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The Woods Ate Them

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The Woods Ate Them

By Amanda Burgess

Part 1

She was gentle after the fashion of agile and graceful animals, with enigmatic eyes, and was as disturbing as, in the morning, the memory of vague and poignant dreams.

–Marcel Proust

I

Structure reveals space. Space reveals her. In a room spaced between the bellows of my thoughts, Rebecca sits. Waits. Then raps at my mind's door, tap, tap, can she come out yet? No, no, I shush her and fold the story back for a moment, snapping the sides together with my chapped fingers. The floorboards wheeze under her steady pacing.

Hush, I'm trying to warn everyone first.

Rebecca's house is white with beige shutters. When it was built six years ago, there had been less than eighteen houses connecting to Tequesta Drive. The spaces gradually filled with homes, enclosing the original outposts on all sides except the back. The long driveways became streets, and by the time Rebecca moved in, her white-beige house was linked on both sides and neatly faced similar structures. Her front yard is kind of cared for. She left the blue, octagonal Home Security sign in place but didn't renew the subscription. The green borders of the neighbors' yards meet abruptly with the yellowing grass in Rebecca's own yard. Driveways latch each house to a growing web of suburban escapes. Deerfield Plantation. Where roads replace game trails. A community pool and playground. The agreement of mailboxes. Watch groups. People move to Deerfield to put roots in the ground. Misplaced deer roam the edges.

The house was constructed in such a way that the inside directly impedes with any person walking through it. White, regal columns run the length of the entrance hallway and two more brace the living room. Rebecca wonders at the designer's reason for having

interior pillars at all. They impact any direct movement in the house. She inspects the bruises on her legs. Dark purplish fresh ones over old, yellow-orangey ones.

Rebecca stands, leaning on a wall next to the dining room window. The waning day casts strange shadows over her garden. Her eyes rest there. The garden's shape, cut out by small boards driven into the ground, looks like a small coffin. When they first moved in, she planted tomatoes, squash, and peas. Only the tomatoes took to the soil. Maybe they didn't have enough water, or enough nutrients. Maybe not enough attention. Rebecca tends to think about the garden more than maintain it. Coaxing a plant from seed is an intimidating responsibility.

In the spring, the Florida sun pummels the new shoots in the morning. Rebecca guides the new vines on supports, turning them round the posts toward the sky. Budding with fresh softness, the first tomato sprouts. Yellow-pink and newborn. Days darken to rain. Eventually, the light rejoins her backyard sanctuary. Then rain again. The tomatoes don't stay on the vine long enough to ripen. The woods eat all of them. Rebecca refocuses her gaze.

It's the first Saturday in June. Sammy is watching her with a panting, open-mouth urgency. He's half-focused on her and a squirrel on the neighbor's fence. Rebecca opens the backdoor while he clamors between her legs and through the screened porch. Then he's free. The squirrel watches him bark from below and chatters back at him. Rebecca waits at the door for a moment, taking in the temperature and moisture. She feels the urgency too. There's a voice to pay attention to inside of herself. A familiar tone.

Where do I go?

Everything has a cause. In a season, you will reap the harvest.

But my results are off. I feel off. What do I do?

Rise up on wings like eagles.

Rebecca ties her shoes. Sammy wants back in. She knots the housekey into her shoelaces and lets Sammy back in the house. Leaning on her legs, his wiry frame rests for a moment while she pats his back. *Good friend*. She looks up, watching the sun sweep the backyard into greater ambiguity. She notes the darkness and finishes getting ready for her run. Sammy takes in a full-bodied stretch and a yawn. Moving in sweeping motions around him, Rebecca reaches over to lock the backdoor and pulls her hair into a bun. Sammy curls into an oval on the cushion in his crate. She locks it behind him, takes a gulp of water from the kitchen sink, and walks out the front door.

Outside, dusk is singing, *Abide with me, fast falls the eventide*. Rebecca settles the whirring of her mind against the melding of an inner whisper. A single tone in the key of body. She walks down the driveway and into the street. The pace of the air is sighing. The habitual order of walking down her driveway settles her mind and body into a singular objective. Once past the second neighbor's driveway, she leans into a jog. Hard cement radiates pain up her left leg. When she runs in the woods it's easier to ignore the knee. But on the street, she pushes past the pain and puts her mind on something more manageable. Glancing at her watch, she calculates her goal mile splits for this run.

She follows her usual neighborhood route up Sandwood toward Tequesta Drive. A hilly, long stretch of quiet roads. When Sandwood curves, Rebecca leans in and picks up the pace. A responsive light catches her eye, rippling and spilling into an oil rainbow

on a driveway. Her footfalls drum into a faster, more rhythmic pace. She measured a loop around the neighborhood when she first moved in, four miles exactly. Take this street then that one.

Tonight is different. New roads beckon on both sides, encouraging her to explore new paths. She bends toward the change. Veers from Sandwood and follows the terrain uphill, up Starfish Path, up with the elevation. Ahead of her, two figures rise and begin to grow, maybe a couple walking after dinner. A clopping pace. As she approaches, their conversation grows into audible separation of thought and word.

How much is the house worth?

Don't forget to book the hotel for August, I don't want to be stuck in a smoking room.

I already told her the details—Oh, did you see that? I think it was a morning dove.

Oh no, I missed it.

Rebecca listens to the couple as she passes them. Similar to nights she can't sleep and tunes the radio to Coast to Coast. Listening for the white noise. Words without context. She pushes toward the crest of the hill, this must be the top. She speeds up and over the apex of Deerfield. Below her, not far, the street dead-ends. No warning, it's over. Turning back feels strange, redundant.

Rebecca slows. Loosening her posture, she gives in and circumnavigates the bull's eye. The houses' stilled séance pushes her back to what was, back to the same

street, passing the same couple. A folding pattern. She's back again. Closing her eyes, she becomes close with her body again, the momentum in herself.

In the quiet moments between her closed eyes and the road again she remembers what was. In quick synopsis of memory, her mind suspends her and Anthony in youth. When they called each other Sodapop and Ponyboy. She found excuses for the obsession. Their personalities connected without seam, as though his thoughts and hers sprouted from the same soil. They met on a campus visit. A dusty afternoon in the fall. Afterward, they wrote letters, talked on the phone, daydreamed. Each feeling swept into their conception of God's plan. Six months later, she moved to Florida and they married in the waves of love's young impulse. That's when she caught a wink of how she feels now, a certain kind of loneliness.

Deerfield Plantation meanders. It tilts. Stops. But the act of running, already running, is calming somehow.

Later, Rebecca passes the couple again. She wonders if they also have a patterned route through the neighborhood. Maybe they deviated too, explored new roads like she had, but their conversation is lost into noise and they avoid eye contact when she passes. Streetlamps begin to ignite in front of her as if to signal the approaching darkness. Rebecca looks at the answering machine moon, blink-blinking with photon messages. She feels a wave of tired. She pictures Anthony on campus at that very moment adjusting his tie in the mirror. Not looking at the moon.

She turns her gaze back to the road.

A little farther, then downhill the rest of the way. She doesn't look at her watch, pushing to the final stretch of her quiet street. At the bottom of the hill she slows and puts her hands on her hips. She steadies her breath by concentrating on its functions.

On the front stoop she unties the house key from her shoelace. She's never lost a key this way. Sweat drips from her face, her torso hinges and hang over her reddened hands, fumbling with her laces. When she stands, blood rushes her head in treading kicks. She turns around dizzy. Her car in the driveway. The grass in the front yard, coarse and yellow. The front door. It always sticks. Rebecca shoulders into the house. The house responds in mocking, echo slams. She empties her shoes of her feet to the rhythm of habit. Down the hallway, past the columns, she walks into the living room to let out Sammy, who's scratching at the plastic on the floor of his crate in rhythmic rotating succession. He hates getting his nails cut, so they're too long. She hates taking him outside, so his energy is too high. Freed of his cage, little body, big head, Sammy-in-a-box pees all over her left sock in elation. She sighs and leads him to the back door.

The shadows in the backyard are menacing, difficult to decipher. Sammy pours from the house, racing into the darkness. She closes the door and watches behind glass. The barrier and distance wells up feelings of old hopes now vague. She wonders how long it's been since she's been home. A year at least. Back at the kitchen table, peeling carrots with her siblings. The same table where they studied together as kids, listening to mom read Shakespeare and Latin to them. But the image is fuzzy and worn. A squirrel

chatters on the fencepost. She watches as twitches run over its body, then up its tail in a glitchy wave. Its hands fast, turning a morsel against its teeth.

Sed fugit interea, fugit irreparabile tempus,

Singula dum capti circumvectamur amore.

But time meanwhile is flying, flying beyond recall, while we, charmed with love of our theme, linger around each detail (Virgil, Geogics, iii. 284-5).

After tomorrow, the week will approach full-speed. Each bag must be packed, meals planned, schedule analyzed. Making lists helps her order her life in manageable chunks, ladders to climb. She crosses off rungs and works toward the top. Each day's sprawl casts long shadows of attention, usually gobbled up the night before. When the movement of her mind shifts, Rebecca guides it back. *Stay on course.* She plans her running schedule, where she'll go, how far she'll run, balancing rest between.

Sunday: Long, slow distance.

Monday: Speedwork. Interval training on the track.

Tuesday: Hills.

Wednesday: Five easy trail miles.

Thursday: Tempo run.

Friday: Five easy trail miles.

Saturday: Race day.

Rest.

Rebecca finishes her lists and goes to clean the kitchen. The sun is set. Through the window above the sink, small lines of light dance over Rebecca's hands while she washes her plate.

Months ago, maybe years, she planned for weeks to make a special meal for the two of them. Disconnected from practice and passion, she never cared to cook but this meal was a sign of change. Proof of her commitment to him, of her commitment to *us*. But after one bite, Anthony determined the entire meal raw and cold. He was the first to notice. She tried to cook it longer. Still raw. She cried then, embarrassed, frustrated, and those tears became accusations he defended against, this isn't his fault. He couldn't fix what she had prepared and her sadness was too weighty, too embedded in larger disappointment. In the past he had comforted her, tried to, but at some point had to let go, let out slack. He told her, the closer he was to her emotions the more he felt accused of her having them at all.

It took time, but piece by piece, the relocation of her emotional self was in full operation. Sometimes intentional, usually not. But after that night, any attempt to bring them together felt just that, raw and undercooked. Like underdeveloped characters he often found in his students' short stories. He worked more, made himself a regular at Poor Paul's Pourhouse, and found a way to routinely be away from the house.

Something about that night.

She remembers seeing him as unfamiliar for the first time.

Maybe it wasn't her fault he yelled, maybe not his either, but crying makes it worse. She remembers him by the garage door that night, holding up his hands. Her arms

crossed over her stomach, her hands flipping up occasionally to wipe at her face. They stood on opposite ends of their small house asking, *who is this person?* but heard nothing. She went to the backyard; he went to Paul's.

The kitchen stayed clean after that.

A dead-end.

She can't believe she's thinking that, as if her runs could be replicas of her life. How this road bends and that thought travels. But on some nights like this one, when the house is quiet and she's alone, her thoughts drift into wondering what he's doing, where he is right now. Her mind drops to the bottom of a list she never wrote. List of strangers, holding pieces of her, pieces of him, charting over their lives. There at the bottom—or is it his top?—is the longhaired girl from his department. She's a writer like he is. Maybe she's over his shoulder reading what he wrote and saying now, *oh wow, let's stay a bit longer.*

Rebecca followed Anthony's car once the year before. She was on her way home from work and saw his car merge ahead of hers onto the main thoroughfare. There was someone in his car she didn't know. She almost called him but didn't. Instead, she sank into her seat, hands shaking against the steering wheel, and followed him off Exit 7. She followed his car in hers down streets they'd never traveled together before, surprised he never noticed her car in his rearview. He pulled into a movie theater parking lot. Parking on the street, Rebecca watched him get out of the car, then the longhaired girl. She thought of getting out, marching toward him, demanding an explanation. But the world just sat there. So innocent. The stranger didn't hold Anthony's hand or wrap her arm

through his. She just looked at him and smiled and he smiled back. Rebecca went home. She asked him about it later but he didn't tell her about the theater or the girl. Ashamed for trailing his car, she lied too, saying it was too bad he had to work late. But things like this linger. Maybe they're together now. He's tickling over her hair, so beautiful, whispering, *you smell like passion fruit*.

This is distracting.

Wash the dish.

Her breath is suddenly sharp and her hands are beginning to numb.

Wash.

The sponge feels loose, her grip fading. *Please stop*. The lights are off in the kitchen, but the room is slightly lit by the neighbor's light. The houses are so close that the window above her sink faces the neighbor's living room window. She looks up for a moment to see the neighbors on their couch, cooing to their newborn baby. The parents' eyes, their collective gaze, all on a singular existence. Rebecca closes her eyes, too aware of the quiet dread in her own house. A wave of possibility washes over her like a riptide. Her knees wobble and turn. Hands begin to numb. Fingers sign off, then lose feeling entirely. They've dropped the plate. A smooth river rock is gliding up her chest, taking hold of her mind and body in wide fullness. She coughs and swallows against the rock's buoyancy as it pushes against her esophagus. Her legs punch out like Friday. Rebecca grasps the edge of the sink. Any light becomes hail to her face. The only sound no one can hear: her panting breath, a squeak of stumbling legs.

Her mind is forced to focus on limited variables.

Breathe. In. Out.

Rebecca hears Sammy tap-scratching the glass. He's waiting for her by the backdoor. She opens her eyes, realizing she's been crying. Her body is heavy and awkward against the counter. On her way to Sammy she bumps her shin on The Column. Breathe. There is a dog slobbering all over the back door. She can hardly see Sammy's wide-eyed drooling face. On her way, she prays for strength, God-strength. Sammy's nails continue scratching at the glass, but Rebecca is distracted by a smell of decay. *Am I dying? Have I been here before?* She opens the door for Sammy, looking past him as he scrambles back inside. Beyond the square of backyard, there is life moving in shadow. Light from streetlamps on the other side of the house shine on the markers left in last year's garden. Beyond the boxed outline of the garden are trees, more trees, blending together in black-green. She could jump into them like a lake. The green could swallow her whole.

She climbs into bed. Pushing pillows around her body, cocooning herself into sleep. She lies there, knowing her bag is packed for church in the morning, another bag for Sunday's long run. She's showered, brushed her teeth, washed her face. But something in her mind won't hush.

Sleep.

How can she sleep?

Pillow to her chest, steady, horizontal. She falls into a balanced space of body, at least exhausted from kitchen swimming. Muscles can rebuild. Neurons can gather

thoughts in stacks and sort her day. She's able to steady her thoughts enough to ignore their churning and her breathing becomes balanced and drifting.

The garage door opens. The stillness of the house turns into whirring of engines and door slams. Rebecca opens her eyes slightly, 2AM. She's not sure if she's awake or asleep. *Has this happened before? He's home. Is he?*

The bedroom door cracks open. His shadow is all she can see.

Silence. *No, he isn't there.*

Without warning, the comforter lifts with a full-bodied rush of air. His shadow envelops her. Her stomach wakes up. He kisses her neck. His arms around her, a familiar embrace, yet feels cold and unaffectionate. How can she ache for days for him yet cringe his presence?

Order and chaos move between space, weaving as confusion over her body. She feels his weight upon her. Her hands become claws on arms wrapped around herself. She pulls back, thinks of being young and having underwater tea parties with her sister. She remembers her sister's face, bubbles popping out of her giggling mouth. She remembers the day she swam so deep her sister didn't see her below. When her sister jumped in, her legs pushed Rebecca back down as she was coming up for air. Struggling, their bodies became tangled in their attempts to separate. She remembers giving up then. Her sister went up for air, then she followed. But as her mind travels back to her body, in their bed, lost in half-dreams, she feels close to the violence in herself she fears. He's in her ear like an animal. She tames herself and her body gives in to his waves without making any. A

song rehearsed, she knows when the last chorus will break. Her eyes closed, she watches colors of mind. She feels his shadow fade away.

Beside her, he's gone.

The ceiling slightly illuminates. The baby is crying in the house next door.

II

The next morning, the church parking lot is full when Rebecca gets there. She parks in the upper lot, preferring the long walk to the building for the brief solitude. Sitting in the driver's seat she wonders if she'll have enough energy for a run later today.

Keep moving.

She gathers her Bible and notebook together under her arm and walks to the main building. Birds ripen the morning. She listens to the church members call to one another, back and forth.

How are you?

How's the new baby?

Once in the building, Rebecca is handed a bulletin from an usher and greeted by her boss, Mrs. Shepherd. The church owns the school where she works, a tight knit community. Rebecca slips the bulletin between the pages of her Bible and follows the new hallway to the sanctuary. Gleaming with fresh paint and flowers, the hallway is a point of pride for the congregation. This is where Rebecca notices the distinct change in ambient noise from birds and breeze to an elevated level of chatter. Floating, lightly touching the surface, she moves past groups of conversation. Kids run by. She thinks of being a child in church, far from adult expectation, with freedom to skitter away before getting caught.

Angie used to draw cartoons of the pastor, his wrinkled yelling face casting them to hell in various poses. Somehow Angie was only caught once, when a drawing was left behind in their Sunday School classroom. Jonathon's mother found it, bringing it to

Angie's mother immediately. The crayon on paper cruelty of the Pastor holding a child by the heel over cartoonish hungry flames had a gasp-like affect for some mothers. But Angie's mom wasn't as strict. Rebecca remembers her hand over her mouth, holding back the spurts of giggles between her teeth. The sharp looks. Angie's devilish grin. They almost went to college together. Moved cross-country to do so. But Rebecca met Anthony.

Angie would graduate this year, not twenty miles from where Rebecca teaches preschool. The last time they saw each other was two years ago, in their mutual hometown. It was Angie's annual Halloween party. Rebecca had a moment with Angie alone when they went to the basement to get ice. It slipped out. She told Angie she loved her. Angie stopped walking and looked back, half-laughing.

You do?

Rebecca hadn't expected to say that, hadn't expected that response. Their conversation was interrupted by Angie's sister Sophie, looking for her keys. She still wonders why she said that, broken the meniscus. She climbs the steps to the balcony and walks to her section in silence. There isn't a lot of evidence of love here. There aren't assigned seats, but there might as well be, everyone sits in the same place each week. Perhaps she only loved Angie as an idea. From her perched perspective in the balcony, the pastor and praise team look like they're on earth and she's in space. Suspended.

The pianist tinkers into a repeated chorus of *This is the Day*. A woman in the front row begins to clap along. Rebecca stays seated, feeling the river rock rising against her throat. She flips through her Bible, half-praying for direction. For less distraction.

The music leader looks like he is half-laughing when he welcomes everyone to the Lord's house.

Yes, yes, this is the day *He* has made. Let us rejoice. Amen.

He glances to the balcony and seems to look directly at *her*. Rebecca shifts. Something is off. She forces herself to sing the final chorus, unsure where to direct her discontent. The music leader's usual look of joyful overflow now seems pointed, as if critiquing her specifically. What is she doing, sitting there. As if waiting for something, or someone she knows isn't coming.

Time to shake hands, say hello. Turning to those around her, Rebecca nods from her seat. Good morning. The crowd below is laughing to each other, responding in pure delight. They're on film too, broadcast across the United States and parts of Europe. The camera never pans the balcony.

Rebecca flips through her Bible again. There's got to be something in here for a doubter. The pages are too familiar. She was taught as a child what others might say, how to defend against any doubt in the inherent authority of the gospel.

God isn't real? (Look around, He's everywhere.)

The Bible isn't true? (All scripture is God-breathed.)

Jesus wasn't a Christian? (True?)

Rebecca tries to say the old answers. She crosses her feet then uncrosses them.

No, those answers didn't satisfy.

The camera operator pans the choir while they sing a song she's never heard before. With new-found attention, she listens closely to the words. A song about God's

everlasting faithfulness. Her gaze drifts to the stained glass Jesus near the ceiling. He's bent toward a beacon of light from the sky in orthodox tradition, his hands clasped toward heaven. Rebecca feels her hands on her lap, folding with the doubts inside her.

III

The main building of the school where Rebecca works is the church. There are other buildings for the preschool, elementary and high schools, but the church's white, tall steeple outdoes the rest. Rebecca's classroom is set apart from the other preschool classrooms in a trailer near the playground. She's close enough to send students to the bathroom in the adjacent building, but also far enough away that her classroom is rarely interrupted by other teachers or students. A small island. Walls decorated, changing theme each month. Rebecca arrives at seven each morning and preps the room, cleaning and straightening. Routine is the master of her mind. By eight, most of her students are present and needy. She sings, they play, and soon it's naptime. The preschoolers don't allow Rebecca to daydream or weaken, and she kept singing, inside, outside, reminding them: *the world is happy*.

By one in the afternoon on Monday, Rebecca is relieved by a teacher's aide. She has forty minutes to pick up her lunch in the cafeteria, visit the breakroom, and go for a short walk. But before she leaves, she tidies her desk and erases the whiteboard. As though summoned, Barbara is at her door, knocking on the window pane. Rebecca's assistant is organizing papers into the student's cubbies. She signals Barbara to come in. Some students look up sleepily from their napmats. Rebecca changes her shoes to sneakers and the two women tiptoe from the classroom.

The world outside is fresh, new. A spring breeze catches leaves and trash, swirling it into all corners of the corridor leading away from the classrooms toward the parking lot. Sometimes in these moments, Rebecca remembers how much she doesn't

want this job. It's not the kids, not even the schedule, but the freedom. Youth pulls at her body like an anti-gravity, up up. Into an unknown that calls to her in a voice she doesn't recognize. Not God's voice. Someone else's.

The breakroom is really the preschool lunchroom, which is an old trailer converted into two rooms with a bathroom. The main room has four small long tables, thirty-two little chairs, and ten teacher mailboxes. The bathroom next to it is just big enough for a person to walk in, straddle the toilet, then close the door. This bathroom is where Rebecca changes clothes every day before driving to the trailhead for a run. The other room in the trailer is the preschool office. Mrs. Lynch is the preschool secretary and the assistant pastor's wife. She has long yellow hair and always wears pantsuits with pins on her lapel. Today her pin is a large sunflower, bursting toward her breasts, taking any focus away from her face. She's on the frontlines. Treat Mrs. Lynch like a queen. All the teachers know this.

Today is Teacher Appreciation Day, which means donuts in the breakroom. Rebecca doesn't like donuts, honestly, they don't sit well with her, but the other teachers insist she have one for goodness sake, it's just a donut. Rebecca takes a muffin from a basket on the table. Barbara is talking about her battles with cinnamon buns.

How can something so bad taste so good?

Barbara sips from a large travel mug filled with diet soda. A mug with a straw and plastic sides. They pass the church on their way to the track, tall and reaching. Pointing to heaven. A mass of belief in God, simply by existing. The white siding kept clean, the steeple perfectly pointed toward heaven. A constant upward, distracted gaze.

Oh, there they go again, Barbara scoffs. She points to a sign reminding church members to give to the new building project. The Million-Dollar Hallway. The in-progress hallway project includes new bathrooms and a foyer with water fountains and coffee stations. A space praised for its potential outreach to visitors. Comfortable. It'll be the perfect way to get to know each other, in the hallway. Rebecca remembers her moment at church the day before as an aching space inside of her. Her doubts of belief rupture through every thought.

The day is warm. A bright blue sky highlighted by an occasional seagull overhead. This is the every day. *Maybe God's inside everything, smiling a little, or just enough.* Rebecca watches Barbara's eyebrows spring up down from bursting eyes puckered with smile lines and red energy. *Maybe God uses the world around us, what we see, to let us examine ourselves, our patterns.* Barbara's cheeks cling wildly to her face, up down with her bounding steps on the pavement, then stretching side to side in time with her jaw while she talks.

Most days Barbara picks up Rebecca and talks about dieting problems, sighs about her sex life and spills the latest gossip about the deacon's wives. Barbara occasionally asks Rebecca about her husband but Rebecca doesn't say much, or can't say much, it's hard to tell, and the subject drops into stagnant air. This has gone on for years. Rebecca's situation was added to other gossip circles years ago. She found out through side glances and touches to her shoulder. Plus Barbara.

It was as though the other teachers and people in the church were sorry for her, sorry for a loss she couldn't herself comprehend. Barbara didn't question it.

They pass the church and climb the little hill leading to the football field. Barbara is laughing and going on about the new fifth grade science teacher. So handsome, like he was cut from marble.

I'll bet he has master hands.

Rebecca chuckles. A small gesture small enough to encourage Barbara to keep talking, keep yapping along happily imagining fantastical situations with chiseled stone. Rebecca retreats to the silence behind her lips, a place she doesn't feel on trial for. Closed off, she soaks rather than engages with the dizzying feedback of conversation. They're footfalls tap against the rubbery track, falling in step on the outside lane. Barbara falls silent for a moment, birds and background traffic filling in the gaps. She sighs. As though they need to talk and it's coming right for them like a freight train.

How's your husband?

Rebecca sighs. She doesn't have an answer. It's an old topic, but something Barbara doesn't ask about. Rebecca finds herself gasping for air a little, feeling trespassed. It's not that Barbara doesn't mean well, she just doesn't know. Rebecca feels herself say, *he'll come to church when he's ready*, but she doesn't mean it, or think it. She doesn't even know what she means exactly. She's trusting God's plan. *Everything will work out by design, right?* Her long held thoughts now sour on her tongue.

Rebecca changes the subject. They go back to dinner plans and ideas for students, around the track, round round asking, talking, telling. Rebecca's mind keeps returning to her doubts in the patterns she used to trust. But looking into these things only doubled her stomach into nauseated crunches, like punches to her gut. She had stopped praying.

Stopped asking God why, why am I here? Where is he? Where am I? Barbara doesn't know how the weeks swim around her while she bobs in and out of them. Sometimes Rebecca feels perfectly lucid and faithful to her position, other times escaping to the back steps. Like trying to hold water in cupped hands, everything was difficult to hold together. Reality, faith, dripping from her grip. She feels herself losing it. A lost and dying world. But Barbara doesn't know this, couldn't know. She's a part of the saved world, not the lost one. Rebecca starts to ask her questions of why but stops herself, as if in valiant effort to save Barbara from the disease of doubt.

IV

Gina wakes with her mouth open. It's Tuesday, the beginning of her last week in Florida. She pushes the sheets away with her feet. Sticky, hot air hangs in the room. She pulls a cigarette from the pack waiting for her on her bedside table. Two left. Bare feet to floor, then standing, she bends and gropes through pockets of pants. Lighter, lighter, there's one. She pulls on a pair of black jeans. It's Tuesday.

Gina sits by the window, lighting the cigarette with her eyes closed. Today is doctor day. She has three appointments. She takes a hard pull of crisp nicotine. The first doc expects her there in an hour. The world outside is long awake. A hazy late morning melt. The air is shallow, deep in humidity. She watches the building next door in red brick silence, hears Tyler in the kitchen. It doesn't matter but every time Gina looks at Tyler, she thinks of beating her. Nothing deadly, just a good face bashing. She stubs her cigarette on the windowsill and pads to the kitchen.

Gina, why is your lip bloody? Is that from the show?

I don't remember.

You're up early.

I had a dream I ripped your neck off with my teeth. You yelled like an animal.

Shut up.

It feels good to thrash something over and over like that. It's like we were slow dancing.

Gina laughs and Tyler returns to making coffee. Gina drank from the faucet and started rummaging through the fridge. This morning was coming on too strong and

there's nothing to eat. She'd have another cigarette. That's the reason her and Tyler don't get along. Tyler's too goddamn happy all the time.

She presses play on a mixtape from high school and packs a bag for a day at the doctor. Booze, cigarettes, weed. When *Ruby Soho* comes on, she turns her bass amp on to play along. The bass solos are so good. Gina crunches through them, turning it up, up trying to reach her point of distanced judgment. The room is weighted in humidity. She pulls on a t-shirt and leaves for the doctor. Wrestling her bike down the stairs with the crossbar balanced on her shoulder, Gina's immediate thought is to heave it down ahead of her. Destroy something. Apply force. Let out gravity. Fuck it.

The doctor's office is less than two miles away. When she gets outside, traffic whirs in a rushing and pushing pace to get somewhere. Gina gets onto her bike and begins riding in a single, fluid motion, cutting between cars and into the street. Peddle. Push. Stand. Taillights. A quick look down an alley. Shortcut. Warm blood from her chest melts her thighs into a solid push pull.

Once at the office, Gina locks her bike to the stairs and wipes her face with her shirt. It's almost two-thirty. Inside, she's handed a clipboard to fill out and takes a seat with the others performing the waiting room coma. She's running through bass lines for *Hail to Surface*. She's quitting the band, but the bass cuts are perfect. They had been playing live shows long enough that her solos and place were determined. She taps her foot with the beat and plays along in her head. As if the other patients aren't there at all.

The doctor looks uncomfortable trying to define opioids. Too funny. She's somewhere between stammering and yammering. Gina smirks to herself.

I know an opioid isn't the same as opium.

Right.

But funny how those words sound similar, right?

Blank.

The doctor reiterates the non-related nature of opium and opioids (you drug addict). Gina looks at a poster on the wall, trying to figure out where she would fall on the, What is Your Level of Pain Today? chart. Ten is a person completely doubled over, dying probably. Perfect score of ten on the pain chart. Ten has perfected pain. The doctor asks her to lift her shirt and take deep breaths. Her lungs wheeze confessions, *Doc, she smokes!* Fucking traitors.

After the physical, she has two doctors left: a psychiatrist and a medication specialist. Gina is led down the catacomb hallways, noting the molding ceiling tile above the nurse's station.

Do you think that's sanitary?

Pamela is waiting for her in an office with tiny windows near the ceiling with a view of the top of the hallway. Pamela is the perfect name for a psychiatrist. She motions for Gina to sit in a chair facing her.

Nice view.

Pamela looks at Gina but doesn't respond to her.

Gina faces the wall and Pamela faces her computer. It's an odd configuration. Pamela might have commented to patients in the past about how impersonal her office might seem but doesn't say anything now. Instead, she sits into a slouch she wears like a

smoking jacket. Gina's listening to the music in her mind, *Fresh Fruit For Rotting Vegetables*. An album maybe aimed at the plight of mental health workers. The wall in front of her is littered with a of mix of medical announcements and calendar pictures with the calendar parts cut off. Beaches. Gina suddenly finds herself boring, watching Pamela's eyelids linger like lovers, never up or down, half-drowsy, patiently waiting for Gina to speak.

Voices? No, nobody I'd listen to. I'm a singular machine, doc.

Gina pauses. She feels herself talking then stopping. Pamela is without reaction.

I think its these brick buildings. We're monks, Pamela. The extent of happiness is just running a straight line up, up. Like singular mental satiation.

Gina stops. Pamela nods. There's a certain misfire taking place within the momentary silence.

I wonder if I'm an asteroid brain, orbiting itself, forming itself. Like there's no pleasure or pain outside this single, celestial body. Nevermind, fuck that.

Pamela's fingers rush the keyboard, clickity clickity.

After their session, Gina is moved to a third room. April. There are six photos on her wall, perfectly lined as if in their own permanent office gallery.

Nice pictures.

Oh, thanks. Those are from my trip to Italy last summer.

They're good.

You must know about art. Are you an artist?

No.

April isn't Pamela. April has a script: she wants more tests. *They* need more tests. Jennifer doesn't ask what Gina needs, she's removed and oddly comparative. Gina looks at her, focused, professional.

What? No. This place is a fucking test nesting doll. Fuck tests that only lead to more tests.

They're necessary to move forward, Gina.

Bullshit.

April looks at her. As though April is onto Gina, older sister style, wise up. Gina says she'll come back for the test. Lie. April wishes her the best. Lie. Gina leaves the office. Her bike *wasn't* stolen. She kicks parked cars on her ride home anyway, moving ones too. It's a practiced art.

At the house Gina's leaned on the counter, thumb to microwave. Before the last second she opens the door, slides a burrito to a plate and buries it in sour cream. The phone rings. Her head rambles forward, full train, screaming wheels.

What? Hello?

Fuck, Gina, where have you been?

Nothing. What's going on, Jake.

What the fuck was with you last night?

I don't want to talk about it. I just know what's going to happen.

No you don't.

It's fucking obvious, Jake.

Assuming that is assuming you know how I feel, what I think.

Which isn't hard to figure out.

Be serious Gina. I have autonomy.

You'll see what I mean. Tyler said she can be there at seven.

Fine. See ya later.

Bye.

The week before, she started missing her jaw. Strangely, during band practice, she mentally ran her hands over the places she'll miss on Tyler's body as if she ever touched her at all. Some of the songs were well worn to the point that she could imagine it. She'd never do it. But while thinking this, touching her jaw (in her mind) and letting her go in the stillness of forever and all, she was interrupted by a laugh (so loud). Every time, fucking Jake. Gina hangs up and eats the burrito. Free of it. Washing her hands of it. Crucify it.

They decide to meet for pizza before band practice. Standing on the curb afterward, Gina's feels herself raging at the both of them, laughing together about a scene from an episode of *Lost*. Was she jealous? Disgusted with herself, Gina slinks in and out of the conversation. She hates them so much, or maybe its her mind. She feels herself morph into an older brother type. A fake body. Up close are her hands, wrapping over and around themselves in constant motion. The two of them ask if she's okay. Gina laughs and tells them to shut the fuck up, of course she's okay. She slaps Tyler's back, catching a glimpse of his throat over her shoulder, imagining it against the row of her knuckles. So sweet. It's not Tyler's fault. She's really too easy to let go and hate. The doctor's were no help.

Band practice separates the three of them into their own cavern of self abuse and minute accomplishment. Jake biting his lip to the quaking of his body rising in rhythm. His hands and feet race along the kit in pulsing seizures. Tyler's mouth is open and she's squinting toward nowhere. She presses the fret board and twitches from her shoulder to hand, scratching at the strings with chaotic intention. Gina screams into the air, drooling and staggering. She punches at the wall then bends to the floor. Bass angled toward her face, her chin dripping blood.

V

After work on Wednesday, Rebecca takes the back road home, stopping at Goddard Park for its near-perfect 5-mile loop around the lake. There's the usual group, stretching in the parking lot. Parents with 3-wheeled strollers leaning and talking; high-schoolers in a circle pushing and jesting; solo runners perched on one leg holding the other foot against their behind with the drip drip of sweat sparking from their body to the grass.

Rebecca parks near the outdoor shower, turning off the car, closing her eyes. It's nearly seven and will be dark by the time she finished her run. Her body rests easily against the seat. She could sleep. There are shorter loops, but the one around the lake is the best. Most beautiful. Most varied.

She decides to chance the sunset and pulls her hair into a bun. It takes three solid breathes and she's getting out of her car, then hopping over the fence and onto the grass. She straightens her spine. The day can slip behind her.

To get to the trailhead, head past the parking lot, past the horseshoe pit, through the row of trees and across the street. On the left there's a small donation box, honor system please put your dollar here. Rebecca sometimes brings money, sometimes pretends to put money in the box, sometimes ignores it altogether. Today there's a group of three hikers crouched around it, trying to decide if they should go back to the car. One of them says, *Who cares, nobody's checking*. The others argue that it's the principle of the thing.

The 5-mile loop is shaped like a figure eight. The bottom half traces the lake and the upper half encloses numerous mountain bike tracks. From the road, a person can choose to turn left, where the trees are sparser and the sun shines in streaks, or turn right into canopies and darkness. The best way to go is right.

Rebecca tucks her headphones into her ears and runs toward the canopy, hop stepping over roots, pulling and rising from the muddy ground. She feels a lifting, her lungs tightening then loosening again. Her breath between steps stitches her into a whole. A routine, her control. She brings up mantras to remind herself: *good posture, strong ragdoll, shoulders back, knees up*. By the time she emerges from the first cold, dense pocket of woods, she has enough energy to race down the straightaway that leads to the lake.

There's something about today. Something about being asked so many questions by Barbara. Come to think of it, people have been asking a lot of questions lately. Rebecca pushes off the ground. Harder. Faster.

The straightaway gradually unfurls into a long, steep decline before the trail curves right or left around the lake. Rebecca's legs are bounding as she swings, second nature. Her mind, wandering on him again, is tugged back and forth. Legs burning. Not thinking about him is the whole point.

Once at the bottom of the hill, Rebecca takes a left at the lake (also the better option for hills and scenery) and slows to a trot. Only when she slows does she find that her breath is something she has to chase after. Her lungs climb anxiously to escape her chest. Heaving, the world becomes the boom of heartbeat.

Along the edge of the lake, frogs sing aloud to each other, ask each other questions. Rebecca feels as tired as she felt in the car. Maybe more tired now. Her burning legs harden to concrete blocks. She thuds down the trail. Her Quasimodo posture favors her left leg, with her right knee flaring at each footfall. A good time to walk.

Rebecca lifts her arms and clasps her hands on her head. Her chest opens for oxygen. Heavy breaths feed her burning muscle and soak into her brain. Slowness, creating small pockets of space for offshoot thought. This whole life, every syllable from the pulpit, all the inadvertent gazes, pile against her mind's door. She must, has to think about them.

Is this a dream?

What's real?

The world, an aged werewolf, a whirlpool. In saecula aeculorum.

She bobs out of her waves of doubt, deciding to walk only until she gets to the drinking fountain, located about halfway around the lake, then get going again. The trees hold out their roots to touch her feet. She closes her eyes for too long and nearly trips.

World without end.

A sense of portion, a wax end, day of judgment.

Deep cut.

A lie?

At the drinking fountain she checks her watch as way to gauge her pace. A way for distraction. Almost 25 minutes. The sun is beginning to set. She hears a rustling

ahead. A guy in a tank top and basketball shorts soars by, headed in the other direction. He's the only person she's seen on the trail, it's getting late.

Rebecca decides to walk a little longer anyway, her legs stiff and burning. *What about sleeping out here, maybe the spot just beyond the power lines where there's open field, an open sky. It would be beautiful on a clear night.*

The sunset reveals something else. A cloudy darkness that will soon be Rebecca's companion convinces her to give in to a slow jog. Over two miles left.

On average, the next part of the run is autopilot. Meditative. In one place, doing one thing only. Yet, back and forth her anxiety creeps, her chest tightens, she focuses back to breath. Counting steps, counting minutes. A little bit longer. Breath. Step. Don't stop.

Her lead legs slog upward between gasps. To stop means to lose any miniscule amount of momentum she's managed to hold onto. The sweat on her body is stagnant and oozy. With any jostle or turn her headphones slip from of her ears and swing from her neck. She's not listening anyway.

The gravel slides from under her feet while she half stumbles in a half-run, mixing up mantras, her face flushed in tired earnest. Pure focus, ears closed to the woods beyond her gasps for breath. She doesn't wonder who else is out there.

At the top, Rebecca checks her watch again, 50 minutes. This isn't her best run. Already an average pace two minutes slower than normal and she still has a mile to go. It'll be almost 9 by the time she gets home. Push any thoughts aside, anything but the run.

Breathe. Step. Repeat.

After the hill, the trail follows the top of a small ravine filled with songbirds year-round. The sun is set now. She feels herself panic a little. Not panicking because she'll go home to an empty house. A house he could live in but maybe doesn't, she isn't sure anymore. Not panicking for the doubts of purpose seeping into her body, invading, filling her from the inside with nothingness. No, she's panicking for lack of light. Once the light is gone, a person can take a wrong turn and end up wandering the endless mountain bike trails that run in and out of each other in a maze. The panic propels her forward. Fear focuses her mind too, this will be her fastest mile. The trees' large, wide trunks darken. A stillness comes over the trail in collective breath.

Rounding the last corner, she recognizes the gate, almost there. The encroaching darkness is held back by light by streetlamps shining through the sparse trees. When she can see the entrance to the trailhead, Rebecca slows to a walk and feels the chill of evening settle over her sweaty body. Her car is the only car in the parking lot.

Rebecca pulls the car key from her shoelace and decides to stretch at home.

As she opens the car door, a strange wind races out toward her naked legs. She shivers and gets in, grabbing a towel from the backseat to clean her face.

Colm visit us! Everyone is a neighbor at Cornerstone Baptist Church! Rebecca notes the church name. When she gets home she'll write them an email regarding their sign's spelling errors. First Hope changed their sign completely after she emailed them about their *Seasons Gratings* sign. A form of community service, she thought, for the betterment of society.

This is her drive home.

The driveway is dark when she arrives.

The house is empty.

Something watches. Or someone? She'll wonder that later. Only things creep in an unfeeling vision, compiled of tropes and memorized sayings. This shadow steals sleep. A life inside the body, made up of the absence of body. A closet under the stairs.

In the light of a new day, her doubts sometimes shrink back, fold away and, if she tries, Rebecca can forget them altogether. She can keep a straight face. *Don't explore places you can't stand in*, she'll remind herself. Another belief, solidified.

It is not day. Not even a weekend. Another night to prepare for the following day. Pack bags, prep lunch, get ready for bed. If only she could run to sleep.

The kitchen light hums while she makes a sandwich. Her wandering mind flips in her skull. *Where is—why am I—how can—?* Dizziness wobbles down her body. She catches herself, balancing her weight against the counter. This has been happening too often. She's fighting her body to stay upright. To not lie down forever and ever, Amen.

Rebecca wakes up on the kitchen floor. Has this happened before? Could she live as a person on a floor, in the fetal position, silent to everyone outside her hollow box? Has she built her own tomb? Encased, waiting for the sun to rise? She awakens before opening her eyes, hoping the scene will have changed while she was out. Maybe she was actually where she wanted to be, not sprawled on the linoleum. The coolness of the floor is enough of a reminder. Half holding her breath, she waits for an abstract salvation. A way out.

Stand up.

Get off the floor.

Keep moving.

She plants her hands on the floor in front of her and leans on them with her weight, pushing forward and up, eyes closed. Breathing into it, she propels her body to standing. Unsteady, Rebecca holds the counter.

The fall impacted her leg enough that she limps slightly walking to the bedroom. Hopefully this won't affect her training routine. Won't slow her up. She doesn't have time to be injured. Maybe she hadn't eaten enough today. She passed out, didn't she? Admitting the real problem is too much of a problem. It's not that simple. Recognizing she had descended into dry heaves on the floor, a fish out of water, no breath, all because of what? The world is slipping away. She is losing momentum. The outside force of her inertia is fading, losing interest, maybe redirected. Or is she pushing it away? The pushback causing stagnancy, stasis, a standstill. Then the blackouts.

Rebecca pushes herself into bed. She might have brushed her teeth, maybe completed the usual rituals but can't remember now. A slipping away is underfoot and she's still trying to keep from falling. Maybe a night's rest will let it all wear off, disappear. She lies down but doesn't sleep. Her mind looking for origin in memories.

She's being scrutinized. Her friend's mother, eyeing her up and down. Maybe it's Rebecca's outfit, maybe her body. She's young, too young to stare back. They're crowded in the sanctuary in the church she grew up in. Everybody's there. The pastor,

assistant pastor, parents, kids, all crammed in Rebecca's memory. She must be 12. It must be Sunday.

From her vantage point at the back of the sanctuary, she watches the church body ease itself into pews and conversation. Laughter, pats on backs, handshakes. She's a statue mute, feeling the gaze. The mother's eyes hold expectation. Changing and growing as she is, Rebecca is under the collective scrutiny of the Bible, the church body, womanhood, the world. Some rules are understood, others repeated enough that she, and everyone else, knows how she should be.

The odd thing is, under watchful eyes she feels small and huge at once. No longer a child, not quite a woman, on a teetering footbridge of possibility. Whether it's Christopher's mom, her grandmother, or God himself, the watchful eye settles on Rebecca's body. Her stomach cinches, her mouth clamps shut. The gaze isn't something she seeks. There's fear in those looks. A nervousness, the kind that shadows just before something falls apart in front of you.

Rebecca might fall apart. She might lose her innocence and never come back.

The mother glides toward Rebecca, her hands outstretched. She's there to straighten, prod and preen. Buttoning the top and bottom buttons of Rebecca's plaid oxford, the mother isn't looking at her, not really. She's mid-conversation with another mother. She was mid-conversation when she approached her in the first place, listening to another mother describe a recipe she's dying to try. Rebecca's head is down, watching the mother adjust and groom her. Rebecca shifts. Waiting for a mother, especially

someone else's mother, to straighten her up feels sad and embarrassing. It's enough that Rebecca wears pants instead of dresses, maybe, or doesn't smile much.

Lost in memory, Rebecca watches the service open with Jonathon's mother singing a solo about Jesus being the Lord of all time. She can remember it so clearly. A slow song first before the whole choir is rallying behind her, singing the names of God. Some worshippers eyes close and smiles warm their faces. They know this God, the same expanse of unknown, the same eternity stretching as wide as the arms of the infinite.

Rebecca feels the energy of the song's chorus move through her body in waves. The collective voice of the church body is far from individual voices with their quirky specificity and is booming energy.

Your love never fails, never gives up, never runs out on me.

Rebecca's voice too, becomes lost and she's singing along without intending to.

Everything might pass away, but Your love remains the same.

The director, Mr. Carter, steps forward amid the burst of voice. He's wearing a white shirt with a tie, a jacket and slacks. His white hair bounces along with the beat of his enthusiasm. His hand never stops, up down, in time with the piano. He's praying aloud, thanking God for freedom, for belonging to the Holy Kingdom.

Maybe God does accept me as I am. An unworthy animal.

Mr. Carter is instructing everyone to ponder, think deep, ask God for forgiveness and direction. The pianist taps toward Be Thou My Vision. Soon, the church body is in unison, singing the familiar hymn. Rebecca's scanning the choir, sopranos, altos, tenors,

reading the rows. A tenor in the back section keeps adjusting his shirt cuffs. A soprano on the right looks toward the back of the sanctuary occasionally, as if waiting for someone.

Be Thou my Wisdom, and Thou my true Word;

I ever with Thee, Thou with me, Lord;

Thou my great Father, I Thy true son;

Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.

Can I be Thy true son?

VI

Bob's Seafood Grill on Seaport Avenue is open for lunch and dinner. Gina is on the wait staff, working most weeknights and Sundays. Guided by propulsions of anger passing as focus, she's managed to work there for almost two years. Bob has trouble keeping servers. She graduated college without fanfare a month before. Anticipating a rocket in her ass and to be out of town before mid-May, she lingered anyway. Serving tables, filling coffee. Resisting urges to topple Bob.

The band isn't going anywhere. Tyler lost her mind into the clouds like a fucking folk artist. They're breaking apart like challah bread, unbraiding onto the floor. Gina knows, two more shows and the band will be over.

The restaurant is brimming, loud with clinking forks and teeth against glass. Gina took her time. Bob is managing again. He knows all of the customers by name and greets them, taking them to tables. He plays host. In two weeks he'll be on a cruise, a ship bound for the Bahamas. No dinner rush, no invoices to fill out, only his wife and his Panama hat.

Table four has been waiting a while. Lynn is talking to her husband, Paul, about the sermon that evening, and what a moving word it was. Pastor Doug was taking the congregation on a Wednesday night study through the book of James.

Faith, without works, is dead, Paul.

But by faith that you are saved, not by works.

Yes, but works are the evidence of faith, not the assurance of it.

Well, I don't think God has a big problem with me, Lynn. We're chummy.

Then I think you would be more enthusiastic.

Lynn looks down at her menu. This is their usual place on Wednesdays. She knows what to order. They usually bring church members with them to eat after study. Lynn would listen and nod, getting to know who was connected with whom, where they stood. Paul would nod off. This week the sanctuary was nearly barren, most of their friends on vacation, so they went to dinner alone.

No question, the voice of God had spoken to Lynn during the service tonight. She had wondered, prayed, but this was definitely Him. She announced this to Paul in the car, after riding in contented silence for a few minutes. Paul nodded, not agreeing yet not disagreeing enough to argue.

Today is special. Today, God told me to leave my job and go into ministry full-time. This is a real calling, Paul.

Do you really think so?

Once they arrived at the restaurant, the conversation might have moved on but Lynn was determined to bring Paul into full support of the idea. He's distracted. That waitress is working again. Something about her gaze, he felt transported to another place just looking at her. No one from south Florida had such a permanent, etched sneer. Her smile was a smirk of disgust. She fascinated him. But not in the way lovers gaze, but in childlike perplexity. Paul knew that girl would be their waitress again not because she had stopped by to get their drink orders or written her name on the paper tablecloth. He knew just like Lynn knew God wanted her to quit her job. There are inertias in the air, intuitions. Paul had intuitions about people, and there was something about her that

brought him to thoughts he couldn't escape from. Things he used to think when he was younger. The pointlessness of existence. Meaninglessness. She's young, maybe late twenties, with arm tattoos and gnarly hair. Once out of earshot, Lynn had first commented on the girl's hair, maybe she could wash it. Then she found her mannerisms offensive, crude. Unchristian.

Paul wiggles his big toe against its neighbor. The softness of his socks gushes with half-sweaty toes. No feeling to move beyond. His eyes rest back, feet press softly, it's like heaven to look around and take in. Lynn is looking as content and resilient as someone stepping from an outdoor shower.

Lynn watches her husband. *He's a good husband. He's here isn't he? Is that all it takes?* Joe, Patty's husband, he is a doll. He could bring every person to Christ on any given night. What a powerful testimony. Her Paul is just like the Biblical Paul, the inner thinker. Paul wrote letters to churches. *What was it to work for God? Could a person truly do God's work?* Lynn stumbles between prayer and checking her phone for messages.

So, what do you think, Paul?

About what?

Come on Paul, be serious.

What's with the service today? I can't believe we haven't even *seen* our waitress.

He motions to Bob. Bob waves back and slips into the kitchen.

Lynn catches herself. This isn't just about her, or him, this is about God. *Paul needs to understand, or at least be on my side.*

Paul looks through the restaurant in a sort of curious impatience. Lynn eases into her seat, settling her hips side to side then shoulder blades, back and neck. She takes a breath and prays. *Be close to me, God.*

Gina?

What?

Uh... It's the rush, Gina. We need you in here, now.

Bob is like a bird. He waits on the branch near the feeder, ready for the new seed. Once it arrives, damn if he doesn't have dibs on all of it. He's attractive because he should be punished for being such a prick. Food is immediate, always needing food. Asking for food. It's our food-time. Gina stubs her cigarette on the brick building. Watching it burn out, she feels feral.

She's going to quit this job. The ship's future is sailing into the deep, cold ocean. Smoothing out into the afternoon, she scarce thinks a new thought before the old one is outdated. Stepping back only caused rupture, a tear in her present that scared off intimacy. Meanwhile, she's pulling in cash, as much as possible. Carrying plates, stacking up her arms like ceramic sleeves. The plates sear into her skin, the only blessings from the job, streak burns. Shit tips.

Gina goes into the kitchen and picks up the order for table three. A family with a baby. The table next to theirs is a couple she recognizes. The people at the table don't help make room for the food and she's balancing hot plates and dirty dishes again.

She takes the order from the couple and realizes why she recognizes them. They're Anthony's parents. It's taken her weeks to figure it out. She starts to ask them

about their eldest son, about his wife, her old best friend, but doesn't say anything.

VII

Thursday after work, Rebecca drives to Miccosukee Greenway for a short run to stretch her legs. The greenway is positioned between two major highways. Close enough to be accessible by car and far enough away to be surrounded by trees, and the smell of green branches reaching out in growth. People who use the greenway often stay close to the parking lot, but two miles up the trail there's a vine-covered, neglected church bending to decay. The quiet, stillness of the path ignores the slow takeover.

Rebecca normally uses the greenway for speedwork, racing the straight-aways in the sun, gasping for air, sweat dripping and flying from her face. But today she'll go easy. Feelings of aimlessness and singularity tighten her stomach. She walks instead of runs, taking her time in the hidden spaces of the woods.

The empty house in Deerfield invades her focus. Apart from Sammy, whose misbehavior is beginning to overshadow his companionship, the house is a shell, a place she once imagined, accepted, looked forward to. Now a place to hold memories, what-if's, and shadows.

She parks her car near the edge of a low wooden fence. She double-knots her shoes and decides to leave her phone in the car. Today she'll just carry her keys, no electronics, no distractions. Let the run heal. She gets out of the car into the wavy heat of the parking lot. Past the greenway to the east, she walks along the path leading into the woods. Past the abandoned church. She sometimes stops there, peaking in the dirty windows, wondering who used to worship inside. Now the building is in corrosion, taken over completely by Spanish Moss and water damage. Rebecca doesn't stop there today.

Breath. Step. Repeat.

Her mind wanders to the future. An imaginary space she can control. She'll quit her job this year. *Yes. But go where? The end of the year is only weeks away. Yes, I'll turn in a resignation letter. But then what? Cut ties with this whole place, never look back?* Everything familiar disappearing from view into a place to never think about again. Later selves might ask how it was all destroyed, but her intention will be to forget and override. She'll be free.

Today, the sun's poignant rays cause her skin to redden. She forgot to bring sunscreen, or a hat, and her face tightens for a break. A small trail leaves the main path to the right, something she hadn't noticed before. It looks like a narrow horse trail, well-groomed and out of the sun. On a whim, inspired by her thoughts of taking off from this place, she splits from her usual direction.

The ground feels foreign. She loses herself in the adventure of spontaneity. Regaining energy, soon she's running instead of walking, racing into new spaces. Even breaths. Time slips on, leaping ahead of her. The air springs up, into Rebecca's mouth and nose, then awaiting lungs, renewing her inside out, outside in. The old bridal paths have no signs, weaving in and out of each other. She explores their connections without apprehension, making turns on impulse. It's wonderful to lead the way, choosing destiny and direction. She's without compass but doesn't need assistance.

Rebecca soars.

As soon as she notices the fading light, she becomes conscious of the disorienting maze of trails around her. She's lost. Maybe not. Doubling back, she tries to remember

the turns she's taken. She feels panic shudder through her arms and legs. Somehow the green looks the same in all directions. She's running in circles.

There was a road crossing a while back, maybe she can find the road and follow it back to the parking lot. Rebecca stops and listens for traffic. With a faint suggestion of engines as her guide, she stumbles off-trail and into the brush.

Thoughts of danger for wandering off-trail is somehow lost too. She's trying to hold onto the faint feeling of control she had only moments ago when the sun was still up. Having been in charge, then losing her way, leaves her with a lessening confidence that moistens her eyes in defeat. She will not cry over this. *Remain calm, stay in charge.* The forest offers little comfort, growing darker and more dense the farther she wanders. Clinging to her legs, scraping her arms, her body responds sweating, bleeding, her eyes wide. Finally, the road.

No streetlamps, the country road is unmarked and winding. She follows it one direction, then changes her mind and goes the other way. Who knows which way will lead to her car, how far she is from help, how long she's been gone.

A car whooshes past, speeding too fast for Rebecca to gather herself enough to even think to flag it down. She watches its taillights fade into the darkness and looks down, her legs and arms scraped and bloodied.

Another car passes. Rebecca yells to it, waving her arms.

Help me, help please!

The car is moving too fast to notice. Feeling her desperation growing, she screams into the darkness.

Is anyone out there?!

No response.

She continues to stumble, jogging along the shoulder of the road.

The escape she searched for now clothes her in shuddering darkness, unfamiliar and cold. Warmth from the sun, fades behind her staggered gate, leaving her body in waves. Her body shivers.

Headlights creep up behind her. Without thought, she turns to flag it down. A van, moving slower than the others. It pulls up next to her.

The man driving is alone, in his mid-forties, baldish, driving a messy van with carseats in the back. He rolls down the passenger window and asks if she's okay.

I'm sorry to bother you, I'm lost. I don't know where I am. I'm looking for my car.

Where's your car?

In the parking lot off Route 10.

That's in the other direction, about ten miles back. How'd you get over here?

I'm not sure. I guess I'm lost.

I'll give you a ride if you need it.

She climbs in the back of the van, moving food wrappers from the seat and noticing up close how blood and dirt-covered she is. She has to accept. Ten miles is simply too far, it's too late. She has to trust him. He turns the van around and drives in silence. Rebecca watches the dark road drag on, imagining herself running along in the wrong direction, continuing into the night. Falling asleep in a ditch until morning then

running again. Eventually reaching a point of some place when she'll realize she's gone the wrong way, would she go back?

He brought her back, back to her car, pulling into the dark parking lot. She thanks him, that's all she has.

Thank you.

He mumbles, *no problem*, and pulls away once she's gotten into her car and started the engine. She exhales dread into the comfort of familiarity. Her hands are shaking.

Lost, now found.

Isn't she?

Still, safe from the dark unknown, fear slipping away, she feels a lingering sense of loss. For a moment, she was lifted away. As if her body had ran the wrong direction on purpose, pushing her mind back to carry the body to safety.

Breathe. Step. Repeat.

Call and response. Singing a song from just beyond, somewhere else, waiting for her to snap out of it, or into it, to spin around the arbor, to trust a new frame.

Rebecca's drive home appears simulated in front of her. Same roads, stop signs, trees, churches. The house comes into view as in a dream. Somehow greeting *goodbye* as she pulls in the driveway. She gets out of the car into the familiar stillness of the neighborhood. Stifled, alone, the inner dissonance gongs. Her eyes sting, pinching tears over the dirt on her cheeks. She hears Sammy inside the house, barking at her approach, knowing somehow that she'll be a stranger soon.

Rebecca stands in the driveway. She feels a surge of fear. *God is no longer listening not because he doesn't care but because he doesn't exist.* The realization of her sudden loss of faith surprises her. *Will God kill me if I don't believe he's real? What if I'm wrong and my fate is the hands of an offended God?*

Darkness is creeping over the evening sky. Someone in the neighborhood might be in their house saying, *wow, it got dark fast out there*, while Rebecca stands by her car, supposing it's God's wrath about to strike her dead.

She trips to the front door, unlocks it and goes inside. The deadness inside doesn't feel as cold. She owns it.

My darkness.

She opens her mouth and closes it again, eyes wide.

She showers through habit, ordered and moving. A gesture of energy.

Routine. Planning. Execution unraveling.

Sammy waits by the backdoor. Rebecca pulls on a robe and lets him outside, lingering by the door to watch him. Night animals have begun their songs in coaxing patterns, urging her to come out, to break. She doesn't pray. There isn't much to talk about.

Was I born in the wrong century?

She turns from the door. The only light on in the house is a living room lamp. She turns it off. Continuing in habit, she scoops food into Sammy's bowl. When he comes back inside, he laps it up without coming up for air. The house is dark. She skips dinner. Sammy stretches and climbs into his favorite chair.

Fleshly cleaned, she looks down at her arms, sunburned red, covered in scratches. Sammy is scratching too. He might have fleas again. The backyard is a haven for fleas. Night brings shadows of its own, reaching round her body as she crawls into bed. But she doesn't stay there.

Her eyes won't close. Seeing every little thing, as though the entire system of the world is collapsing while she watches. She thinks of her body, her backyard, the garden, the roots deep in soil underfoot. She thinks of the woods and the trees curling round her, wrapping her in forgiving forever. That's when she'll close her eyes again. That's when she'll sigh and let go. In the abyss. As an object in motion with no outside force.

She aimlessly stumbles to the kitchen.

The refrigerator doors are tall like a wardrobe and when Rebecca opens them she laughs. Inside, there is only a single piece of raw meat, thawing on a plate. It looks like it's still bleeding.

You're dead.

Her mind has the meat in her hands, splitting it into chunks in her mouth. Chew. Swallow. Repeat. *That's not logical. Nothing you do is logical. What is wrong with you? Are you even listening to yourself?* She leaves the meat there and closes the fridge.

Sammy watches her from his chair. She drops a treat in front of him and walks to the bedroom. She pulls on clothes. Her phone falls from her pocket. This is her chance to reach out. Rebecca kneels to the floor, picking up her phone with both hands.

I'll call him.

She dials.

Hello?

I'm leaving the house. I did it. He's dead. I'm going to the woods.

Wait, what?

It's over. It's all over. He's dead, buried in the garden, now coming for me.

Bark, stop, what'd you do? Hold on, I'm comi—

Bye, Anj.

Rebecca hangs up. She walks into the backyard. Forward motion, the only direction anymore. She tramps into the darkness. Thorns hook like fingers into her legs and sleeves.

I am the black sun. You cannot blot me out.

Rebecca falls into a run.

I'll bury it all. Burn it all to blackness.

The woods spring her forward.

The darkness deepens, Oh Lord with me abide.

Part II

The pattern of my life

Is spread before me—

Lovely pattern

Run through with ugly threads,

And yet,

These threads,

Pulled out,

The pattern falls apart—

Smoothed down,

The nap spells courage

But rubbed the other way

Cowardice shows—

Sunlight streams on

Truth and honesty

But in the dark

A strain stands out

Of falsehood—

But still the pattern glows,

Complete,

A shining thing

A monument

To having failed

And tried again.

-Doris Caesar

I

Bark wakes up in the passenger seat of her car. She scratches, feeling at a trail of tender bumps leading down her face and neck. Her hands and arms are covered in rash too, or are they bug bites? She feels the car rattle and bump down the highway. The daze seeping down from her mind puts her in a state of near ambivalence. She turns her gaze to her driver.

Is this a dream?

Look at you, all awake and semi-lucid.

Bark watches Gina's arms droop over the steering wheel, her back and shoulders hunched forward. She feels her eyes sagging toward closing again. *Are we running away?* She looks out the window, not so much to see where they are as to pretend they're not anywhere. If she could hold it together, she could've made everything work. Questions bubble in her throat, where they're going, what's going on, but her body feels lifeless against the seat. As if coming back up from the dead, it comes back to her, the woods, her panic, her desertion. She remembers darkness, then Gina pulling her to her feet and to the car.

Gina coughs.

The backseat is stuffed with bags and trash, maybe luggage, all squeezed in like filling. Gina is in the impulse of the moment, how they hadn't planned any of it yet were racing along an evacuation route anyway. Bark asked her hours before, *Where are we? What are we doing?*

We're in your car. I'm taking you home.

Wake up. Get grounded. Fall asleep. Gina flips on the cruise control and pulls a bag of tobacco onto her lap. This isn't about morality, right and wrong, Gina picked up Bark because she's a real savior. Gina crinkles the rolling paper in her hand. *Gallant. Saved this girl.* She pinches the paper between her thumb and finger, creating a trough before filling it with tobacco. She hadn't talked to Bark since her Halloween party, then on the phone last night. If it had been any other week, she might have not taken the call. It was as though the night were predestined for the two of them to need each other at the same time. Gina rolls the forming cigarette between her fingers a few times before bringing the edge of the paper to her lips to lick it then roll it up completely. Bark holds out a lighter.

It's near midday on Friday, the day after Gina found Bark in the woods. A near perfect summer blue day, with trees glistening back in bright reception. The darkness of night, the shadow of the day before, was lifted now, reborn in a new day. Tiredness lingered like dew on bruises still evident like ripples, but they're on the road now.

Gina pulls off the highway and into a shopping center parking lot. Bark looks up at her but doesn't say anything. She seems to mouth *hey* while Gina takes the keys out of the ignition.

I'm getting us food. Stay here, Gina says.

What? Wait, stop, what's going on?

Just relax. I'll be back.

What's going on?

Gina doesn't answer. She kind of smiles and waves Bark off, *go back to sleep.*

Gina stands, balanced between the car door and the car, waiting for the blood to flow to her legs, finishing her cigarette. Bark closes her eyes and turns to the window.

The grocery store employees are on strike for something, with picket lines outside and demands for decent wages and benefits. Gina nods past them and into the store. The shelves are nearly empty with one register open. She finds a loaf of bread for a dollar and couples that with a block of cheese. She counts the change from her pockets. *Shit tips.* She gets in line behind carts and carts of waiting patrons. She looks at her feet. Her untied shoe. She kneels down just as another register opens up. The masses take note, herding and shuffling to be first in line. A shopper carrying a basket and gallon of milk pushes behind her, knocking Gina to the floor. *What the fuck.* Gina stays on her side on the floor in a sort of death pose. *This is hell.* People rush past and around her. She takes a breath and props her weight on her wrists, her hands still holding the cheese and bread. The shopping world keeps on. Standing, Gina glances to the door. *Now or never.* She tucks the bread under her arm and slips the cheese into her back pocket as though they're her wallet and bag, then a couple candy bars too because she's feeling brazen.

In the car, Bark drifts in her mind, hearing the same voice telling her: *Get out of the car. Get out of here. Escape this.* She doesn't move. Her half-dream state has her body paralyzed. She can only stare out the window, her cheek against the seatbelt. She tries to look down at herself but can't move her head. In her peripheral, her body seems strange and stiff. Gina's door opens and cool air races inside, wrapping Bark's body in a chilling embrace. Gina hands her the bread, cheese, and a chocolate bar.

There's traffic, then empty. More cigarettes. The two don't speak. Instead they look outside the car, at the world racing toward them. Gina feels tempted to give the wheel a jerk and send the car racing toward a barrier. The impulse of wreckage. Fold the scene to bloody pieces, and let someone else hold it up the spinning.

Bark is watching Gina drive. She looks so beautiful in her purple tank top and cut off shorts. Bark feels sweaty, red bumps itching over her body and remembers taking an antihistamine.

The little blue car somehow arrives in Massachusetts without a flat tire or an overheated engine. Gina parks the car in her sister's driveway and passes out, asleep. Bark stumbles from the car. It's the first time she's used her legs since Gina picked her up yesterday. Her imbalance takes over and she falls prostrate on the grass on Gina's sister's front lawn. They remain this way until Gina's sister gets home from work.

II

Sofia had been working third shift almost every weekend at the hospital since Daniel went to Aruba. *Aruba. How can people just go to Aruba for a while? Typical. Not a lot to be said for consistency anymore.* But that day had been rather quiet and she managed to get some paperwork done.

Climbing into her car after work, she's greeted with her favorite Christian radio station, cleansing her from the outside in with positivity. She pulls her hand sanitizer from her bag and rubs her hands together, the scent of guava and alcohol followed by guava hand cream. Sofia likes to treat herself with expensive hand creams, but in every other respect is completely careful and frugal with her money. Tonight she has plans with another episode of her favorite public broadcasting show, an hour-long melodrama of family versus family. The older sister so poised. Last week on the show she had her hair pulled back, with two perfect curls resting on her perfectly pointed shoulders. Sofia would heat up some leftovers and sip white wine under a quilt. Perfect.

Her house is situated not far from the hospital, but Sofia prefers to drive when she works nights. Something feels different about tonight. It's as though the air sat poised, ready to drop with locusts or frogs. Sofia chuckles to herself and pulls out of the hospital parking lot.

Waiting for her, a girl in the front yard, breathing in the dew on the grass, and her sister, slumped over the steering wheel of a car she doesn't recognize.

Oh great. What'd she do now?

Sofia slowly pulls her car into the driveway next to the blue car. She lets the song finish before turning off the engine and picks up her purse. Walking closer to the car, she notices the girl in the yard isn't moving. Sofia starts to panic, not knowing who's vitals to check first. She knocks on the glass.

Angie! Angie! You okay? What's going on? Angie!

Gina looks up. The pounding at her window smacks at her head.

What the fuck, Sofia?!

Gina hurtles out of the car at her sister, yelling and holding her head. Sofia is already on the grass, checking the girl in the yard. The girl blinks her eyes open.

Bark?

Yeah, she's fine. Just tired. Sorry. You fucking scared the shit out of me, Gina says.

Angie, what are you doing here?

Come on Sof, what the fuck, you live here by yourself. What difference does it make?

It makes a difference.

Come on. Don't be a bitch.

Angie, I've asked you not to cur—

Sof. Sofia. Can we stay or can't we?

You have to tell me what's going on. Then maybe, maybe you can stay in the basement. Has she been to the hospital? She has bites and scratches all over her.

Sofia, she's fine. Seriously, let me take care of it. Everything's fine.

Gina grabs some bags from the car and lights a cigarette. Sofia helps Bark into the house.

Once inside, Bark sits on the sofa, still. Sofia's living room is white. The walls are white and hung with blue paintings of horizons and seagulls. Outside her windows are rolling, soft Berkshire hills, but her décor focuses on coastlines. Draped over the couch is an old quilt Bark recognizes, or maybe she doesn't. Maybe old things all become familiar. Sofia wraps the blanket around her and puts the remote in her hands.

Watch whatever you want, I'll go get you some water, she says.

The smoke from Gina's cigarette wafts past the window behind the TV stand. Bark sits, staring, feeling at the rubber buttons on the remote control. She hears a cupboard open, a faucet, ice clinking, footsteps.

Sofia returns with a glass of ice water.

Are you hungry? I'm going to heat up some leftovers if you want some.

Bark shakes her head. Sofia disappears to the kitchen. Gina comes back inside.

Hey, Gina says.

Bark looks down.

Gina takes the remote she's not using anyway and starts flipping channels. The microwave dings. Sofia returns with food and a bottle of wine.

Want some food, Gina? Sofia asks.

Nah.

Are you ready to talk?

Not really.

Then give me the remote, I wanna watch my show.

Gina hands her the remote and starts rolling a cigarette.

You shouldn't smoke, Angie.

I'll smoke outside.

You shouldn't smoke at all.

What is it you want to know?

What you're doing here.

You don't recognize her? She's Bark, remember? From Chippewa Lake.

Sofia starts to ask questions, trying to put together a picture of what has happened in last 15 years, but sips from her wine instead. Her name isn't Bark, that was her nickname. The girl hated that nickname. Sofia could tell but didn't say anything. Such a bad nickname.

I saved her, Gina says.

You what?

I saved her. She called me. I went and found her. Now we're here.

Why here?

A sister can't visit a sister?

Angie, you're always welcome but you know how I feel about, about what you do I mean.

What's that?

You're disrespecting yourself, acting the way you do.

What?

If you're here you have to live by my rules. Tomorrow night is my Bible study group. A great group of ladies. Come with me, bring your friend, and you can stay at my house. I think you could learn a thing or two.

Not interested.

Okay, you're choice.

The sisters look at each other in silence. Sofia was going out on a fragile limb asking her sister to come to Bible study, but she knew it was the right thing. If anybody could benefit from knowing Jesus, it would be Angie.

Gina looks at her sister. Sophia's hands folded in her lap, a TV table with dinner and a small glass of wine before her. *There's no way she's happy. How can she stand living how she does? How could someone so smart be so brainwashed?*

Okay, fine. I'll go, Gina says.

Sofia smiles. *Maybe this will work. Maybe Angie will finally sense she's missing something.* She'll email the group tomorrow to let them know she's bringing her sister to study. Also warn them, yes, she is an atheist, maybe a lesbian, but she needs God. The most lost need God the most.

I'm glad, Sophia says.

Gina finishes rolling her cigarette and goes outside. Sofia settles in to watch her show. Bark on the couch, the world a bath of ocean waves crashing in her ears. White noise, ringing pitches. Bark lets the noise wash over her like a blanket. Nothing can touch her in these white walls, no shadows to hide behind. The show on TV is serene and

subdued, so far from the screeching chaos of her thoughts. She watches in a balanced, drowsy stare.

III

That night, Gina leads Bark down the stairs, to the basement of her sister's house. It's cool, winding, like catacombs. Sofia already set up the fold-out couch and put two toothbrushes on the table. Gina flops on the bed. Bark stands, looking at her.

Remember when we were kids? Remember what we used to call you?

What? No.

Come on, seriously? Bark. Remember?

Bark smiles and nods. She kind of remembers. What a horrible nickname. Every time she hears it she's reminded of her shyness. Her inability to speak. Kids joked she could only bark like a dog, which is why she didn't say anything. It was in jest, just for laughs, but she couldn't help but feel she was a dog. She really might be a dog.

Gina gets off the bed and starts rummaging through a cupboard. The house is quiet, as though they're somewhere completely hidden. Bark thinks about taking her shoes off.

Aha! Gina pulls out a bottle of white wine with a shrug. Not much.

Bark nods.

Do you know why Bark is a great name for you?

She shakes her head.

Because you shed. You cast off layers. Right now you're fuckin' shelled. You can hardly talk, but you'll be fine. Fucking fine. Just relax for once. It'll be fine.

Gina untwists the cap from the wine bottle and gulps it down while tugging her socks off.

Here, give me your shirt. Get under the covers. Relax, Gina says.

Gina guides Bark through the motions of night, tucks her in and goes back to the bottle. She tries to finish the wine, spilling most of it on her shirt to the floor. It was like water anyway, no difference drinking it.

Shit, she mumbles.

She takes off her shirt and crawling into bed too, Gina wraps her arm around Bark's torso, squeezing their bodies together.

Hey, Bark.

Yeah?

You okay?

...

I know what you did.

What?

You called me. You told me. I mean, I think it's cool. Really intense I mean. But fuck, I respect it. Fucking bad ass. Hot. Demands you get a new name, ya know? Like a badge. You're a woman transformed.

What?

I won't tell. But everybody else would fucking worship you for it.

IV

Sofia was up and gone for work before Gina stirred on the foldout downstairs. Bark woke at sunup, exploring the outside of the house with measured steps. The back porch lets out to a small square of grass with an aged ceramic bird bath. Filled with yellow water, leaves and cracks, the bath's basin welcomes and she dips in her fingers. Sun casts light on dew, birds sing in the new day. Bark's amble through the yard takes most of the morning.

When Gina wakes up, she finds Bark on the back porch, sleeping on the concrete. She stumbles for a mug, fills it with leftover coffee, and goes outside to join Bark and have a cigarette. The door opening wakes Bark from dream and she looks up at Gina.

Hey.

You awake yet?

Bark closes her eyes.

I got a message from the performance studio in Germany. It's sort of last minute. I mean, I didn't expect to get it.

Get what?

Not today. But yeah I'm leaving. They're paying for everything.

Oh, wow.

You're gonna be okay.

What?

Shit happens, real shit. Somehow you keep going, ya know, fuck it.

I don't feel alive.

It's a life vest. Who's truly alive?

Bark's gaze follows Gina as she goes back into to the house. Gina turns on the stereo, up to a level of deafening swathe. Bark follows her inside and lays on the floor, soaking it in. Gina snacks on health chips and mixed fruit concentrates, vigorously drawing on her leg with a pen.

I need a new tattoo, Gina says.

What?

You should get one too.

Where?

We have everything we need. Think about what you want.

The garage door rumbles open. Bark sees a shimmer of sun reflect from Sophia's gray sedan as it pulls forward. As though the day went by in the span of a short dream, a half stutter. Gina stubs out her cigarette in her hand and runs to the bathroom to flush it. She yells back to the living room.

Oh yeah, we have to go to a Bible group tonight. But you like that stuff, right?

Sofia's approaching voice is upbeat and sing-songy, as though she just stepped out of an animation. She's humming as she walks to the stoop. Bark considers this. Her chattering of voice, a swift moving river. Bark smiles at Sophia when she comes in, and sits up from the floor. Gina comes back from the bathroom rolling a new cigarette. Sophia doesn't seem to notice, standing and stretching by the front door.

What a day, she says.

Sofia hangs her keys on a hook and takes off her shoes. Bark moves to a chair at the dining room table.

They eat dinner there.

Gina smokes on the back porch.

Warmth of approaching summer lends the evening a sense of hope and renewal.

Sofia doesn't push Bark to talk, though she would, but tonight she's distracted with getting her notes together for the study and cleaning up her (already clean) kitchen.

Why do you think we allow it?

Sofia stops loading the dishwasher and looks at Bark. She starts to answer, ask what she means, but Bark isn't looking at her. Sofia follows her gaze to the backyard bird bath. Two birds scuffling and flapping for space. She leans on the counter.

Fights for power, Sophia says.

Bark looks away from the birds. She doesn't know what she's saying.

Thank you for dinner, she says.

You're welcome.

Gina opens the sliding glass door and steps in from the back deck. Sofia turns from watching and wipes down the counter.

Leave in fifteen minutes? She asks.

Yeah, says Gina.

Gina looks at Bark. Bark nods.

V

They arrive at the Bible study few minutes before seven. Sofia's beaming face is genuine, she looks forward to the weekly fellowship. Bark follows close behind, looking half-apologetic, confused. They parked up the street from Jill's, walking single file to her front door. Jill greets them there. She motions them in, excitedly spills the news—her sister having twins!

A foyer of shoes. Sophia slips out of her flats, Bark from her sneakers, and Gina is left unlacing her boots by the door. She isn't exactly moving quickly. Bark follows Sofia to the kitchen. Faces and hands greet them. Shining brightly as conduits of hope, Bark shrinks like a pupil adjusting to light. Their approach is familiar, as if church folks plan their personalities together. She wonders if they can read through her, see her doubts like the bites on her skin. Sofia hands her a plate of shortbread cookies. Jill waves them to seats in the circle of women gathered in the living room. There's room for both of them. Jill gestures toward a greater spread of cookies and pretzels on the coffee table in the middle of the room. Bark nestles the plate among them.

There's also tea and coffee in the kitchen, ladies, Jill says.

Bark feels the women staring then corrects herself, *no, no, they don't know anything*. Some nod hello but most glance over and away as though their eyes wandered there by mistake. But they're smiling. Serene. Bark sits back and breaths. She counts to thirty, sits up straight. She can do this. Sophia pats her leg.

I'm glad you came, Sofia whispers.

Bark wakes up and forces a smile that folds into an uncomfortable grin. Sophia smiles back and turns to her notes. Bark loosens. Jill opens the study, thanking everyone for being there.

Praise be to God. What a joy it is to gather in His name with you ladies tonight, she says. We're so blessed to have two guests with us tonight, Sofia's sister and—what was your name, dear?

Rebecca.

It's wonderful to have you, Rebecca. I hope you will find tonight's gathering to be a blessing in your life.

Bark smiles and looks down.

Do we have any announcements? I have a very special one but I'd like to hear yours first. Anyone?

There's an engagement, a baby on the way, an illness, an unsaved parent. Written down, remembered, shared with God. The group nods, lips pursed in understanding. Bark pleads to the universe for Gina to save her. If she leans back, she can see the wafting trail of smoke from outside. Gina is flaking out. Scared. Or maybe smart. Bark was also kind of relieved Gina wasn't there, for her own sake. Tonight was the first time Bark had said her name, Rebecca, aloud since everything happened. Since she swarmed into a cloud, losing sight of the ground.

The group has been studying the book of Esther. Beautiful queen Esther, whose loveliness saved her people. They open the discussion with prayer. Bark half-listens, but as her fear of being found out fades, her impatience grows and she wishes herself outside

with her friend. Jill finishes her prayer and opens her eyes like waking up for the first time.

Ladies, I'm so glad you're here. The book of Esther is so unique. What other book reveals God's providence so completely? He has a plan for all of us. Let's turn in our Bibles to Esther, Chapter 1. Who wants to read the first verse?

Sofia raises her hand. Jill nods. Sofia's whisper thin voice moves over the passage like a sound machine, lulling Bark into a posture that looks enough like deep contemplation to not bring attention to herself. The other women take notes, stare, nod at each other. God used Esther's beauty to affect an entire nation. She feels an unsettled urgency. The group represents a place outside herself. She might have once belonged, been at home there, but the enclosures have changed. They don't see the chasm between her and God because she knows all of the words. Nodding her head, closing her eyes, it's automatic. If they knew, if she knew, where she lost her way, maybe they could turn it all back.

Bark is rubbing at the handle of a World's Greatest Mom coffee mug. A stout woman near the fireplace is smoothing her shirt against her lap. The corners of the woman's mouth sinking behind her cheeks like a disappearing grin. She's talking about another study she was a part of that tracked the queens of the Bible.

We called it Babes in Bibleland, she laughs.

So perfect, Jill says. She's leaning back in a chair with her hand gently patting her chest while she breaths quiet laughter. Then she closes her Bible and the women turn to her. She bows her head and the room quiets.

We praise You, Lord Jesus, for this special night. Thank you for Your Word, for the people You have used to bring us closer to You and Your everlasting glory. Lead us in Your Will this week, oh God, and may we be vessels of hope for a lost and dying world. Thank You for each of the ladies here tonight. I pray as we seek You, we will find You, Lord. Help us to be seekers, God. In His holy name, Amen.

Amen.

Sofia rubs Bark's back.

I'm going to talk to Susan, so I'll be about twenty minutes, she says.

Bark nods and steps back into the foyer, slips into her shoes and out the front door. Gina's on the stoop, chewing on a piece of gum. The sound is agitating. Gina's outstretched body, her hair like a hood, is leaning on the steps with her legs crossed at the ankle. Bark feels relieved. Then guilty. Gina stops chewing at the gum, sits up, and half-laughs when Bark comes outside.

How's it in there? Gina asks.

It's okay.

Are you?

I'm going to miss him.

Who, God?

Gina laughs and leans back on her elbows. Bark chuckles. The summer night is clear and warm. Gina stands. She lights up and they automatically start walking down the driveway. Bark's gaze drifts upward to the sky, blackened and infinite.

What a mess, she says.

I know.

The two start walking down the road without meaning to. Gina takes a long pull from her cigarette and blows the smoke to the sky.

Some things seem unending, but they're not, Gina says.

How do you know?

I don't. But that's the whole point. It's a balanced freefall.

Is there such a thing? Bark laughs.

They walk together without direction, laughing and nudging toward each other.

Should we go back? Gina asks.

Eternal return, Bark says.

Gina turns to Bark and extends a deep, animated bow. Bark bows in return and performs a militaristic about-face. They continue to bow, curtsy, and turn in the street, bumping each other and giggling. Gina reaches out and pulls Bark close to her in a side-hug. Bark leans her head on Gina's shoulder. She looks up at her and smiles. Gina smiles too. Bark reaches to Gina's hand and Gina takes it, holding tightly. Their fingers intertwine.