fair, he and Theresa and Astrid and Ben were waiting inside the Gravitron for the ride to start, their backs resting against red foam padding damp from other people's sweat. Ben raised his arms over his head, pretending that the ride had already started and Astrid looked nervous. Theresa put a hand on her shoulder and asked if she wanted to get off, but she shook her head no. Graham did not really want to be on the Gravitron either. It was supposed to look like a spaceship inside, silver and domed, and rows of purple and green lights flashed to let them know that they were about to start moving. Gears lurked and they began to spin, slowly at first, soon the faces across from him blurred. There was a loud hiss as the hydraulics engaged and a system of metal poles below pushed the spaceship on its side. Graham tried to lift up his arms, but force kept them at his sides. Theresa let out a little whoop and Ben was screaming for it to go faster. When it was done, Astrid smiled and asked to go again.

Graham eyes were closed and he was leaning so intently on the car that he thought he would make the door pucker. The voice was a little too loud when he finally heard it, so she must have had to ask him a few times, “Hey, you okay?” It was Lisa, sweat had gotten rid of the line, and her hair had found its natural wave. Her jean jacket was tied around her waist. “You just looked a little out of it.” He said that he was fine, just needed a break, but that he was going back inside to finish watching the band. She smiled. It was the same one she used with her customers at D’Agostino’s.

4.

Graham was a product tester for a company that made contact lens. The night he stole the Thompson’s mail, he and his team were in the process of checking the durability of a new pair of fourteen-hour wears and he worked so late that, even with daylight savings, he had come home in the dark. They were having a family movie night, all five of them tightly fit on the couch, shoulder’s magnetized, and he wondered if his family had ever been that close. The new house was bigger, and maybe because they needed to fill up the space, he and Theresa and the kids never seemed to be in the same place at once. Graham wondered how the Thompsons did it, lived with each other. He crossed the newly paved road and took the *Pennysaver* out of their mailbox. The cover was a list, *Seven Tips for Safe Driving During Deer Season*, and a recipe for blueberry cobbler.

Graham had never committed a crime before. For some reason that was the way he saw it, as committing a crime, and for the next three days he reasoned that there must at least be some fine for stealing mail. He even thought about returning the small newspaper, putting it between the flag and the rounded metal because as a kid he had heard that it was illegal to open someone

else's mailbox. But nothing happened. Ed Thompson waved at him from his front porch, his youngest son hanging from his elbow. The next week, Graham took their electric bill, and after that, a letter from Pam's mother where she talked about her guilt for wishing Pam's father would die instead of having to go through another round of chemotherapy. He put his little collection in a shoebox and hid it behind his dress shirts in the closet. Every few days he would take out the letters and run his fingers over the stamps and the return addresses before hiding them again.

5.

Graham did not know if Astrid was being stubborn, or if she just did not want to be wrong, but two weeks later, she still had not gotten in the car, and the standoff between her and Theresa was growing. Her mother refused to let her ride her bike to the library or to the pool party her friend Ashley from school was having, but this only deepened Astrid's conviction and drove her farther into the woods each day. She would come back with leaves and bark and flowers. One day she brought home a caterpillar that she had found and left it in a jar in her room for three days, waiting to see if it would cocoon. When it did not, when all the leaves she had given it were eaten, she placed it on the sapling Theresa made Graham plant in their front yard. He tried to remember what it was like before he could drive a car, when he had to use his feet, his body, to get around, but he could not, having grown up in a small farming community where everyone drove by eleven or twelve.

She appeared from the woods one afternoon earlier than normal and went directly upstairs into her closet pretending she was not in the house at all, but when she could not find a shoebox, she asked him for one of his before disappearing back behind the tree line, the summer thickness making it impossible to see her once she stepped inside. Graham had not thought to

worry about her back there until then. Though it was directly behind the neighborhood, there were still animals back there. They had seen a heron and a snapping turtle when it rained, so he thought there might be something more dangerous as well, something with teeth. Yet the real reason he followed her was because he could not imagine what she did when he was not there, as if the only way for her to live was for him to see her do it.

Theresa wanted Graham to put up a fence, stacks of wood and a roll of chain link were lying on the now budding yard, but he had not begun to build it. He told himself it was because of work or the construction going on around him, but really, he was not sure if he wanted the house to be fenced in. He liked the openness into the paved street and having access to the trees behind him.

It did not take him long to find Astrid cross-legged by a large oak. Its branches, fully covered by newly developed leaves, were a perfect place to stay hidden. He figured that was why the robins had built their nest there in the first place, but the tree was older, covered in knots and twisted limbs, and when he saw Astrid lift the baby bird into the shoebox, her hand cupped around its small, hollow body, he knew that it had fallen. It was a myth. A bird will not abandon a hatchling that has been touched by a human. They do not have a highly developed sense of smell. In actuality, a bird only leaves its nest when it perceives a disturbance. Graham left the woods before Astrid saw him, because he realized that this was something she should do without him. He let her show him the flightless robin when she came home. They put a towel in the box and left it on a shelf in the garage. She fed the bird from a syringe every two hours and stayed up with it for most of the night.

6.

The police officer was standing in the foyer. Ben had let him in and was now showing him how he could jump from the third staircase step to the floor and still land on his feet. The officer was young, and out of politeness, he waited for Graham to walk in from the kitchen, completely unaware that there was anyone else in the house. Theresa was at the hospital, and he had been leaving Astrid alone in her room. When Graham saw the uniform, the badge place straightly above the heart, he felt as if he had done something wrong, like forgetting to pick Ben up from karate class one afternoon right after the move. He almost forgot to say, “Can I help you?” and “Would you like something to drink?” because he wanted to make sure that the young man stayed in the foyer. He did not want him to look at the unwashed pans in the sink or know that they left the tv on for background noise even when they weren’t watching it or skim through any of the closets. He did not want to invite him inside.

The officer was looking for the person who had vandalized one of the homes being built down the street. Someone had taken newly mixed driveway tar and painted it on an electrical box, causing it to short out. He said that the developer assumed several of the neighborhood children had done it. All they were after was financial compensation and did Graham think that either of his children could have been involved. He remembered seeing Owen Miller getting the mail that day before, routing around like he was looking for something, looking for the report card Graham had taken the night before, the one with the “D” in math, as he told the office that he did not think that either one of his children would have done something like that. He left quickly, giving him a card with a number to call in case either his son or daughter were involved and reiterated that the only thing they would have to do would be to pay for the damage. When Graham asked Astrid about it later, she said that she had been with Grace Miller and Eliza

Paddock when they got the idea to cover the electrical box with tar, but she didn't think it was right, so she just came home.

7.

Lisa's hair spread loosely over the pavement, and he stepped on a piece of it when he was trying to see if she was okay, really checking to see if she was alive. She wasn't, even though the blood was still running from where her forehead connected with the road. Graham had taken the back way home, the one with no cars and the fewest lights, because he wanted to avoid anything bad from happening. He was looking out for deer, especially as he rounded the corners, braking more than he needed to. Even if a police officer had pulled him over, he would understand that, slowing down for deer, a deer could take out your bumper. A deer could wreck your car. He had looked at the car. There was a little dent that he could pop out himself in the morning. People never walked on this road, especially at night. It was too winding, too vast, surrounded by the few remaining farms in the area. Children didn't walk on the road here because they knew they could be hit too easily. Even in the daylight, there were blind spots. He could not figure out why she was there. What he did not know was that she lived in a house fifty yards away hidden behind a clump of trees with her mother while she saved some money, or that the outside light was left on for her.

8.

The baby bird died after three days. Graham helped Astrid bury it inside the shoebox in the backyard, but that had not stopped her sadness. They placed a round gray stone on top of the grave so they would not forget where it was, Astrid cried. She cried all the next day too, and let

Theresa put an arm around her. Graham realized that she still really was young. He could not think of another way to cheer her up, so just as the sun was setting, he grabbed the keys from the counter and told her that he was going to teach her how to drive.

The racetrack was only about a mile away from their house. Betting stopped around seven because the horses could not run in the dark, so by the time they drove up the parking lot was empty, and the flood lights had come on. “You ready?” he asked her after she had gotten in the driver’s seat. She was wearing a purple oversized sweatshirt, her feet did not reach the pedals, and Graham worried that he had been too reactionary, but when she put the key back in the ignition and turned the car on without ever asking him if it was okay, he realized that he had underestimated her.

He grabbed onto the seat and pushed her forward as she lifted the lever, “I can reach now,” she smiled, and he directed her from park into drive.

“Just stay in a straight line at first,” he told her as she pressed down on the gas.

The car moved slowly, around five miles an hour, and Astrid held tightly to the milky plastic of the steering wheel, trying to focus on what was in front of her, an empty parking lot with hundreds of painted-on yellow lines. Graham told her to push the pedal down more and that she was doing fine. She did and it finally felt like they were moving. He rolled the windows down and little strands of her hair slipped out the opening. The radio was on low when the song ended the news minute came on. A reporter from Channel 8 said that the weather for the next day would be partly cloudy with a high of 79 and that a young woman had gone missing.

Graham let his mind wander with the movement of the car. He forgot for a second that Astrid was the one driving and that she had no idea how to turn, how to brake or signal. His eyes were half closed, the other half looking at the muddied track with the white wooden fence around

it, until he heard her yelling, not loud, but with worry. Astrid had taken her hands off the wheel and the car was heading directly towards the base of one of the flood lights. He tried to react, tried to reach over and turn the wheel away, but before Graham could do anything, the front bumper of the car knocked lightly against the concrete and both of them were jostled.

Astrid, still eeking, covered her face with her hands when he put the car into park and turned it off. They did not look at each other, but they both knew what happened was real. Graham got out of the car to look at the bumper. It was scrunched up and some of the paint had rubbed off onto the light post. Standing up, he saw Astrid through the windshield. She was staring back at him, waiting, and even though the windows were still down he mouthed the words, *Everything's okay*.

9.

The neighborhood did not have streetlights. There was a plan to install them after all the houses were built, but for now, Queen Valley was dark except for his headlights. He drove past the house and saw that there were no lights on there either, Theresa had not waited up for him. Graham was grateful that he would not have to explain where he had been. There was still police tape around the electrical box, left there as a warning. He pulled his car up onto Lot 63, the ground already torn up with tire tracks from the construction. A concrete mixer was parked in front and a hole dug ready to lay the foundation the following Monday.

He lifted Lisa's body out of the trunk like he used to pick up Astrid when she was sick, so her arms were around his shoulders and their chests were touching. If someone had seen them illuminated in the headlights, they would have thought Lisa and he were dancing. He started to hum one of the song's Mike's band had played. Her jean jacket was saturated in blood and earth,

and the laceration on her forehead looked like a third eye. Astrid had no more premonitions after she finished the book, and Graham realized that he never thought much about the future.

After laying her body down at the edge, he climbed down into the would be house. It was not hard to imagine where the rooms would be, the floor plan was the same as his own. He walked from the entry way down to the kitchen, passing the hall closet and the bathroom. When he left that night, Astrid was at the table feeding the baby bird and Theresa and Ben were watching a movie, something animated. He feigned obligation to Mike and to work, but really, he had not wanted to stay home. Graham found an abandoned shovel and picked a spot to dig. As he buried Lisa's body he built up the house around her, he poured the concrete and laid the brick, then he installed the insulation and plastered the walls and painted them the same color blue as her dress. He put up curtains and added gold fixtures, and finally hung a picture of her on the wall. When he finished burying her, he sat down in the kitchen and wondered what it would be like to live there.

Facewash

I keep a list of everything that is wrong with my face to remind myself what I need to work on:

- 1) Eyes different shapes.
- 2) And too far apart.
- 3) Flat nose.
- 4) Undefined cheekbones.
- 5) Mismatched eyebrows.
- 6) Extremely dry skin.

*

I have a habit when I am on the phone, I take my index finger and scrape excess skin from my face. Most of the time I do this without even thinking. I do it while I am talking to my brother. He tells me that my mother is dying of liver failure, but not to talk to her about it because she does not know that I know. When I hang up there is a small pile of my lifeless skin of the kitchen table.

*

I read in my favorite beauty blog, *The Winged Eye*, about a new technique called skin confusion, where you change all your creams, serums, and masks each month to make your skin more responsive. The facewash is stocked meticulously on the shelf at the drug store, flanked by other liquids and gels, I am instantly drawn to its mate coral packaging because it is the same color as the comforter I bought recently online. Looking around, I push the bottle from the ledge into my purse and leave the store. At home, I examine the bottle, *Relieves Dry, Itchy Skin* is written in flowery cursive at the bottom.

*

My best friend Cassandra is really into body positivity. She tells me my face looks fine, but if I want, she can teach me to do cat eye mascara so my eyes look closer together.

*

The packaging on the facewash is complex. At first, it is impossible to find the tearaway on the plastic wrapping that covers the top. I turn the bottle around several times before the light from the bathroom mirror catches the dainty row of eyelets. My nail catches when I attempt to peel back the edge of the perforated strip and chips. My nails are break easily and I had been trying to grow them out for weeks. I squeeze the bottle, but nothing comes out, so I unscrew the cap and find a small, silvery cover vacuum-sealed to the opening. I take the dull end of my toothbrush and stab until it penetrates the wrapper. I toss the toothbrush on the counter, a small bit of peachy facewash on the handle, and work my thumbnail into the sliver it has created to push back the rest of the packaging before twisting the cap back on. This sort of procedural femininity has always aggravated me.

After I wash my face, I apply moisturizer and an eye serum sample from Cassandra's stash. "Take it," she said about the small product tester bottle, "I have so much of this shit. I still have three of those left. Plus, I didn't like it that much, anyway." I'm not sure if it helps, but the skin around my eyes is tighter. When I don't sleep well, it prevents those dark purple, squishy bags.

I haven't been sleeping well lately. When I wake up in the middle of the night, I go into the bathroom to look at my face. Stretching out my skin under the vanity lights, it is already starting to look better.

*

I have been using the facewash three times a day for a week. *The Winged Eye* says that washing your face three times a day ensures that all the dead skin cells will be removed from your face. After I use it in the morning, I put on a moisturizer with hyaluronic acid and at night I use a retinol cream.

*

My mother calls me in the middle of the night. This is not unusual. I pick up because I know she will keep calling. Half asleep, I have a hard time remembering how I am supposed to answer a phone call. After a few second lag, I hold it up to my ear and say “Hello”. My mother does not breath, she does not ask how I am, but instead tells me that she has just finished reading an article about dressing for your body type in some women’s magazine. The last time I saw my mother there were books and magazines stacked in every corner of her apartment. She told me it was because she liked to keep track of what she’s read. Magazines made for women make me think of aprons and poufy skirts and inedible dinners, and I stop listening to her for a second to think about the fact that without the invention of the vacuum cleaner there would be no carpeted living rooms.

When I tune back in, she’s saying, “You’re a pear shape. I compared a photo of you to the diagram and you’re a pear. It’s an unfortunate shape, small bust, wide hips. I’m not criticizing. I’m a pear, too. You got it from me.” My mother has always made comparisons. Besides comparing the two of us, she has also made lists of the similarities and differences between brands of lipstick, always in the color mauve, which is what she wears, even at home by herself, and between different brands of gin. She relies on careful evaluation of these products because she does not trust other people’s opinions. She tells me I should wear A-lines and bell sleeves.

*

After I hang up with my mother, I try for thirty minutes, but I cannot sleep. When this happens, I look for ways to entertain myself, that's why I can turn thirty-six times in a row before I get dizzy. Tonight, I decide to go for a drive. I am in the car for twenty minutes before I find something open, a gas station, red and yellow and backlit. It's an overload of florescent light. I park off to the side where no one can see me and make sure to lock the doors. I like that all gas stations are designed the same. I already know my way around.

When I open the door a bell rings, but the man at the counter is already looking in my direction. He doesn't talk but allows his head to follow me for a little while. I start to collect things, not normal things that you would get at a gas station, like chips or something to drink, but all random stuff that no one ever seems to buy. I have a key chain with a fuzzy pink ball on the end looped through my finger, the snout, felt eyes, and a curly-q tall are haphazardly glued on. There are camouflage baseball caps with lettering machine stitched in. I pick up one that says *Just Livin'* and place it on my head. Finally, I get this As-Seen-on-TV miracle towel that is supposed to soak up a gallon of liquid before it needs to be rung out. I have never seen it on TV, but I'm interested to see if it really works.

The cashier pretends to check his phone, but I know he continues to watch me as I shop. As I walk to the counter, I hope he will make some comment about my face, like how nice my skin is or that I look fresh, even for four a.m., but he just picks up the scanner and starts ringing up my items. "Do you like this hat?" I ask, and he gives me an unconvincing "Yeah" as he holds the scanner up to my head. The cap rings up as \$8.73 with tax, and I think that's a deal. On the checkout counter is a small shelf with fruit. It looks like he has just set out new bananas and

apples. They are unbruised and colorful. While the cashier grabs me a bag from underneath the counter, I take a pear and put it in my purse.

*

When I wake up in the morning, Cassandra is sitting on the couch, her feet propped up on the cushions so that her legs form “V” shapes. When we hang out I often find myself studying her legs. They are thick, but do not jiggle at all when she walks, and they lead to hips that have substance. I think her whole identity is wrapped up in her legs. She walks heavy on them, with long strides, and she’s always showing them off. Today she is wearing shorts. Her shins are so moisturized that they shine.

*

My skin is different. The dry patches are almost completely gone, so instead of picking at them, I rub my whole hand over my cheek and admire how soft it is. In between washes it’s all I can think about. I think that I’m changing. My skin is a different color, pinker. Maybe my entire cellular make up has changed. Parts of me have shifted and I wonder if I am still recognizable.

*

When I talk to my brother, he reminds me that mom is sick and it’s good that I’m answering her calls. I remember watching her put makeup on when I was growing up. She went out most Fridays, always with a full face. The remnants of blush and lipliner still on her face on Saturday mornings. When I was eleven, she was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. My brother wants to split the cost of her casket.

*

It’s only been a week, but I have run out of facewash and it’s out of stock at the drugstore where I bought it. When I ask a salesclerk if they are getting any in, she tells me that they get

deliveries on Tuesdays. I have to go to three different places before I find a bottle at the beauty supply store. Before I check out, I walk up and down every aisle. I put a Vitamin-C serum and a pore reducing mask I read about on the *Winged Eye* in my basket.

There is a woman in the parking lot when I come back outside. She's about the same age as me and has one of those overly exposed foreheads, so large that you cannot tell if she's attractive or extra-terrestrial. The woman is not paying attention to me at first, focused more on the list of things she needs to buy. I can see her mouthing these items and assigning them each a finger. I know that she is out of toothpaste. As we close in on each other, I see her looking at me. As I pass by her, she says, "You have great skin," without even looking at me.

The Unlocked Door

Mrs. Oppenheimer told Penny that the street was exactly four miles from the realty building where she had given her the keys, so she kept the overhead light on as she drove, watching the odometer. It was exactly where the landlady said it would be, indicated with a half-needed pine that drooped to the left instead of a street sign, the road where her new house was. It was a sort of neighborhood, four houses, each rectangular and a single-story, separated by an acre or so of land and a strategically planted row of trees, meant for people who did not like communal spaces. There was the road out front, thick and well-paved, but Mrs. Oppenheimer had told her when she called with an interest in the property, that it didn't really connect any one town to another, and so it was mostly empty, except for the people that lived there. But what had really drawn Penny to the house was the woods behind it. In the photos that she had sent her, the trees were so dense that nothing was visible behind or above them, she could not even see the sky, and looking at them in a picture, she felt the barrier they created between her and anything else, and she knew that she wanted to live there.

Penny did not know how to navigate moving three states away. Mapping out their loves had always been James's job. The cardboard boxes squeaked, rubbing together as she turned into the driveway of the third house. In the half-light she could see that one of the shutters was hanging by a single hinge and the grass unmowed. Shapeless and unruly, it consumed the bottom of the house and she imagined it growing up over the structure and the trees rooting up into the lawn until the entire things was given over to the land. Instead of the cheerful yellow from Ms. Oppenheimer's photos, the whole property looked uncared for, and Penny thought the pictures she saw must not have been recent. She parked and took her duffle bag out from the trunk.

The only source of light was a dual hood lamp over the side door, and when she walked over she found that it was open. There was no lock, the knob was one that belonged on a closet door. She did not feel unsafe because no one had ever walked into her house who was not supposed to be there. Inside, she dropped her bag on the kitchen linoleum, the kind that was meant to look like tile, but was instead flat squares with small purple flowers inside of them, and though she had every intention of going back out to the car and getting the boxes, of finding her room and unpacking the sheets and the book that James used to read before bed, Penny sat down at the kitchen table, perhaps the sturdiest object she had come across so far, and, without realizing it, fell asleep, because, for some reason, she already felt comfortable there.

*

The banging woke her up. It was not quick and sharp, but methodical as if the sound had purpose. She was not afraid at first, but when Penny lifted her head, the woman startled her. She was wearing gray coveralls, zipped down exposing wrinkly skin that had once been cleavage, and her hair was unruly, some strands were gray or white and others were red, with curls and straight pieces, all unbrushed, forming a wispy coronet around her face as she trooped down the row of kitchen cabinets, opening them one-by-one and shutting them with a muscular force to deliberately wake up Penny. The only appealing part of her was her mouth, flower-dipped and full, it looked like you would enjoy it if she ate you alive, and when she saw Penny gapping at it, she stopped what she was doing and gave her a little smile, just wide enough to show her four front teeth.

“What are you doing here?” Her stance wide, Penny could see the several different scenarios playing out in her head as she eyed the broom in the corner waiting for an answer.

“I’m your new roommate. The landlady didn’t tell you I was coming?”

“Roommates sleep in beds.” Her body soften as she moved closer to the table, still unwilling to sit down.

“Sure. I don’t know what happened. I didn’t quite make it that far. Is there tea in the house? Maybe I’ll just have a water. I’m Penny. I don’t know what happened. Next time I’ll make sure to fall asleep in my own bed.”

“Moira. I already have the bedroom at the front of the house, so you’ll have to take the one in the back. It’s almost four, you should probably sleep there now.”

The back bedroom already had a four-post bed, a mattress, and a dressing table with an oval mirror. Furniture left behind by former tenants. When Mrs. Oppenheimer had told her that the house came furnished, she had expected new things, chairs and rugs that the landlady had bought herself. Instead, the furniture came from other people, the wooden and plastic viscous with their problems and worries, so it felt almost like they were all still there. If she would have been more awake, Penny would have wondered about them, what they looked like and why they left what they did behind, if Moira had driven them off, or if they had left because it was time to go, time to make a change in their lives, just like Penny had decided to do a little over a month before in the black dress that didn’t quite fit anymore. It was the only one she owned, so she wore it, uncomfortable as she cried over James’s body. After the funeral she had thrown it away. She had thrown almost everything away. She laid down on the sheetless mattress and took Moira’s advice. It had been Penny’s biggest fear that John would die quietly when she was not home. Her normal way of saying goodbye was telling him not to die while she was gone, so it felt like a self-fulfilling prophecy when she found him, post-aneurism, in the recliner. She wished all the time that he was still here.

When she woke up, Penny noticed a small rectangle of sun brightening up the hardwood. The sun was coming through the small window in a door that connected Penny's room to the backyard. She got out of the bed and saw that this knob was the same kind that was on the side door. Penny touched it gently at first, deciding in her sleepiness whether to open it now or later, and then she grabbed the knob, rougher than she had intended to, spread all five of her fingers over the metal so that she had a handle on the entire surface, and turned. She let in the air, the sun not high enough to warm it yet, she let in the sad crunchy grass and a crumbling shed, and she let in the trees, which seemed to come through the door, with the smell of pine and earth, and grow up through the bed and the dressing table, to root in the floor, and for a second, Penny made believe that she was in the forest, hidden.

*

When Penny went outside to unload the boxes from her car, Moira was already outside reclined in a rubbery lawn chair, sunning herself. Really just sitting in the sun, since the caftan she was wearing covered most of her body, and for the rest was high-level sunblock and large framed glasses. What was strange to Penny was that she looked less frightening. Her hair was combed and pulled back and the skin on her chest seemed smoother. It was probably just the light, but Penny thought there might be something wrong with Moira, maybe a degenerative disease. She did not offer to help Penny unload her things but watched her as she walked back and forth between the car and her bedroom by way of the lawn, which, in its length, kept getting caught in her sandals as she walked, so that every time she lifted her foot, she unearthed several of the blades at the root.

“The lawn's really long.”

“You could mow it,” she said so assuredly that she seemed as if she would shallow Penny whole.

Penny, hesitant to admit anything to a person she barely knew, “I’m...I’m a little bit scared of the lawnmower.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

Unsure if Moira was trying to intimidate her, or that was just the way she was, Penny started back into the house when she saw on the neighbors elevated deck, a completely naked woman, but with the noise that came out of her it seemed as if she had seen an animal, a wolf, or something else sharp and predatory.

Moira sat up at this and said, “When the girlfriend comes over, she doesn’t where any clothes.”

“So, you’ve seen her like that before?”

“Yep.”

Have you ever said anything?”

“What for?”

“So you just watch her.”

“There isn’t anything else to look at.”

After Moira went to work that night, Penny, in the kitchen making a box of macaroni and cheese she had replaced with a post-it note she had written *Owe you one* on, kept staring out the window, looking for the girlfriend, but pretending that she was psyching herself up to cut the grass, wondering why someone would walk around naked knowing that other people could see them, and then she realized it was purposeful. She drawn to the window, convincing herself that

she was looking at something she wasn't, so she ate the macaroni and cheese, in a bowl, with a spoon, as it got darker and darker outside.

The girlfriend set off the motioned-censored lights on the deck, still naked from the waist up, but wearing cutoffs now. She began to collect the towels that hung over the railing of the deck. Her nakedness a chore like cleaning a bathroom or folding a towel, just something that had to be done, and in her matter-of-factness, with the towels now collected and slung over the crux in her elbow, the boyfriend came outside and wrapped his arms around her, grabbing her and the towels with bright green stripes and yellow polka dots into a meaningful hold, one that she sunk into without thinking, without protest because her own arms were full. She looked up at him and laughed and he kissed her. But the sun was completely down and the flood light kept flickering on and off because as they were kissing, and without cognizance, Penny crawled up on the counter, the bowl of half-eaten macaroni and cheese still in her hand. She watched their mouths opening and closing around one another and, for a second, Penny ignored who she was. The boyfriend maneuvered around the towels and found the zipper to her cut off shorts. She was naked again, Penny feeling like she knew the woman's body better than her own, and she remembered how easy it had been to take off her clothes in front of James, the first time, every time, because he came with such little judgement of her. He did not notice the puckers in her thighs or mole that changed shape on her back. He did not focus on the small imperfections of her body that she did, but told her that her mouth, when she said the word *forest*, was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Penny had watched their bodies morph into something subhuman and raw as he found his way inside her, but there had also been something delicate between them, after, as he held onto her body, draped over the railing where the towels had been, for much longer than he should

have, so later, brushing her teeth, she felt a twinge of shame for having stared so long at something so personal. Looking at her own face in the mirror, noticing the torn collar of James's old t-shirt and the bags that had formed under her eyes, she did not recognize herself. She was disorganized without the parameters of her old life, and she thought that if James saw her now, he would be disappointed in how messy she had become. With the knots in her hair, she had started to look like Moira on the first night with the cabinets. There was something unsettling about her roommate. Moira was memorable and forgettable in the same moment, spitting toothpaste into the sink, she had the uncomfortable sense that she was being lured in by her.

*

It was still dark when the door to the backyard opened. The motion of it against the floor woke Penny up and when she looked over, she saw a figure backlit by the floodlamp. "Moira?"

"Hey there, Copper Penny."

That's not right, she told herself, *I need to buy a bedside lamp because that's not right*. Penny got out of bed and walked right past the open door to get to the bedroom light. After she turned it on, she waited a moment before turning back around. She breathed, and when she looked, James had already shut the door. He was standing strangely, with his hands in his pockets, but since he should not have been there anyway, Penny hardly noticed that he was not like himself. She put her hands on his chest and neck. He felt real. Solid, not like something she had made appear with her wanting.

"I can't believe that you're here."

"I am." He brought up his arms and put them on her shoulders. It was almost a hug, almost holding on, and she thought that there should be an armful of towels between them to cushion this re-meeting.

She looked at the line where his forehead met his hair. There was something different about James, his teeth were pointer and he was more relaxed, but she had heard that death changed a person. What Penny did not want to do was make eye contact with him, afraid that if she looked directly at him, he would disappear. They sat on the edge of the bed. Penny turned over his hand so that his palm was exposed and used her index finger to draw a little house. It was something that they would do back when James was alive. He was supposed to guess what shape she was making, but after tracing the outline of the house again and again, James pulled his hand away. Before, he loved to guess what she was making, and almost always guessed right.

*

When Penny walked into the kitchen the following morning, clouded from the previous night, trying to figure out if her time with James had been real or imagined, Moira was there drinking coffee. Each time she took a sip, she replaced what she had drunk with creamer from the carton that was out on the table. The house, the kitchen, the air, still felt off, and she leaned, somewhat for balance, against the door frame between the hallway and the room, almost gawking at Moira. She did not know why, but she thought that her skin seemed smoother, the creases on her chest rubbed out, her chin rounded and her hair more red. These changes didn't seem possible, a person could not change their appearance day-to-day, she must have seen her wrong when Moira had woken her up her first night in the house, or that maybe she was seeing her wrong now. The haziness of the night before must be skewing her perception. Moira either didn't notice or didn't care that Penny was looking at her, she just sipped and refilled and sipped and refilled until Penny offered up, "I think I saw my dead husband last night." To which she said, "That can happen with the dead."

It was late afternoon before Penny felt righted. She did not know how to prevent dreams, but she knew that seeing James again in any form would just confuse her more. Whenever she worried, like she was now, about falling asleep or then about accidentally killing a deer at night with her car, James would say, *Actions help*, so she learned to change the headlights. After she felt better, Penny went out to the shed and found a doorknob with a lock and key and a charged up power drill, and even though she had never done anything like it before, she changed the knob on the door to her bedroom that led to the backyard. There was relief in knowing that there was something between her and the mattress where she was certain she had sat with James the night before. As she screwed in the new doorknob, burnished and without fingerprints, she told herself that dreams could feel authentic. When she was finished, Penny threw up a little bit in the grass, the long blades hiding what she had done, and blamed the sickness on spoiled creamer.

*

She remembered locking the door, but when she woke up just after four in the morning, she found James standing above the bed.

“You’re back.”

He walked over and unlocked the door, pulling it open, he said, “Get up. There’s something I want you to see.”

There was more excitement in his voice than normal. There had been things that enlivened James, hiking out of the Grand Canyon and jelly-filled donuts, but he spoke about them with a steady passion, like everyone felt the same way he did about suburban sprawl and poisoned fish. He was never monotone, but in this ghostly interaction, because she was starting to believe that she was seeing a ghost, James was more inflective than he had ever been when she knew him. Somehow though, this did not stop her from rising out of the bed, getting a

sweatshirt from the dresser and following him outside. Even if he was not real, the thing he wanted to show her probably was.

Her sneakers, roughly slipped on without socks, felt heavy in the dewed grass. She tripped a little and damned the overgrown grass. James was a few paces ahead of her, his long strides visible in the light from the side of the house. He walked straight back into the woods, and she followed him, her steps becoming easier. What Penny liked about the smell of pine was that it smelled the same whether it was real or artificial. She reached up in to touch the needles and a few of the dying ones fell off into her hands. In the darkness, she watched for James's outline to know where to place her feet. They walked through the density of tree for what seemed to Penny like a mile, and when they got to a patch of knotted roots and loose rocks, James reached out for her hand.

He stopped abruptly, not in a clearing, but in a small space where the trees had refused to grow. The moonlight came angularly through the pines, enough so she could see his face. It was the first time she had really looked at it since he had come back. His eyes were still brown and the scar on his forehead was still there. He still looked like the picture she had on her bedside table. Penny didn't know why she wanted him to look different, but he did not. Even in the darkness he was oddly the same.

“We're here,” he smiled.

“Where?”

She saw it before she realized that it was what he wanted to show her, a deer, antlered and dead in the middle of the trees. Looking down, away from the fresh carcass, she swelled with the horror that James had brought her here for this, to see at a body, just like she had seen his body, in a casket, unmoving. A piece of the animal's stomach was missing, carved out by the

pointed teeth of some predator, and that is when she understood that the deer had been stalked here and consumed.

*

Penny woke up the next morning, sicker than the day before. She thought that this would have been how the deer felt, trying unsuccessfully to wait for the wolf, but the deer felt like a dream, something she had imagined, with a bite mark taken perfectly out of its middle. That was not how wolves killed deer. They went for the neck first and then the stomach. They ate them. They were food. Wolves did not kill deer for spite. She thought that she should probably go find it again, in the daylight, but she was not sure how to retrace her steps back through the forest.

Willing herself to feel better, Penny had decided to cut the grass. She could not fit the pieces of the last several nights together, and after tripping on an especially overgrown patch on the way to the mailbox, she imagined each stalk severed by the circling blades of the lawnmower, and it made her feel better. After finding it in the shed, she wheeled the mower to the corner of the backyard and paused before pulling the cord that started the engine. She had to reach her whole body down to grab it, her face close to the machinery, but it did not start at first, she extended the cord three times before it caught. The motor filled up the yard, it drowned out a jumping squirrel and the air-conditioning unit attached to the house, and when Penny moved it forward it was the only thing she could see. Later, when she was all bandaged up, she would say that it happened because she could not stop staring at the cut blades propelling themselves from beneath the lawnmower, chopped in half, the grass smell making her believe that this was actually her yard. Later, when the doctor asked how she had run over her own toes all she could tell him was that she had cut outside the lines.

Moira found her yowling in the back yard, her shoe ripped open at the top, with the middle two toes of her right foot cut off. In the car of the way to the hospital, all her roommate could do was comment on the fact that both of them had been cut off cleanly. They were in an ice-filled plastic baggy resting between her legs. At the emergency room, she held the bag tightly in her right hand and stared at the bloody towel wrapped around her foot, wishing that James was there because he knew their insurance information from memory. Moira sat with her, told her it was the endorphins, and that someone would be out to get her soon. Penny did not know it until then, but she liked Moira, who now looked like some sort of forest nymph, her hair tendrilled in alternating rows of gray and red and her face, well-lit from every angle, seemed to be painted on. In the middle of the waiting room, Penny rubbed her cheeks, wondering if it was possible for a person's face to change so much in just a few days, but then she thought that maybe she had never actually seen Moira until now, and while they waited her roommate told her about how the weakest and oldest wolves set the speed for a traveling pack. The doctor sewed her toes back, gave her a Velcro boot to put over them, and told her she would be in more pain in the morning. Back at the house, Moira helped her get ready for bed. When Penny asked her about going to work, she told her that she had called in sick to take care of her.

*

James woke her up when he pulled back the sheets. He did not appear the night she was injured, but he had come the three nights after, each time lifting the cover off her foot and examining the boot. Even though she had not wanted him to, on the first night he undid the straps and took it off, her foot was shrunken and sweaty and the toes were held on with thick metal stitches that made her feel like she was part machine. "They'll scar," he told her, touching one of the pointy metal edges, and that excited her because she knew that she was different now, like he

was, so somehow they could occupy this space together without her questioning whether or not he was real because she didn't really care anymore if he was.

“What if I was someone else?” he asked her, bolstered on the pillow.

“I already think of you like a different person.”

“So you wouldn't mind?”

“I guess not.”

She reached over and kissed him for the first time since he died. His mouth seemed like it was shaped differently, more oval, wider, and she tried to match the creases in his lips with her own. They kissed for a long time, like they had never done it before, until Penny took off his shirt and then her own. Then there were hands and tongues on skin and collarbones and belt buckles, and once they were completely naked Penny reached down and bit his stomach because she wanted to leave a piece of herself on him. James hesitated, just looked at her and touched near his bellybutton where her teeth had been. Penny did not care about any of the questions that rolled through her head because she had missed him even in the short time he was gone, so she grabbed his hand and put it between her legs as a way to get things started again, as a way to say that it was alright. She laid down, her head hanging off the bed, and drew him on top of her. His face was familiar, but the sex was not, mistempoed and blissfully strange, it was how she wanted to remember it. Every sound she made, each yelp and moan and sucked in breath, was completely genuine. Was he the wolf, she wondered, or was she?

*

This was becoming her routine, going from the bedroom to the kitchen in the morning, finding Moira already settled into her breakfast, but when she got to the kitchen, she saw them. This mixture of James and Moira, his hair and arms with her height and smoothed skin, and even

though they shrouded themselves behind one of the cabinet doors, she could tell that they had coalesced into some being that was between both of them. It was Moira that kept coming to her room. The forest. Last night. After her shift at work before she went to bed, a therianthrope, she changed into James walked around the outside of the house and came through Penny's lockless door.

“What happened to your last roommate?”

“I changed into her dad.”

There was still blood on the lawn and the grass still curled over her feet as Penny, still in her pajamas, still in her boot with stitches, made her way into the woods. She had not known what to say to Moira, if she owed her words at all. The pines seemed crinkled and dried out under the sun. They poked her as she walked through them and she could smell was the dirt they had rooted themselves in, it was coming out their needles. The boot should have slowed her down, but she pressed it hard against the knobs and earth, and she felt stabilized, like she was on a manmade trail. Moira was James and James was Moira, and thinking about them tangled together in the kitchen, a comfortable space, she felt like the house was theirs, not hers like she had been trying to make it for weeks. The locks on the doors didn't matter and neither did the grass, because Moira and James had found a way in, and as she walked she felt overgrown and stuck to herself.

Homemade Monsters

It was her mother's idea for Mya to get a summer job. She said it would be a productive way to use her time. Over the last year she had started to describe things as *productive* or *not productive*. Her mother would say something like *I don't think that would be very productive*, instead of telling Mya that she could not do something or go somewhere. Instead of dealing in the absolutes of *yes* and *no*, Mya's mother focused on productivity. She thought that maybe her mother worried that she would not follow any of the new rules, since she had spent so much time last year pushing back curfews and ignoring punishments, but she wanted to tell her mother that last year was different, that she was just acting on her emotions, like she believed anyone in love would do, and that she was not a bad person or that she had not wanted to disobey her, and that she had no more emotions left after what had happened at school, but she could not figure out how to tell her mother any of that. So she focused on being productive.

Dale, the mini-golf course's manager, had trained her how to use the cash register, clean the clubs, and unstick the neon-colored balls that got lodged in the tube connecting the top part of the eleventh hole to the bottom, and was now laying on his stomach at the edge of the eighteenth hole, "See," he grabbed her arm and pulled her gently down next to him on the ground, the skin on her cheek burned as it rubbed against the Astroturf, "There's a really small incline," and she agreed with him even though to her the whole surface seemed flat. She thought no one ever made the eighteenth hole in one shot because they had to bank the ball off a plastic taxi cab at a perfect 45 degree angle in order to send it through a small opening at the base of the buildings, but she did not say this, even after she stood up, even after he had handed her a club and coaxed her, unwillingly, to take the shot, because Dale had worked at the miniature golf course since he was younger than her, past graduation and into adulthood, and she knew that

keeping this secret was what he was most proud of, “That’s why no one has made the shot in about twenty years,” he said, “It’s not really fair, but every place needs a gimmick.”

The buildings were just a row of black cubes painted to look like five-foot tall skyscrapers with opaque windows that lit up after it got dark, but as she put the ball on the right-hand divot of the starting mat, she imagined that she was in the middle of a real city, that it was loud and there was a person next to her, and she realized that people really could believe anything. Aiming for the tiny yellow car, she connected the club to the ball and then watched as it bounced off the buildings and rolled back almost to where it started.

“What happens when someone does?”

“Does what?” he had rolled over onto his back and Mya thought that someone might mistake them for a couple.

“Makes a hole-in-one?”

“The monster comes out.”

“What kind of a monster?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen it.”

*

Every weekend in the fall she went to her friend April’s dead grandmother’s house. April’s mom was paying her and April and Tonya ten dollars an hour to pack up the dead grandmother’s things so the family could get it ready to sell, but the girls mostly sat around the living room cross-legged, talking about school and examining each knickknack or throw pillow in search of why anyone would want it, before putting the grandmother’s things in the cardboard boxes the April’s mother had left by the door. One day, when they were in the kitchen eating from the same bag of chips, but mostly doing nothing, Tonya walked over to one of open boxes

and turned to make a goofy face at them before she plunged half her body inside. Mya and April laughed while Tonya fished through the grandmother's old clothes. She pulled out a dress with green flowers and lace around the collar and the sleeves and put it on over her clothes, several sizes too big and too short. The grandmother and Tonya had different body types. Mya laughed harder as she pretended to model the dress, crossing her legs over each other as she walked up and down the hallway, but April got mad and told her to take it off. Tonya said she was sorry and April told them that even though her grandmother had been dead for two months, every time she walked in the house it still felt like she was there. Tonya hugged April while she forced herself not to cry. When neither of the girls were looking, Mya put the green dress in her backpack.

Her mother picked her up after her shift and asked Mya how her first day had gone. She told her it was fine, but not about the monster, even though she still wondered what it looked like. When they got home, Mya went directly to her room. Her family used to eat meals together, but now they haunted each other. Never in the same room at once, they just listened to each other watch TV or shower. Mya saw her brother's leg as it rounded a corner or heard her father's voice through the walls. Now she assembled all of her meals, cereal and milk, cheese and crackers, because she did not know how to make anything on her own.

When Mya was too focused on something she had this ritual where she circled around her bedroom touching the corners of every piece of furniture and magazine clippings that she had hung up to cover the pink wallpaper that she had hated for about two years. The last thing she touched was a picture of her and April and Tonya that she kept lodged in the corner of the mirror above her dresser she should have already thrown away.

Usually the circle, putting her hands on something that she understood, helped her forget whatever she was thinking about, but even after making two passes through the room, she could

not get the idea of seeing the monster out of her head. She imagined something brute, hairy with jagged teeth and horns, that could survive wholly on its own by eating concrete or arms, moss or human hair. She smiled when she thought about its versatility and pictures its nest in the sewers below the block city. Taking her old biology notebook from the floor, Mya went into the closet. She took off the khaki shorts and purple polo with the miniature golf course's logo embroidered on the front, sat on top of the pile of dirty clothes and made a sketch of the monster. When she was done she ripped out what she had drawn and lodged it in the mirror above the photo.

*

There were three boys from her biology class at the golf course and Mya followed behind them with a broom pretending to sweep the Astroturf. It was her second day. Dale was on his lunch break, and she overheard one of them call her *amphibious* when they were walking out the door that led to the course even though it was under his breath. She knew that she was supposed to stay behind the counter until Dale got back from the gas station, but she wanted to hear what else they said about her.

Mya had always willed herself to be different. Even though she had been a little squeamish during frog dissection, she made herself match Tonya's level of confidence, pulling the organs out of the small body, using a pair of tweezers with such precision that by the end of biology class she wondered what other animals she could look inside of. After the experiment the three boys told them they were murderers, which Tonya refuted as asinine, since the frogs were already dead, instead of apologizing for not being as delicate as April, who had refused to participate in the lab. Lagging behind them, it did not make sense to Mya that she cared so much about what they thought of her, but she had the idea that if she could just explain to them what happened they would understand.

The boys were vaporous, moving from hole three to hole eleven, and then back through the middle, taking advantage of the fact that no one else was there because the miniature golf course was only busy on the weekends. The seventh hole was a rainforest scene and when she caught up with them there, she saw the one who had called her names hanging from the branches of an aluminum coated tree. There was a parrot noise that came through the ground speakers, but no parrot. Dale had told her that the birds were supposed to be flying overhead. She hid behind a disproportionately large plastic sloth, and as she did, she ran her fingers over its long claws as she spied on the boys, who suddenly seemed to her like rat kings, lurking through a place that was hers. She had picked the golf course because she thought that she would never see anyone that she knew. The only people who came to putt-putt were grandparents who did not know what else to do with their grandchildren when they came to visit.

Mya felt bold, like she had when she cut out the frog's lungs and lightly tossed them on the table. When she told April about it later, her friend's reaction was to yell the word *gross* and reiterate that she was glad she had not been there. "You can't be up there," she felt herself saying, even though she did not come out from behind the sloth.

"We know you've been following us, weirdo. I can see you hiding behind that rat from up here."

"It's a sloth." Mya stepped out onto the seventh hole green.

"You would know," one of the other boys said, "You're so good at animal stuff."

"Yeah, a real murderer." The boy jumped down from the tree. "You and Tonya are real murderers." Tonya had taken the empty frog carcass from the biology lab wrapped inside a paper towel and stuffed it in the outside pocket of her backpack. Mya did not know how she learned

the boy's combination, and he never did find the body, so when he opened his locker the smell of formaldehyde would ooze into the hallway.

Mya thought about the monster hiding underneath the eighteenth hole and she wondered if she could somehow reverse the mechanism and instead of having the monster rise up, she could make herself sheet thin and sink below the cube city. While she was thinking of this, the third boy, the one who never spoke to her took one of the plastic frogs that was suctioned to a branch and threw it at her. It hit her in the face before they all ran away, leaving the clubs splayed on the ground, waiting for her to clean up.

*

Mya never should have told April and Tonya about seeing April's dead grandmother's ghost. Now, looking through the old Halloween costumes in the attic, she was not actually sure that she had seen her at all. Maybe she had made her up, like she made up the monster.

April asked Mya to clean out the bedroom by herself because she did not like the way the room felt. She said that she expected to walk in and find her grandmother sitting in the rocking chair in the corner or taking a nap underneath the mauve blanket trimmed with mauve fringe. So Mya was inside the closet, taking all of the old woman's clothes off of the hangers and stuffing them into large, black garbage bags. There were so many outfits, all brightly colored, that Mya had over filled the bags and there were little holes in all of them. When she appeared, April's grandmother was wearing the same green dress that Tonya had put on, which was why Mya believed she was a ghost, since the actual dress was underneath a pile of dirty clothes in her own bedroom. The woman, almost gray and dark and sort of squiggly like a poor signal, was sitting on the edge of the bed fixing the hem of the dress with a needle and thread.

She stopped briefly and looked up at Mya and said, “Everyone should know how to make something.” The girl watched the woman for several minutes poke the needle into the frayed edge of the dress, pull it up through the top, and then loop it before making another minute hole with the needle until the hem was repaired. After studying the grandmother, Mya figured that it was something she could do herself.

She found her brother’s old werewolf costume and cut it open down the middle, so it looked like the skin of a dead animal splayed on the floor. There was supposed to be a plastic mask that fit underneath the hood of the one-piece, but she remembered that her brother had bent it back and forth until it tore in half and that the pieces had ended up in the garbage less than a month after he wore it. She did not know why she remembered unimportant details like this, like that April was allergic to raspberries, but she did, not realizing that it made her more human. She took the ears off the costume with scissors and replaced them with plastic bat wings and when she found the horn from her old unicorn costume, she broke it in half and put the sides in front of the wings. Then she attached a pair of vampire teeth to the end of the hood. Lifting up the mass, she put her arms through the sleeves and let the limp legs and body hang around her. Without looking in a mirror, she was proud of what she had made. Mya thought about calling Tonya, but she knew that it would be unproductive since she and her family had moved and she did not have the same phone number. Mya had tried to call her once, but a man named David picked up instead.

When Tonya heard about April’s grandmother’s ghost, she told Mya that the house was protected. April asked what that meant, but Mya knew that something was going to happen. A few weeks before, when Tonya spent the night, Mya, bringing snacks from downstairs, walked in on her friend changing into her pajamas. Tonya was naked except for her underwear, and Mya

could not stop staring at the way her friend's limbs connected to her body, like long metal wires looped around each other at the ends to keep everything in place. Embarrassment washed over Mya, not from Tonya's nakedness, but from the fact that she could not will herself to stop looking. Tonya seemed realize all at once that she was examining her while trying to resist doing so, and she slowed her movements so that her friend could watch her bend into her shorts and curve her arms and head into holes of her t-shirt without acknowledging Mya.

After Tonya was dressed, she looked at Mya and propped her foot up on the bed and said, "Sometimes I wish I could transform myself. Not become a better person or anything, but change into someone completely new, like a shapeshifter, only permanent." Even though she did not say anything, Mya knew exactly what Tonya meant.

Mya took the cut up werewolf costume from the attic down to her room. Her mother saw her retracting the stairs, but she did not ask her why she was there, only smiled. She had tried to convince herself otherwise, but Mya knew that her mother was afraid of her, too, or that she thought about her the same way that everyone else did. When her mother was going down the stairs, Mya bared her teeth at her.

April was nervous when Tonya tore the blanket and sheets off the bed and then dragged the exposed mattress from the bedroom to the front lawn, but Mya told her that it would be fine. From outside they watched her run back into the house, open the bedroom window and crawl out to the roof.

"You can't," April called out right before Tonya jumped from the roof and landed flat-backed on to the mattress.

As she laughed and bounced herself up to her feet, Mya felt envious of Tonya. She always seemed to get things right, even when she did not know what she was doing. *How*, Mya

thought, *could she have known the exact right place to put the mattress? And how come she jumped without being afraid?* When she looked over at April, she knew that she was thinking the same thing. They both just wanted to be like her, for it to be easy and thoughtless and right without trying to be. There was this pressure that they did not talk about, for Mya and April to go up to the roof, too, and in order to not be scared, Mya imagined that she was a frog when she jumped. She hit the mattress stomach first and as it squished to catch her, she wondered why she had been worried in the first place, “It was easy,” she told April, “You don’t have to be scared.”

*

Saturday was Mya’s last day of training at the miniature golf course. It was crowded with children and their parents, there was a birthday party holding everyone up at the sixth hole. The father wanted everyone to play through, but the mother said that was not how it worked. There was Motown music playing over the loudspeakers and the bopping caused a general happiness, even in those who had to wait. Dale called from the cash register for her to disinfect the clubs faster because there was a line building up, but Mya could only move at the pace she was going. It seemed fine to her and every time that Dale urged her, his voice getting more and more annoyed, she regretted less and less not telling him that his lips were stained blue from the slushy he had drunk on his break. The golf course was different on Saturdays, the noise and the clumps of birthday cake frosting smeared on the picnic tables at the side of the building overwhelmed her.

This was how she worked for most of the day, with a crowd of people and with Dale telling her what to do. Dale reminded her of Tonya because whatever he said she had to do. In biology class, when Mr. O’Dell taught them about the principles of flight, he told them that all birds had hollow bones and about the myth of Icarus. After class, Tonya said to Mya that they

should build their own sets of wings, and Mya knew that if her friend had given her a pile of wood and feathers, she would have glued and nailed and assembled them until they could both fly. She had drawn Tonya wearing the prototype in her notebook.

It was about three o'clock when Dale told her she could go on break. There was no line at the cash register, but the green was still filled with people waiting behind each other at several of the holes. Mya went out to her car and got the remade werewolf costume. She walked in the front door past Dale sitting at the cash register on his phone and got out to the course before she put it on. She went through the small green space that separated the first hole from the eighteenth, reached her arms inside the armholes and then lifted the hood over her stringy hair and worn out face before putting the false teeth in her mouth.

The birthday party was at the eighteenth hole. Mya stood behind the cube building watching them through the eye slits she had cut in the hood. Two of the girls, around six or seven, were attempting to putt at the same time until the one in the birthday tiara told them that what they were doing was dangerous because they might hit each other with the clubs. Mya jumped up on top of the cityscape. She crawled over each of the buildings, and it felt natural to her, so she growled, but the kids from the birthday party were so loud and so preoccupied with when it would be their turn, that they did not notice her at first. She growled louder and curved her back, trying to make herself grotesque, as if she had just come from a sewer. Her hair was wet underneath the hood, her chest sweating, and she felt like she was expelling all her energy.

Mya stood up on top of the tallest building and stretched her arms above her head. She cried out and as she did, she began jumping up and down, harder and with all of her weight until the wooden structure began to crack like April's leg bones when she jumped and missed the mattress. Mya jumped so hard, her hands curled up like claws and the vampire teeth showed

because she was so out of breath, that the building cracked in half. She fell and landed, sprawled across three other buildings. The mother from the birthday party looked over and said, *What the hell is that?* The kids were screaming and people from the sixteenth and seventeenth holes had wandered over to see what was going on. Dale, blue still etched around his lips, had come outside when he heard all of the noise and was attempting to pick up the pieces of the broken building. But Mya did not register the commotion, from on top of the buildings she could hear the mechanism start to whirl, she was going to see the monster.

The Replica

Edith was surprised when she found the replica, but not shocked. The night before she had glued a periwinkle backpack on a magazine clipping of a frog and doused the whole thing in glitter before adding it to the newest section of her collage, a schoolhouse scene where the teacher was a fox with glasses and the rest of the students were woodland creatures from a vintage brochure produced by a state park for hikers. This carbon copy of herself, another thirty-three-year-old Edith Crouse, was lying naked at the bottom of her shower. She had turned the water on the other woman before she even realized that she was there.

When she turned the other, half-lucid, Edith saw her own coin-shaped eye, but did not piece together that this was a second version of herself until she saw the constellation of birthmark on her right shoulder. She asked herself if she was okay and where she came from, but every question was met with an “Uhh,” because, Edith would later find out, a defect of the replication process is that the duplicate cannot speak for several hours after facsimile/birth/creation.

The replica’s hair was wet, so Edith grabbed her from underneath her arms and guided her from the shower to the toilet. She took the softest peach towel out of the linen closet and began to dry off the other body starting at her feet. As she rubbed the water off her legs and chest and face, she was not sure, but she thought she heard the other version of herself hum. When she put the towel around her body and tucked it into itself, Edith examined her for some difference, but the duplicate had the same tough elbows and cellulite dimples on the backs of her thighs. She liked their exactness.

Leaving her in the bathroom, Edith went to look for some clothes. She grabbed a pair of elastic-bottomed sweatpants and a sweatshirt from her trip to the Grand Canyon from the drawer, thinking that the duplicate would want to be comfortable. She brought the clothes back into the bathroom and dressed her carefully, making sure that all her extremities went through the right holes. Edith had never taken care of anyone before and wanted to do a good job.

Even though she was well into adulthood, the time when other women her age were being promoted or starting a lifestyle blog, Edith Crouse was focused on finishing the collage on her bedroom wall. The collage began as an evidence board, but police caught her sister's murderer eight weeks after they had found her dead body in workout clothes on the park trail. The only picture Edith had of Grace was an eleven by fourteen gold-framed senior portrait. She hung it in the middle of the bedroom wall with a hammer and nail. Next to it was a handwritten list of suspects she had pinched from Officer Monroe's desk with three names already crossed out. Around that she taped newspaper clippings, features about her now dead sister and articles about the trial. David Francis Duke was serving three consecutive life sentences for the murder of Grace and three other women. Edith kept the photo hung out of guilt. She had not warned her sister about running in the woods even after seeing a news segment on Julie Haynes, the woman who was killed just before her.

The newspaper eventually stopped printing stories about Grace but standing over the kitchen counter mindlessly flipping through the pages of the town magazine mailed to her whether she requested it or not, Edith noticed that one of the models looked like her sister. She had green eyes and bigger hair and was taller, but she somehow reminded her of Grace. They both looked easy-going. Edith cut her out and taped her on the wall. That was how the collage started, she took women from magazines that reminded her of her sister. Then she added things

to them, running shoes, hot green smiley face stickers over their other faces. Edith was the only person in America that still bought magazines in bulk. They were stacked in the corners of her apartment, and she put things on top of them, vases and mugs, like they were coffee tables.

Eventually, Edith got an Exacto knife and blue gum so that she wouldn't damage the wall. She clipped a green sofa out of an interior design magazine and a long-horned goat from a yoga publication and layered them on the wall with the gum. There was a plaid hat in a men's magazine, so she removed it and put two little slits in the top before placing it on top of the goat's head. She knifed out a hepatic tanager from *Ornithological Quarterly* and perched it on the arm of the couch and she found a frosted pink cake in *Suburban Living* and added it in between the two animals to show what they were about to snack on. Later on, she added teacups and a full martini glass and referred to the little set up as *The Friends*. The wall was now covered in these petite scenes. Every few weeks, Edith assured herself that she would stop, find a different hobby, she would go to singles mixers in a bright yellow paper bag dress that hid her stomach and her sides, but when she got home, she would sit on the bed and admire the collage.

“When does your body start to feel like a body?” the replica croaked. After the tea, her voice half worked, and while it had been a struggle, she made it down the hallway to the kitchen using the wall for support. Edith walking behind her with her arms outstretched in case her double fell. Instead of answering, she offered to make pancakes. “Because mine feels tingly, like it belongs to someone else.” The replica slurring the sound between the *g* and *s* in belongs. Edith wanted to say it was because her body was not hers, but instead she offered that maybe what she was experiencing was like anesthesia wearing off, which seemed like a perfectly good explanation to the duplicate. It would have been a perfectly good one for Edith as well.

Edith wondered if their brains were exactly alike, just like their bodies, so eventually she would not ask questions anymore because she would know the things that Edith did. She would know how to cut an exact edge and skim a newspaper article for the who's, what's, when's, where's, and why's, and she would know to never wear strips and when she missed her sister she should just remember the time that Grace put on a tutu and made point shoes out of paper and pretended to be a ballerina even though she had never taken a dance lesson, just knew what a piqué turn was from a movie she had watched one afternoon when she was home sick from school.

When Edith gave the duplicate a plate of pancakes, she lifted the top two off the third and placed them on the edge. Then she reached for the knife and the butter, scooped and smeared it on the cake before taking another one of the pancakes and stacking it on top. She repeated this process until the tops of all three pancakes were covered from edge to edge so that each bite would be buttery and doughy at the same time before lifting each layer again with her nail and squeezing syrup in a line down the middle. Edith watched her cut medium circles into small triangles and then fork through them all at once before lifting the pieces to her mouth like some sort of pancake sandwich. The replica closed her eyes as her chewed, mixing together the dough and the butter and the syrup together in her mouth so that she could taste them individually and all at once. After swallowing the first bite, she stabs into a second and once it is in between her teeth she tells her host that the food is delicious, that she remembers pancakes, that she could probably eat three more. Edith knows this because this is the way that she has always eaten pancakes. She had forgotten until now that they are her favorite food.

There were three large lines of syrup running down the sweatshirt. They reminded Edith of the slash marks on Grace's chest when she went to identify the body. Looking at her dead

sister was not as horrifying as she thought it would have been. She expected to recognize Grace, to know her, but when the coroner pulled back the sheet there was just a body that she could not connect back to her sister at all. She had touched the lines even though she was not supposed to.

As she mixes another round of boxed batter with water, she asks the other version of herself, “When do you think a body starts to feel like a body?”

She waited a long time to answer because, Edith thought, she could not do too many things at once yet, but when the pancakes are flipped and cooking on their second side she said, “I’m not sure, but I think it’s when it feels full.”

“Are you full, yet?”

“No,” she said as Edith put the new pancakes on her plate.

*

After breakfast, the replica found the collage. She called Edith into the bedroom when she saw it and as she walked along the wall, touching each scene in admiration, she asked Edith if she had made it herself. The double laughed when she saw the frog with the backpack, but when she got to the photograph of Grace, she stopped, “Where is Grace, now?” she asked. Edith’s stomach dropped, she knew her duplicate expected her to say *married with a two-year-old or living in the Alaskan wilderness*, but she was not prepared for what Edith actually said, “Grace is dead. She died a long time ago.”

“Oh. I don’t remember that.”

*

In the park, a woman walking her dog told them that she was a twin, too, but her sister had moved to Minnesota after she got married, so now they led fairly separate lives, but saw each other at Christmas. Edith was not sure why she had agreed to bring the replica here. She had

come once, when she was still investigating, but had not been back in more than ten years. It was not like she remembered it. The city had built a pavilion by the lake and the tree branches on the walking path were trimmed back.

Grace always ran in the early morning, when it was just barely light because, she said, if she did not do it first thing, she never would. When Edith turned down the woodland trail, she tried to imagine what her sister felt like as she went up the slight incline. She knew that this was where Grace started. She would walk from the parking lot and stretch out her legs on the large boulders brought in to mark the trail head. The replica was behind her. Even though she was not supposed to, she had picked yellow and purple flowers from several of the landscaped patches and was now breaking leafy branches from surrounding trees to add to the bouquet.

When it first happened, Edith tried to piece together what happened before Grace died. She walked the path slowly, trying to find clues. The police had found her sister's keys several hundred feet from the body. Grace always looped them in her laces, so her shoe must have come untied. Edith imagined Grace struggling to get away and her terror when she could not. She started to run down the path, like her sister would have done, knowing that to David Francis Duke she was just another body.

Some of Grace's friends had paid to have a plaque put up at the murder site in her memory. Edith breathlessly leaned against it while she waited for the replica to catch up with her. There was an oval-shaped photo of her sister taken a few weeks before she died and a short description of her:

Grace Healy was many things, a loving sister and a wonderful friend. The park was one of her favorite places. She ran this trail most mornings and was never afraid. But somehow, these pieces of her do not add up to the whole. If you knew Grace, you understand.

The concrete was newly paved, but Edith figured the stains would have faded by now anyway. The replica sat down next to her and placed the finished bouquet underneath the plaque before grabbing ahold of her hand, “You really don’t remember,” Edith asked, and she said that the last memory she had of Grace was sitting in the sun flipping through a magazine.

Food

“Did you ever notice how teeth and nails look similar?” she asked him, pausing from filing her left index finger to pretend to bite him with the small monster she formed with her hand. Amelia forced a laugh and pinched Martin’s arm hoping to get him to interact with her, to force him to be playful, like she had seen other couples do, but unfazed, he just said, “Well, if you think about it, they can both be used in defense,” and she could not help but feel like he was upset with her.

When Amelia made the reservation, she thought that the Crestview Lodge was a string of free-standing cabins that looked down on a tree-dense section of Newfound Gap. During the entire six-hour car ride there she kept using words like *soundless* and *vacuum* to try and convince Martin that a vacation to the mountains would be good for them. The restaurant had been closed for three months and Amelia felt that their interactions were only getting louder. She meant to pinch him, but instead nicked him with one of the newly filed nails, “Ouch,” he pulled as far away from her propped-up leg as he could without leaving the table. She had left a mark. When they arrived, they found that the Crestview looked nothing like the pictures on the website. Paint-chipped and sunken, was one flat-topped building, the rooms strung together with adjoining walls. It was the remnants of a 1960’s hotel that had been refurbished with log cabin vinyl siding, and Martin looked at her in a way that said *You fucked this up, too*.

Amelia’s signature dish at the restaurant had been a venison stew that she modified from her father’s recipe to include juniper berries and sage. The result was smokey, earth-filled soup that one critic had described as *the closest thing to hunting your own prey*. She had named the restaurant after her father, Charles, and hung the mounted head of the first buck he had made

stew with on the largest wall. It was going to be the story she told diners when they called her out from kitchen to compliment her.

She had never killed a deer herself, jarred by the animal's assuming face, but she knew a man, a local hunter forty miles outside of town who would sell her the meat from a free-standing shed by the side of the road. He sliced the animal up into small parts, shoulders and thighs cut to fit in the trunk of her small sedan and wrap them in a waxy paper so that they did not juice into the interior and smell. She unloaded these pieces of the deer at the restaurant and stored them conveniently in the freezer. This was how she preferred the deer, sterile and faceless.

Martin had not said anything when they arrived at the Crestview, just got the groceries they had bought in town and their overnight bags out of the car and asked her for the key. Trying to make things a little less tense she said, "The view really is fantastic." They were up so high that the sky seemed closer than the road they had driven up on, like there was no route of escape from this place.

Martin responded with a sharp "Mmm-mm," before hefting all of the bags to his left side so that he could unlock the door to their room, Number Six on the end. Amelia stayed back for one second, the next peak so close that she could not resist reaching out her hand to try and touch it.

When she conceived a new dish, the first person to try it was always Martin. He would lean over the counter at home and comb the food with a fork. He would make scratches in it so deep that she could see the plate underneath. Then he turned the plate around, looking at the noodles or the pork chop or the vegan mushroom stroganoff from every angle. To her, he seemed disappointed before he even took a bite. And when he ate the look on his face was sallow and

joyless, already forming the critique with his teeth. He told her that this made her a better chef, but she was never sure that it did.

Walking inside the room, she saw the bags piled at the end of the bed and Martin running his hand across a blank spot in the wall that adjoined them to Room Five. It was painted a generic beige, there was a framed poster of the Smokies above Martin's hand and next to it, a yellowish stain shaped like a bullseye. Amelia thought that the only way to get a stain on that part of the wall would be to throw something at it, a young couple having a food fight. She had met Martin when she was older, and so their relationship had never been impulsive. He formed his hand into a ball just under the stain and knocked on the wall, a quick succession of three raps that echoed against the ceiling. After a pause, just long enough for someone to cross a room, there were two slow knocks in response. Martin gave her a half smile before fishing a beer out of one of the grocery bags and sitting down at the table.

Now, Amelia, unable to make Martin less annoyed with her, was cleaning underneath her nails with the tip of the file and staring out the window. He was methodically reading through the tourism brochures fanned out on the table and drinking a second beer. He did not drink very often, so she knew that he was trying to create a buffer between them, hoping she would get angry at him, too, so that they could not accomplish what they had come here to do. The trip was supposed to be a way of un-straining their relationship, but, looking over at Martin, Amelia could tell that he no longer wanted to be close to her.

She had messed it up when she booked the room at the Crestview without calling ahead. They were supposed to be in a cabin by themselves where they could work things out, privately. But because of her impulsivity they were in a room next to someone who could hear them move around, flush the toilet, open their suitcases, or have sex, if that were even an option, and she

knew that Martin would not talk to her if he thought that someone would overhear. He was always scolding her for being too reckless, especially when she brought up the restaurant. Amelia noticed him stare at the adjoining door. She kept waiting for him to say something about it, but instead he just made sure that she saw him looking at it.

The sun was setting, and the Crestview looked different in the twilight. The trees, distinct down to their branches in the light, were shadowed and massed together as if there was no way to move through them and she had the sudden feeling of being trapped. Amelia swore that she saw something move on the adjacent peak.

“There’s something outside,” she leaned her body over Martin’s and put her face closer to the window, “Do you think it could be an animal. Like a wild animal?”

“It is a mountain,” Martin responded in a light way that made her think that he was trying to be comforting, “How can you tell anyway? It’s practically dark outside.” But as he said this, Amelia was convinced that she saw a tail flick.

*

They had closed the blinds, and the entire time they ate dinner, pasta she had made on the small stovetop in the corner with store-bought sauce and the beers, Amelia resisted pulling them back and looking out. The inconsistencies at the Crestview Lodge worried her, and at the end of the meal she suggested that they just go home in the morning. Martin agreed that the room was not what he had expected, and he told her that it would be fine for them to leave. She felt something release between them.

The knock on the door was so sharp and hurried that they both were not convinced it happened. Feeling the same nervousness she had when she was looking out the window at dusk, Amelia was happy to ignore it, but then they heard the sound again, a stout rap determined to be

let in. Martin went over and opened the door, partially at first, and then, taking only one second to realize there was no danger, propping it open fully. The woman on the other side matched the knock, she was small and rectangular. Her hair had thinned and even though she kept it shoulder length, it looked like it would no longer grow. She was wearing a long purple t-shirt and cutoff shorts. The combination of all these things made Amelia pity her.

“Hey, there,” the woman stepped one bare foot in the doorway, “I’m Paula. I’m next door in Room 5. I saw you come in earlier. I think we’re the only people staying here this weekend and I thought that maybe y’all would want to play a few rounds of gin rummy,” she took a worn deck of cards from the back pocket of her shorts and waved it back and forth.

“I’m not sure,” said Martin, “I can be kind of competitive.”

“It’s only cards, Martin,” Amelia walked up to Paula and pulled her the rest of the way inside, “Of course we’ll play.” Amelia took the deck from her hand and started to clear the travel brochures from the table. She sat down, removed the cards from their container, and began to shuffle them, finding ease as she split them apart and then fit them naturally back together again.

“You’re good with your hands,” Paula noticed, sitting down in the chair next to her.

“Thanks. Do you want a beer? Martin, will you grab us all beers?”

“She’s a chef,” Martin said, dropping the three cans awkwardly on the table.

“What?”

“Amelia’s a chef,” he said again, “That’s why she’s so good at shuffling.

“Oh, because of the chopping,” Paula only then seemed to connect those two skills.

“Yeah,” he sat with them, “You should see her with a knife.”

Amelia smiled and dealt the cards.

She did not have a poker face. Every time she drew a card that she did not need, Amelia released a frustrated burst of air from the side of her mouth. Martin was better, he picked up and discarded, moved the cards around in his hand like he was actually making a run, but she knew by the way he stared at his cards that he did not have anything either. Paula was the only one who talked as they played. She told them about the jobs she'd had. She had worked at a state fair fried dough stand and as a landscaper. Paula had sold women's clothing at a defunct department store and had cold-called single women as part of the marketing branch of a matchmaking service. Even though Amelia did not know what they were, the cards she drew seemed to remind her of all the work she had done, "You're a cook," she said in the middle of the game, "I've been a waitress so many times. I can't really do it anymore, though. I can't stand for that long. Plus, I don't like to smell like food. Don't you hate smelling like food? It gets in your hair and no matter how many times you shower and use shampoo; it stays with you. I spent years smelling like hamburgers." Amelia laughed a little at this because that was one of the things she liked most about cooking, that underneath her fingernails it smelled like thyme and that the smoke from grilled meat somehow stayed on her skin all night so that when she crooked her arm underneath the pillow, her elbows were reminiscent of something wild. Paula was here because she wanted a few days in the mountains before she started a job as a chair lift operator for Anakeesta.

The first round went quickly, but they played six hands. Paula kept talking. Amelia tried to hear her and respond during the short breaths the woman would take in between sentences or when she took a sip of beer, but she usually wasn't quick enough. Paula seemed lonely to her, the kind of person who only ever talked to strangers and did not mind staying silent because Paula did not need her participation to keep talking, but she could tell that Martin was annoyed by her. It was not her stories that made him shift back and forth in his seat, but the fact that she

kept winning. Hand after hand she would be talking as if nothing was happening, until suddenly, her eyes would widen and she would look around as if she heard a noise in the distance before placing her cards on the table and squealing out, “Gin!” Amelia could see Martin trying to learn her patterns. He leaned in close to her, wondering if there was a part in her stories that coincided with her victory, but each hand was won at a different point in her narrative. After the sixth round, Amelia saw Martin blink rapidly, which meant that he was too frustrated to continue.

“Alright, Paula,” she said throwing down her cards, “I think I’m too tired to play anymore. You ready for bed,” she looked over at Martin and both of them began to get up from the table.

“Oh, but I’m not done with my beer.”

“You can take it with you,” Martin offered, “Do you want another one for the road?”

“The road,” she laughed, “Yeah, it’s a really long way to my room. No, I’m okay with what I have, but instead of going around, do y’all care if I just go through?” Paula was referring to the adjoining door.

A wave of fear moved from the bottom of Amelia’s stomach into her throat. She had been trying so hard since they had arrived to make Martin forget everything that was wrong with the Crestview. All they had to do was make it until morning without fighting and she knew that he would never bring it up again. When they got home she would find a job in an already established restaurant and they would go on living. She knew that Paula could not go through that door.

“Look, it’s just as easy to go around.”

“Okay, but would it be okay if one of you walked me over? Normally, I’m fine to do anything on my own, but earlier, I swear I saw something out there. Like an animal.”

“Really? I thought I saw something, too, but it was too dark to tell.”

“Yeah, that’s why I came over in the first place. I don’t know much about wild animals and what they’ll do.”

*

Martin walked Paula back to her room. It took less than a minute, even with him waiting for her to turn the lights on, and when he came back the look on his face said *I’m still not going to believe you*. Amelia was putting on her pajamas and lotioning her hand, which she had always thought of as too rough. Her nails were constantly breaking because of the cooking. When she pulled the venison meat out to be thawed, bloody water ran down her palms and onto her arms. She wanted to have smooth hands, to hide the fact that she used them so much.

Amelia knew that they were leaving in the morning, so she did not say anything, but there was a twinge in her chest, she was positive for the first time in a long time that she was right. They both got into bed and turned off the light. In the darkness, Martin turned over, struggling to find her face. When he did, he kissed it in a long, deep way that he never had before, not even when they first got together or moved into the same apartment or opened the restaurant. Even though she did not want it to, the kiss seemed strange to her because the only thing that was special about this moment was that she had let Martin be right. When he no longer felt like kissing her, he put his whole body on top of hers, let his weight become her weight. His arms were wrapped around her shoulders and her back and she was stuck in this little ball that she had gotten herself into while they were kissing. He had not given her time to adjust, but Amelia did fall asleep eventually, and when she woke up around 4 in the morning, Martin had moved to his side of the bed. She got up slowly so she would not wake him and went over to pull the blind back from the window. She was disappointed that the only thing she could see was darkness.

*

The knocking was coming from the adjoining door and when Amelia did not immediately answer, a voice from behind it said, "You have to let me in," and obediently, she did. Paula was on the other side in the same purple shirt and cutoff short and Amelia wondered if she had slept in them and then if they were the only clothes she had.

"Have you seen?" Paula asked her in a way that Amelia thought she expected her to answer *yes*.

"I've been asleep."

"Go look," the older woman was frantic. Her words slurry and her hands shaking, "Go look out the window," she pushed Amelia. Paula was stronger than she expected her to be. She got caught up in the woman and teetered a little as she moved her, "I don't know much about wild animals and what they'll do." At the window, it took a minute for Amelia to find what Paula wanted her to look at. Right next to the drained kidney shaped pool was a mountain lion.

The big cat was stretched out, straddling the line where the shallow end became deep. Its head rested on one of its elongated legs and its face was so corporeal that Amelia finally understood why her father referred to mountain lions as ghost cats. If you had asked her in that moment, with its sandy colored fur and round ears, she would have said that the animal was completely harmless, that it would have eaten a deer thigh right from her hand. She was going to tell Paula that there was nothing to worry about. If they just waited, it would be gone by the afternoon. She was not sure if this was true or not, but she wanted to say something to calm the other woman who was standing beside her refusing to come close to the window. Then she saw what she was worried about. Martin, camouflaged in the khaki shorts and a dark blue t-shirt he was planning to drive home in, walked up behind the mountain lion with a rusted pool skimmer.

Its eyes closed, the animal did not notice Martin and Amelia thought that now, before anything happened, he could turn around and come back to room. She would let him inside and lock the door behind him. Even with Paula, they had enough food to last for several days until someone from the rental company came wondering why they had not returned the key. Their car would scare the big cat away. Amelia would apologize. The person from the rental company would apologize, too. Then they would leave. All of them. Yet seeing Martin crotched down with the pool skimmer, she knew that she could not stop him from dying.

Martin poked the back of the mountain lion with the metal rod. Amelia laughed, imagining the predator sitting at the restaurant with its face in a bowl of venison stew, the white fur around its mouth turning brown. “Why the fuck are you laughing?” Paula asked her, her voice cracking, and she was about to tell her about the cat in her imagination when the cat outside turned around slowly and noticed Martin. The mountain lion did not hiss or growl, it did not feel threatened. It was not going to run off, which was what Martin had wanted and when he realized this, he made a face that Amelia had never seen before. His mouth opened so wide that his eyes seemed to move to the sides of his head, but he did not let out a scream. Even though he knew he had been wrong to try to drive the mountain lion away, he still thought that maybe if he was silent he would not provoke it.

Amelia’s father had told her that mountain lions do not eat cows because they like to chase their prey. When Martin turned to run, the big cat followed closely behind him. If Amelia were to describe it, she would not call it a pursuit. The animal fell Martin before he moved three feet. It dug its claws into the sides of his torso and without contemplation bit into his neck. What Amelia found strange was that Martin made no sound. She figured that the teeth and claws must have been painful, but he died without noise. For the first time since the restaurant closed, she

felt the quiet. She got closer to the window because all she wanted to do was watch the cat, she let her nails click on the pane and put her nose against the glass. There was a small black spot on the end of its tail that she had not seen before. The mountain lion ripped off Martin's arm with its teeth. It took a long time, moving the appendage back and forth, first loosening the skin and muscle and then the joint from the bone. When the arm was separated from the body, the cat ate it, chewing slowly because parts of sinew got stuck in its teeth. Amelia wondered what Martin tasted like.

*

Amelia and Paula did not leave the hotel rooms. Paula had opened the adjoining door and was pacing back and forth between them trying to get her cell phone to work. She opened the bathroom window a crack and stood on the tub, gripping the enamel with her short toes until they began to turn a reddish purple, but they both knew that there was no service. It had said so on the website and in the brochures. Amelia was at the table filing her nails into sharp points and monitoring how much of Martin the mountain lion had eaten. By three o'clock in the afternoon both his arms and his left leg up to the knee had been consumed.

"What will it eat when Martin's body is all gone?" Paula asked.

"Maybe it'll just be full."

Still surrounded the lifeless torso, the animal seemed to be hugging Martin, protecting him. The mountain lion knew Martin better than she did. Paula told her that she was in shock, but she thought that was the reason she had not cried. It was difficult to be sad about an apparition. Maybe the relationship she'd thought she had was not really one at all. These were thoughts that she had never had before. The mountain lion gently plucked the big toe off his right

foot. The nail lodged between two of its teeth. Curling up its lip, it used its tongue to remove it. As it reached down for the rest of the foot, she realized how much the cat was enjoying its meal.

Paula worried they would be eaten. She had taken the blanket and sheets off the bed and built a small linen cavern. Her body filled up the hole. Amelia wondered who she would call if she had service. Martin had been the only other person who knew her movements. He tracked her from the apartment to the restaurant and back again. When she got the meat for the venison stew, she never saw the deer's faces, just chunks of their bodies without skin. Maybe that was what she had been to Martin, just a body.

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As it was getting dark, half of Martin was gone. The mountain lion had rolled over on its side and was spooning the upper half of his body, saving the rest of him for later. "Are you hungry?" she called to Paula.

"I could eat."

Amelia stood, stretched the stiffness out of her legs, and walked over to the kitchenette, a stove top, three small cabinets, a short countertop to work on, and a minifridge. She took two beers out of the fridge and presented them in the doorway in order to coax Paula out of her room. She did not bother to put the blanket and the sheets back on the bed before walking over and grabbing the beer, "Can I help?"

"No, I think I've got it."

The fridge was still open and she reached in for the Styrofoam carton of eggs and the vacuum sealed package of bacon. She and Martin had prowled the aisles for the things they normally bought, free-range, organic, made from nuts and seeds, lived a decent life before it became their food, but the grocery store only carried Wonder Bread and the SuperLo Foods

brand. Amelia traveled through the whole store complaining about dented packaging and low-quality ingredients, leaving the basket looped underneath her arm completely empty. She was about to leave the store when Martin said, “food is food,” before dropping a chest full of cans and dry goods in the baskets.

She found a handled griddle in one of the cabinets, stacked with other miscellaneous pots and pans of varying sizes and uses, and put it on the stove top before turning it on. While the pan heated, she looked through the stack of spices left by people who had stayed there before her, grabbed out the pepper, salt, and paprika, and lined them up on the counter next to the pan. The strips of bacon stuck to each other, and she pulled them free from the small opening she made in the vacuum seal before laying them flat on the griddle, three for Paula and three for her. She imagined that the noise they made was like the noise of Martin’s muscles being dislodged from his bones as the mountain lion ate away at them slowly. As it cooked the bacon started to hiss and the fat leaking off it popped with the heat from the stove. She let the grease leak all over the pan and then turned the bacon over. She opened up the carton and picked up one of the eggs. Letting it roll between her hands, she was suddenly aware of how white the shell was, that all of the brown spots had been dyed, before cracking it on the side on the flat pan and letting the yolk roll into the hot grease. She repeated this three more times until there were four yellow eyes staring back at her but didn’t mind that they were watching.

The eggs went from translucent to white under the heat and Amelia flipped them carefully with a spatula and let them cook for just a minute more before shoveling them and the bacon onto the same plates she and Martin had eaten off the night before. She shook the pepper, salt, and paprika over the tops of the eggs. The whole room smelled like the restaurant did when

she arrived there in the late morning, like things had been made there, had seeped into the walls, and Amelia thought that what Martin said made sense, food is food.

She brought the plates over to the table and set one near Paula and one near herself. Paula began to eat quietly. She cut her eggs up into small pieces, the yolks messing her plate as they leaked from one side to the other and snapped the strips of bacon into more manageable pieces. As soon as Amelia saw her take a bite, she became aware of how hungry she was. The Crestview had spooned out little pieces of her over the weekend and she wanted to fill them in. She forked each of her eggs in half and then ate the oversized pieces. There was a pepper flake on her lip and grease on her chin, but she could not take the time to wipe them off, or to talk to Paula, who was watching her consume her meal instead of eating her own. At the restaurant, Amelia would hold open the swinging door that led to the dining room and watch people eat. She would focus on the bites of food as they entered diner's mouths and then on their jaws as they chewed, finding satisfaction when they reached down for the second bite before they had swallowed the first.

Once she had finished all the food that was on her plate, Paula handed her a piece of bacon and she ate that too. A corner of it fell on her shirt. Still hungry, she went back to the kitchenette and toasted two pieces of the white bread Martin had bought. After they browned, she put butter on them. There was no jelly. She barely tasted them or the pretzels she ate after. She finished with an apple, letting her teeth break the skin and scoop into the flesh. The juice ran down her arm and dried there, leaving her sticky until she showered the next morning. Throwing the core, eaten down to the seeds, in the garbage can, Amelia registered that her stomach was full, and she stopped. She pressed her arms against the countertop and stretched. The stove was

still hot. Amelia was not thinking about Martin but imagining the food she had just eaten layered in her stomach like logs. She had built something in there and it felt satisfying.

“You were hungry,” Paula said with the last bite of egg in her mouth.

Three Times

Unfazed the first time the girls say her name, she takes an elongated sip of tomato juice from the highball glass (with less than half an ounce of vodka mixed at the bottom), before setting it down on the glass tabletop and rising from the unsympathetic glass chair. She is still glassy, too, her hair, face, and dress are reflective, they cannot see her yet. The second time they say her name she is unwillingly drawn towards the edge where all three girls are standing in a row in front of the mirror, their hair pulled back in clips from the drugstore and their hands raised in the air. Two of them look scared, like they are legitimately concerned something will happen, but the third, hip popped in defiance and eyes staring straight ahead, assumes that the knife is an illusion caused by the angle of her arm as she holds it up with a clenched fist. These kinds of girls annoy her because she has spent some years cultivating her reputation. This one's cheekbones irritate her because they are too defined for someone who still has baby fat on her face. A girl's face, she thinks, should be chubby with unawareness. In her experience, the young women that play her game do not have the faintest idea that something bad could happen to them. It takes several deep breaths, a few pitchy screams, and one "Don't be a chicken shit," for the girls say her name a third time, but they do, in unison, the non-believer the loudest.

It is not the fear she likes so much, people in empty rooms are afraid, it is the anticipation. She likes to make them think they are safe, that the legend they heard in the second-floor middle school bathroom from the older girl was just a way for her to fuck with their seventh-grade minds, so she waits until their shoulders relax, and they start to believe that it was a lie. One of them lets out a giggle and she knows it's time. She catches the light and appears haloed in the mirror. The scar stretches from above her right eyebrow, over her lid and cheek,

down to her jaw. The muscles around her mouth strain when she smiles, but she cannot help herself. The knife materializes in her hand. Terrified, the first two girls run back into the safety of the house. They bump into each other, but do not separate, and she wonders if it is possible for their skin to merge. She thinks she sees them grab hands. The defiant girl pauses, for just a second too long, trying to earn the right to mock the other two when they are safe, lying on the living room carpet in their sleeping bags. She drives the top half of her body through the glass and cuts a small gash into the girl's cheekbone. It is not enough to scar, but it is enough to warn the girl that her hips should stay in line with her shoulders. Using her fingers to stop the bleeding, she follows after her friends. One of the clips from the girl's hair has come loose and fallen in the sink basin. Before she is drawn back into the mirror, she picks it up and presses it into her scalp.

*

There is not much to do while she waits for her name to be called, so she uses this time for reflection. She can summon any memory from her past and project it on the crystal walls of her room. Mostly she looks for things she could have done differently.

After she cleans the knife and puts it back in its place on the table, she pours herself another glass of the tomato juice mixture and remembers the party. It had been in winter, she knows this because she remembers watching people take off their thick, button-down coats from her hiding place at the top of the stairs. They would have had to look up to see her, but no one did, they just handed their coats to her mother, who draped them over her left arm in an almost unmanageable stack and brought them, by memory, to the guest bedroom down the hall. Her mother was upset with her for staying over at Susanne's when she should have been getting ready. They had been drawing each other's portraits in crayon and she tried to explain how

difficult it was to get the shape of Susanne's mouth exactly right and that she had to start the drawing over three times because it was a Christmas present and she wanted to make sure it resembled her friend as closely as possible, but her mother did not really understand.

She overheard some of the guests at the party, mostly mothers of her friends, gossip softly about Diane Blake. "Isn't it sad," they said, "There's no new information, at least there wasn't on the six o'clock news." She had seen the posters of Diane hanging from telephone polls in her neighborhood and her school picture projected on the television next to statistics about her hair color, eye color, and weight. They had an assembly at school about the importance of not talking to strangers or getting into unknown cars. No one had ever told her that Diane Blake had been abducted, but she knew that something was wrong.

From the stairwell, the noises from the party sounded distant and submerged. Her mother had left her post by the front door and was now unseen in the living room. Glasses clanked together and knives dropped on top of emptied plates. The voices melded together, and someone was in the corner tentatively pressing down on the piano keys. Still unnoticed, she stood, a handful of pigs-in-blanket wrapped in a napkin and stuffed into the pocket of her dress and went to her bedroom. Sitting in front of the mirror, she reached for the bottle of perfume her parents had gotten for her as a Christmas gift and sprayed so much on her neck that she started to cough. She smelled like flowers picked early to speed up production.

Yanking the expertly sliced hot dogs from the pre-packaged dough, she ate the appetizer parts separately because she did not like the taste of them together. When she finished, she took the napkin from her pocket and wiped her mouth. This made her think of Suzanne, and of the portrait sitting on top of the desk in her friend's room. She had been nervous to bring it home because her mother had been overly critical of a drawing of a cat she had made at school three

years before. As she watches the memory, the exact feelings she had at the time repeats themselves, she can feel them as if she is experiencing them for the first time, they are a mixture of longing to be seen and wanting to escape.

She opened the window, the air colder than it had been on her way home that afternoon, and crawled, jacketless, out to the awning and down the side of the porch. There was a new snow in the yard. She clomped through it, wetting her patent leather shoes on her way to the street. Following a tire mark, she walked on the road all the way to Suzanne's, a blue ranch style house with white shutters. It was dark when she got there, but still she went up and knocked lightly on the door. After a few minutes, when no one answered, she thought that maybe Susanne and her family were out or maybe they were asleep, they had not been invited to her parent's party that year, or any previous year for that matter. Before she went home, she drew a smiley face in the snow to show Suzanne she had been there.

When she got back to the house, all of the outside lights were on and the garage door was open. The cold air felt like needles against her skin and the finger she had plunged in the snow was numb. There were several adults wandering around the yard, looking in dark corners and under bushes. Someone yelled, "There she is," when she got to the middle of the driveway and the light from the garage pooled around her. Her mother, flakes of snow unmelted on her hair, ran up and grabbed her by the shoulders. She turned her around to make sure that she was not marked or bleeding after which she said, "You scared me."

*

The mirror is not that bad. The refracted edges give the illusion that it is just a room. Besides the chair and the table, there is a bedframe and a hard-edged mattress reminiscent of those in her first apartment, and a vanity where she displays all the things she has collected from

the girls, teddy bears and the ripped sleeves of pajamas. She sits down on the icy bench that should have a stitched cushion, but that is flat and hard because there is no fabric here, no real-world amenities, and takes the clip from her hair and places it next to her other trophies. They are her favorite things, because, even though she can have anything she wants, what she conjures up always appears as a slight variation. In this diffuse reflection, where the light echoes haphazardly, when she asks for a magazine to read, one that would have interested her mother appears. There are always recipes for caramel cake inside. And when she requests, out loud, for someone to talk to, the picture of her and Suzanne arm-in-arm on the front lawn arrives, and though she has tried to interact with it, her friend remains stone cold. Even so, she balances the photo on the vanity and looks at herself in the mirror while she talks out loud.

She wonders where Suzanne is now. As a girl she was bright and curly and full of adventure. It was Suzanne who suggested they skip school on that last warm day of the year and drive two hours to the beach to feed seagulls and get their last tan because her legs were starting to whiten, and she wanted to wear a dress to Tom Vaughn's party over the weekend. Her friend must be older now, so different that she would not recognize her because even though she does not know how long she's been in the mirror, she knows it's been years, a lifetime. She knows she is trapped inside it unless the girls say her name, and even then, she is only free for several minutes. Over the years, she has been invoked in many different locations, and though she resisted it at first, she has no choice but to appear when called.

In the beginning she tried to escape, heave her body against the glass like a fish unaware that there was something in its way. Bruised and scratched, she would force herself against the mirror over and over until she could no longer pick up her body, but the glass would just bend around her, as if she were swimming, and then fling her back inside in a reversal of her own

force. Eventually she just thought that she deserved to be there because she always was a little bit frightening.

Her mother said that she attracted too much attention, but it was just a picture of her in the newspaper captioned, *Local girl participates in the tomato toss at annual Harvest Festival*. The man from the newspaper asked to take her picture, not the other way around. Still, she knew she would like to be on a poster one day, like the ones hung with loops of clear tape above her bed and on the outside of the closet door. So, when Suzanne got the Polaroid camera for her birthday, they started taking pictures of themselves. Burning through the film, this was a study in their own bodies. She taught herself how to elongate her neck to accentuate the right side of her face, which she thought was more attractive than her left, and she showed Suzanne how to position one leg in front of the other so she would appear taller. It was something they played at in her bedroom with the door safely closed. It did not take much to convince Suzanne to strip down to her underwear, a lilac set her mother bought her from Sears that was practically the same tone as her skin. Flipping the chair to face away from the mirror, she told her friend to sit down, to cross her legs, to drape her arm over the back, to angle her chin down and smirk. When Suzanne asked how she looked, she held the eye of the camera up to her face and said, “Really Sexy.”

She lied to her friend and told her that she had accidentally left the Polaroids at their lunch table, but really she had given Tom Vaughn the picture of Suzanne in her underwear. It was passed around school for several week until a teacher found a group of boys looking at it in the back of the chemistry lab. She had no real reason for doing it other than she wanted to see what would happen. They were never really girls after that. Suzanne spent the next three years taking down cheap lingerie that had been tied to her locker.

*

The sisters are so fast that she leaves half a glass of tomato juice on the table to be finished after. As she approaches, she sees that the younger one on her cell phone, so with the lights off and a towel stuffed in the crack of the door, both girls are illuminated blue. The older one nudges her to pay attention, but, scrolling, she says, Bloody Mary isn't even real," unwittingly saying her name for the third time.

Three seconds go by...four...five, "See, "the one on the phone says, and that's when she reveals herself. he feels more terrifying than she has in a long time and begins to believe that the cell phone, the modernization, could actually help her reputation. That her fear, her grotesqueness could be shared and sent and liked and known everywhere. She smiles as she raises the knife. Opening her mouth wide, she begins to shriek, but is met with the sister's laughter.

"Oh my God," the older one says, "With the phone on you even look like her."

"I know. If you're not careful, I'm going to cut you."

They continue laughing as they turn on the light and open the door. The younger one, receiving a text, says that this was cool after all, and she is definitely going to do it with her friends.

*

The memories come to her like she comes to the girls, abruptly. She does not control what she sees. She is drawn back in from the sister's house and tonight's recollection is already projected on the wall. Even though she does not want to watch this one, she sits. The man was dressed in a suit jacket and a pair of jeans, and she did not think anything of getting in the car with him. He called to make their date three days before, her phone number written on a piece of

receipt paper the salesclerk had printed from the register. He complimented her on how she looked in the green while she was looking at herself in the three-way mirror outside the dressing room. He told her she looked really good, and he would buy it if he were her, but she still wondered if it was worth putting on her credit card. He asked her to help him pick out a birthday gift for his teenage daughter, the reason he was trolling around a women's clothing store he said. She couldn't help but laugh at him when he picked up every item on display and said, "How about this?" The dress's price tag dangled between her fingers, constantly reminding her of the cost, until she had convinced herself that she should buy it. Together they picked out a small purse with a gold chain strap because she told him it was something she would have wanted when she was sixteen. At the register, she commented that she didn't know where she would wear the dress, leaving him open to say, "How about when we go to dinner?" which was what she was hoping for. She didn't mind that he was older than her, he looked like the world bound up in a button-down shirt.

At the restaurant, one with table clothes and candlelight, vests and bowties, they ate wedge salads that he ordered for them and a type of fish she had never heard of, seared. He told her about a time he went deep sea fishing, hooking swordfish in their cheeks, and she imagined herself on a boat, laying back on cushioned seats, undulating in the water, but maybe the visualization was the result of too much red wine. She was not sure if she'd had half a bottle or a whole, but he kept refilling her glass without asking. By the end of the meal, several bottles have been ordered and were stacked at the edge of the table like an ocean barrier between them and the waiter. He reached over and cupped her face between his hands and stared at her as if looking at his own reflection.

When they got back in the car, she felt overpoured, like she was floating in a vastness of water without edge. When she moved her arm, trails of green light follow behind the sleeve of her new dress. Even drunk, even with her part crooked and her loose hair sticking to the headrest, she felt like this was the best she has ever looked. She asked him to take a picture of her and frame it while he buckled the seat belt around her, but he said that he did not have a camera. Outside her front door, leaned against the siding, she told him the keys were in her purse and just to feel around in the side pocket. It was her everyday purse, too big for her outfit, but she could not have afforded the one that matched the dress.

She was unsure of how she had gotten into bed when she woke up. It was so quiet that she thought she was alone, but he was in the room with her, sitting on the edge of the bed. He had taken off her shoes and got her under the covers. The knife he held was picked carefully from the kitchen, and the fact that he had gone through her draws without asking disturbed her more than the light from the streetlamp being reflected off the blade. He was on top of her before she is fully awake, his knees squeezing her hip bones, immobilizing her. "What are you doing?" she asked him, but he just lifted up the knife and made her look at it. She thought that it was her fault, that she should not have worn the dress or had the last glass of wine, and when she tried to struggle free the weight of his body was too much. He grabbed her at the wrists with his free hand and tightens his knees. He cut into her forehead and the knife felt icy against her skin. It took him several passes with the dull blade to make a gash that went over her eye and down to her chin. Blood and skin had gotten into both of her eyes, but she heard the knife clang against the bedside table, so she knew that he was finished. There was something in her that hoped she had made him happy. Before he left, he cupped her face in his hands the like he had at dinner and said, "You look better this way."

After several hours spent unconscious, she dragged herself to the bathroom to see what he had done. The pillowcase had been sticky with when she woke, so she placed her hand nervously over the right side of her face before turning on the light. She was afraid to look at herself, thinking of her photo on the cover of a tabloid, a cautionary tale passed on by mothers to scare their daughters. Squaring herself up to the mirror, she took her hand from her face. The cut was deep enough to sever skin and muscle, the wound opening up to a person that she did not recognize, a haggard sorceress only recognizable in modern myth. Using the tips of her fingers she tried to gently suture the skin back together, but she knew that she would be this way forever. Breathing heavily through half her mouth she leaned against the mirror, her face over the sink, holding back acceptance and vomit, when she felt the glass give way. The coolness of it soothed the gash, crawling up onto the sink, she thrust her body through the mirror, which swelled around her like water. She turned to look out into the bathroom, but everything was glass.

*

In the summers, when she and Suzanne used to spend all day at the community pool, they would play a game where they would sit cross-legged under the water of the shallow end and one of them would mouth a sentence while the other one tried to guess what was being said. Once the person said the sentence three times, they would have to surface and the player would have to say, out loud, what they thought the sentence was, no matter how ridiculous. The last time they played had been Suzanne's turn. Bubbles streaming out of her mouth as she spoke, she could not understand what her friend was saying. She responded with an exaggerated shoulder shrug. The second time she said the sentence, Suzanne pointed directly at her, but she still didn't understand. With one round left, she stared at the other girl's lips, her cheeks trying to hold on to the last bit

of air she had inside her, and watched as they formed each individual word, so that she was sure that Suzanne said, “Your face looks funny down here.”

When she is called, she is trying to stuff the frayed sleeve of the green dress inside itself. Tattered clothes make her look more frightening, but sometimes she wishes for something new. The damaged muscles around her mouth are sore and she is glad she does not have to speak to scare. There are long pauses between the first and second time her name is said, so she knows that whoever is on the other side of the mirror is contemplating whether or not to call her at all, making this conjuring feel less like a game. She tucks wild pieces of her hair behind her ears and reties her belt before sitting in the chair to wait, but she does not drink anything. When she is finally pulled, there is one small girl standing in front of the mirror.

The side of her face is bruised and starting to purple. She holds a real knife, and it takes her a moment to realize that she is no longer staring at her own reflection. “I didn’t think you were real.” They study each other. She focuses most on her face, and she sees that the girl has several more bruises on her arms and a scar on the side of her neck, and she knew that they were both trapped in the bathroom. For the first time she wonders if anyone came looking for her while she was trapped in the mirror. She hopes someone did at first, but now she knows that she is just a story. She pushes her hand through the mirror and holds it out. The girl puts the knife in her open palm. She does not know if she can, but with all of her strength she forces the rest of her body through the mirror until they are standing next to each other. Turning back, she wonders if being on this side has changed her, but the scar still muddies half her face. She does not feel anything profound; she just puts the girl behind her and opens the bathroom door.

Immersion

It was June when Brenda Massey went missing from the well-lit parking lot of the department store where she worked, and I was almost finished with fourth grade. We had seen the news that morning, stood around the television, angled and motionless. Brenda's face, rosy and round and floral, made my mother flinch when it appeared framed on the screen, and after the newscaster had moved on to a story about vandalism at the local swimming pool, my father rubbed his face with his two webbed hands.

My mother offered the detectives coffee, which finished brewing before they had arrived. One of them was a woman who was so tall that she almost touched noses with my father, who was unusually large. She did not look like other women. There was no warmth in her face, like my mother or my teacher, Mrs. Foster. Most of the woman I knew tried to connect with me in some way. They'd ask me a question or give me something, but the woman detective barely registered that I was there. She and the scrunchy-faced man, a little shorter than her and a little more worried about being in our house, were sitting at the kitchen table with both my parents. I was standing on the floor barefoot because I liked the way the coolness of the linoleum drifted into my feet and, if I stood there long enough, through my entire body. I did this whenever I was worried. During the week the police officers came, I barely had my shoes on.

The female police officer kept referring to her partner as Detective James, but since he didn't speak. A red birthmark circled his right eye that made him look like he had been forever punched in the face, and I thought that he must know what it's like to have people stare at you and then pretend like they weren't looking. He must have been there for support, to make her backbone a little straighter, because she did not hesitate when she questioned my father, holding

her mug of coffee through the handle, on the hot part the entire time, sipping on it only when it was my father's turn to speak.

“Yes, I was part of the construction crew that built the Clear Lakes Mall, but I haven't really been back since.”

One of my father's tentacles rested on the plaid tablecloth, but the detective purposely avoided it as she spoke, “Well, I see that you're wearing clothes, Mr. Alston, where do you get them?”

“Different places, I guess. I'm an unusual size, so it's a mix. Mostly from catalogs.”

“So, you have shopped at the Clear Lakes Mall.”

“As you can imagine, Detective, I usually avoid public places.”

“Because you don't like to cause a scene?”

“Because I don't like to be stared at by people who don't understand me.”

The detective did not change her expression. There were no wide eyes of sympathy, like I got from the girls at school because I looked so much like him. Instead, she gave my father something he wasn't used to from other people, directness. “Mr. Alston,” she said, “did you kidnap Brenda Massey?”

I didn't understand why all of the adults were acting so cordial to each other. I thought that my mother should be angry for my father, and that he should be upset; I thought that the female detective should have been more threatening, and that James should have used more muscle, but they all just looked like they were old friends, visiting with each other after a long time apart. It was like a game they were playing to see who would dry out first, but no one really did. When the other boys at my school played tag, the game would always finish before someone won, recess was over or they were tired. They never let me play because I was almost twice their

size. When the detectives left my father still denied that he had ever seen Brenda Massey, but he had stared intensely at her picture on the news before they arrived and made sure to watch both the five and ten o'clock broadcasts that night.

After she closed the door, my mother cried. They were not subterranean, but surface tears, like she had cried them before. Even though he was met with some resistance, my father wrapped her up tight, in all of his arms, and told her very softly that she had nothing to worry about. I heard him because I had excellent hearing, above average for someone my age. She let him hold her for a long time, so I knew that she wanted to believe him.

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When I asked my father how the extra appendages worked, he told me that a tentacle is a lot like a tail, his help to give him balance and make him more agile. And when I wondered where he came from, he said he was not sure because he never knew his parents. Until he married my mother he had always lived around the lake. When I asked him why people always accused him of things he didn't do, my father said that the way he looked made him easy to blame. I think he said this because, though my teeth were more like my mother's, I had gills on the sides of my neck. Before, when I ask my father too many questions he always made me get him a glass of water.

But after Brenda Massey's disappearance, he thought that he should teach me how to swim, not just the strokes that regular kids learned at the pool on Saturday afternoons, but how to use the webs between my fingers and toes. He said, "You're unique, Thomas, like me. It's time you figured out why," and I started to think that maybe I was too good for the playground games and should not waste my time trying to be picked. He brought me to the quarry he had worked at when I was five or six, excavating limestone to make the white pigment in toothpaste, until the

crews had dug up all the usable rock and it closed. Now it was filled with blue green water so deep that even he could not reach the bottom.

Whenever I was invited to swim at my friend Liddy's house, I would keep my t-shirt on. No one ever told me too, it was just something I thought I should do. Liddy said that she liked my green skin, but if anyone else from school was there, they looked uncomfortable. When I saw my father take his off and throw it on top of his towel, I did the same without even thinking. After he dove in, I waited on the stone, dunking one foot in and then the other while he lingered under the surface. Even though I could soak it up, water had always overwhelmed me. The other kids at Liddy's pool parties would hold me down by the shoulders in the deep end and tell me it didn't matter, since I could hold my breath for a long time and not drown, but it still felt somehow like I was losing air.

I put my foot in the water just above the ankle and something grabbed on to it tight. I was nervous for a second until I saw my father's face emerge from the water. "Aren't you coming in?" he asked, pulling at my leg gently. I resisted him, hopping on my grounded foot, trying to keep balance, trying to stay on land, but he did not let go of my foot until my body toppled in next to his. We were both laughing as I half-heartedly struggled away from his loosen grip. "I'm free," I said without thinking about it and he agreed that I was. Without warning, he paddled away from me, his tentacles scrunching, gathering the water, using it to drive him forward, and though I stretched out my webs and kick hard with my legs, I couldn't keep up with him and yelled for him to wait.

He was halfway across the quarry when he finally stopped, comfortable and buoyant in the thousands of gallons of collected rainwater, he used two of his tentacles to wave me on. I felt tired when I reached the center and told him that I would never be able to swim the way that he

could, but he grabbed one of my hands and formed it into a cup, and then motioned me to do the same with the other. “Swim now,” he said, “Use the water to move yourself forward...and don’t think about swimming. Think about moving.”

Water rushed into my palms as I pushed them below the surface, and it seemed to harden in my hands, become solid, so that I could leverage it to propel myself forward. I just swam, I did not look back or come up for air until my webs were sore, and when I reemerged, I found myself at almost the other side of the quarry. I remember thinking how easy my body made it to swim. Behind me I could hear my father cheering, and for the first time I knew what it was like to be him.

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My mother was a normal woman, but my father was a four tentacled serpent who dehydrated so easily that he spent most nights soaking in the bathtub. From her, I get my accommodating nature, and from him, an affinity for drinking water. I can always be found with a glass in my hand. Noting their differences, people always asked my parents how they met, and if my father felt lucky for snagging a woman whose hair was so soft and whose eyes were almond shaped, but my mother was quick to respond that she was the lucky one, because my father saved her from drowning.

When my mother told the story at the fundraiser our neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Bloomfield, held to help Brenda Massey’s husband, she started with the temperature, “It was 103 degrees out that day, so no one can blame me for wanting to cool off. I put my toes in the water first, and when nothing bad happened, I dove in.” There was a sign posted. My mother acknowledged that she saw it, that she read the words, but she decided to go in anyway because nothing bad had happened to her up to that point and she figured her streak of luck would continue. She did not

know that, according to town myth, the lake was said to consume people, to swallow them without chewing. As it goes with community legends, everyone in town knew someone who knew someone who had been eaten and the threat of excruciating death was used frequently by mothers to stop their children from wading in, especially on the hottest summer days.

My mother, always willing to relive her near death experience, used dramatic pauses and hand gestures, but as she began to describe the coolness of the water, my father sunk into a corner of the room, away from everyone else. Once she jumped in, she decided that she would swim to the opposite side of the lake, and wave so vigorously that she would wake up her friends, Sally and Ava, as they dozed on lawn chairs on the beach. My mother told the gathering crowd that she felt completely safe until what she still believed to be a piece of eelgrass curled around her ankle. She reenacted attempting to kick herself free, made the motion with her leg, and when that did not work, she reached her arms down and tried to detangle herself, but everything she did just made the grass tighten around her. My mother looked directly at Mr. Bloomfield when she said she thought it was alive, she knew that all plants were alive, but, losing air, she began to wonder if the eelgrass actually had a thought process and if it was killing her on purpose. Then she shifted her chin towards the ground, so she could dramatically look up and say, "I had resigned myself to die. Without regret or fight, I just accepted it," and then she paused for a second too long, causing Mrs. Richardson to gasp, before she clasped her hands together and looked up at the corner where the ceiling met the wall, as if to convey some sort of religious phenomenon that she did not understand, before she told now almost everyone at the party how my father rescued her by snapping the eelgrass with his teeth, wrapping his tentacles around her, and pulling her to shore. There was clapping after that.

When the noise died down, it was inevitable that Mrs. Bloomfield asked if, when she regained consciousness, my mother was scared of my father's appearance. Though he looked a lot like a regular man, he had arms and legs and a face that my mother thought resembled Burt Reynolds, but besides the tentacles, there was the scaly skin that reflects the light when it was wet, the gills that allowed him to hold his breath for up to thirty-seven minutes, which I knew because I had used a stopwatch to time him, and sharp, pencil-point teeth that hung a bit outside his mouth. Instead of saying yes or no, she told Mrs. Bloomfield that when she was young she used to capture the limey salamanders that would sun themselves on the outside of her neighbor's brick house. After grabbing them quickly by the tail she would put them in jars that she would keep them on the dresser, unscrewing the top every so often to run her index finger over their scales. She says she captured them because she was afraid that they would be stepped on or run over by a car, because she couldn't imagine that they had any mechanism for protecting themselves, and when she looked at my father, she figured that he might need protecting too. That night the Bloomfield's raised three-hundred and seventy-three dollars for Mr. Massey, which they delivered to him the next day in an envelope.

*

My father was a private person. Besides sitting in the bathtub, he spent a lot of time in the basement. He made small scale models of historic sites from kits that my mother bought him at the hobby shop. The last was building a replica of the Pyramids at Giza. A procession of one-inch ancient Egyptians lead a sarcophagus inside. The structures were all a bit lop-sided, and the people painted like blobs, but my mother still displayed it and the other models on the living room windowsills, so that they could be seen from the outside of our house. She thought that people walking by would enjoy them, but the famous places were unrecognizable. When I

walked up the driveway on my way back from school, I hoped that no one thought they were mine. When my father finished the Pyramids, I told him that I thought it was his best model so far. He told me that the parade of people in front of the Pharaoh's body would be locked inside the oversized tomb with him and that they would eventually die inside.

My mother liked to encourage my father to do things that a regular man would do, that was why she never went in the basement. After the police came, my father spent more time down there, whole evenings and Saturday afternoons, and when he wasn't there, the door to the basement was locked. He installed the hasp latch himself, took it out of the plastic wrapper and drilled it into the door frame.

My mother was in the living room watching the four o'clock news. They had a Brenda Massey countdown. She had been missing for just over a week and the number eight was displayed below her face on the screen. There was an exclusive interview with her best friend, Diane. I never told my father, but my mother had cut a picture of Brenda out of the Sunday newspaper and kept the clipping folded in her pocket. I had seen her look a few days before. Diane was crying and she went up to the screen and tried to dry off her face. I remember her getting upset about little things like that and that I hated when she did. That's why I went into the kitchen. I told my mother that I was going to get a glass of water, but she didn't hear me.

The door was freshly painted white and was not at all ominous, but as I stood near it, I thought I heard a noise coming from the basement. It was not a human sound, more like a wooden chair sliding against the concrete or a hammer being knocked against metal pipes or the water heater leaking onto the floor, but it still scared me because with the lock on the door I wouldn't be able to figure out what it was. I got down on the floor and put my ear up to the crack between the two, but the sound from downstairs muffled with Diane's crying and it was even

harder to tell what it was. I thought about my father's latest model being wrecked with water or steam, and I wanted to save it for him. I reached for the lock, used it to pull myself up, put all of my weight into trying to get it to open. I could hear the noise more now, a scraping or a bursting, and I felt myself getting frustrated because I wanted to protect my father's things. When the lock would not open, I started to tug at the handle, trying to break the latch he had so contemplatively screwed in.

I must have been too loud because just as I was starting to cry my mother's hands looped through my arms and tug me away from the door. I felt little patches of heat where her nails dug into my skin and so I knew that she was upset.

"Stop it," she was loud, "You cannot go down there. It's not for you."

"I thought I heard something."

"There's nothing there. You heard nothing."

I was sniffing and rubbing the skin between my shoulder and my chest. My mother knew that she had left a mark, and because she didn't mean to, she took the ointment and a band-aid she kept in the junk drawer. She knelt down beside me and lifted up my shirt sleeve. My blood is red. Some people ask. My mother treated the little puncture with the cream and stuck the bandage over top and then kissed my arm pit until I laughed.

"Thomas," she said, "your father is special. The basement is his place to go when he feels like he has nowhere to go." I nodded when she asked me if I understood. "Your father is special, just like you're special, and people always want to make him into something that he's not. You know that you're special, right?"

"I think so."

“Well, you are...And because your father is different, he needs things that most people don't need. It's not his fault, just know that. That's why he's here, because we understand.”

My mother once told me that if she ever won the lottery she would erect a large plexiglass cube in our back yard, fill it up with water and a shoreline, and lock my father inside it. She said she would feed him through a door with the handle on the outside of the tank and bang on the glass once a day to make sure that he heard her. She said this after he threatened to go back to the lake, but she did not want him to. She never told me this, but I know that my mother felt indebted to my father, and that when he saved her from drowning, saved her from her careless mistake, she forever wanted to prove to him that she was not foolish, even if it meant putting him in a plexiglass cube where all he could do was watch her. My mother always likes to say that before she met my father, she was a bit of a rule breaker.

*

The police kept calling our house. My father just hung up the phone without even putting it to his ear, while my mother asked whoever was calling to give her their home number so that she could inconvenience them, too. The ringing gave me headaches, so I started walking around the house with a couch cushion covering my ears. Whenever we were both in the kitchen, my mother put two aspirin in my hand and I took them with a glass of water. He was at work building houses in a new neighborhood across town. The job has begun in the spring just as the weather warmed and would probably only last through September, but that was normal for him. After this job ended, he would find a new one.

The phone rang right after my mother left for the grocery store and I ignored it. She had asked me if I wanted to come but let me stay behind when I told her no, as long as I locked the doors and did not leave the house. I laid down on the couch and buried my head between two

cushions. It ached worse than it ever had, and I thought the pressure of having two pillows pressing on it at one time would make me feel better, but I remember that I just felt sick. When it rang again, I picked it up without thinking and said hello.

The female police officer was on the other end. Her voice was different then when she had come to our house. She asked me how I was and what I was learning at school, and I told her about my latest B+ and how Mrs. Foster had shown my math test to the entire class, her voice syrupy, long and thick as if her mouth was working around too many teeth. She asked me what I was planning to do during summer vacation and if I had any pets. I told her that sometimes my mother let me trap fireflies in jars and keep them in my room overnight. The female police officer told me that she used to do the same thing when she was young. I didn't realize it, but I actually liked talking to her. This was probably the longest I had ever talked at once. She asked me so many questions that when she asked me if Brenda Massey was in my house, I almost told her that I would try to find out. I started to say the words, but then I remembered how she and Detective James treated my family when they came over. So instead, I told her that I had only seen Brenda Massey on tv and that she was wrong about my father.

*

At school we had an assembly to teach us how to prevent being kidnapped and a reporter went to the construction site to try and get an interview with my father. He was fired because the builder did not want the hassle. My mother bought him a new model, the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, and he had been in the basement for three days building it. The news was on constantly and a list of Brenda Massey sightings she had made was hanging on the fridge. I stood barefoot on the kitchen floor, drinking water and eating salami and cheese sandwiches with the refrigerator open. The door to the basement was unlocked and I thought about going down there

even though I knew I was not supposed to, to help my dad or to ask him if he wanted to go swimming. He would want to see me.

I finished my sandwich. At school I always ate by myself. Even Liddy didn't like to sit near me because she said that I spit crumbs from my mouth as I chewed and they would get all over her shirt. There were crumbs on the floor now, which felt hot no matter which tile I moved to. I walked over to the door. Some of the new paint had chipped off and I used my fingernail to remove a little more. I heard another noise from the basement. This time it sounded like voices. I thought that my dad had turned the radio on, and I hesitated, wondering if he would be upset if I came down. Maybe all basements look the same, concrete floors, exposed pipes, the smell of moisture in the corners, but I figured that ours had something that would help me understand my father. I reached for the doorknob and started to turn it when my mother walked through the swinging door from the living room into the kitchen. There was a commercial break.

*

There are rumors about my father. Liddy told me that the other boys in my class say that he was the one who really tried to drown my mother, and that she overheard her mother on the phone saying that he eats prostitutes whole. I never saw my father eat another person, but he took bites out of my mother. He did not do this in violence. They were both very matter of fact when it happened, my mother lifted up her shirt to expose her stomach, which was already filled with deep, circular scars and my father bent down to find a piece of it that he has not taken before. She did not complain or ask him to stop. She allowed him to take what he needed from her. He drained her but she never seemed empty.

There was no warning, no countdown from three, my father just curled back his lips, exposing carnassial teeth, before gripping my mother at the hips. When he was close enough, he

bit down on her skin and she only winced, making it seem like the pain was bearable. From behind the kitchen door where I hid it sounded like a hand clapping on the surface of the water. When my father disengaged from my mother, there was not as much blood as I would have expected, like he had taken it with him. The blinds were closed because they did not want anyone to see what they were doing.

While my father chewed on the skin that he has taken from my mother, body relaxed in a kitchen chair, tentacles curling around the arms like a cat kneading a pillow, his face serene, frozen except for his rolling jaw, my mother began to treat her wound. Before my father took a piece of her, she laid out neatly on the table, alcohol, gauze, scissors, and tape in the order that she would need them. She unscrewed the cap on the alcohol and pored it loose over the wound; the excess ran down her stomach and seeped into the waist of her jeans. Once she felt certain that the bite mark was clean and would not infect in a day or two, she took a kitchen towel and blotted it dry. She rubbed ointment where the teeth had inserted themselves and said, in passing, that she hoped they wouldn't scar this time. My father responded with an "Mm-hmm," as if he weren't really listening, having swallowed the skin he was falling asleep sitting up. My mother rolled a piece of gauze over the wound, taking care to make sure that it was completely flat over her stomach, then taped a square around it so that it would stay in place. When she was finished, my father asked her for a glass of water. She took his cup from the table and filled it up in the sink.

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Brenda Massey had been missing for three weeks when my mother got a job at the drugstore. She was gone most of the day and told me not to go outside. My father split his time between the basement and the bathtub. When he left the model of the Mausoleum at

Halicarnassus on the kitchen table, I glued on all of the columns and stuck on the details of the sculptural reliefs. When it was finished it looked like the picture on the side of the box. I was proud of it, so I took it up to the bathroom to show him what I had done. The door was open, and he was resting in the still water, his knees exposed, hugged by all four tentacles. I wanted to go to the quarry again and practice swimming again, but the detectives were still parked outside. I wanted to see him move from one rock side to the other, but I knew that would never be possible again, “You know that you’re special,” I said and, finally registering that I was there, put his arm around my shoulder and brought me closer to him.

I stuck one of my hands in the bathtub next to my father and soaked up water into my scales. It made me angry that we would always need this, lakes and quarries and bathtubs to feel normal. I clapped my hand against the surface of the water, hitting it harder and harder until my father told me to stop, his voice louder than it should have been. I froze and he must have known that he startled me because he looked over at the model, used one of his tentacles to take it out of my other hand, “It’s good,” he said, “Better than mine,” before he let it drop between his legs and into the tub. “I have another one. Your mom got it for me a few months ago, but I never had time for it until now. I think it’s somebody’s temple or something. You want to go down to the basement and help me build it?” I nodded. He got out of the tub and opened the drain. As he dried himself off with a towel, I noticed the mausoleum had floated over to the edge, hitting the enamel over and over because it had nowhere else to go.