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THE MEN THAT SLEEP BUILT

BY

SAMUEL SIMAS

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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OF

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Abstract

The Men that Sleep Built, a collection of short stories, is an experimentation with the formal narrative elements that represent observable trends across a select body of texts from the genre of gay literature. This collection points to stylistic commonalities between texts that give the genre a distinctive, cohesive formal body, and is an attempt to offer an alternative representation of gay literature as a genre that not only possesses its own mythos, symbols, and taxonomies, but that also occupies its own unique stylistic category. This collection, gestures toward the importance of style as a series of inherited techniques—acknowledgements of historical and cultural meaning, which point to commonalities not only between the stories that are being told, and have been told, but also the formal devices that a group relies upon to tell its stories. Gay literature should be understood as an art-form that depicts a mode of being, and that mode of being is best captured through attention to the stylistic and formal elements of storytelling.

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Dedication

For my father.

Preface

When you open *The Men that Sleep Built*, you will find stories of sexual encounters and awakenings, of repression and confessions, stories of alienation and surrender. For readers of gay literature, this will be unsurprising: for better or worse, the genre has been telling similar stories for decades. Therefore, it is not necessarily with a focus on thematic suitability that I have written this collection, though many genre specific elements arise as a matter of course. Instead, I am interested in changing the kinds of stories that can be considered “gay literature”; I want to extend criticism of the genre beyond the historical attention it has given to thematic concerns and, instead, grant primacy to the formal elements of the genre, which represent a uniquely gay mode of storytelling. My concern is that if content is to be the most important qualification for gay literature, then the genre will never amount to more than a caricature of gay culture meant to placate a heteronormative readership. *The Men that Sleep Built* is my attempt to expand the criticism that is made possible by the formal elements of the genre and also to offer an alternative representation of gay literature as a genre that can be defined by its own stylistic idiosyncrasies and nuances. This collection, I hope, gestures toward the importance of style as a series of techniques that acknowledge their historical, political, and cultural roots while also pointing to commonalities not only between the stories that are being told, and have been told, but also the relationships between formal devices and the historical moments that have been made them necessary for gay literature to tell its stories.

Before I address the formal qualities of the genre, it makes sense to begin with a principal concern: articulating an expanded definition of gay literature. The current conception of the genre arises from a “post-Stonewall” mode of presenting gayness to heterosexual culture—that is to say, literature after 1969 in which “gay” becomes highly politicized as a way of explaining and defending gay culture to a heteronormative readership. Post-Stonewall literature, in its drive to describe the nuances of gay relationships and connections, has created an unproductive habit; over and over again, readers of the genre encounter stories that hold exclusive focus through men on male-to-male relationships. Otherwise put, gay literature has been defined by its exclusive prioritization of stories and scenarios in which maleness and male-to-male sexual relationships take precedence. While I am not suggesting to completely abandon this as the core constitutive model of gay literature, such a restrictive definition of the genre fails to recognize the foundational formal contributions of authors like Virginia Woolf, who, in her works *Orlando*, *The Hours*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and others, presents stories and philosophies that abrade the conventional conception of the genre and that also create foundations for formal elements—such as a theory of time called “queer temporality”—that are adopted as gay formal techniques. I will attend to this in greater depth later. For now, it is important to know that Woolf is only one example of the authors who may be overlooked with the current definition, and, of course, there are others (Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, Patricia Highsmith’s *The Price of Salt*, etc.). In this collection, you will find that many of my stories may not have direct thematic links to

what has been considered to be gay literature. “Home,” for example, the story with which this collection begins, betrays the anxiety and trauma of learning and being taught gender and sexuality roles, not strictly focusing on gayness or maleness, through the structured juxtaposition of three geoculturally disparate stories. By way of example, this story represents what I hope all of my pieces can achieve: a combination of stylistic elements that represent how gay literature has responded with formal elements, particular to its culture, in order to give rise to a unique mode of storytelling.

Many contemporary stories are called “gay literature,” yet they perpetuate a fundamental misunderstanding of the genre’s historical relationships to gay culture. In these stories, queer relationships are almost always unstable or toxic. Sometimes they are portrayed as honorably or surprisingly tender—as if gay men were incapable of loyalty or depth. This literature is often invokes major cultural crises, such as the AIDS crisis, for their deeply troubling reverberations, yet they are deployed without complexity or nuance. Furthermore, these stories insist upon non-platonic relationships between men, which fetishize male-to-male connections for a heteronormative readership (Leavitt and Mitchell xix). Annie Proulx’s representation of gay cowboys in *Brokeback Mountain* is an example of this misrecognition. Her novel seems to unintentionally play and replay roles that, maybe with slight reconfigurations, do not alarm a heteronormative readership, but always depict queer relationships as reliably, exotically, innocuously “other.” Please, do not misapprehend me. I am not policing who has access to or who can articulate gay stories.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge instances in which heteronormative power masquerades as truth within and for this genre, and, as a result, reinforces an obsession with heteronormative modes of masculinity and masculine performativity as sexual currency.

Each genre uses formal techniques to its advantage, and “a given technique cannot be judged according to its service to ‘the novel,’ or ‘fiction,’ but only according to its success in particular works or kind of works” (Booth 98). Much like Booth, I plan on attending to technical successes and failures by reference to general formal principles, for fiction as a craft defies strict rules and inhabits a space of possibilities and exceptions. Formally, gay literature has supported the aforementioned thematic focus on heteronormative masculinity through engagement with the reappearance of numerous established mythos: character-types (e.g., the jock, the faggot, the closeted man, the married man, the sexually awakened young man, the lecher); the reoccurrence of events such as coming out, confession, and consummation; the exultation of locations like New York City, Paris, Fire Island Pines as safe havens; and even patterns of focalization and exposition that depict processes of dealing with sexual disclosure, revelation, and epiphany. Texts such as Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*, Forster’s *Maurice*, Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance*, and Isherwood’s *A Single Man* all represent a pattern found in the genre wherein gay characters are operationalized as tragic foils meant to highlight the need for achieving the straight (and white) normality of the heterosexual male or family; “usually these queer characters [are] punished with violence, depression, exile, and death—often

suicide—because of their non normative desires” (Bibler 127). Formal representation of character types and stylistically similar elements across texts draw ironic attention to gay culture’s attempt to define itself in opposition to heteronormative culture. The two correspondents in “Dancer from the Dance,” for example, perform their gayness by way of proving how “not-straight,” or how homonormative (I refuse to use “non-heteronormative” as if heteronormative should be the standard through which all else flows), they can be:

I can’t help [the novel’s] being gay. I have been a full-time fag for the past five years, I realized the other day. Everyone I know is gay everything I do is gay, all my fantasies are gay, I am what Gus called those people we used to see I the discos, bars, baths, all the time—remember? Those people we used to see EVERYWHERE, every time we went out, so that you wanted to call the police and have them arrested?—I am a doomed queen. (Holleran 17)

Before this witty monologue, the narrator writes (he is writing a letter) that readers would “demand [his novel] be ultimately violent and/or tragic, and why give in to them?” (15). Ironically, the novel becomes exactly that—a violent and tragic end—as if the form itself leads to an inevitable, inescapable conclusion. While Holleran’s work exemplifies a form that responds to unique historical, political moments, if it were to be imitated in contemporary gay literature, it would seem dramatically out of place—as if the novel were attempting to rail so strongly against heteronormative culture so as to become caricature.

In order to demonstrate how this collection contributes to the discourse of narrative theory, I find it is essential to retrace a fundamental understanding of how narrative is constructed. Phelan articulates a well known adage that the construction

of narrative is “understood as a rhetorical act: somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose that something happened” (3). A narrative is composed of three major components that engage readers in sympathetic or, to use Phelan’s term, “judgmental” relationships to the text; these three components are the synthetic, the mimetic, and the thematic. The mimetic component of a text involves the audience’s interest in the characters as possible people, while the thematic involves the ideational function of characters in cultural, ideological, philosophical, and ethical issues. Finally, the synthetic component of the text involves an audience’s interest in and attention to the characters and the narrative as artificial or contrived (6). Aristotle, in *Poetics*, presents these components in a more rigid way; he divides the narrative into six core elements: the story, the moral, the style, the ideas, the staging, and the music (24). Each component is present in every text to varying degrees, and they exist in mutually beneficial or antagonist roles depending upon the author’s goal. In gay literature, I have observed that writers of the genre have been preoccupied with complicating linkages between the presence of mimetic textual characters, situations, and feelings to queer people in the non-textual world; these types of connections have the potential to introduce readers to non-textual gay people and culture, but also to dilute gay culture. I am calling for a turn away from mimetic representation—from questions that debate how well gayness is or is not represented—toward considerations of *how*, formally and stylistically, gay stories are told. Essentially, this is a shift from mimetic focus to synthetic. For the sake of brevity, and

for the goal of this project, I will attend to only the synthetic component of gay literature as a point of departure for addressing style.

All stories need a narrator. The narrator function is itself a contrivance that bespeaks the synthetic construction of a text. There are ways of integrating a narrator in such a way as to draw attention away from its synthetic quality. For example, in Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, the character-narrator, David, convinces the reader of his mimetic potential through the distance of his narrative perspective. David is narrating retrospectively; he is presently telling events that already happened as a sort of healing. There is, then, an altered sense of time (a synthetic component) in the narrative, to which the narrator does not bring the reader's attention. Booth describes this experience as "distance," which is the metaphorical space between the narrator, narrated events, and the narratee (90). David insists upon discretely distancing himself from his past ignorance and blindspots, what he did not know and could not allow himself to articulate, which led to the current situation:

I was going to have to tell him that he had made a mistake, blindly misreading everything—and out of necessities, then too shameful to be uttered. I was in a box for I could see that, no matter how I turned, the hour of confession was upon me and could scarcely be averted; unless, of course, I leaped out of the cab, which would be the most terrible confession of all. (Baldwin 47)

Baldwin's choice of a first-person narrator heightens the mimetic quality of the text—as it is an act of direct telling, which creates the illusion that the reader as the intended audience of the text. In some texts, if the mimetic quality of the text is heightened,

then the synthetic component necessarily slips out of focus. Booth writes, “In fiction, as soon as we encounter an ‘I’ we are conscious of an experiencing mind whose views of the experience will come between us and the event” (87). Although the reader is conscious of the texture and quality of the narration, which is one of the synthetic qualities of the text, it is clear that Baldwin disguises the “constructedness” of the narrator within the skin of realistic representation. Baldwin draws attention to David not as a synthetic structure (a narrator), but as a character with mimetic potential through the sense of ownership over the story that is made possible with first-person narration. Moreover, this narrative decision, in and of itself, makes use of the illusion of “intendedness”—that the reader is the intended audience—to make the story seem an organic act of telling. In “Sacrosanct,” I follow Baldwin’s lead and attempt to modulate narrative perspective in order to give the illusion of a more highly mimetic story.

Otherwise, Baldwin’s use of David as the character narrator in *Giovanni’s Room* gives the illusion of a more compelling point of view than a third-person narrator would have done precisely because the character-narrator takes a distant temporal position, which allows him to tell and evaluate past events without alerting the reader to his narrative function. David’s perspective invites the reader into an intimate relationship in which one feels capable of organically bearing witness to David’s misrecognitions and his capacity for error and misjudgment even as he attempts to reconcile the past from a present retrospective narrative. Moreover, the reader engages with this passage as a result of a sense of urgency that is conveyed

through the narrator's distance from the events, which is a covertly synthetic component. Instead of drawing the reader's attention to the constructed, synthetic quality of the story, the narratorial interpretations, "then too shameful to be uttered," or "which would be the most terrible confession of all," allow for these narratorial interpretations to be read as narrative events themselves. Finally, David's conflict for expressing his feelings in the form of confession is emblematic of the tropes that drive mimetic representation in most coming-out stories in gay literature; the genre's literature has made promises to fulfill mimetic representation through structural consistencies (synthetic components) that lead readers to expect moments in which the narrator confesses to illicit or deviant desires.

In my story, "Hair," I attempt to establish a dynamic tension between narrative perspective and the reader, as well as a similar distance or degree of intimacy with the narrator and the narrated events, to change the focus of from moments leading up to what Baldwin's narrator describes as "the most terrible confession of all" to what happens after and outside of that moment of confession. The narrator of my story takes a similar stance in his telling so as to evaluate a past situation that complicates his present. In "If We Are Not Fine," I am not necessarily interested in the pressures of confessing to one's sexuality, but rather in the pressures that strain gay relationships such as illness and family. Moreover, I try to reframe the same degree of distance as a perspective that does not rely upon confession for its urgency, but that instead likens the retrospective to mourning or elegy. Both of these examples share

the insistence on foregrounding mimetic and thematic components that are present in Baldwin's work.

Regardless of whether the goal of fiction is to be highly mimetic, synthetic, or thematic the work will require certain formal elements to be successful. There are simply too many formal elements to address them comprehensively and clearly in such a short space, and too much to write for any one element, so I will address the following, which are, I think, essential: time, structure, character, and point of view.

Narratives unfold in time, in the past, in the present, and in the future of a given event or action (Bridgeman 52). And, our focus on the text will not only be "colored by our memory of what has gone before and our anticipation of what is to come" (57), but also by how often an event, a scene, or a piece of dialogue repeats, circles back or charges forward. In gay literature, time starts and stalls, sometimes there is no sense of progression or clear causal links—in other words, time itself functions as "queer temporality." Queer temporality, in the sense that I intend it, refers to time as a structural function that mimics the conflict between character's revelation or acknowledgement of their alternative sexuality and a cultural milieu that prescribes their difference as psychological and/or emotional trauma. In gay literature, queer temporality creates tension through its inability to progress linearly or straightforwardly because it is in conflict with chrononormative, linear, "undamaged," time.

For example, I consider Virginia Woolf to be “stylist-zero” for queer temporality, as she exceeds at creating atmospheric temporalities that disengage the reader from ordinary meaning making or causal relationships. A scene during the initial exposition of *Mrs. Dalloway* feels like a hurricane of images:

In people’s eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June. (Woolf 4)

The burst of images suggests that the attention of the focalizing character, Clarissa, flits from one thing to the next, almost as if the narrator tries, as quickly as is possible, to describe all that is seen in the eyes of Clarissa Dalloway. This moment removes the reader from a sense of chrononormative temporal progression in the narrative, and, in doing so, represents a mode storytelling that not only links perception to time, but that suggests the queer character’s patterns of focalization and sense of time would represent a removal from and resistance to “chrononormativity” or a “straightening of narrative” (Matz 231).

Time in *Mrs. Dalloway* is so complex that, as it unfolds, careening through Clarissa’s perspective, sometimes delving deeply into her subconscious, one cannot truly hold on to a sense of time. This use of time moves beyond individual experience without ignoring it; and like many modernist novelists, Woolf foregrounds a time beyond individual perception by “allowing readers to experience subjective

temporalities other than their own and to perceive events as they appear in these different frameworks” (Heise 364). This work with time creates the conditions of possibility for queer time, which Michael Cobb describes as a temporal arrangement that, much like Genette’s “zero time” or descriptive pause, resists linear movement into the future. It is true that, in *The Hours*, Cunningham imitates, “Woolf’s fluidly free indirect narration, recalls her epiphanic tonalities, and elaborately reworks incidents from *Mrs. Dalloway*...” (Davidson 151). But I would like to suggest that his work of layering three distinct times while repeating many phrases or structures, operates as a representation of a mode of temporality that belongs to gay literature.

Michael Cobb writes that Cunningham wants the reader to focus on how “the zone of ‘no time’ can enable depth, or ‘beautiful caves,’ to be carved out of the queer characters tangled in the undersigns, in various ways, of *Mrs. Dalloway*” (Cobb 20). I am not interested in anything so opaque as “beautiful caves,” but in my story “Orlando,” I attempt to make queer time work as a function of perception, taking from both Woolf and Cunningham, to create a sense of disorientation that calls attention to trauma that is not derived from alternative sexualities, but instead with the violence and aggression that people of alternative sexualities often face. Heise describes time as a quality that “becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence” (Heise 361). One of the ways I attempt to create a condition of possibility for queer time is to present time as, in and of itself, traumatized; I do this through the segmentation of the text into number sections.

The sequential progression of the numbers is misleading, for the organization of the narrative is not necessarily linear, yet the numeration insists upon some sort of meaning making or ordering that the narrator cannot grasp. I support the temporal fragmentation through repetition, which disrupts the causality that is traditionally associated with temporal sequence in the novel, ultimately destabilizing another kind of conventional narrative causality: the narrator's control of the story (370).

Furthermore, I insist upon bombarding the reader with torrents of images, much in the same way Woolf does, to wrest the scene from a sense of time. My work tends to be more elliptical than Woolf's, and it relies more on abstract lyricism to convey meaning than Cunningham's.

Both "Hair" and "Tiny Claws" affect a similar relationship with queer time, but they are both more conventionally linear. I try to create a sense of continuation and dissolution in "Hair" that queers the present story moment. I am interested in conveying how one decision, impulse, or feeling is not linearly experienced or articulated. This represents a type of queer temporality, or synchrony, in which all events are occurring in the present. The length of this story is kept intentionally brief, so as to allow the scenes to generate a cumulative atmosphere. "Tiny Claws" is meant to be a bridge between "Orlando" and "Hair"; the segmentation gives a false sense of order that betrays the non-linear narrative events. I recognize that these stories resist the guideline which expresses that plot should be driven by causal relationships in fiction.

In “We the Liars,” I respond to the causal relationship between plot and time in a much more direct way. In other words, I like to think that I give the illusion of following a linear narrative structure that describes scenes of a character’s life from childhood to adulthood. In the first paragraph, I manipulate the tense so as to allude to a sense of predetermination and futurity. The move may seem clumsy, but I hope to give a sense that the boy’s actions will have consequences, though he does not know what they are. This, no doubt, distracts the reader from the present of the story by pointing toward the future. Time, in this way, extends beyond the characters and the causal progress of the story, though it gives the appearance of linear progression.

What drives a narrative? In the previous section, I point to time as the organizing principle of narrative, yet time itself is not necessarily what drives the narrative action. According to Aristotle “the most important element [of narrative] is the plot” (24). Of course, Bakhtin, as one of the most prominent formalist literary critics, is a staunch supporter of Aristotle; he writes, “Aristotle's poetics, although occasionally so deeply embedded as to be almost invisible, remains the stable foundation for the theory of genres” (Bakhtin 47). Other writers, William Gass, for example, argue that character is the driving force of narrative, and it is through that plot unfolds:

Talk about literature, when it is truly talk about something going on in the pages, if it is not about ideas, is generally about the people in it, and ranges from those cries of wonder, horror, pleasure, or surprise, so readily drawn from the innocently minded, to the annotated stammers of the most erudite

and nervous critics. But it is all the same. Great character is the most obvious single mark of great literature. (Gass 113)

While I tend to agree with Gass and other writers, I recognize that the decision between the two is fraught and slippery, for deciding upon whether character or plots drives a story presents the possibility of asking the question of how a story is to be told and in what order. Peter Brooks writes that it is an impossibly speculative task to define what a narrative is, or how a narrative should be shaped, but that it is useful and valuable to consider the patterns that arise from the sequence of events and the shape the story takes as a result of this structuring (202). Gay literature does not rely upon deviation from structural beginnings, middles, and ends, nor does the genre habitually change the order of the events to resist a chrononormative time signature the way time itself resists linear narrativity. In other words, there are still beginnings, middles, and ends in literature of the genre, such as in my story “Home,” but the stakes in these, as well as the structure of description, withholding, and revelation, trend toward a similar goal. In the case of gay literature, most stories are structured to reveal an instance or moment that complicates the focalizing character’s sexuality, the quality of their participation within gay culture on a greater scale, or their relationship to their own yearning.

Often, when one examines the structure of stories, the language of change, of inciting incidents and rising action, of climax and denouements, arises. If the conversation does not focus on change, then it may be the potential for change. I have observed that in gay literature, however, stories are not necessarily structured to

support change, but instead, most stories do not focus on change, for the important epiphany, which is usually the revelation or confession of sexuality, happens before the story begins or is itself the focus of the novel. In this way, gay literature is not concerned with tracing change, but rather accepting a new state of stability. In order to do this, the beginnings of these stories do not always concern themselves with a noteworthy disruption of “an initial state of equilibrium by an unanticipated and often untoward event or chain of events” (Herman 10). Isherwood’s *A Single Man* begins with a moment of unsettling temporality that alludes to an incident beyond the text with the promise of returning to it:

But *now* isn’t simply now. *Now* is also a cold reminder: one whole day later than yesterday, one year later than last year. Every *now* labeled with its date, rendering all past *nows* obsolete, until—later or sooner—perhaps—no, not perhaps—quite certainly: it will come. (Isherwood 9)

Isherwood demonstrates that it is not the simple act of waking that is interesting, but the process one must undergo, when grieving, to reorient oneself to each day. In other words, the “inciting incident” is simultaneously missing from the story—in the sense that the reader never enters into a scene in which the narrator’s sexuality is revealed (to himself) or realized—but also present, as the story concerns itself with every action that has occurred as a series of abstract pseudo-causal connections of his sexuality. Furthermore, one can again notice that queer temporality dictates the terms on which this scene orients the reader to the story and structures what is to come—

that causality, or the lack therefore, is and is not one of the organizing principles of the story.

Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance*, presents a similar example of a story that does not begin with a typical "inciting incident," but that instead mobilizes time to circle back to a past trauma, rooted in sexuality, as the core of the story; in the case of Holleran's work, this instance is the death of a friend that is narrated through framed narrative:

So, vision, the novel is ready at last; it is, in the end, about Sutherland—and Malone. Did you expect that? People are celebrated for all the wrong reasons, I think—people should be famous for being good—and Malone was—and his story is the saddest of all, somehow. I've called it *Wild Swans* do you think people will think it's about birds? (Holleran 21)

The conceit is that all of the narrative action in this novel is filtered through a letter that contains a novel. Addressing letters is a narrative technique that toys with the reader's feeling of being the intended reader of a text. In gay literature, this can function in such a way that alienates heteronormative readers, yet, in Holleran, the narrator's intended audience is a correspondent, a friend. This maneuver allows the reader to feel as if he is reading concurrently with the recipient of this novel. Yet, as a result of this narrative structure, there seems to be no correlation between the beginning, middle, and end. Both Isherwood and Holleran's texts exemplify the mode through which gay literature presents challenging scenarios or atypical narrative

beginnings that, much like time, create tension between a normative mode of storytelling and the narrative mode of gay literature.

Gay literature is a genre that abrades typical storytelling progression through its resistance to change, as well as its insistence upon queer temporality, and the attention that the genre pays to repetition and revisitation of trauma often presents the reader with opportunities for empathetic connection and catharsis. For instance, in *Boy Erased* by Garrard Conley, connect time, and the repetition of time, to the structure of the overall plot: many of the chapters begin with dates, as if they are journal entries, except that the entries do not proceed linearly, and sometimes it is difficult to know where in time one exists. Like Holleran and Isherwood's work, Conley's story deals with the ramifications of the confession or revelation of alternative sexuality. The discovery that is so common in most normative narratives, which is the same discovery that often allows for change and that Aristotle defines as "a change from ignorance to knowledge, and thus to either Love or hate, in part of those destined for good or bad fortune" (Aristotle 30), does not often take place in gay literature. Instead, the change, as discussed earlier, is usually itself is returned to as a dramatic, climactic, point of trauma, or is otherwise the inciting incident from which all else follows; it is not the revelation or recognition of an alternative sexuality. Gay narratives can be structured as a result of a previous revelation that may or may not appear in the narrative, but that governs it almost completely.

The technique of withholding and disclosing information typifies the structure of many texts in gay literature: it is common for information to be withheld rather

than given, in holding with the tradition of secrecy for survival's sake that defines gay culture. It would be another project, or perhaps several, to examine the intricate interlacing between gayness at times of war in the United States. A deep examination of those moments is beyond the scope of this project. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that Cold War era America, specifically the McCarthy-era Red Scare, raised the stakes for any form of atypical Americanness. In *The Men that Sleep Built*, "Atascadero" presents conditions of possibility for imagining what this moment might be like. In the story, I pull on the existence of a real aversion therapy hospital in Atascadero, California, and frame the stakes of the narrative around the character's disclosure of his difference. Much of the gay literature from the late 1980s and early 1990s signals a response to this era in which shame and fear prevent gay people from existing in a detectable way:

Instead of totally embracing or succumbing to shame, many Cold War queers turned away from the mainstream discourses of sexual deviance to write different stories. And it is in this turn that we can see the uniquely Cold War approach to the patterns of silence and disclosure that we associate with the closet. (Bibler 125)

My story, "Gansett" is written in response, almost an elegy, to this generation that was most brutalized by pervasive wartime thinking. I chose to follow a narrative structure similar to that of *Boy Erased*, drawing from telling that predates its stakes on the acceptance of a change that has occurred prior to the present story moment.

This story, particularly in the moment that Ace drives his truck into a ditch, attempts

to imitate the opening of Isherwood's *A Single Man*, in which the character awakens in a disorientated state to a changed world that he does not yet have the tools to assimilate.

The narrator of *Dancer from the Dance*, whose name is not revealed, frames the telling of his friend's death within the conceit that the story is told entirely through correspondence, yet it would be difficult and restricting to define the novel as epistolary. The non-typical epistolary form, in which an entire "novel" is included, creates tension between not only the confessions and revelations being made through the narrator, but also the reader's ability to believe the material that is being narrated. Viewed in a different light, this would be a situation of narratorial unreliability, yet it is the structure itself—the dissonance between what is being told and the narrator's conceit that the story itself is a contrived novel—that creates a story resistant to change, but that begs for acceptance. In "Spokane," I attempt to replicate this structure; I craft a framed narrative that hinges upon the narrator's ability to accept Mac's story. To some degree, both stories, and all of the stories I mention here, relate to the notion of individual truth and the acceptance of truths that may not be certain or obvious.

Character may be easier to define than narrative, but the construction of character, otherwise called characterization, is equally complex, even if gay literature relies upon certain forms of characters that appear and reappear across the genre. Uri Margolin defines character as an "artistic product or artifice constructed by an author for some purpose; character as a non-actual but well specified individual presented to

exist in some hypothetical fictional domain, in other words, character is an individual within a possible world” (66). I have extended how Aristotle writes about creating compelling characters in tragedies—that in order to evoke pity and fear, one must rely not only on the plot, but also on the characters who are “necessarily either superior or inferior, better or worse, than we are” (Aristotle 18). If characters are artistic constructions, then Muñoz’s *Zigzagger* creates a veritable encyclopedia of character forms that appear in gay literature. Muñoz does not, however, fall prey to portraying characters, especially if they are the protagonist in the narrative, as inherently good or bad due to their degree of sexual normativity. Instead, Muñoz challenges the entire moral structure of contemporary heteronormative culture by reversing a de facto categorization of characters as good or bad in the titular story “Zigzagger.” Furthermore, Muñoz flash fiction, “Swallow,” exemplifies how queer temporality enables movement around and above and between moments that proceed from instances of forcedly traumatizing one’s sexuality:

You are no longer a boy. But you are one of those boys. And you behave like it’s still a circus and everywhere below are triple nets waiting to catch you. You know cutthroats and maybe boys who want to cut your throat. You know boys who’ve swallowed fire. They ache for fire. It sits in their bellies and burns. You’ll burn, your father tells you. You’ve burned already, for a strange boy who took you to a strange place. You did things that you no longer think are strange. He did not harm you in the way that boys like you are harmed. But still, you ache anyway. You ache like a boy with a slit throat, the slice clean and fine. (48)

In my own story, “Girls Like Her,” I follow Muñoz’s lead and construct the mother character of the story as overly pious; she straddles a line of almost stereotypical harshness toward her queer daughter that challenges the notions of innocence and

“goodness.” To establish the moral stakes of the story, I write, “[Fern] was good precisely because that kind of life, the sick one her daughter had chosen, was far away—a tornado tearing shutters from homes in big cities and towns that had lost the way.” This upfront attempt to direct the reader’s moral judgment of the character is an attempt to call into question the way goodness is assigned to or connected with heteronormativity—that it cannot be a de facto connection.

A return to Aristotle reveals that his recommendation that characters exist in service to and for the sake of plot may not encompass characters who do nothing to further develop the stakes of the moment of the story (Gass 114). In other words, some characters are “flat” and do not contribute much to the overall movement of the plot; they are archetypes, bit-players, who do nothing to further the action of the plot. Others contain psychological and emotional depths; they are considered “round.” These terms—flat and round—belong to E.M. Forster, who suggests that characters be thought of in terms of dimensions and physical space; his suggestion uses terms like flat and round to discuss the mimetic potential of characters. Forster places higher literary merit on round characters “the test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince it is a flat pretending to be round. It has the incalculability of life about it—life within the pages of the book” (Forster 41). Virginia Woolf is another proponent of character-driven fiction. She articulates, perhaps more beautifully than anyone else could, that “all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite” (Woolf 26). Woolf goes on to explain that the characters in fiction represent depths and desires

that are more interesting and essential than any plot could be—that is out of character’s desires, either met or unmet, that drive meaningful narratives.

In “Ave, Ernesto!”, I make the central character, Ernesto, round by carefully illustrating his desires, both his present psychological desires that drive the moment to moment action in the story, but also a deeper and more existential yearning that supports and motivates how he is able to interact with the telling of his story: “When Ernesto imagined this life for himself, he saw a straight-backed man with strong arms and weak lungs, a man who would kiss his wife out of necessity instead of love.” A deep drive to develop his own definition of manhood—separate and apart from what his father has defined for him—is what drives Ernesto through the story. James Wood describes the importance of developing deeply important yearnings and beliefs for characters in *How Fiction Works*:

So the vitality of literary character has less to do with dramatic action, novelistic coherence, and even plain plausibility—let alone likeability—than with a larger philosophical or metaphysical sense, our awareness that a character’s actions are deeply *important*, that something profound is at stake, with the author brooding over the face of that character like God over the face of the waters. (Wood 126)

Moments that reveal this deeper yearning can be considered to contribute to the process of characterization that breathes life into characters. Understanding characterization as a driving force of the story-telling allows for a connection to be

made between structure and character in such a way that grants character primacy in the importance of narrative construction.

Dialogue is perhaps the easiest situation in which the reader can objectively evaluate the power dynamics and clash of characters in a given story. The reader can glean this information by paying specific attention to “who is controlling a conversation, who speaks most, and for the longest amount of time” (Thomas 85).

Gay literature often presents situations of dialogue that not only depict power imbalances in the present story moment, or the moment of speech, but these moments also reveal what characters feel they can or cannot say. For example, in *Maurice*, the eponymic protagonist delicately balances his need to understand a sense of alternative sexuality, of which he is surprised and ashamed, with and a proper, polite, “hetero” comportment around others:

“I’m afraid I want to speak to you, sir” [Maurice] said with an emotion so intense that he felt he should never accomplish the real words at all.

“Well, speak away.”

“I mean professionally.”

“Lord, man, I’ve retired from practice for the last six years. You go to Jericho or Jowitt. Sit down, Maurice. Glad to see you....” (Forster 156)

Maurice is a synecdochical representation of the pressure placed not only upon stories, but also the characters within them, whatever their gender may be, to be “ersatz imitations of the norm” (Morrison 273). In other words, Maurice draws our attention to the ways in which the writer and critics impulse is to position both literature and criticism within heteronormative desire and story structure. Dialogue presents the opportunity to depict a situation in which Maurice’s, though aggressively

ordinary, is in tension with our dominant narratives of (homo)sexual self-fashioning and self-knowledge (Morrison 254). The central character in “When it Rains in South Carolina” does not balance internal and external dialog in the same way that Maurice does, but instead watches a partner who does: “Being Southern has crept so deep between his heart and his brain that he believes we really are bad people. Beliefs can spread faster than weeds. Once, he said you that could not take the South out of a southern boy. I have worried about that.” From this outside perspective, the character uses geocultural differences as a way to explain a mode of performing gender and sexuality in a particularly moral way; the narrator then finds that because Charlie is unable to successfully imitate Southern homosexual character stereotypes, he feels that alternative sexuality is completely foreclosed to him.

Discussions of character and characterization inevitably lead to the following question: who is responsible for telling a story? There is no definitive answer to this, especially as narrative perspectives go in and out of vogue, but it is best to return to Booth’s claim that it is most fruitful to speak in general terms about narrative principles than to prescribe rules. Both Todorov and Booth are of the mind that one of the most important features of narrative perspective, which is also called “point of view,” is that it should always be used consistently, otherwise “the realistic illusion will be destroyed” (Booth 85). Here, Booth connects narrative perspective as a formal decision that contributes to the mimetic quality of a story. He does not, however, seem to consider that an author may not necessarily want to create a mimetic narrative. Nevertheless, the narrator’s perspective, which is often spoken of as

functioning like a lens through which the story unfolds, insists upon filling the gaps of what happens in the story world. As a result of this mitigating focus, the reader must cope not only with what is given as part of the narration, but also what is omitted (Abbott 45). It is important to note that focalization contributes to the overall tone of the story. For example, the focalizing character in Justin Torres' novel *We The Animals* is a young boy, one of three brothers. Although he and his brothers may have been at the same place and the same moment for certain narrative events, their memories and the important details upon which they focus are indisputably different.

The author should not only be concerned with the decision of perspective, or point of view, but also of optics—of how that narrator or character may be seen by a reader. James Wood writes that changing who a character is seen by has changed the art of characterization, as the act of perception, much like time, carries with it the weight of memory and trauma (40). In “New London” and “Carolina Rig,” as well as others in this collection, I am interested in imagining scenarios in which children see and are seen; in an effort to put Woods' theory into practice, I imitate the patterns of focalization that are found in *We the Animals* to depict the ways that gender roles seen and adopted by children. “Home” is the most obvious example of this method; three unique stories intertwine and unite around the theme of childhood and the role parents play in this process. Gay literature benefits most from a style of focalization that connects both structure and characterization; in other words, focalization establishes the patterns of disclosure, withholding, and silent focus that shape the structure of the

narrative. Characterization is so deeply involved in this process that it is actually subsumed within focalization.

The Men that Sleep Built is an experimentation with the formal narrative elements that I have identified as trends across a select body of texts from the genre of gay literature. The historical foundations of the genre's style, its methods of arranging narrative according to time and relationship between character and focalization, which demonstrate the potential for stylistic connections over and across generations of writers, are undervalued. Clear lineage of formal methods from one generation of writers to another, such as in the instance of Virginia Woolf's works, which set precedent, perhaps more than any other texts, for the mindful manipulation of time the led to Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*. Narrative theory is a rich field for tracing the hallmarks that cultural groups take on as a mode of their storytelling. The field is so rich, in fact, that attending to any single element of style within such a short space is an unwieldy task. Nevertheless, I hope the stories themselves, their careful arrangement and constructions, will open up the conditions of possibility to create meaningful connections between texts that may not have been considered as participating in the discourse of gay literature until now. Storytelling has the power to bridge theoretical gaps, and to refocus our vision so that we may observe new places of tension and dissonance. Please, enjoy the collection.

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Home

Khaled's teacher asks him to draw a picture of something he loves, so Khaled draws a house, a red-roofed house, and stick-figured man, who leads a mutt around trees and birds and mountains, crayoned under the word Hussain—حُسَيْن,—“beautiful” spelled out like the Hollywood sign. Before airplanes began dropping bombs on Aleppo, his father owned a gray truck for their deli and parked it next to the telephone pole. He doesn't know how to draw a cracked windshield, so he leaves the window blank. Everything is drawn with two eyes and a smiling mouth, even the cat-shaped pot, in which Khaled's mother grows hibiscus, is smiling.

The teacher peeks over Khaled's shoulder and asks, What kind of birds are those, Khaled? What kind of dog?

Seagulls, Khaled says, and a mutt. Because mutts are the best behaved. And see, here, that is the house where we lived before we moved. We were lucky then.

The teacher nods, Yes.

The teacher steps over to Bana and asks her what she's drawn. Khaled puts his markers down and listens.

These people sitting on the couch are my family, Bana says. Her english isn't very good, but the teacher is patient because he is American and says he is there to help. He wants the children of Syria to have a chance somewhere else. Anywhere. See: this is my mother and brother and me. Sitting, she says. We're holding our hearts because we are a loving family.

Then what are those other hearts that are floating above the couch? No one is holding them.

Bana says: Those are my sister and brother and uncle and father. Their bodies aren't on the couch because their bodies aren't here, but my mother always leaves empty chairs for them at dinner. I drew hearts because I still love them.

Khaled inches forward at his desk to look over Bana's shoulder. It is exactly how she described it to the teacher. One couch with stick-figure people holding hearts. Rosy hearts floating like clouds in a white sky. And a bright yellow, smiling sun, so proud of its own warmth that its eyes are closed.

. . .

Lexi's teacher asks her to draw a picture of how she sees the world. She draws a picture of her family standing in the sand at Misquamicut beach. Mom and John are holding peach-colored stick-hands; Dad and Alex are clasping one peach-colored stick hand and one chocolate-colored stick hand. Her gray dog, Pepper is three oval

outlines, and six whiskers. Whiskers? If she is asked, she will lie and tell her teacher that Pepper is the cat. Her brother Mark is to her right; they aren't holding hands. Everyone is smiling except for him.

She draws a starfish, then a scallop shell, then sharp gray Vs that represent seagulls. It is the way the water rushes over things at the beach that Lexi likes. How one minute she is drinking a CapriSun with Alex on the beach blanket, and the next a wave has rushed up and stolen a bag of grapes or the sunblock and they float like toy boats out toward where the bigger kids swim. Water, she thinks, can do amazing things.

The teacher taps Lexi on the shoulder and asks her to present her drawing to the class. She stands up, because what choice does she have? She tip-toes to the front of the room and crosses her arms and her legs. She is a human knot telling the other children about her Mom and John—*John is my new Dad*; and her Dad and his husband, Alex—*who Mom doesn't like*; and her older brother, Mark, who teases her for her pigtails—*and plays too rough*. Mark isn't very nice, she says to the class.

Now, Lexi, the teacher says, He's your brother. You have to love him. Lexi wraps her arms more tightly around herself and listens to the teacher.

The teacher hands Lexi the drawing and shoos her back to her seat.

Now, the teacher says, Jamie, will you come up and share your picture?

Jamie toddles up to the front of the class. One finger is jammed into his nostril, and the free hand waves the drawing like a lover with a handkerchief at an auto-race.

How wonderful, the teacher says. What a happy little family you have. Who are they?

Jamie takes his finger out of his nose to point to each peach person.

This is my Mom, my Dad, my brother, my sister, and me. We live in this house with this dog—Max.

Lexi looks from Jamie's drawing back to her own. She sees that her own is better, but the teacher doesn't think so.

...

Burt's teacher tells him to draw a picture of his family. So, Burt draws a picture of his father covered in brown and green blobs. Then Burt draws all of his father's favorite things around him; the red truck he used when they went fishing or mudding after a rainstorm; the rifle he used to teach Burt how to aim and what pulling the trigger felt like. For his mother, he did his best to draw a gravestone with a white lily growing in front of it like he had seen in Scooby-Doo. He draws some things his father said she had liked: books and a cross and a star-spangled banner. Burt isn't sure if he should draw his sister, Gabriella. He's never met her because she doesn't live in Alabama anymore, and she has a child a little older than Burt. He can't make up his mind, and he doesn't have a tan marker, so he doesn't draw Gabriella.

At first, the teacher walks past Burt without looking at his drawing. Then she turns around and says, Burt, why don't you put your picture on the wall? He has never been asked to put his work on the wall before. He springs up and runs to the tape dispenser. He trips on Sally-Mae's backpack.

Sorry, Sally-Mae, he says, It's just that I ain't ever got to put anything on the wall before this.

Sally-Mae doesn't care. She colors the red roof of her two-dimensional house and doesn't respond. She's new and doesn't talk to the other students, especially not Burt. But she did called him dirty, once.

Burt tapes his drawing in the center of the board next to Alice's. He is surprised that hers has so many outlines. Seven brown outlines linked together. They're arranged by height, some taller, some shorter than Alice. Tallest on the left. They're one chain, holding hands, smiling in front of a two-dimensional house and a fence and a tree with a bonafide tire-swing.

That's a fine picture you drew, Burt says to Alice on his way back to his seat. He wants to ask: Do you think I could come play with you on the tire-swing some time? But he knows his Dad wouldn't let him play with Alice, so he doesn't ask.

. . .

Khaled passes the market on his way home. A bright parrot sidles across a vendor's arm, squawking. The man stretches the rainbow plumage of its wing, nodding to the woman whose face he cannot see. She shakes her head, No, and holds an orange to the sun to get a better look at the skin. Three men stand in the shade. Their beards have grown down to their bellies. They do not laugh. They do not speak, but Khaled knows they are watching. Not him, he's only a boy, but everyone else. Looking into the windows of buildings above the market. Into the folded fabrics the women wear. Into the sun when they grew bored.

Khaled grabs the straps of his pack and runs to the corner where his mother waits for him. She is watching from between the folds of her hijab. Each day after she closes the pharmacy for lunch, she walks to the corner. Today, she's holding two crispy kibbeh, one goat the other beef. Hello, mother, he chirps. Khaled fumbles with his pack's zipper, excited to show her the picture he drew, but she tells him, Not now, Khaled — hurry.

She grabs his hand and pulls him down the street. Khaled can move only half as fast as his mother, and eating slows him down. He trips. He looks to his mother, and then sees the kibbeh has rolled out of his hand and into the dust. Should he cry? No. He must not cry. But he accuses his mother with the serious look he learned from watching his father haggling with customers at the deli.

Don't worry, his mother tells him, I'll give you mine.

She crouches and helps him stand. She pats the dirt from his shoulders, examines the backpack, and says, I'll take that, and then pulls the strap across her arm.

She looks into the distance beyond Khaled and then looks behind her.

Hurry, Khaled, she says.

They rush, hand in hand, Khaled struggling to stay by her side.

At the park, Khaled trips again. This time his knee scrapes against gravel and oozes blood.

She can't stand it anymore. She throws Khaled's backpack onto the street, picks him up, and begins to run with him in her arms. Her hijab pulls down, and he

sees that her eyes are wet and shiny; that her cheeks are ruddy from crying. She sets her gaze somewhere at the edge of the city.

Khaled watches over her shoulder, confused, ready to cry. His picture is gone, but he will not cry. A stranger picks up his backpack and yells, Wait! Wait!, trying to get his mother's attention. The three men with beards appear at the far edge of the park, running, becoming further away, until his mother turns a corner and they disappear.

...

Lexi shuffles out of school with Tamara when the bell rings. Don't forget to show your parents your drawings, the teacher yells after the class.

Lexi walks with Tamara, talks about soccer, and waves goodbye as Tamara gets in line for bus twelve. Lexi scans the parking lot. Will it be Mom and John, or Dad today? Or, she hopes, Alex? He lets her listen to whichever music station she wants and doesn't ask questions (what did you learn in school today?). He does not make her feel tangled like a knot. Sometimes he sings along to songs with her, snapping his fingers, using the steering wheel as a drum.

There's the van, Mom's van. Lexi skips towards it, waving to friends and ignoring raindrops as she goes. A puddle spanning an entire parking space beckons her, and she stomps through it, soaking her socks, her shoes. Tamara says that those puddles are dirty, but they make Lexi feel fresh, despite the brownish tint the water adds to her socks.

The horn sounds from her mother's van. She lifts her head, expecting to see Mom. No. Oh no. It's her brother. Mark. She stands in the puddle. The water soaks through her shoes. She does not feel fresh. Can she go back? Did she forget anything in class? The teacher would ask her why, and she couldn't say that it is because of Mark. The teacher already told her to love her brother. Lexi thinks that families are supposed to love one another just because the teacher has told her so. But her mother does not love her father's new husband, and he is family.

The horn sounds again. She turns. Is Tamara watching? Tamara is playing with Jackie on the bus.

Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack...

Lexi slides open the back door and climbs in.

All dressed in black, black, black...

Aren't you going to say hi? Mark says.

With silver buttons, buttons, buttons...

Lexi sits at the back of the car. She crosses her arms. She knots her legs.

Hi, she says.

Why don't you sit in the front with me, Mark asks.

Then he smiles the straight smile that has gotten him out of all the trouble he should be in.

All down her back, back, back...

...

In Mobile, teachers tell the students not to go into the woods around the school, but Burt takes the cut-through between the tennis court and the track to get home. He knows that the secret to crossing the stream that had swallowed Johnny Lopresta's ATV is that, if you walk far enough south, felled trees make a path across it.

The sky darkens, and Burt emerges on the road; he kicks pebbles, playing the game by himself. Get it to the stop-sign in ten kicks. Now, to the Jodry's mailbox. When he makes it to the fire-hydrant he stops. His father's truck is parked in the driveway. The houselights are on.

Burt sneaks around back to the kitchen window and listens for bottle caps clinking against the counter. A wasp-nest hums in the eaves, so he doesn't get too close. All quiet. He goes in through the front door and kicks off his boots.

Dad, he calls.

No answer, but the television is on.

He creeps into the living-room. His father sleeps on the sofa, his hand stuffed inside his underwear—as if he were afraid of losing it, like Burt's mother said. News flickers on the television. Someone yells about change and violence. He pronounces the word huge like “yuge.” People seem to like him. His father does. Burt tip-toes into the kitchen.

The refrigerator is open, and its yellow light casts the door's long shadow across the tile. Burt closes the door. Then he begins his usual sweep of the kitchen, tossing bottles and sharp bottle-caps into the garbage. He pours water into a pan and

sets it on the stove for macaroni and cheese. Burt goes back to the refrigerator for hotdogs. They are old, but there isn't any other meat, so he will fry them when his father wakes up.

Burt closes the door and looks at the refrigerator thinking how nice his picture would look up there. The water boils over in the pan, and Burt turns away to take care of it.

. . . .

Khaled's uncle is waiting outside the house when Khaled and his mother arrive. His mother carries him to the uncle's car, its engine idling, and belts him into the backseat. His father hands her papers wrapped in plastic and asks her to hide them in her hijab. She pins it around her neck. They kiss each other. Then his mother enters the car.

I will come after, his father says. Don't cry, Khaled.

His father closes the door. Khaled does not understand.

His uncle and his mother speak in a language Khaled does not understand, a language he did not know his mother spoke. *Ça ira. Ça ira.* Were they moving again? Khaled checks the small canvas bag his father handed him. His father had not packed Khaled's cleats, or his books. There is a change of clothes and a booklet that his mother snatches from him as soon as she sees it: *Union Européenne République Française: Passeport.* This, too, goes into her hijab.

The car bumps along, and Khaled is too small to see where he is through the window, but he can see the dark sky. One, two, three, he begins to count the stars. The

seatbelt pulls tight across his chest. He reaches for his mother's hand. Between the fingertips, there is slickness. Mama, he says.

Khaled's uncle turns in his seat and smiles. His uncle and his mother have the same small nose, and the same cocoa eyes. He turns to his sister and whispers.

T'inquiète pas. Ça ira. Khaled wishes they would speak in a language he knew.

The car stops. His mother unbuckles herself, then him. Khaled steps from the car. All around them, abandoned train cars sit off the tracks like discarded toys.

Nonsense graffiti, swooping purple and orange letters, covers the rusted boxes.

His uncle points toward a train that is creeping through the train yard.

Go, he says, run.

Khaled's mother unbuckles him, and for the second time that day, runs with him in her arms. They come up alongside the train and a panel slides back. Another woman with frightened eyes reaches out. His mother passes Khaled to her and continues running, but the train is slipping away. The woman places Khaled to the side as if he were a sack of cabbage and then reaches for his mother. They link arms. His mother trips. She cries out in pain, her legs failing beneath her. The woman falls to the boxcar's floor. She holds on, dragging his mother through the gravel while her feet work underneath her to find footing. Khaled begins to scream. He comes to the woman's side and pulls his mother's arm. Slowly, they pull her into the boxcar. When her feet are inside, the woman slides the door shut behind her, and they are silent.

Khaled tucks himself under his mother's arm while her heavy breathing grows fainter, more controlled. Khaled looks through the dark. They are not alone. Groaning

cattle shift and bounce with the train. A calf tries to feed at its mother's utter, but the mother lows and nudges it away.

Khaled watches the country pass by through the boxcar's wooden slots. Speckles and flashes of stars wink at him from the sky, the desert stretches forever underneath them, stopping at the faraway mountains. The manure stings his nose. Chokes him. It is too hot to breathe. The other family has not made a noise; has not raised a hand to say hello; has not moved since the ordeal of getting his mother into the car. A child is curled up next to them. A girl, younger than Khaled. Her head had been shaved so that she does not look like a girl.

Khaled thinks about food. The kibbeh was the last bit of food he'd eaten since leaving school. At home, his father had packed bags for each of them and said, No food, Khaled, we must hurry. So, neither Khaled, nor his mother, had eaten that night. But his mother pulls falafel and a chocolate from her bag. She crouches down and looks at Khaled.

This, she says, is for when you have no other payment.

He does not understand. He wants to cry, but he had listened to his father when he'd told him that, No, he could not cry, not here.

The girl on the other side of the car begins to cry. Her mother tries whispering a lullaby to her, but it does not quiet her. Despite this, Khaled's mother has closed her eyes. She rests her head against the train-car's wall and dreams with her mouth open. Khaled reaches for her hand. There is wet between her fingers. Khaled cannot breathe. He turns and crams his nose into the slots. The outside air is sweet, cool. He

wants to share it with his mother when she wakes, but he does not understand how to pass oxygen from his lungs to hers.

. . .

Lexi has decided that she will not speak again. She will not uncross her arms. She will not untangle her legs. And she will not speak again. To anyone. She runs out of the van, wiping tears from her eyes.

If you tell Mom, I'll, Mark says...

But Lexi is in the kitchen before he finishes the threat.

Mom looks up from her laptop and chuckles.

Tell Mom what, she says.

But Lexi has already decided that she will not speak again, not even to Mom. Lexi thinks that her mother will tell her that she is wrong to be upset. She runs up the stairs and doesn't answer. She slams the door shut behind her, locks it, and throws her backpack onto the floor in front of it. She wonders if it will be enough to keep the world out of her private space. Pepper, who had been sleeping on her bed, lifts his head, wags his tail, and then flops down to sleep again. Lexi piles her stuffed animals on top of her backpack. Dog the bear. Ralphie. Mister Chicken. All are sacrifices to barricade the door. Lexi tries to push her bed in front of the door, but it is too heavy with Pepper on it. She gives up and crawls under the sheets. Pepper doesn't mind. Lexi puts her face in his fur and cries.

When she calms down, the quiet of the house becomes painful. Why had no one come up to her room to check on her? She sits up in bed and looks out the

window. A streetlight floats in the dark, and old Mrs. Beauregard is walking her poodle through the neighborhood. The woman stops and looks into a nearby tree. The dog waits, lets her look, standing guard for her while she searches for something her old eyes cannot find between the thatch of branches and leaves.

Footsteps climb the stairs. Lexi can tell it is him from their heaviness. She hugs Pepper around the neck to let the dog know that she needs protection and starts to cry again. Mark knocks on her door.

Lex, he says.

Pepper's head jerks up. Lexi doesn't move. She hopes he'll go away. He knocks again. Pepper jumps off the bed and barks at the door.

Mark tries the knob. He knocks again. Pepper won't stop barking. Lexi looks out the window, wondering whether or not Mrs. Beauregard was as mean as everyone said. And if she was, then why? What made her that way?

Mom says, What's going on up there?

Nothing, Mom, Mark says.

Pepper barks and barks and barks. Lexi holds a pillow over her ears to block out the noise.

Mom climbs the stairs now. Her footsteps are lighter, but slower. Lexi imagines Mark shrugging his shoulders and saying he doesn't know what's wrong.

Liar! Lexi screams from the bed. Liar! Liar!

Pepper hears Mom's voice and the screaming. He howls at the door.

Lexi rolls over and watches Mrs. Beauregard open her front door and step inside. Tamara is out there, playing with her sister and splashing through puddles. The rain pours down. She wants to hold the rain in her hands. She pushes the pillow to the side, opens the window. First she puts her hand outside, collecting raindrops in her sticky palm. Then she swings her legs over and lets them dangle. She spreads her toes wide, trying to catch raindrops on each toenail.

Mom knocks on the door. Pepper howls.

Lexi, she says, Open the door, honey.

Mom tries the knob. Lexi throws the pillow at Pepper to get him to stop howling. Lexi has forgotten that there is a pin above the door, on the lip of the frame, which will open the lock. The door cracks open, but the barricade works. Dog the bear's foot stops the door. Mom peeks into the dark room.

What are you doing, Lexi, she says.

She will not speak to her mother. She will not speak to Mark. Lexi looks out the window, at her feet dangling, toes spread wide, and sees her stepfather's car turn onto the street, making its way to the house. She will not talk to him, either.

. . .

Burt leaves a bowl of macaroni and cheese on the kitchen table with a note: *Love you, Dad.* He considers writing *My picture got put on the wall*, but doesn't. His father wouldn't know what wall. School, he has said, is for faggots. For this reason, Burt never lets him know that he enjoys school. His father sleeps on the couch, his hand in the same place. Light from the tv casts shadows across the walls.

Burt takes one of his father's belts, his camo jacket, and a can of wasp-spray from the hall closet. He shakes the can. It feels light, like he might only have one shot with it. He sneaks out the backdoor, careful to hold it so that it doesn't slam against the frame. His father would be in a bad mood if he was woken up, especially like that.

Before Burt leaves, he pretends that the wasp-spray is the pistol his father had taught him to shoot. He wraps both hands around the can and counts backward from ten. His father's voice says: Breathe out through your nose. 4, 3, 2... The red dot is lined up with the nozzle. 1. He sprays the nest. Great shot, Burt! his father says. Burt turns, smiling. His father is not where Burt had hoped he'd be. Burt sees through the window; he snores on the couch, adjusts himself, and rolls over. Humming comes from the hive, and Burt remembers the wasps. He drops the can and dashes out into the street, running until he'd made it to the street.

He didn't usually see the house from this side of the street, where it seems smaller, less important. His father doesn't know he is gone. When he wakes, he might go looking for him.

Cars don't drive down this dead-end street, and Burt's father picked the place because, There warn't no neighbors for miles.

When they moved, he said that, Burt could have a trampoline. And, when his father brought home a tiny exercise trampoline, Burt tried to teach himself to be happy with it. Oh? his father said, You wanted a real one? He laughed and laughed, not realizing that Burt wanted something he could share with the friends he had not yet made.

A plane ruptures the quiet as it passes above, and Burt walks away. He kicks a stone down the street. Twelve kicks to the streetlight. Ten kicks to the corner. He slips into the woods.

Teachers said it was dangerous to go into the woods because of snakes and gators and other reptiles with mean teeth. Burt was not afraid of them.

He finds the split boulder and the giant oak beyond it. He grabs the oak's lowest branch, puts his foot into the groove, and pulls himself up, up seven more branches until he can see his house below and the blue green flashes of television through the window. He ties himself in with his father's belt and waits.

Let it come to you. That was his father's advice when they had gone hunting. Set up shop, enjoy the quiet, and let it come to you. Hours could pass before a deer might come rustling through the brush. If you're quiet enough, if you're still enough, Nature can't tell you a part from itself. His father had pretended to be a tree, brought his hands over his head like branches and screwed up his face.

Burt knows his father will wake soon and be angry that his son had been come home only to sneak out again, that Burt left a note upon which a dirty word was written. Burt holds his breath while he watches the front steps, waiting for the door to swing back and a dark shadow to emerge. On the other side of the forest, the school's flagpole stands tall. The flag is still. Can he see Alice's house from here? Where does she live? There is a house with a tire-swing in the neighborhood over *there*.

There is a car. It must have taken a wrong turn and wound up near their house. Twin lights creep through streets, slowing, realizing its mistake, turning around, disappearing back under the tree-line.

Burt's grip weakens. He pulls his father's belt tighter over his waist.

A slam.

He looks at the house. Out of the front door, under the yellow houselights, his father emerges in his underwear. Burt tenses around the branch, holding his breath, waiting for his father to come to him.

Carolina Rig

Little cursive *A* is the same as little *O*, but it has a tail. Not a cat tail, but like a chipmunk, pointing down.

What's a chippymunk, I asked.

Missus said, No, Wit, not a "chippymunk," a chipmunk.

Her heart-shaped, red lips sprayed spit when she made the *p* sound.

Next time, Wit, raise your hand if you have a question.

Okay, Missus, I said. But I still didn't hear the difference.

Little *C, K, M, N, O, P, T, U, V, W, X,* and *Y* are all just like the big ones, she said.

She drew the letters on the board, and white chalk dusted her black dress.

Under her arm the skin flew back and forth, jiggling like the chocolate pudding Ma made every Christmas before she died. I had asked her to put gummy worms in it and

cookie crumbles on top. I had called it Swamp pudding. *Click. Screech. Click.* The chalk broke, and Missus stretched across the board for another.

I couldn't draw the letters the same way, mine came out too big and square and ugly. So, I stopped.

Missus focused so hard on drawing letters that she didn't notice me, or Leona, who stared at the bushes outside, with her finger stuck up her nose; she didn't see Joey-Lee throw an eraser, laugh, and stick his tongue out at Sammy who was thin like a girl.

Sammy had the most stars lined up after his name on our reward board. An entire galaxy floated behind his name, and his cursive was as fancy as Missus'. Sometimes I wanted to throw erasers at him, too, but not in the mean way Joey-Lee did it to hurt him. Ma had taught me better than that. Sammy's sweeter than pie, she said, Wouldn't tell you to move if you were standing on his feet.

Sammy just knew more than everyone. Maybe even Missus. One time, I asked Sammy how he got to know so much, and he looked down, all embarrassed, and said, I don't know, I read a lot. If I were Sammy, then I'd be proud of knowing my math and cursive and spelling and reading before the fifth grade. I thought Joey-Lee was just jealous of Sammy, and some people just ain't even smart enough to know when they're jealous.

Joey-Lee ripped the corner of his paper and popped it in his fat mouth. He was always chewing something. Pie. Grits. Pork rinds his Pa bought from Piggly-Wiggly. Two-for-one Joey-Lee would say, holding his dirty hands out and showing anyone

who would look. Joey-Lee chewed up the spit-wad, puffed out his bullfrog-chin, and spit it at Sammy. It stuck in Sammy's curly black hair like a paper booger.

Sammy sat as still as if he were one of those people, all white and frozen forever in stone in Brooke Green Gardens. Pa called them Sculptits once, and Ma told him, No, Barney, they're sculptures. Anyway, Sammy didn't touch the spit-wad even though some of the girls were giggling, pointing little fingers, and making faces as if the inlet's low-tide stink came in the windows. The spit-wad lost its stick and landed on the floor with the same wet plop of Ma's mop on kitchen tile.

I hoped Missus saw and that she'd take to yelling at Joey-Lee about respect and kindness like she does. When Missus started, she'd go on for so long it that felt like she was going to use up all the air in the room. That was what Ma would say when Pa complained: Lord knows you're using up every ounce of air in this place. Gunna choke us with your complaining. Sometimes he stopped. Sometimes he got louder. So, when it happened, when anyone yelled, I held my breath until it stopped or my head felt like I had spent too much time on the merry-go-around.

But Missus might as well have been blind. The spit-wad laid on the floor, and Joey-Lee had given up on trying to get a rise out of Sammy, who acted like Missus and her curvy writing were the only things in the world.

Making a little cursive *Q*, *G*, *B*, *D*, or *Z*, Missus says, now *that's* hard.

. . .

Barney hauled his bait-box to Millie's favorite spot at the end of the pier. He cast his line into the shadows, sighed, and waited. When the bobber dipped under, he

pulled until the air abandoned him, and then gulped mouthfuls of inlet-breeze. His first catch launched itself from the water, up and over a low-hanging branch. The fish shimmied and glinted. Barney yanked, trying to free it, and the rod wilted like a flower. The branch shook, and the fish jiggled and spun—a pendulum, twisting, turning, dead.

His shoulders pinched up to his earlobes; his eyes shifted right to left, scanning the dock for any of the regulars—Lou Reed or Harry Strunk. Loons and pelicans spied on him, from their seagrass roosts, but no one fished near him. Not a person was around to wonder how Barney Stowe, the Horry County Tournament Fishing Champion, could have forgotten to cast his line clear of the contorted trees.

If Millie were there, she would have touched his arm and said, No, Barney, not there, and then pointed to a spot off the end of the pier, somehow knowing the fish would be hungrier and fatter.

Barney's arms surrendered. He severed the line and opened his bait-box for a new lure. He didn't use real worms, not after Wit had taken to slurping down the wriggly suckers like Millie's spaghetti. Willow blade spinnerbaits and crankbaits and jerkbaits all aligned in the box, as Millie had left them, color-coordinated and neat. He took Green Willie, the rubber worm that Wit had liked enough to name. It had been one of Barney's first lures, and it would be Wit's, when he was ready.

After Wit was born, Millie insisted that they go fishing together. Barney resisted. The other gruff, barking men stood far enough away to not invade his privacy, and Barney liked get splinters from the pier and pulling them out on his own.

Millie persisted, and Barney, who had begun wishing she were with him during the day, packed the truck and brought them along. Wit was three-years-old by then.

On the pier, Barney taught Millie how to tie the Carolina Rig with Green Willie; Wit was still in velcro. And, after that, as if by some magic, Barney's fingers had swollen so that tying the thin, translucent string was nearly impossible without her. Millie always came every Sunday and set his lines. They would coo about the weather, and she'd peer into the water to say: Over there, Barney.

As Wit grew older, learning wasn't enough to keep him quiet on their fishing days. Barney grumbled and wrung his hands around the rod, but Millie patted her husband's shoulder and whispered to Wit between his shrill giggles. (Quiet down, Wit. Don't you like how peaceful the water is?) She walked with their son to the edge of the pier where the clear crabs scuttled beneath clear water. Sometimes she whispered secret-plans, or a game, which only they played. (I bet I can count more seashells than you, Wit.) They ran to the shore and scoured for scallop shells and sea-glass while Barney fished. From the pier, he watched Millie tickle Wit and kiss his cheeks made plump with southern cooking.

Millie had kept Wit laughing through the October hurricanes, when he hid from thunder and lightning under their covers. She knew more than which sprays stopped lizards from eating her rhubarb; how to shield Wit's ears and say No, Barney, when he got into it with her about gays or Muslims; how to raise a boy in the South without turning him into a southern boy.

Without Millie, Barney doesn't know the right way to say, No, Wit, those are for the fish, when Wit picks worms out of the bait-box and tries to eat them. Instead Barney says: Put those god damned things down. So, Wit doesn't come fishing. And Barney forgets. He forgets simple things like tying knots and Wit's favorite meals and where to cast his line to catch the biggest fish.

. . .

Missus didn't like it when I asked, Missus, why is your skin dark?

It was the first time it occurred to me that her skin was darker than mine.

She stopped writing and talking about cursive in the middle of a swoopy curved *Q*. She turned to me, and placed her hands on her hips, leaving chalk-dust handprints on her dress. Joey-Lee's toad mouth, aimed at me, stretched wide. Sammy and the other kids looked at me, too. Sammy was frowning and examining the tile ground like he did when he was embarrassed; that's how I knew I said something bad. Missus hadn't stared yelling, but I felt it bubbling up.

She cleared her throat and stretched her lips wide like she was trying to smile, but she looked like she smelled the tuna sandwich, again, the one Joey-Lee left in her desk over Thanksgiving break.

What did you ask, Wit?

Why is your skin dark—

—Enough Mr. Stowe! This is exactly the kind of thing that I mean when I talk about respect—

—But Missus, I said, My Ma says there's no such thing as a stupid question.

And Joey-Lee leaned forward in his desk, clutching his bulging stomach as if he were fixing to barf, but instead of puke he said: Well, your Momma's dead!

I didn't say anything because I started holding my breath. The others were quiet, suddenly finding their cursive interesting. Sammy stared at me, then Joey-Lee. His frown was real deep. His eyes grew twice as big, and they looked like they were fixing to jump out at Joey-Lee. This must have been how Sammy looked when he was mad. Joey-Lee chortled, patting himself on his stomach like Pa does after eating Ma's meatloaf.

Joey-Lee, Missus shrieked, O-U-T, out! To Mr. Carver's!

She threw the chalk onto her desk, breaking another piece, and snatched Joey-Lee's doughy arm. Joey-Lee pushed himself from his desk, scraping the chair into the tile. As Missus lead Joey-Lee past me, he puffed out his chest, stuck out his grubby hand, and mussed my hair.

I could have screamed or said, Don't you dare touch me, Joey-Lee, but, instead, I held my breath. My chest pulled tight. My face hot. My cheeks puffed. Sammy didn't like this. Didn't like that Joey-Lee touched me. He jumped up from his desk, his arm arched high in the air above him. He drove the sharp end of his pencil into Joey-Lee's arm. The girls shrieked. Joey-Lee yelped. He fell on the floor crying, flapping his arm like a chicken-wing. He rolled around like a hog in mud, kicking desks, wriggling, and cursing. He kicked Missus in the leg, and she fell over Leona. She smacked her red lips on the desk. And then I don't remember.

. . .

Barney Stowe parked his pick-up outside Wachesaw Liquors and watched slump-shouldered men carry brown paper-bag goodies to their trucks. Inside the shop, customers grabbed bows and sparkling gift bags for consumable last-minute birthday presents. Barney rolled up the windows and turned on the air-conditioning. In the air-vent, the yellowing picture of Millie clicked like a playing-card in a bicycle's spokes. 1983. She had cut her hair short because it was just too darn hot that summer. Barney loved how her ears poked out from under her curls. Cutest ears in the inlet. Small. Like seashells.

Before Millie died, she had made Barney show up to meetings. He promised he would after he got drunk, angry at nothing, and left a red handprint rising on her cheek. She said, Either you find yourself help at AA, or I'm taking Wit and leaving. Barney blubbered apologies, said, I'll go, Millie, I'll go, and passed out on the sofa while Millie, holding a frozen sponge to her cheek, played *SORRY!* with Wit behind the locked bedroom door.

So far, Barney had kept his promise, meaning only that he went twice a week, but stopped at Wachesaw every other day to stock up on Stoli, drove home, and fell asleep before the water started to boil for Wit's mac-n-cheese.

A bell chimed, and Kip, hoisting two 750s of Burnetts, strolled out. Kip had fallen off the wagon months ago, and everyone talked about it. He came back to the Wednesday night meeting, but Sandy and John and Lisa refused to sit with him, crossed their arms and sipped watered-down coffee while listening to Step 8—*Seeking Forgiveness*. Barney hadn't seen him at a meeting since. Everyone said, It's a

shame; Kip's a nice kid, he needs some help is all. Barney didn't mind him; Kip had laughed at Barney's story about how Wit lined up the plastic Stoli bottles for target practice in the backyard. Barney thought it was more embarrassing than funny; the line of bottles grew so long that Wit had to stack them two deep so they wouldn't go onto the neighbors' yards.

Kip rushed toward his Tacoma, crossing in front Barney's truck. Barney pulled his camo hat down and adjusted the rearview to look at himself, his jowly face, his dry, gray eyes looking back at him. Could Kip recognize him?

When next Wednesday rolls around, it'll have been one month of craving and hunger. Hunger like that sits deep, practically bottomless, and Barney knew he couldn't survive, for Wit, much longer with that emptiness.

Kip started his Tacoma and drove away, the red lights disappeared down 17-Business toward Surfside Beach. Millie's picture *click click clicked*. A steady rhythm of people moved in and out, some proud, some not, some being lead as if on a leash through the glass and plastic and aluminum aisles. Wit would be getting off the school-bus soon, he thought. The house-key is under the ceramic toad, so he'll get in on his own. Barney Stowe played with the key. He didn't cut the engine. He waited, listening to the *click, click, click*, of Millie's picture, and watched traffic creep down the street as raindrops splash against the windshield.

. . .

Remember to bring canned goods to help your class. The drive ends on Friday, and the class to bring in the most gets a pizza party after Christmas.

When I woke up, I was on a hard plastic bed in Nurse Wickham's office. Joey-Lee sat across from me; he stared at a sad looking boy in a poster. Footsteps echoed down the halls as the other students ran to the buses waited, lined up like ducks in a row, outside. They were running extra fast today because they had four days off from school to play with their toys and video games and parents.

Can I go, I asked, I'll miss my bus.

You hit your head, Wit, Nurse Wickham said. We have to make sure you don't have a concussion.

What's a concussion, I asked.

Missus, peeking in through the glass, holding an icepack to her lip, knocked at the door. Nurse Wickham forgot about me and waved her in. She smiled at Missus, but Missus couldn't smile back on account of her lip. Nurse Wickham asked questions I didn't understand like, How's Teddy?, and, Has anyone bought the house in Oak Hampton? Who? Transplants!

They chatted and forgot about me. Forgot that the bump on my head had't shrunk any, and that I did't know what a concussion is. Sammy would know. Where is he?

The halls were empty by the time they remembered I was there. My bus was probably already past Kangaroo Mart. Nurse Wickham hobbled to her desk and shuffled through her papers and cough-drop wrappers. Meanwhile, Missus says, Have you thought about what you said? She was talking to Joey-Lee.

Not really, Missus, Joey-Lee said. He wasn't smiling his bullfrog smile anymore, but a ratty smile with his buck teeth covering his bottom lip.

Well, Joey-Lee, she said, if you don't want to say you're sorry, then we'll wait until your father gets here. You can say it front of him, too.

He snorts.

The phone rings. Nurse Wickham answers:

Yes, he's still here...

Nurse Wickham stares at me with sad eyes, like she's going to cry, and hangs up the phone. She waves Missus over, whispers in her ear.

Missus helped Joey-Lee off the plastic bench. His arm fat is pressed white between her fingers. Joey-Lee shuffled out of the room, the scent of peanut-butter and tarmac trailing after him.

Principal Carver was out of breath when he came into Nurse Wickham's office.

Missus was *clack, clacking* behind him in her shoes. He dabbed sweat from his hairy upper lip and burped a small, quiet burp, said, Excuse me, and burped again. He twisted the walkie-talkie's dial, and the crackling voices grew louder; he twisted it the other way until the voices were silent.

Hello, Winnie, he said.

Hi Jim, Nurse Wickham replied.

Principal Carver stood next to me. It was the closest he'd ever been, so close that I could reach out and touch the walkie-talkie. He looked at me, his eyes filled with the same wet sadness that all the adults who looked at me seemed to have. Veins spidered out from the corners of his sharp nose.

His teeth weren't as crooked, or as yellow, as Joey-Lee had made them out to be when he'd tell stories about sitting in Principal Carver's office, kicking his desk, watching him scribble words in black ink onto Joey-Lee's permanent record.

How is Mr. Stowe, Winnie?

Seems fine now, Nurse Wickham said, Just bumped his head.

Where is Sammy, I asked.

Principal Carver said something about responsibility and laws and parents and policies. Again, they seemed to forget I was there. Then, they stopped. Principal Carver stepped into the hall. Taking the walkie-talkie from his hip, he whispered something into it. He came back into the room and gave me a long, hard look.

Missus touched his arm and says, I'll bring him, Jim.

He looked from her to me, shook his head. No.

I'll go, too, Nurse Wickham said. Her voice was syrupy, sweet.

What happened to Sammy, I asked.

Voices crackled through Mr. Carver's walkie-talkie. Missus' brown eyes looked at him as if he were a student she wanted an answer from. Principal Carver pinched the top of his nose, squinted, chewed his cheek. Nurse Wickham patted her hands dry on her pants and said, Well, Jim?

He sighed and shrugged his shoulders like Pa did when he wasn't sure about anything.

He said: So long as there are two of you... I'll leave a message to make sure his father knows.

...

Barney dropped the twisted brown bag on the floor and transferred the half-thawed chicken from the cellophane packaging into the pan. At least he stopped at the Piggly-Wiggly, too. Half-off chicken breast and barbecue-sauce today. He had loaded a bag with green beans, unsure if Wit would eat them, and carried them to the sun-burnt teenager at the checkout. He bought a pack of gum, just in case. He hadn't waited to pay for it before opening the foil and taking a piece. It had been in his mouth since, so he spit it into the trash, not wanting the peppermint to mess with the bite of vodka. He didn't bother with a glass. He drank it warm.

Today, the vodka made his hearing-aids shriek. When Millie was around, he would stash them in the table next to his reclining chair, turn on the television, and stare at the newscasters' lips while they talked about another robbery, another murder, another flood. He'd lose track of the hearing-aids and then, the next day, when she'd come out of Wit's bedroom, he'd ask, Have you seen my ears, and she'd say, They are were you *always* put them. But he didn't know where it was.

In the kitchen, Barney shoved ice into the freezer and browned chicken breast in the pan for Wit. She had been the cook. A damn good one. And Wit mashed potatoes or over-salted the chicken next to her while they hummed and laughed

together. Millie had wondered about Wit; what he would be like when he was older, when she wasn't there to distance them anymore, to stop Wit from hearing, seeing, speaking like his father. Something banged against the counter. Millie? He stared at the spot where her shadow should have been and listened for the noise again, hearing nothing.

What's the use? he asked and took out his hearing-aids, leaving them a knife's-width away from a puddle of chicken juice on the counter. Millie would have slapped him for leaving that filth there.

Barney moved to his recliner, looked through the window at a gray sky, and thought. Hard to believe the morning was so beautiful and quiet. Stupid fish. Lost me one of those good lures. Millie would've stopped me. Should have taken notes. Should have asked more questions. Can't do for the kid if I can't do for myself. He pulled the lever and the chair's leg-rest swung up.

Without his hearing-aids, Barney did not hear the phone ring five times, stop, and then start again five minutes later. He also did not hear the clacking of Missus' shoes, or the shuffle of Nurse Wickham's sneakers, as they escorted Wit to the front-door. Millie would have said, Wit's home, when she heard him take the key from under the ceramic toad, and gone to the door to meet her son. But Barney had turned the volume off. Wit invited Missus in, but she stayed on the doorstep. She peers inside. A piles of shoes sits at the base of the stairs, discarded candy-bar wrappers sit like fallen leaves in the hallway, a faint smell of burnt, or burning, something floats

from somewhere, and decided for herself that the rumors were true—not that she had any doubt.

Wit stood in the doorway, smiling, waiting for someone to rush forward, wrap themselves around him, and tell him that Joey-Lee ain't worth nothing; that mean kids like him end up learning the hard way what love and family is about.

Kindness, that's what Missus had said. And respect.

New London

Ma clutched the rickety wooden bannister while she descended the stairs. She wore the five-inch black pumps. Sensible, she called them, compared to her other shoes, for weddings and funerals—for dancing. A new dress, with a v-shaped neckline plunging down to the middle of her boney spine, outlined her hips. In the mirror, she primped her sagging curls and frowned at her prettiness. She was tired, that's all. Working in the elementary-school asking, "Chicken patty or pizza?" and scooping burnt tater-tots onto paper-plates for chubby kids. It wears you out. I was sitting on the couch, wrapped in a blanket, watching cartoons while she drew on lipstick in the mirror. When she finished, she stood behind me, sucking her teeth, looking through watery eyes from me to the television. An unlit cigarette waiting, between her scarlet lips, to be lit.

After looking at me like I was something she needed to remember she arrived at her decision, folded the thought in half and stored it. Then she went to the kitchen.

Cabinets banged as Ma looked for something, and, when she found it, she clacked back into the living-room. She hovered next to me for a moment, unfolding her thought, and then willed herself to press her lips to my forehead. The shock was like plunging a butter knife into a toaster. My curls, which old people at the supermarket said made me “the spitting image” of my Ma, straightened. Ma’s eyes bugged, and she tensed her arms. She brought her hand to wipe her lips, but remembering her lipstick, stopped.

It wasn’t that Ma didn’t like me, although sometimes she acted like she didn’t.

“I lov—” she began to say, but snapped herself out of her dream and said:

“Make yourself dinner. Save some for Miranda. Okay?” She tossed the box of mac-and-cheese at me, rough, to correct a mistake, and then left through the front-door.

When Ma walked away her hips warned the world that she could make it fall apart. I guess that’s why men liked her so much.

I stumbled after her to the open door. She didn’t look back. The Volvo’s engine started. The streetlights flickered on. I couldn’t see into her car. She sat idling in the dark. I could have stepped onto the yard and said, “Ma, stay. I’ll paint your toes and we’ll have mac-and-cheese now. I lov—.” Red tail-lights backed out of the driveway gleaming until she turned down Niagara Street, and then she was gone.

I kept look-out from the threshold, hoping two yellowed headlights might turn into our driveway, but my stomach’s emptiness clawed at me. I left the door unlocked behind me. She had keys, sure, but maybe having to unlock the door was just enough to make her give up, to turn away on the stoop.

In the kitchen, I filled the good pot, and set it on the working stove coil. Ma had accidentally broken the others, one after another. Slamming frying-pans or melting plastic cutting-boards on them. Once setting fire to the kitchen. Ma stopped cooking after that until she bought a new fire-extinguisher. And she could only use the back right coil. It would take an hour to bring water to a boil, but it was what we had, and, like Ma said, “It’s better than no coils at all.” I left the pan on the burner and went into the living-room.

An old-timey movie, black-n-white, horns and crooning voices, had started. In these movies each actress looked the same—like Ma. Curly hair. Smoking cigarettes. Hips that make the world fall apart. In mirrors, they frown at their prettiness. In bars, they laugh as if they were born for it—laughing. Wouldn’t that be nice? I pulled the blanket around myself. If it weren’t for Miranda and I, Ma would have been like these black-and-white women; laughing with her face rested in her palm, her scarlet lips puckered; waiting for someone to carry her away. Away. The shapes of the actresses’ mouths that spoke that word were perfect and romantic and hid their crooked teeth.

. . .

Smoke was dancing out of the kitchen when I woke, and the living-room ceiling was blackened with soot. I held the blanket to my mouth, pretending for a moment that I was a fire-woman; that I could fight the fire. If there were flames, the smoke would suffocate me. The heat would sting my eyes. Those were the warning-signs. Get out. In school, I learned about escape plans, always knowing the exits. Jump from the lowest windows if you can’t take the stairs. “Call for help,” the fire-

woman with cherry red cheeks said. “Don’t fight it alone.” I didn’t have an escape plan; Ma never sat me down to say, “Go to Mrs. Webb’s if the house is burning down.”

I felt my way to the wall separating the kitchen and living-room. The wall felt like fever. I peeked around the corner. The pan had melted through the coil like a piece of cheese on a hamburger. And there were flames. They sparkled and flit in the pan, winking at me, saying, “Run, or you’ll have to fight me alone. You are no fire-woman.” The scorched stove sagged in the middle. The dials bubbled and melted, and the wall behind it was charred black. The fire-woman had been right: my eyes stung, the smoke clogged my lungs, and I didn’t have an escape plan.

I pressed the blanket hard over my mouth. I wouldn’t let the fire in, I would not let it hurt me. But the air coming through the fabric was thin, and my head felt like a balloon. “Always keep a fire-extinguisher in the kitchen,” the fire-woman had said. Where was the fire-extinguisher Ma had bought? Not in the cabinet. Not under the sink. Was it in the stove? I inched toward it, squinting, keeping the smoke out. I sucked air through the blanket, my lungs swelled and screamed. I held my breath, took the blanket from my mouth, and wrapped it around my hand. I pulled the stove open.

The fire watched me moving; watched me, with my cheeks puffed out, holding my breath to not let it in. The fire looked at me like Ma had, deciding something, and then it pounced. The blanket welcomed the fire, and a glowing blue frenzy waltzed up my arm, melting my curls. It licked my neck, my ear. I shook it off,

but it would not leave. Somewhere, someone was laughing. I screamed, “Ma! Help me!”

I let the fire in.

Smoke gouged my eyes; it set fire to my throat. I stumbled back and kicked something metal next to the refrigerator. Was it the fire-extinguisher? I grabbed blindly for it. A handle. A hose. I squeezed the handle. Nothing came out. Breathing wasn't breathing anymore. It was pulling the fire into me. “Ma!” The fire sputtered and crackled and laughed at me. I squeezed the handle. Nothing came out. Seeing wasn't seeing anymore. “Ma, where are you?” “Pull out the pin, aim, and squeeze,” the fire-woman had demonstrated. I felt for the pin, found it, and ripped it out. I pressed the handle. Foam and chemical scent filled the room. The fire closed its eyes and died. We had won.

My balloon head felt as if it were drifting close to a clothespin. I needed to be outside before I popped or floated away. I ran out the front-door and stood barefoot on the driveway, holding the fire-extinguisher, gasping open-mouthed. How was it morning already? I patted my hair. Patches had melted and fused into coarse clumps. My eyes watered and leaked without my consent. “When you get out, go to a neighbor's,” the fire-woman had said. I wouldn't. Not Mrs. Webb's, not the Benjamin's across the street where Bonnie and Chuck were standing on the sidewalk, wearing their backpacks, and had stopped talking when I'd run from the house. What?! I almost shouted at them. I needed air in my lungs and clear eyes to squint through the sunshine down the road. I needed Ma. I stood, breathing, while the wind

drew smoke from the house. There wasn't enough fresh air in this neighbor to make me feel safe again.

The school-bus drove past and stopped at the Benjamin's mailbox for Bonnie and Chuck. Lupé wheeled himself onto the lift, and it drew him up. I'd miss another day of school. Principal Slonimski would call the empty, burnt house in two hours and leave a whispery message. Ma's eyes would fill with tears and rage when she replayed it, and she'd say, "You make me look like a bad mother." I'd try to make her feel better, saying, "You're not, Ma. You're not."

Ma couldn't say, "I lov—," so I never have a chance say it back. I want to say it today, but knowing how she might complain about the money and the wall and the pan. "That was the last good coil." Ma gets so passionate about little things that she sometimes forgot the big ones, and I couldn't stand Ma being mad at me. In those black and white movies, when people argued, sometimes a character would try faking their death. Always some beautiful person with an escape plan, a destination, and a way to get there. I would have to leave, and leave like the beautiful people do.

. . .

I glanced down the street. No sign of Ma's car rolling along, so I went back to the kitchen and opened all the windows. Disappearing involved cash. Ma probably had some in her nightstand. Her room was off-limits. But that didn't stop me when she wasn't home. The curtains were drawn, the room dark. As neat as if it were slotted to be the next cover of a Macy's catalog, but even up here it smelled like smoke. Ma barricaded the nightstand against the wall. I climbed over her bed, careful

not to bump the pillows aligned like perfect teeth. Ma used the same olive-colored comforter she had, the one with the flowers, when she used to read me bedtime stories before saying, “Goodnight,” and letting me sleep in her bed; when she thought I was too little to be left alone.

In her nightstand an assortment of fives and tens, even a twenty, mixed with lotions and loose sticks of gum. Pearl earrings she never wears had sunk to the bottom. I took it all. Fifty-four dollars. Five sticks of peppermint gum. Even the pearl earrings, for myself, if I started to miss her or feel ugly or ran out of cash wherever I ended up. And then I backed away, careful to smooth out the imprints my knees made on the comforter.

I recounted the cash on the way out. Fifty-three, fifty-four. And, not looking, I bumped into her dresser. A picture fell forward with a sharp crack. I lifted it. The glass had broken in a neat ‘Y’ shape. In a rush to pick the glass from the frame, I cut my finger. One long, shallow slice like a strand of hair down my pointer, weeping onto the carpet. I put my mouth around it to stop the dripping, and it tasted how I imagined wine would: blood and fire.

I coaxed each shard from the frame, hoping Ma would never notice, and cradled them in my hand. Then I saw the photo.

Who was that man standing with Ma? And Ma was smiling her black-and-white movie-star smile, lips stretched wide, teeth like a pearl necklace. Her eyes reflected all the happiness she had stored away somewhere. What was she so happy about?

I leaned forward. The dress she wore, white, or maybe yellow, had flowers embroidered across the neckline and sank into a deep V. Her dainty butterfly tattoo flitted across her collarbone searching for pollen in her breast pocket. The freckles she'd passed down to me, to Miranda, begged to be connected between her long, sloped nose, and up to the crinkles of her round eyes, which crinkle more deeply now.

A park sprawls out behind them. Her arms wrapped around his thin waist as if she were trying to lift him. His dark hair wind-licked. Did this man's lopsided smile, and his hooked, hawkish nose, make Ma smile? He had rough hands, caked in grease—the kind a mechanic is always rubbing with white handkerchiefs turned black. Did he love her? How could he not? Look at her. Ma's curls hadn't changed, except they may have been curlier—so curly that the dark ringlets bounced in the frame. A summer day. The sun shining out between cotton clouds and slow moving air.

Photographic proof that Ma was happy, once. Whoever that man was, he was before me. Before Miranda. Before the three—now four—broken stove coils. He had made her happy.

Ma hadn't come home. But, the night before, she had kissed my forehead and spent enough time in the kitchen to make me think she would stay. I touched it where she had kissed me; her lipstick was still on my forehead, and the blood from my finger smeared the sticky paste across my freckles. She hadn't come home.

Downstairs, the front-door opened, and I remembered the glass, the money, the stove. One thud against the wall, and then another. Footsteps mounting the stairs,

slow, heavy. I left the picture, Ma, that man, and the room, closing the door, hiding the glass behind my back and the money in my pocket.

Miranda crept past me in the hallway without speaking. I wouldn't tell her about the stove or the smoke or my bloody hand. She wouldn't ask. I wouldn't tell her about the picture or ask her if it was us, Miranda and I, that had done it. Did she know? She pretended I wasn't there and went into her bedroom and closed the door. Her bedsprings wailed under her weight, and then everything was silent again as if she hadn't arrived at all. I only ever saw her in the two minutes it took her to climb the stairs to her room, or to open the refrigerator door, sigh, and leave, but that was enough to know that Miranda knew something I didn't.

I went downstairs and started away.

I ditched the glass shards in the Benjamin's garbage bin. The bleeding had stopped, but my lungs hurt, my eyes hurt, and the photograph stayed, imprinted on parts of my eyes where smoke hadn't touched. The trees and the birds and the mailboxes were all rounded edges and colored blobs. I focused on the gravel and my dirty shoes and passing cars, but I couldn't blink Ma's smile, or that man's face, away.

Ma's Volvo bumped down the street, her hand hanging out the window and a Marlboro cigarette between her painted nails. I ducked behind a tree.

The car passed. It wasn't her — just another woman who was everything Ma was, too. She was looking through her sunglasses and primping her hair in the rearview, pretending she didn't see me.

. . .

At AJ's Diner, Bernie gummed a piece of dry toast at the counter. Barb carried a coffeepot to his empty mug and said, "More, toots?" Everyone was "toots" to Barb. Bernie shouted, "Eh?" and Barb raised the coffee pot toward his face. "More coffee, you deaf son-of-a-bitch?" I walked past the old diner-styled bar with red lollipop chairs to the corner and settled into the wooden booth. Lite rock played from a radio somewhere in the kitchen.

I looked out the window. The construction crew on the other side of the road milled around one guy whose arms vibrated while he tamed a jackhammer chipping away the pavement. Another man, his arms crossed, a faded tattoo slithering down his arm, looked familiar, but I didn't know from where. He chewed something and spit over his shoulder. He wiped his arm across his hooked nose. Then he stood up straight like the guy next to him had goosed him. But he must have liked it because he was smiling. Then he waved. A woman in a loose black dress and heels, all hips, crossed the street towards him. Her curls bounced around her shoulders and erupted over her sunglasses.

She held two coffees and brown bag, stained with grease. Where did these come from? She waved it at him, smiling, and held the coffee out to him. He took it, and they laughed, just like the handsome man at the bar and the actress with her perfect cheek perched in her palm. Her curls jumped up and down while she nodded or shook her head at his questions. She was smiling like she had in the picture with that man, like she hadn't kissed my forehead, left a lipstick smudge, which I still

hadn't wiped away, and stared at me as if trying to remember my name. Sure, he had a hooked nose, but his smile wasn't handsome. He wasn't thin.

I looked away.

Barb didn't bother to take my order. She placed the plate of chocolate chip pancakes on the table and noticed me looking out the window. She saw Ma; she smelled smoke. Her nose crumpled.

"Elaine's burning the toast again. Let me get you some OJ, toots," Barb said.

I mashed the chocolate on the plate and listened to the news and lite-rock playing in Elaine's kitchen.

New express service to New London for twenty dollars...

I checked my pockets. Fifty-four bucks. It was enough to take me to somewhere, anywhere that didn't smell like burnt hair and metal; that didn't taste like wine. Without me, Miranda would meander like usual, a ghost, who did not even bother to haunt anyone. But what would Ma do? Would she fix the stove and the wall and the house we couldn't say "lov—" in?

Barb placed OJ on the table alongside an extra saucer of chocolate chips.

"You got something on your forehead, toots."

Barb handed me a napkin. Outside, Ma waved goodbye to the man, turned, and walked toward AJ's, toward me. The men were talking now, nodding at the man Ma had given the coffee and bag. They clutched their bellies laughing. Ma must have felt my eyes watching her because she turned her face toward me in the window. Her

eyes met mine. But she didn't know about the house, or the picture frame, or the money. She didn't know about how I was alone when I fought the fire.

I used the napkin to wipe my forehead—the lipstick could not stay.

Sacrosanct

During the second week of January, Joel covered himself with musty blankets and wished for someone to be as cold as him. There was only enough space in Joel's mind to worry about one element of his life that he didn't have, so he ignored his loneliness and chose to worry about the heat. Still, he searched through the piles of unopened mail and empty potato-chip bags for a bottle of something to make him care less; that the heat was out; that Wes had fled without giving any indication of returning. Joel sucked down a few mouthfuls of old whiskey from a bottle he had found under the couch. It was a start.

His search brought him to the hallway closet, where he stored things to forget about them, and Joel found an unused toilet brush, a can of shoe-polish, his high-school diploma, and the vacuum that his mother had brought as a present when she set him up in the apartment. She had been cheery when she'd told him that, after high-school graduation, he'd be living between a butcher shop that only served Spanish-

speaking customers, and a ma-n-pa shop where, for cash, you could buy quality penicillin.

Three years ago, when they painted the walls, she said that his life was becoming his own; that she was starting to feel proud of him. She did not say that their two bedroom apartment, with no yard and one bathroom, was getting a little cramped since things were getting serious with Bruce, the building contractor who talked louder than he should have, with the walls as thin as they were, about how much he disliked her son.

"This is for when the world ends," Joel said to himself. He held the shoe-polish up to the light.

The shoe-store cashier hadn't laughed when Wes made the joke. She reached her hand out, asking if Wes really wanted what he was holding. She may not have understood that there was alcohol in the polish. Maybe it just wasn't funny. Wes turned everything into a joke, and Joel settled himself into them, believing that they were meant for him. But with him gone, Joel could see that Wes spread jokes like a child throwing breadcrumbs on water for ducks. He was only ever trying to see what he could get away with.

Joel ran his thumb around the container's edge. He opened it. As tar-black as he remembered. The fumes stung his eyes, made them water. With the tip of his tongue he touched the goop. Nothing but a little tingling. Then he took a finger-full and ran it across his tongue.

. . .

You could look out of any tall, drafty window at Saint Bart's and see Josephine on her way somewhere she shouldn't be going. Arms across her chest, her habit folded and tucked away, running through the garden as if the devil himself were chasing her. She was a nun, but no one called her Sister.

Father Riley scheduled a special pre-graduation mass, one in which he gave advice about the future, about what to do and not to do; and Josephine, who could have used the advice more than anyone, seemed to disappear before they all stood and shuffled into line to receive stale bits of salvation-flavored wafer. Joel had said:

"She's really in a hurry today. Where do you think she's going?"

"I heard Malcom's dad is back from his trip to Singapore..."

The rumors, that some students had seen Josephine's shadow slipping through the door in the morning while their fathers made breakfast and whistled, were well known. Although St. Bart's had not taught him to doubt what he knew, Joel did not rely on others' sense of truth. He knew the rumors might be false, and he did not want to underestimate anyone when he, he and Wes, had a secret to protect.

"Ahem." Sister Anne cleared her throat behind them. One of her eyes lolled at them, while the other drifted up toward the ceiling, giving the impression that she could not move it from the crucified Jesus above the altar. At least one of those eyes had seen the bare ass of every almost every boy at Saint Bart's. Told them to lower their pants, just an inch, so that the sliver of exposed skin could serve as the landing-pad for her cane, which, because of her vision, would never have been able to find the

same spot twice. Corporal punishment had not been advertised with the admission packet, and as with many of the practices at St. Bart's, the parents did not complain.

Joel wondered what the parents knew about Josephine — if she was as bad, as sinful as the students made her out to be. Hardly the disciplinarian like Sister Anne, she was still a nun, Joel thought, and those vows must have meant something to her. Joel placed himself between Sister Anne and Wes.

With Sister Anne standing behind them, looking God-knows-where, he opened his mouth only once more before they left — to let Father Riley place the wafer on his tongue.

...

Joel's mother dusted the snow from her hair and placed the foil-wrapped dish on the counter. She smoothed the frown from the corners of her mouth. The grimy kitchen, the dust caked floor-boards, the pile of sweat-stenched blankets, and the garbage on every surface in her son's apartment revealed a version of herself that, whenever she confronted it, dried her mouth, made it sour. Feeling responsible for him had kept her away. She should have taught him to mop, to use bleach in the toilet, to scrub the dishes with hot water and soap.

"What's that?" He pointed at the dish. He had peeled the tin-foil from the lasagna before she replied.

"Jesus, Joel. Don't you have heat?"

"Power just came back," he said. He poked a glob of tomato sauce. His eyes, unfocused, squinted at her as if she were far away.

She drew hot water from the faucet and started cleaning the dishes.

“Get me the others,” she said.

Her hair fell before her eyes, and, hiding behind it like a curtain, she watched Joel stumble across the living-room, gathering bowls, crusted yellow and brown, and shove garbage into his sweatshirt's pouch.

The first time she had seen him drunk was after they, him and Wes, had been found out. Break-up was too strong a word for what followed; she didn't like the heaviness it lent her tongue after speaking it. But she had no other term to explain why she did not recognize her son. He usually wore crisp shirts smelling of fresh linen or citrus, but he hadn't changed out of the green flannel — the one he wore while he sobbed so hard that she had become jealous. The attention he gave his first real heartbreak, over a friend, was unexpected. It was true, she thought, we all keep secrets in chambers that should remain locked, at least until it was safe to let them out.

Guilt did not stir her from her sleep next to Bruce. He had trained her to spend no more time than was necessary thinking about Joel. But, when she packed a container with leftover lasagna or mashed potatoes, which she did twice or three times a week, Joel's voice, the way he cried, "He abandoned me," exploded in her head. She had let him wipe his eyes with her shirt, pat his head, set him on the couch, and stared out the window, watching the sunrise, wondering what that other boy had done to her son. But the affection was as useless as a bandaid applied after the wound had already decided not to heal.

She turned off the faucet and left the dishes to dry.

. . .

Sister Anne gave her lecture on Gandhi's Salt March, and Joel let her droning wash over him. He looked out the window in the classroom door. Wes stood in the hallway, his back toward Joel, head inclined toward Josephine. Her face was grave, as if she were delivering bad news, which Wes deflected with a joke and a wave of his hand. Josephine's face lightened, and she laugh so loudly that Sister Anne stopped her lecture, opened the door, and yelled from the room:

"Don't you have somewhere to be, Sister?"

Josephine stiffened. Joel suppressed a smile. He hadn't liked how close she stood to Wes or how she touched his arm after laughing at whatever he said, shaking her head like she was some silly girl who didn't know better.

"And you, Mr. Sullivan. Which class are you skipping right now?"

Wes rubbed his neck and looked into the room. He saw Joel and his eyes took on the same misty quality that they did on the rare occasion that Wes couldn't find anything to joke about. There was something there, in the black of his pupils, like an animal, pacing in a cage. It was a look that threatened; that betrayed doubt.

Later that day, when Joel met Wes at his truck after school, Wes wouldn't answer Joel's questions about what had happened in the hall. Instead, he joked about Sister Anne's eyes. Then he climbed into the truck and waved Joel inside. They drove to the silo, out past the abandoned paper-mill. A distance that, today, felt worn-out,

stretched and therefore too long to also accompany a silence that neither of them felt strong enough to disturb.

Wes parked, turned the radio down. This was how Wes told Joel that he wanted to do what they had both agreed they would never put into words. The words made it unwieldy, inescapable. Sometimes, but not often, the words made it disgusting. Once they were there, Joel had to start it; that was an unspoken rule. He had to run his hand up Wes' thigh, which would lead to pawing other places, and then their bodies would shiver as the weight of what they held back found its way out of them.

Seeing Josephine laugh with Wes in the hall, as if they had shared a secret, fueled Joel's decision to skip the thigh, the usual rules of their game. He hauled himself over Wes' seat. He was shielded, there in the truck, with Wes under him, with the air, warm and electric, from thinking too much or too hard about why they drove out past the farms and the streetlights and the houses to hide under the silo where no one would ever find them.

But the rules had been silently agreed upon for a reason and were arranged like purposeful music notes. They could not be played out of tune or out of time. Joel's excitement had sent the tempo too fast, and Wes pushed Joel's mouth from his own to say, "No, not today man."

. . .

His mother had turned on the stove and left the lasagna inside to keep warm. She and Bruce were going to see *Death of a Salesman*, and she was sorry that she

couldn't stay longer. Joel opened the oven after his sobriety began making its way back to him, but the stink of meat and wholesome cooking made him wretch. He threw himself over the toilet as the black vomit spewed from him and darkened the water a gloomy shade of gray, speckling only a small portion of the floor. Head rested on the dirty porcelain edge, he reached for the toothbrush on the edge of the sink, and the toilet seat slammed onto his face.

He let it rest on his head. His private humiliation made him wish that he had asked his mother to bring toothpaste, more food, some whiskey; that he had used that toilet-brush from the closet — at least once. His empty stomach begged to be filled with something whole and warm and, despite its emptiness, felt heavy. Of all the stupid ways to die, he thought, eating shoe-polish would top the list. He pushed himself upright and, when he let himself cry, was surprised that his tears were not black like his vomit.

When they drank, Wes handed a fake ID over the counter to purchase the alcohol. For this, too, they would drive out to the silo and practice opening beer-bottles with their molars. Wes handed a bottle to Joel, and they sipped, keeping the heat on, the doors closed. It had started there, on the broken leather-bench in Wes' truck, and both of them were surprised when alcohol did not offer a complete explanation of their excitement and lack of shame.

His phone rang from the living-room. Two people knew this number, and one of them had stepped into the cold, moments before, humming to herself while she imagined the night she would have. She had no reason to call.

Joel lifted his body, as lumpy and lopsided as a deflated ball. His heart throbbed in the back of his head.

He took the phone from the receiver, ready to recite the apology he had rehearsed.

“Hello?” he growled.

“Joel?” a woman’s voice asked.

“Yes? Hi. Who is —” he stifled a belch with his hand.

“— Jesus, Joel, it’s your mother,” she said. “Don’t forget the lasagna.”

. . .

Joel did not go into his house when Wes dropped him off in the driveway. The conversation that never happened, but needed to, was not over. It could not be over. He walked around the back of the truck and refused to move. Wes backed up until the bumper touched Joel’s leg. Joel climbed into the truck’s bed and stared through the rear window, arms crossed, watching Wes, who shook his head and rubbed his face as if he were trying to cleanse it. He had made his decision that Wes would not be allowed to joke his way out of this one; that he would apologize; that everything would continue exactly how he wanted it.

Then Wes pulled out of the driveway, Joel, immovable, in the back.

They coasted down backroads, Wes taking streets at random, circling cul-de-sacs until the house-lights turned on and shadows appeared in the doorways. Joel reclined between dead leaves and a frayed bungee-cord. Power-lines, tree branches, street-lamps, and what Joel thought was the small tunnel that connected the

Boulevard to Main Street passed between his vision and the sky. Each time the truck paused at a stoplight, he reminded himself of the delicate things her could say to Wes to stop him from panicking, but Wes never parked the truck. Instead, he glanced into the rearview mirror, maybe to check that Joel was there, maybe to see that they weren't being following. His eyes, in that tiny square mirror, were sunken, sad.

The sun had turned the sky pink around the edges when Wes killed the engine. Joel, floating on the brink of sleep, sat upright. The baseball field, the light warming the dew on the grass, the silo, rusted and dented. Joel understood. Wes stepped from the truck and came to the side of the truck. He put his foot on the tire and hoisted himself over.

Joel gave his eyes permission to look at Wes' boots, his denim jacket, faded at the elbows, at the leaves behind him that dangled from bent trees, at Wes's hands folded in his lap. His own were trembling. Embarrassment shook his spine, hinged his jaw so that it was unable to open, to speak. Wes leant forward and took Joel's hands. He kissed one palm, then the other.

"It's time to get out now," he said.

His voice was too gentle.

"It's time to get out."

. . .

Joel had nothing left. Nothing inside his stomach to purge. Nothing outside him to prevent him from cleaning the apartment, scrubbing the toilet, and disposing of the trash, except for the familiar buzz of not-quiet-drunkenness that would soon

become a headache. Luckily, it was not as bad as it could have been. He would not die, and the lack of anything holding him back made it easy to leave, to drive out to St. Bart's; to park his car in the nearly empty lot and walk up to nun's housing unit. Warm light filled the windows, and steam billowed from roof.

Wes claimed that Josephine had invited him there; that the ugliest portraits of the Virgin you'd ever seen fixed on the walls. He joked it was sacrilegious that something so perfect had been allowed to be made ugly.

Joel thought it smelled like boredom and age. The ugliness made it easier to focus on the electricity of his skin, angry prickles tearing down his arms. He had to guess which door Josephine lived behind, so he went to the door furthest down — the one no one could find by accident, the one that you were invited to or never visited because it was too far.

She opened the door and slammed it closed.

"Go away," she said through the door. She did not scream.

"I need to talk to you," he said.

His gentleness welled up from a serene sense of rage. All he was doing was asking her for something back, something that was his, something that she had taken. He had to ask her how she had known to take it in the first place. He knocked the door. Paused. Knocked again. His patience would outlast her discomfort, he was sure. A few minutes later, the chain lock slid open, and Josephine opened the door.

She wore a black t-shirt, tight-fitting jeans. The one who told Wes that what they had never put words to was ugly; that she did not feel guilty for telling the

others, Father Riley, Sister Anne, what she knew — because God had already seen them — in the truck, by the silo, in his bedroom. Seen them empty their bodies into each other, only to fill them again with something they had all called sin. It had been her own redemption — betraying the secret the two boys held.

There Had Been Others

While he walked home, pressing toilet paper to his lip, Filipe comforted himself with his own imagination; with the stories his grandfather told him of Rua dos Durados' streets that the fishmongers perfumed with ocean and fish guts; with the men who hammered marble to repair the streets that, with time and rain, smoothed over like glass. Here, his imagination conjured a reality filled with people who understood him. Here, a version of his mother, one he could confide in, did not open the windows into the night to convince herself that they had not come all this way for nothing.

Filipe turned the corner onto his street. Gone were the smells of Rua dos Durados and the sounds of men toiling under the sun. He saw his grandfather peeking at life from behind the rose-colored curtains and shivering. Fear of the tarry streets, the heat that rose off them like magic, had kept him inside every day except Sunday.

A white soccer-ball rolled across the pavement toward Filipe, and he stopped it with his foot. Justin Whittaker trotted behind it. His wide shoulders dipped as he ran, giving Filipe the impression that a lazy dog, not a boy his own age, was lumbering at him. His thighs, once as thick as oak branches, had withered with too much time indoors. Justin's father must still be afraid, angry.

“Sorry about that,” Justin said.

He wiped sweat from his forehead, picked up the ball.

If he had wanted to blame anyone, then maybe it should have been Justin. He could have blamed his smile. Hadn't he learned that it was dangerous to aim it, wide, rich-toothed at people like him?

“What happened to your lip?” he asked.

Filipe hesitated. They spoke like strangers now that Justin's father had forbidden them to see each other. The potential of moving beyond simple, dispassionate talk, made his palms ache. He wanted to hold his friend again. Holding another body, and the sense of calm that followed, had delayed his fears and his guilt; and it had mislead Filipe. His hands, smeared with snot and blood, were too dirty to hold anything.

“Nothing,” Filipe lied and then walked away.

Justin's smile dissolved as he carried the ball back to his younger brother, who he would have to threaten to ensure that he did not tell their father that they'd seen Filipe Alves walking home with a split lip.

. . .

There had been others before and after Justin Whittaker. Filipe counted three before, and one after—each one a memory burdened with the essence of whichever place they had met. When he thought of Justin, he thought of hands pressed flat on a bed of leaves or on the rock formation out past the main road. He also thought of how value, any sense of wrongness, never arrived waving a shame-black banner to make them self-conscious of their nakedness and the pleasure it brought them.

Their pushing and pulling had only ever been witnessed by the flies that darted above—and then by Mr. Whittaker. He had wondered where his son would disappear to and why he came home with dewy bliss streaking his cheeks. A girl, he had assumed, as there was no alternative, and maybe a window that his strong son had to pull himself through with a grunt. All his hopes for Justin molded like peaches after he followed his future-soccer-star son into the woods and saw him, as weak as a puppy, moaning and snuffling with pleasure, underneath Filipe Alves in a patch of sunshine.

Filipe had darted away before Mr. Whittaker could grab his throat and throw him against a tree. His feet spirited him out the woods, leaping over roots and rocks, turning around trees, and disorienting him in the swirl and panic. He stepped onto the asphalt, distracted by the imprint that his pleasure had left and the heavy darkness settling over it like smog. A truck horn blared, warning him to step back onto the sidewalk. He reclaimed control of his body and saw, past the unfamiliar street-signs, the Aberdeen's swollen berms and tiny orange flags and the golf-carts, small white specks, darting over the greens. From there, he knew the direction of home.

He tiptoed into the house through the backdoor and stole a cupful of his grandfather's ginja from the kitchen before sneaking upstairs. He closed his bedroom door, sat in the darkness, and listened for his mother's parking-break. The drum of newscasters speaking Portuguese haunted him from the room below. Justin, he thought, might be in his room now, too, staring at the ceiling while bruises darkened his neck. Justin did not need their time in the woods. For him, it was uncomplicated fun. But Filipe could not go without it, and he could not transfer the blame, for Justin's bruises, for Mr. Whittaker's rage, outside of himself. Who would punish him?

For the first time, the glimmer of joy that accompanied moments with Justin was inked out. Filipe dug his knuckles into his stomach, above his navel, where he imagined a pit growing, caving in, filling with the light from the bedroom. Outside, the parking-break. He wondered if his mother would look at him the way Mr. Whittaker had. Face contorted with hatred—a way that fathers should never have reason to look at their sons, Filipe decided.

He put the empty cup on the windowsill.

Downstairs, the loose doorknob rattled as his mother stepped inside. Plastic bags crinkled and then a heavy thud, like a dropped can of tomatoes, boomed in the kitchen. What would he do if his mother looked at him like Mr. Whittaker had? After she smoked her second cigarette and opened her first can of cola, he would brush his teeth and go downstairs to explain, before Mr. Whittaker could call her, and to ask her what they had done wrong. But then she would notice the guilt that betrayed his innocence. That guilt would devastate her.

Instead, he placed the pillow over his head and swallowed the too-sweet taste of his saliva.

. . .

He waited one day, then one week, then one month. Mr. Whittaker never called. During all that time Filipe stayed out of the kitchen, where his mother sat in the yellow evening light, for he was certain she'd smell the perfume of his fear through the cloud of her cigarette smoke. At night, when his house was loud with the shrill chirp of crickets and the muffled noises from his grandfather's television, he tried to bar Justin from his imagination. If the memory of his friend's skin were to raise the hair on his arms, then he would be doomed to feel something that, he thought, was wrong. He cast his thoughts out of his mind like a bottle into a river, but even if the current took it downstream, it would always pop up as vital and as urgent as before.

To distract himself, he asked for more hours at the country club, and left his house early to walk there. Every stranger he passed on the sidewalk had the potential to pull him from his mind, he thought, if only they gave him a nod of recognition.

Filipe met a number of strangers every day at the Aberdeen. The men were often closing the bathroom door before they realized Filipe had searched their faces, desperate for eye contact. They never could have known he remembered all their curves and adornments, their crooked noses; that, when he saw them again, he held their present form, their slouched shoulders and baggy pants, up to his memories of them to see if and how they compared.

Filipe offered the men soap and hand-towels, breath-mints or sips of bourbon, and they tipped him like they did other bathroom attendants—as distantly and quietly as possible. Filipe took their money from the counter, which he then sprayed with disinfectant because his boss liked to see it shine.

Late one afternoon, he overheard two men, who were washing their hands at the sink, and one of the men, whose skull was so bald that it reflected the fluorescent lights, said:

“For all the money he has, you’d think he’d hire someone to teach him how to golf.”

“He probably needs it to replace the golf clubs he bends,” the other man said. His meatiness was accentuated by his shortness, which required him to lean on the counter to reach the faucet, staining his khaki pants with water.

They laughed together. The bald man left, but the shorter man stayed, drying the spots with the towel Filipe offered him. As he rubbed them, his face reddened and a large vein protruded on the center of his forehead. Then:

“Did I get it all?”

He gestured to the zipper of his pants, then pulled the fabric flat so that Filipe could get a better look at the dark, wet splotches. Pulling the fabric as tight as he did revealed more than the man realized. Filipe choked, and then sputtered:

“Y-yes, sir.”

He did not realize that his face had gone scarlet, despite its heat, until he turned toward the mirror.

The man looked at Filipe through the reflection, considered him like a bear searching a river for salmon, and then placed his hand on Filipe's shoulder.

“Are you okay, son?”

He lowered his voice to an artificial depth. Filipe recognized the stern masculinity as a barrier; that it should not be misconstrued for caring.

Filipe forced himself to look up. His eye-contact signaled a greeting in a familiar language. The man smirked. He stepped back, and Filipe hoped that he was storing the image of his figure, the density of his hair, the stretch of his white shirt across his young, narrow shoulders, along with the honeyed scent of bourbon and urinal cakes, for later. Then the man, picking up the thread of his previous thought, left so as not to be late for his dinner.

That night, the starchy scent of mashed potatoes weighted the house with hunger. Filipe's mother hummed as she stirred butter and garlic on the stove, steam fogging her glasses.

Careful to remain silent, he climbed the stairs and shut the door. The aura that conjured the man in smooth edges, cleared wrinkles near his eyes, and dyed the stains on his teeth white would dissolve if he had to share his day, even through the lies he would tell, with his mother. Filipe clenched his hands and pressed his elbows to his side. Making his movements as small as possible was essential. If he moved too suddenly, then the excitement that had alighted on his shoulder might drop dead of guilt.

The sun had not yet made his room dark. He laid on his bed and unbuttoned his pants.

That first Saturday, when he and Justin had slipped into the forest, Filipe felt like he was floating in a grotto. Sounds ricocheted so loudly off the trees that he was afraid his own breathing would turn him deaf.

He placed his hand under his shirt and felt his own chest. His heart responded to his fingers as if it had arms of its own and was reaching up, out, trying to be held.

His breath quickened, but his other hand stopped its contained searching. Filipe sat upright, feeling his chest with both hands.

He assumed that the quality of Justin Whittaker's pleasure was like placing a hand on a warm blanket, comforting and temporary, but Justin did not know that Filipe's swollen, beating heart had reached out and asked for something permanent. Filipe himself had not known, either. He had thought he was too young to understand why his mother sometimes cried at night; that loneliness was a patch of sunshine in an empty forest. Touching his chest now, imagining that a black node somewhere deep inside there, he wondered if he needed someone else, someone older, to show him how to stunt its growth.

After four days of biting his lips and wiping the marble counters with disinfectant, Filipe thought the short man would never come back into the bathroom. All the lines that he'd ripped from television shows, "Come here often?" and "What brings you here?" would not have a chance to be used. And, as the days passed, the

guilt and excitement that had appeared like water stains on khaki pants dried and faded until they eventually disappeared.

Two weeks had been all Filipe needed to completely forget the lines he learned and the shape of the man's face, which was something he usually made a point of remembering. And, the next morning, when the short man did walk into the bathroom, his dark, loose fitting jeans and a white polo with coffee stains speckling the collar, Filipe almost did not recognize him. But he did. And all the disinterestedness he had tended evaporated as the man walked past Filipe to the urinal with the trace of a smile lifting the corners of his mouth. He aimed his strong stream, as if it were a game, at the pink urinal cake in the bottom of the porcelain. While the man's back was turned, Filipe took the opportunity to appreciate the folds in his neck that looked deep enough to hold a quarter when the man tilted his head back and sighed.

Filipe walked up to the urinal next to the man, stood a little too far away from it, and took himself out. He thought this would have been enough to grab the man's attention, but the man kept his eyes forward in the way men do at urinals, excavating the details of the grout, or reading the *Jonah sucks big dick* graffiti penned onto the tile and wondering who wrote it—if it was true. Discouraged, Filipe sighed loudly, and the man stiffened, drawing his shoulders up to his ears, but then relaxed as his stream weakened to a trickle and stopped.

From the corner of his eye, Filipe could make out the shape of the man's penis and the fingers that held back its foreskin as he flicked the piss from its tip. The man

zipped himself up. He was going to leave. Two weeks he'd waited for this, and now he was just going to leave. Filipe's body began to turn, but he had not finished peeing. The pale stream sailed out of the urinal, splashed against the tile, and collected in a pool on the floor.

"Are you alright, son?" the man said.

Filipe could not stem his stream of piss, and the yellow pool was growing, covering six tiles now, racing through the grout to where the man stood. But before it touched the soles of his white shoes, he back stepped back and left the bathroom without washing his hands.

Empty-bladdered, Filipe walked, his shoes squeaking, to the sink and grabbed several towels. He returned to the urinal and bent over to clean his mess. But the floor was slick, and Filipe slipped. He fell forward and met the crusted, yellow edge of the urinal with his mouth. He spit onto the floor, trying to get rid of the nastiness of that porcelain edge, and saw his own blood and saliva mix with his urine into the color of a sunset. When wiped his mouth, he felt the tender shame of his split lip dripping blood onto the spot where the man had stood.

. . .

Any lie Filipe would have told his mother, who sat him on the couch with ice wrapped in towels, was better than the truth. That is why he lied to her. That is why he lied to his grandfather, too, who now sat in his chair, his chin held high as if this proved his fears right, and breathed heavily.

"What happened to your lip?"

His eyes, guilt laden, stared into the carpet's fibers.

His mother had spent her life protecting him, from strangers, from family, from politics, without knowing that what he needed to be guarded from was the pressure that boiled his insides like potatoes. He wondered if that man had known some secret that Filipe was too immature to understand; that maybe, he had been just like Filipe and gone into the woods, only to realize that secrets couldn't be kept there; that the secrets he would have liked to have kept there made him heavy and sick with guilt; that he had also been determined, when he was Filipe's age, after he knew that the only way to never, ever, feel that guilt again was to take what he desired and to light it on fire with all the other toys from an age in his life that he would call "a phase." Did he ever want those toys back? The smoke had not yet cleared, and Filipe missed his memories of Justin.

"Oh, honey," she said. "You can tell me."

She poured him a glass of ginja and made him comfortable. He sat on the couch and listened to the sounds of his grandfather breathing as he pulled back the curtain and watched cars pass on the street.

"Nothing," Filipe lied.

He suspended the secret between himself and the man it involved, until it would grow too large for its hiding place and step outside of him. Until then, guilt hovered on his mind's horizon, a distant cloud, unremarkable and inconsequential.

Girls Like Her

Fern had torn all the posters from the wall above Laure's bed before the taillights of her daughter's car disappeared around the barn. The glossy slabs of glamorous women with bright red lips, limbs arranged like a wilted flower stems, should have given her away. Clearly, she did not know her own daughter's mind, which was, Fern thought, truly a testament to her own faith. She was good precisely because that kind of life, the sick one her daughter had chosen, was far away—a tornado tearing shutters from homes in big cities and towns that had lost the way.

She hummed as she shoved the basketball trophies, the CDs, and the sketchbooks into a black garbage bag, which, thankfully hid the contents inside it. Not even the garbage man could know that she had told Laure to go, to get out. Think of who he'd tell—all the other people in town, that's who. And Fern had planned to offer the tidy excuse of college for Laure's absence, which she would do in September at any rate. She needed extra help to get ready, Fern would say, so she left

early. But Laure had been exceptionally bright, and Fern had been so proud of her daughter. Fern would think of something soon—something perfect. Until then, half the truth would serve them all well enough.

Laure's room felt empty, it felt clean. Cleansing it made her tired, but it was good work. Fern surprised herself by lifting the bag, which was so full that it bulged in all directions. Either her anger had strengthened her soft arms, or this kind of work, this purification, lent her God's strength. In the hallway, she removed the framed photograph of herself and her husband, Carl, standing next to Laure. Her daughter wore a white cap and gown. She hesitated. They all smiled. It was unlike Fern to question the happiness of her memories. Company would wonder if Laure disappeared completely. She placed the photo back on the nail, but flipped it so that the image faced the wall. She did not bother to straighten it. There were some changes that could not yet be made.

The house still smelled of burnt olive oil. That, well, it was an accident.

Fern sat in her chair next to the window and looked at the dusking sky. Tomorrow, she decided, she would bring the bag to the dump. It was better not to take chances. If someone saw it—well, she thought, *that* just won't do. She drew a cigarette from the pack she left in the fruit-bowl, but she could not find her lighter. The stove coil was still on, and the olive oil that spilled during their struggle had been burning so long that it stopped smoking. Fern pressed her cigarette onto the bright orange metal and then blew out the fire that exploded at its tip. She took the pleasure of a long drag.

Wherever Laure went after that fight, Fern hoped she was safe. She couldn't shake that feeling—of being a mother that had, somehow, failed. But, if Fern had accomplished anything, then it was teaching her daughter what was achievable for girls like her. All of the thinking was far too intense and too much for her to understand. Faith supplied only some answers here, and all the outcomes would be nasty for her daughter. There was some joy in this—knowing that retribution was real—but mostly, she was not sure that her sweet girl deserved all that brimstone and fire. Fern found her bottle of sherry and poured the first glass of the night.

. . .

In the park, Laure laid on the edge of the fountain and watched a hunter's bow shoot a forked stream of water into the green copper basin. The moon above, a sliver tonight, rose behind the ivied gutters of the library. She was wrong: her eyes did not see its white edges more sharply than if she were sitting on her bed. Everything outside of the house gave her the illusion of seeing more clearly, as if her eyes were whetstone and sharpened every edge they passed over. And the distance between here and that house had dulled the electricity of the fight with her mother, but the shiny, scarlet skin of her palm still throbbed.

She submerged her hand in the fountain and hoped the water was clean. Infection would cost more to treat than she was worth to her mother now.

If she had only been attentive to the Buick's tires on gravel and her mother's footsteps, coming nearer, unaccompanied by the rustle of grocery bags, then this all could have been avoided. Laure had already learned how to soften the way she

walked; she lengthened her syllables into long, flowing, girly sentences. Her mother would not have suspected anything. Laure should have waited, should have been more careful. Instead, she had trusted her hope, and it led her, and Florence, to the empty horse-stall that blocked out too much noise. Being seen with Florence was the only part of it all for which she did not suffer guilt.

Laure reassembled the image of her mother's face, the narrow slits of her eyes, the bright red lipstick, how she loomed at the stall's entrance, but said nothing. It was a hard face, beautiful in its severity. People told her, always when they were standing together, that she looked like her mother. In the barn, Fern turned her back to Laure and walked in the direction of her car, and then past it, as if it weren't there, as if the milk and sliced ham were not spoiling in the sun.

Florence hurried out of the barn and had her keys in the ignition. There was a tornado touching down, and she needed to make a break for it. Fern called, "Laure, come inside, please." Laure went inside.

Fern's rage took the same tone it had when her father, during dinner, turned on the radio. Laure watched her mother nod approvingly at all the wrong things: new laws that limited peoples' rights or reminded Laure that safety was rare and expensive for people like her. Her mother pushed the fried chicken, the potatoes, the string beans to the center of the table when she heard undesirable news and said, "Carl, I've lost my appetite."

Her father, who always took Fern's side, pushed his plate to the center of the table and said, "If you won't eat, darling, neither will I."

How had that woman, with all her quiet opinions and fears, gone into the kitchen and turned on the stovetop with no intention of cooking?

Underwater, Laure's skin forgot the sensations of touch—the memories that crawled with either pain or pleasure underneath the whorls of her fingertips. Our skin remembers so much, she thought. She withdrew her hand, but the cool wind struck it, making it scream, begging to forget what it had learned that day about wanting.

. . . .

Fern licked her lips. The bottle of sherry contained sweet vapors and one drop, which she drank greedily. She chipped her tooth with the bottle and sent her tongue hunting like a clumsy beagle between her cheeks and gums for it. She took the sliver from her tongue, inspected it, and flicked it to the floor where it landed near the trash bag filled with Laure's belongings.

She couldn't help being glad, so glad for black trash bags—grateful.

Fern looked at the clock. 11:00pm was too early to worry about her, and she needed more time to let the events of the day, the weight of her newly childless life, solidify before her.

"Carl! I need more sherry," said called into house.

"Carl!" she screamed when he had not replied.

She pushed herself up from the table and stumbled into the living room. Carl snored, open-mouthed, on the leather reclining chair.

"God dammit, Carl."

Her hand flew to her mouth as if it were trying to stuff the words back behind her lips, but she knew that they had already been heard.

She heaved a sigh, and then: "I guess I'll get it myself."

Fern took her keys, and, before she went out in her slippers, she grabbed the trash bag from the kitchen. Outside, she opened the Buick's trunk and placed the bag inside. Then she lowered herself into the car, fumbled with the ignition, and clutched the wheel. The dump first, then the package store for sherry.

She drove without letting the orange needle pass 25 miles-per-hour. As a test, she shut her eyes tight, then she reopened them to find that her car had been kept between the white lines. Or were they yellow? She would take it slow, take it easy. She had done right. He was still on her side.

...

She withdrew her hand from the fountain. The burn still throbbed, but sleep distracted her from the pain. She cradled her palm as if it were a flightless bird and walked back to her car. In a few hours, the night cold would be unbearable, maybe even dangerous. Her mother, she knew, would not make phone-calls—not for something that might betray her to the neighborhood. No one was looking for her. No one knew. And Florence would not welcome her. Shame erected itself as a towering wall between them when Florence scrambled out of the barn, hoping, no doubt, that Fern did not recognize her. The running away was proof they had done something wrong. Whatever they had was fragile anyway.

She started the car and drove in the direction of home. If nothing else, she knew it would be warm.

Fine mist settled on the road, and Laure's unburnt hand managed the wheel on its own.

She also drove past the package store, which even at 11:00, had its neon signs shining and a few trucks lined up outside—a crowd her mother would have called undesirable.

Laure turned right and took the long way, out past Nguyen's Farm and the playground made of wood and old tires. Before she turned onto her street, headlights came toward her, but the angle of them seemed odd, as if a car were moving far from one side of the road to the other. The mist had fogged her windshield, so Laure slowed and used her knee to guide the steering-wheel while she fiddled with the defroster.

When Laure looked up, the other car's headlights blinded her, and were coming straight at her. Her burnt hand slammed the horn. The other car jerked away, careened to the far side of the road, and straightened out as it continued, its red taillights disappearing around the curve. The car, wide as a boat and low to the ground, looked like her mother's. It was not impossible for it to have been Fern, searching her out like a heat-seeking missile only to explode on contact. But the clock read 11:24, and Laure couldn't think of a place she would go so late.

She parked a few houses down, behind the road's curve, where her headlights could not be seen from her mother's window.

She did not consider using the front door. Her father would be asleep in the recliner, the television muted, and her mother might be up drinking and smoking in the kitchen chair. Instead, Laure walked to her bedroom window on the side of the house and looked inside. The hallway light was on, but her bedroom dark. She pushed the window up and hoisted herself through.

The possibility that she had entered the wrong house made her head spin, and when it settled again onto her shoulders, she saw the pink stain on the green carpet, from when she learned that bleach would take care of any stain, and knew it was her room. But where had the posters and the photos and the books gone? How had her closet been reduced to series of skeletal wire hangers and old shoes that she never remembered wearing? Her bed, the mahogany headboard, its scratches and notches from where she tested the sharpness of her fingernails, was two feet from where it had always been—the carpet's deep dents visible.

Laure had never been there. That was the only explanation. That first time she had kissed that stupid Florence was not real. It hadn't led to anything else. Her mouth had not tasted like popcorn. And Laure's own body had not convulsed with pleasure and fear, sending her scurrying to hide in the hay-loft to sort out which feeling would last longer. The barn might not even have been real. But if it she had not kissed Florence, then why had her room been scoured, sterilized?

She rushed to the window, and saw that, though it was a faded and chipped brown, the barn still leaned to the left; that the door was wide open and her father still kept the tractor that he had taught her to drive inside.

Laure climbed back out of the house and made her way across the yard to the barn. She did not notice that the Buick was not parked in its usual spot. If she had looked back to see whether or not her mother peered out the window, then she would have seen the cold blue light from the television and a very empty chair where her mother would have sat.

. . .

Fern arrived at the dump to find the gate locked. She sat in her car, watching the windows fog, while she thought of how to get inside. That bag could not be left outside for just anyone to go through. Privacy was the most, *the most*, important thing right now. And little raccoons could split it open with those tiny paws and, the next thing you know, everyone in the neighborhood would have shredded pictures of Laure and Carl smiling with fishing poles and sunfish at Sawmill Pond.

She steadied herself on the door as she climbed out of the car.

She tottered up to the gate and examined the lock.

“Open sesame,” she said. Then she banged the gate with her hand when it did not open. She laughed at herself for thinking that would work.

“God dammit!” she hiccuped, and then looked over her shoulder to see if the trees had heard her. Satisfied that no one was near, she said it again, “God dammit! God dammit! God fucking dammit!”

She banged the gate again and again until her hand numbed from pain. Then she had a divine idea.

Fern walked back to her car and, after lowering herself into it, inched forward until the metal of the bumper clanged against the gate. Then she floored it. The car shot forward and the tires squealed. There was a deafening crack and the gate flung open, slamming against the fence. The noise was so loud that Fern was sure sleeping birds had fallen from the trees. As noisy as it was, she had done it. She was in.

She once again left her car and stepped around back to retrieve the bag from her trunk, which felt much heavier now that the sherry had flattened her rage into a sleepy calm. It was almost too heavy. She dragged it across the concrete to the pit where all the other neighbor's eggshells and tissues and broken picture frames had been flung. Fern stood at the edge of the pit, thinking, trying to ignore the very unpleasant smell of eggs and rotten meat. It may have been a bad idea to fill the bag as much as she had because she could not lift it now. She was no longer sure that she wanted to. It had been so easy before, she thought. And, she had come this far. But she had not really thought about what she'd be throwing away, or about what could be salvaged.

Her body, which had been looking forward to this release, acted without her. It pulled with all its force and managed to swing the bag off the ground like an olympian performing a hammer-throw. Fern felt the plastic stretch in her hands, but the spinning disoriented her and she was afraid to send the bag flying back at the Buick. Her will to throw this bag into the pit diminished, but she could not stop spinning. The bag's weight pulled her into the pit.

During the fall, a basketball trophy had pierced through the plastic and the little golden figure came dangerously close to punching the remainder of the chipped tooth out of Fern's mouth. She felt her chest and made sure all her limbs were in place. She moved her hands, which had felt something cold and mushy. They made contact with a photo of Laure as a sweet girl, sitting between Carl's legs, driving the tractor over a sad looking and very squashed pumpkin. She placed the photo onto her chest and imagined her heart speaking to it, lying to that little girl, telling her that there were limits—even to God's forgiveness. She pulled the frame away so that her heart could tell it no more lies, and then she stood with all the power and grace that she could muster, which was not much. She surveyed the wreckage of her daughter's room strewn among trash. Trash! She said, "This will not do. No, it will not."

Hair

James asked me to shave his back. He stood in the doorway, leaning against one arm, the white towel wrapped around his waist threatening to fall to the carpet.

"I can't reach," he said.

I placed my notebook on his bed. I paused. I looked at him. If we hadn't been friends before our bodies sprouted tufts of coarse, brown hair, which we would compare in his mother's full-length mirror after she put on her purple dress and left for a date, then I might have noticed his gradual ascent into the heavy-set, thick jawed man that held hair-clippers out to me. But time and the warm blanket of our masculinity immunized me against attraction to him, when maybe it would have been permissible. He was not my brother, but I thought he was positioned firmly in a forbidden space that I had resigned myself to acknowledging as "off-limits."

I took the clippers and followed him into the bathroom. He dropped his towel.

Keeping him squarely in that space was difficult.

"You're lucky," Kylo said. He stirred the umbrella on the rim of his sangria, then: "James is not like most breeders."

Kylo was another bitter small-town escapee. Somehow, he had ended up in Greendale, a town about the same size as the one he snuck away from during a snowstorm. A short stay selling purses in New York City (you can say New York, he'd always say) convinced him that he knew better.

"Seriously. You don't know what its like."

Kylo could not believe that James was unafraid to walk naked from our kitchen to his bedroom.

"They're afraid of us. Ugly or not, they all think we want to sink our teeth into them."

He peeled the skin of the orange garnish with his long nails and ate the meat.

After I told him, I screwed my eyes up tight and braced my cheeks for his fist. We were seventeen and beer-breathed. Music and laughter shook from the party downstairs. I could not stand from his bed. I could not open my eyes.

I imagined us standing in the full-length mirror. His mother's drapes were on fire. He came for my throat with scissors. I screamed silence and the house smelled of singed hair.

A warm arm wrapped tight around me.

He kissed my goddamn forehead.

"I love you, buddy," he said.

One hand was on my shoulder.

No, he was not my brother.

Katherine slammed the door on her way out. She was, I think, trying to break it as a parting gift. Something James could remember her by, because she was, as she said, "done being a mother. She wanted a boyfriend, not a baby." Katherine was not articulate. She was not bright.

I threw the bottle-caps into our collection and brought the bottle to James. He watched it as if he were waiting for it to move or burst into flames, sparks, fireworks. Finally, he put it to his lips and drank.

I could not help but feel responsible. Cleaning, cooking, ironing the collars of his shirts. I did that for him because of that gratefulness—the feeling that made staying possible, comfortable. His stale scent and the sound of his footsteps made me safe, but also indebted me.

James drank until he fell asleep on the couch in his boxers, clutching a pillow to his chest. I took his favorite blanket and covered him, before turning off the light, so that he would not be cold.

Kylo couldn't help himself. He called all of James' girlfriends by the wrong name.

At our Halloween party, he said, “Hello Corinne,” to red-haired Caitlyn, whose frown made her Pippi Longstockings costume look sad, deflated. Once I had finished laughing, I took him under the dangling bat lights and told him he shouldn’t do that. James wouldn’t like it.

“Why do you care?” he said. He gestured toward James who had dressed in his regular flannel and jeans and proclaimed himself a lumberjack. Then: “I’m on your side.”

Kylo walked through the kitchen to have a smoke with a man in a biker’s outfit who had caught his eye.

James laughed at a woman in a librarian costume. She carried a dictionary with her all night.

I fixed myself a strong gin and tonic, then with one more glance toward James, I went to have a cigarette on the porch.

I cleaned up the small of James’ back and placed the clippers on the counter. He twisted over his shoulder to check in the mirror. His penis dangled like a cold hotdog from the pubic hair he has previously asked me how to manicure.

The moment took a long time to pass, and I stood behind him, taking in the sight of the places where age had begun to round him out and weigh him down. I was waiting for something to stir inside me, and when nothing did, when he was satisfied with the smoothness of his back, he wrapped me, pinning my arms to my side, in a

hug. His penis found its way into my hand, which I had moved up to pat his shoulder, to let him know that I was happy to help.

We ignored it.

Kylo would have shaken his head and told me that I would fall for him; that he used me to stroke his own ego. Standing there, him naked, seeing myself over his hairless shoulder in the mirror, I was sure of nothing except that, in two weeks, he would ask me to shave it again when the stubble began to itch.

When it Rains in South Carolina

Hurricane S— is tearing roofs off trailer-park homes in Murrells Inlet, and retention ponds are overflowing. Instead of taking the path that slopes up behind Carpenter’s Funeral Home, we avoid the mourners gathering in the parking-lot and follow a longer path to the train-tracks through a new development. Built before I left for New York, I do not know the curves of the neighborhood’s streets. The rooftops, all slanting at the same angle, give no clue to where we are. It is unlike other neighborhoods. Here everything is paired off: two Palmettos fan their leaves ten feet from the soil in each yard. Two adirondack chairs sit beneath a motionless fan on front porches. Even the driveways accommodate two trucks each, frog guts jellied in the tread.

Mud squishes under my boots, and I slop after Charlie through someone’s backyard. We fight our way past knee-high reeds and onto a flooded path. I turn the heavy iron stake over in my hands, and I am panting from keeping up with him. I am

wondering why we have not spoken. Two years may not be long, but it is long enough for apologies to be demanded, and for them to be given. I want to say, See, Charlie? I remember the tracks, how to get here, which would be true if the development had not been built. But that was the place that changed, not me.

We are deep into the woods, and the sound of cars crashing through puddles does not reach here. Raindrops collide with leaves and jessamine. It thunders, the rain. Thunders louder than a jack-hammer *ding, dinging* on New York City metal and pavement and pipes. Louder than the blaring car horns and the garbage trucks' whirling, which wakes me before the streetlights turn off. Here, it is the silence that wakes me. After five years of constant noise, my brain decodes silence as something fearsome and heavy; it fills the quiet with imagined sounds, draining, like a faucet into an already full tub, as endlessly as the sky into the South Carolina ground. You can get used to anything and not even know you've done so.

After I finished classes at NYU, I paid for a cruddy apartment in Harlem with a sliver of a paycheck. I was a graphic designer. My job, meetings and appointments and deadlines, served as excuses for refusing plane and train tickets with *South Carolina* destinations; excuses as to why my messages to him became fewer and fewer until they stopped. I am so busy, I said, Busy, but happy. I have important meetings. I will call you soon.

Once, Charlie asked, Why have you been gone for so long? He could tell that I was running, but he did not know from what. It would be ridiculous to tell him that I ran from the heat and the gun-toters and the bible-thumpers yelling about the assured

damnation of my soul. All of it, even the teeth, had brown, beer-stained teeth. All of it bit.

But I am here, and that is what matters. I came back for the sweet smell of morning humidity and for tea (only northerners call it “sweet”) and for loud crickets and for gators threatening to jump at slow-moving cars from roadside retention ponds. I came back for the train-tracks.

Charlie climbs over a fallen log, and the back of his shirt lifts, revealing his back’s dimples. My feet slip on the log, and I drop the stake into a pile of mushy underbrush. When I take it from the muck I look up to the sky. The sun makes no effort to appear. It is in hiding. Incognito. It is somewhere else, using black clouds to filter a strange bright light.

He turns back and, seeing I’m far behind, stops. His brown hair drips rainwater down the slope of his forehead to the tip of his long nose. No smile. Strange, unrecognizable blank-faced seriousness. He is impatient that I have trailed behind. It is the first time I have taken a good look at him since I picked him up on his driveway. He jumped into the car and said, Work at five, so we gotta make it quick. Then he stared out of the window through rivulets of water, rubbed he hands like they were already sore and covered in flour from a long day of work. He chewed his lips while I drove to keep from talking.

When I catch up, he turns and trudges onward.

You got the stake? he asks from over his shoulder.

‘Course, Charlie, I say.

I shove it through my belt loop and check for it each time we vault another log or slide down a hill. Ten minutes more and red lights float between tree trunks.

There it is, I say.

We stand on clearing’s edge. He evaluates the rail running like an infinite string of licorice that disappears into a lazy curve. On warmer days, we would stare at the narrowing irons and strings of red orbs. I reach for his hand, but he jumps like my touch is foreign, like he’s forgotten it. Maybe it is the wet between my fingers. Or maybe it is him. Being Southern has crept so deep between his heart and his brain that he believes we really are bad people. Beliefs can spread faster than weeds. Once, he said you that could not take the South out of a southern boy. I have worried about that.

A puffy white line, thin like a toothpick, hangs under his left eye. A new scar. I don’t ask, cannot ask, How did you get that? He shifts his eyes away, to the stake in my belt loop and asks, Are you ready?

I pass it over. He carries it to the tracks like an offering, fragile as a robin’s egg, and places it horizontally on the rail. He imbues the moments that are important him with magic that I cannot comprehend or see; it is magic that I can feel, even when I’ve left him. Then he steps back to judge its placement. After a while, he walks to me where I wait under the outstretched arches of tree branches growing together like a trellis, wild, unafraid of passing trains.

. . .

The night before I left, we snuck into the woods where, for the first time, we found the tracks. That night the slow-moving train scanned its headlight, like an eye. One by one, it peered through trees. And the ground rumbled so hard and fast our bones shook. We froze, worried that the light would find us, that the conductor would see our nighttime figures, intertwined and amorphous, and stop the train so passengers could laugh or shoot at us—a tangle of limbs and clothes. We were lucky that the only watchful eyes belonged to a little girl who, perhaps, after having started from a nightmare, tugged at her father's sleeve and tapped her finger against the glass at what she was sure to be a monster lurking in the blackness. I saw her, and I have not stopped thinking about what she thought she saw. After the train passed, leaving us behind to watch its red lights disappear around the bend, we gathered our clothes like blankets and fled deeper into the woods.

Our early adventures were not marked with quietness and the fear of touch. They were adventures. We jumped, ran, and embraced under the refuge of trees. We pretended we were not here. And, although my leaving loomed over us taller than any live-oak, we thought about it only when we crossed the chainlink fence and snuck towards the streetlights that would guide us home.

Back on the other side of the forest, Charlie no longer kissed me. He walked me to the white fence and palm trees where Prince Creek joined Route 707. A red stoplight blinked, blinked, blinked above the road. That is where we said goodnight.

The next morning Charlie parked his Honda Civic next to our mailbox and slammed the car-door shut. My mother grabbed her frightened heart as if it would leap from her chest. She did not enjoy the thrill of unexpected noise. My father peered out from our black Silverado and scowled. Ma, at least, said, Hello, Charlie. How are you? Pa just chewed his tobacco, arranged my bedding and suitcases in the truck, and left rusty spit puddles on pavement as he went.

Ma chirped, How *are* your parents? I haven't seen them at church... not that I've been going myself! She laughed shrilly then crossed and uncrossed her arms once, twice, three times before flying to the kitchen where she had been packing nuts and carrots for the trip.

I went through my toiletry bag. Toothpaste and brushes and combs. Charlie inched closer to me, and whispered: How long is the drive to New York?

About twelve hours.

He looked up. Pa was eyeing us from the other side of the truck. Charlie pulled a map from the door and opened it. We pretended to find the Carolina roads beautiful. Will you call when you get there?, he asked.

Pa heard this. He sighed and slammed the driver's-side door. He walked around the back of the truck, where the sound of his rummaging through a steel toolbox blocked out anything Charlie or I could say to each other. Pa had never given us privacy before. In his mind, he did not have to admit something that I never confirmed. He could roll his eyes and shake his head when his friends asked him about me. To his dismay, I loved my father more for what he did that day.

The top of the map folded in half. Charlie watched me with sad eyes.

Charlie, I said, There's one heavy box left in my room. Can you help me carry it down?

He nodded and folded the map then placed it at an odd angle in the door. We made for the garage, striding past Pa, who had taken a seat on the stone bench in the garden and was staring through his sunglasses at Tim Stanley's new boat.

Inside, Ma's metal knife whacked against the wooden cutting board. She listened to gospel radio. Every other word from speakers was *Amen* or *Hallelujah*. She hummed along with a sultry sounding pastor and a chorus that clapped their hands, loud at first. All of that faded as we climbed the stairs, and then disappeared as I pulled my bedroom door shut behind us.

Charlie surveyed empty spots where he knew pictures of us, framed and placed on my desk, had once sat. Unimportant books were left behind in bookshelves; Michael Jackson and David Bowie CDs abandoned, lined up in neat rows. I tested the lock before grabbing his hand, pressing it to my cheek, kissing it, and leading him to the bed. He kissed my head and his lips lingered there. Downstairs, Ma's humming evolved into singing. *Swing low, sweet chariot. Coming' for to carry me home...* And, from the window, I saw Tim Stanley's truck roll into his driveway, saw Pa walking over, his shoulders hunched to his ears, his hands tucked into his pockets.

New York City, huh, Charlie said.

Yeah, I said.

Are you nervous?

I pulled him tighter to me.

. . .

There's no telling when the next train will come around the bend, shining its light, threatening to reduce us to dust with its rumbling. Charlie lets me pull his arm around my shoulder and thread my cold fingers between his. He fidgets like a dog being held in place until, after a sigh, he surrenders. The rain was letting up, the birds still chirping.

How is the bakery? I ask.

He stares down the rails and says: Okay.

And everything else, Charlie?

He pulls my forehead to his lips. The kiss is quick, the kind one gives their mother before saying goodnight. Then his mouth resets into a frown. I am an obligation between his limp arms.

What's wrong, Charlie? I ask. It comes out high-pitched, a child's voice. Already, my tone apologizes for me.

He says: I met Jessie a month ago. Made her brother a birthday cake...

He sees confusion written on my face. It's not what you think, He says.

I stare at him, waiting.

Jessie, he says, is my girlfriend now.

Before I ask if she knows about me, about him, about us, a faraway whistle screams. Wind picks up and bends trees like plastic straws towards the ground.

Charlie's arm burns around my neck. I move so that it falls and drops into mud. He wraps it around me again. Sit with me, he says. He nods toward the tracks.

The ground shakes. Charlie sighs. The whistle blows again. Charlie says:

—Alex Sikorsky got the shit kicked out of him last week. He was walking down the Garden City pier. You know, past all those fishermen who hang out drinking beer. Sometimes they piss into the ocean when they're hammered.

I nodded.

He wasn't even like us, Charlie says, They just didn't like the way he *seemed* like he was. They started pushing him around, and one guy pushed too hard. Alex tripped and fell off the pier. Smacked his head on the supports while he fell.

Drowned.

The train-whistle cuts off Charlie. We are quiet, the earth trembling beneath us, rain dripping on our backs. The stake bangs out a tinny song on the rail, and Charlie's fingers are wrapped in mine. The ground quakes and threatens to split, and the trembling, the danger, reminds me of South Carolina. Of Confederate flags and guns and rocking chairs on porches. Of trucks decorated with swinging metallic testicles and curvy silhouetted bumper-sticker women lounging on Clemson football logos. Of the people in those trucks who spit out their windows and push their camo hats back onto their heads before taking off through stop-lights.

Out here, though, Charlie says, Here we can—

Then his voice is lost in train wheels grinding against slick rails, and there we are under the shelter of trees, paying half-attention as the train whizzes by, spraying

water as if it has sprouted wings. As if, with one momentous lurch, it could lift its body from the tracks and sail away, leaving the tracks and the rain and this town behind.

Metal snapping, loud, sends Charlie to his feet. He is running. Running back into the woods because he forgot that the loud snap of the stake is not a gunshot. He is too damn scared to hear me yell, Charlie, come back! He is running. Leaving me like a unhappy pig that will not even roll in its own muck.

. . .

Charlie is so far gone that I cannot hear the clumsy cracking of branches underfoot and the foliage he's ripping from the trees. He is running, thinking, Someone knows. And, now the train, as if it had never passed through, has disappeared and the rumbling has stopped. The stake's rounded end lies like a misshapen penny on the rail.

I search for the spiked end, which usually pancakes into a metallic amoeba. We keep these so we can say, Do you remember what we did *this* time?, or, It was the first time you'd come back from New York. Collecting them was our way of shaping an indecipherable code of us onto steel. We both thought it could last.

There's the round bit, Charlie, I say. It is not pancaked, but split in two. I put the parts into separate pockets of my jeans, fearing what sinister explosion might happen if they were to meet. I walk along the tracks past the red lights and rusted signs and overhangs with frayed wires to the curve an unused trestle bridge that hands over a river. I sit and dangle my feet over the edge. The water below shimmies and

glints. Another train is coming. I hear it pass back in the direction from which I came. Until now, I do not realize that I am soaked, cold, and hoping this will be the last time I come to this place others tell me is my home.

I start along the tracks again and take the familiar path that will lead me to Carpenter's Funeral Home, out to Route 707, then Prince Creek, and then eventually the white door of my house where, inside, Pa will be sipping beer while Ma cooks and hums to gospel music. I walk up to the top of the hill, and look down at the funeral home's flooded parking-lot. White lines wave like seaweed under murky water. The lot is flooded, and the water is as high as the door of the abandoned hearse, its cabin open, empty. I climb down and struggle through water, as high as my knees. I worry about how Charlie made it to his car. I walk out to Route 707. A large man has fallen into a retention pond, which is deep enough to swim in. He uses a wooden-box to support himself. The box is almost as tall as him. I yell: I'm coming, and, Hold on! Once I am close, his face takes shape. It is Mister Sikorsky. It is Mister Sikorsky pushing himself through the hurricane flood, keeping himself afloat with a pine box.

Orlando

1.

Clover mites march out of the library's foundation, and Alex crushes them with his thumb. They mark him like freckles, like scabbed over zits, like chicken pox. Some have infiltrated his skin. Fingernails can't dig deep enough to scratch the itch, to pull them out.

Students strut by his desk, backpacks slung over their shoulders, late for class. They are laughing. They cannot see what he sees. But they sniff out his strangeness like a smoke signal, like an alarm, and steer clear.

If he focuses on answering research questions, then maybe they'll go away. But being a librarian is boring, even for him, today. Instead, he waylays his dreaming with the news. And that is where he sees it again.

NPR, CNN, BBC, and NBC have bought the same photos of people folded in half. People huddled together under palm trees, holding small, wooden, cross-shaped

figurines. Depending on who you ask, those won't do anything; or maybe this is what all that praying did. Maybe that is the problem.

Alex finds Christopher Soto's poem in the slurry of Facebook confessionals. A heartbroken poet recommended it. As he reads, the funerals in Orlando are being planned, and the body bags are being zipped shut, and the mothers and the fathers and the sisters and the brothers and the lovers are waiting to know if the tags on the bags match the tags on the toes of the bodies.

2.

He jumps from one article to another:

- It does not matter who is stroking your hair, so long as they keep their handkerchief pressed into that surprising bullet hole and whisper, "Be strong, baby, be strong."
- Liquor bottles look beautiful when you're pressed against a bar's floor.
- The family's house is on fire, and those who do not live there say: "It is the family's job to put out the fires. They chose to live in those houses." They say: "It is their problem, and we have given them broken fire hoses and buckets of dirty water, but we shall not lend them our muscles, or our tears, because we have none. Not for them."

3.

During Alex's lunch break, he walks to the quad with his boss.

His boss' hat is drawn down to disguise his concern. Black sunglasses cover his eyes so his colleagues won't see them leaking. Professionalism is a top priority for him.

Jessie is there, standing in the shade of an oak tree. She wraps and unwraps a purple scarf around her neck. Her mascara is a mess.

A man with a pastor's voice recites Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech. He too has a dream; and the dream is the same; and the dream was for Alex and for himself, and for the one-hundred and two people who can't scratch deep enough to draw out the music of gunfire and screaming and sirens ringing in their ears.

4.

On the grass, mourners form a circle. And in the center of the circle a Jewish woman sings in Yiddish. Her blue dress spirals and flows out beneath her. Her arms stretch outward. She is a dreidel, spinning, twirling, unfurling, catching raindrop tears in her palms. Her voice touches Alex on the shoulder, cups its sound around his ear and whispers, "Shalom."

A strong breeze blows through the trees; the rainbow flags flutter. Her singing grows louder. She cannot stop spinning. She doesn't sing Shalom anymore, but now: "How strong I am. How strong."

And the words place themselves like iron bars where the flower of Alex's spine wilts from the weight of his backpack, or the weight of Orlando, of an entire city.

He, too, is mouthing the words, “Shalom.” But he is not Jewish.

Someone Alex does not know grabs his hand.

The wind carries caterpillars off the trees.

5.

Someone says: “Omar was like a child spraying a water gun at a rabbit through the bars of its cage. The creature can do nothing but shiver, shake, and shit itself until Omar has given up or his pistol has run dry.”

6.

Ava stands in the center of the circle, and the mourners struggle against the wind to keep the flags taught. Ava’s words fly across the quad, and bury themselves deep into the giant oak’s heartwood. Her syllables lodge themselves between the initials *AT + LE*, next to *BM + MA*, under *SS + AG*.

The mourners hear: “We *should* be angry.”

Ava punctuates her sentences with her fist. Leaning forward in her combat-boots, she looks ready to run into a burning building. To save the people inside who are screaming so loud that even God has turned the volume down.

She turns her back toward Alex.

The latina behind him murmurs, “How strong I am. How strong.”

Ava turns toward him.

“And it could have been you.”

She stands in the circle, pointing at him; her hand is in the shape of a gun; she is shooting him with those words. Everyone sees him; they see a target. Made of cardboard and concrete and Elmer's glue—it is so heavy. He didn't know he had it before, but now he can't wipe his eyes and keep it steady in the wind at the same time.

7.

An important man, the kind of man people protest to, is speaking. But he doesn't seem to mean it. It is all, "My heart is broken... blah, blah, blah."

Five years ago students refused to leave the library until he said, "You are safe here. You are welcome."

He asked thieves to cut out his tongue so that he wouldn't have to say it. But even thieves did not want it.

Powerless, he made his wife pin a rainbow ribbon on his wrinkled Armani suit and another on her pantsuit.

He used his lapel to obscure it; hers was camouflaged in a beautiful carnation she decided would be her new signature look.

His wife's expression reminds Alex of *that* picture. The one of Carly from his sister's wedding: two-year-old Carly staring at the camera, bored, miserable, and on the verge of shitting herself. Waiting for her mother to drink the only glass of wine she'd had in two months while she talked with the bride about love.

8.

Jessie holds Alex's hand. She is crying from behind her glasses, and he tells her, "Don't be sad, Jessie," although he couldn't stop himself when the man with a pastor's voice read, "I Have a Dream."

Alex dreams, too. The world has fallen back twenty-years. The Wyoming prairie is colder than he imagined. Alex searches for the fencepost where Matthew Shepard has been tied. Where snot is freezing in his nostrils. Jessie points to shadows on the horizon, saying, "Don't let them get away!" The footprints in the snow are melting.

"Don't be sad, Jessie," Alex says.

The man in the wrinkled suit leaves the circle.

Another man replaces him. Patchy beard and a day-glow orange sign. *No More Guns*. His mission is different; this is his opportunity to shine.

9.

After the vigil, Alex sits down at his desk. He refuses to answer the emails that have built up over lunch. Daydreaming has already distracted him.

His heart has been shot through with an AR-whatever, and he is laying on the bar's floor next to Edward, Stanley, Luis, Mercedes, Juan, Terry, and 97 other people who are crying, or can't cry because they are wondering if they're good enough to go to heaven.

Some have taken out their phones to text, “I love you, Mommy,” but it comes out, “I loathe you, Mommy.”

Turns out, it is impossible to tame fingers that cannot quit jumping each time Omar does to Edward and Juan and Mercedes what he did to his pet rabbit.

10.

Tony trots up to the desk. He’s been working on that goatee for a while. Alex has seen him on campus—around. He’s thin, short, older, straight.

They whisper to each other about what it feels like to be afraid. Alex says, “It’s feels like when a wasp is stuck in your car. You put the windows down because you want it to get lost. You don’t want it to hurt you, but it’s looking for someone to sting. Then you swerve off the road and into the shrubs when it gets you in the neck.”

Tony says he carries a gun, but it’s not an AR-whatever, and he doesn’t know what he needs it for.

Protection, he says.

He says he doesn’t know what it is like to live like an owl, twisting his neck around to see who belongs to the footsteps creeping up behind him.

“But, I can imagine,” he says.

11.

Tony says he can imagine how it feels to wear a target. Alex laughs.

A target is invisible to the people wearing it, but the mothers say, “I always knew.”

The fathers say, “Take that damn thing off.”

“Help us,” the people wearing it cry. It is too heavy.

Tony smiles and leaves. On his hip, the bulge of his piece protrudes like a tumor.

The clover mites are in the thousands now, marching over Alex’s arms and legs.

They’re pouring out of a crack in the foundation. It is widening and too expensive to fix.

Alex is sick of the headlines, so he watches the mites march out of that crack.

12.

Alex keeps a one-liter water-bottle in his bag, and if he doesn’t hydrate, then he will shrivel up. And gays don’t shrivel.

13.

If an idea could be shot in the back with an AR-whatever, then no one would have to lay their head in anyone’s lap and hear, “Be strong, baby, be strong.”

The handkerchief pressed over the bullet hole is dirty and may only cause infection. But it’s the only thing that the bear has to with him. A handkerchief. A smoke signal. He pulled it out of the back pocket of his leather pants.

The building isn't burning, but smoke stings his eyes. He wipes his face. He tastes blood. He smells blood. He hears blood. And now his blood is mixing with someone else's, which is something gays are told *never* to do.

14.

Alex turns to the gossip columns: "Omar Mateen, allegedly gay..." They gave him his very own target. Placed it around his shoulders like a prized hog and said, "blue-ribbon, first-place."

And the people ate that shit up.

15.

Omar Mateen Allegedly Gay

"According to two men who claim to have previously had contact with Mateen via a gay dating app, Mateen frequented Pulse for as many as three years. He was often seen in the corner of the bar, drinking alone. Mateen was known for his violent outbursts, which were common. He abused his wife."

Of course, they all say, and roll their eyes. That! That explains *everything!*

Once, a man reports, Mateen pulled a knife on him after a dispute about religion.

His wife made no comment. She was not asked.

One man says it is like peeling powdery wings off butterflies.

We are waiting for the Canadian Press to confirm these details.

16.

When Alex is home, he kisses his husband goodnight and pulls the covers up to his chin.

He is standing in the center of the circle, in the grass, beating his chest and howling. He covers himself in dirt and shoves leaves into his hair. He pours the one-liter bottle over his head, and mud trickles into his mouth. He chews the grit.

Swallows the mud. The man with a pastor's voice is bellowing, "I have a dream," and the Jewish woman can't stop twirling. "Shalom, shalom, shalom." She wheels into the sky, shrieking, "Shalom." Her dress flies off her body and floats to the earth like a piece of paper. She is gone.

His boss crosses his arms and squints from behind his glasses, crying. His tears are clover mites.

The important man holds a rake, and he is raking tongues into a pile.

The man with the day-glow orange sign is using it for a math lesson, adding one and one to get 102, which is not divisible by the time it takes for Edward, Akyra, Oscar, Brenda, Deonka, or Alejandro to stop the bleeding where Omar shot them with his water gun.

"How strong I am. How strong."

Spokane

Every night, I cooked pasta for Mac, my father-in-law, and he never—not once—told a story. Mac was not a talkative man, never-mind not having the sense to hold a conversation on account of his dementia. Anyone coming into my apartment smelled the stink that lingered from my job at the fish market, and they ate with mismatched silverware, fork tines sticking out as random as a cactus, but they did not hear stories—especially from Mac. While I cooked, my husband Busker slept until it was time to go to work, and Mac, silent as a sleeping goose, curled and uncurled his toes, waiting for his dinner on a paper plate. He rocked himself in the creaky wooden chair. I suppose he found it comforting—most people do. The rocking tricked his brain into believing that he was a child again, and when that happened, he could feel okay about forgetting what he'd learned about being an adult. Most of us, myself included, did not have the luxury of forgetting. Every day, my mistakes darted over

my head like a swarm of hornets, and I waved my hand at them. I knew that it would only make them angrier, but I did it anyway.

On the day that Mac decided he had a story in him, and that it was all going to come pouring out, I cracked the white colander into which I drained his pasta. Steam fogged my glasses, and the entire yellow apartment took on a sick, jaundiced glow. When the lenses cleared, it was waiting for me—a silvery strand of saliva descending like a spider from his mouth. I walked over with the blue dish-towel. He smiled at me, innocent, toothless, happy, and let me wipe his face. It surprised me each time he trusted me. That was one good about the forgetting—it made him better to me for a little while.

When I pulled the towel away, he said: “The first star that fell landed somewhere between Missoula and Spokane.”

He spoke as if reading from a story-book, and I imagined him holding a picture book, leaning on a wood-paneled desk. Before he started losing it, Mac had been a teacher.

“What the hell, Mac” I said. “What are you talking about?”

“The night it fell,” he said, “There was a big snowstorm. People in Spokane strapped chains to their tires and salted their driveways. Phil Arlee predicted snow high enough to lose your knees in, snow we weren’t ready for so early in December.”

I thought the story had a limited shelf-life—that it was good for only another breath. I said, “Do you want butter on your pasta, Mac?”

“When it fell,” he said, “you could see a purple streak of light hanging up in the sky, thin as a paper-cut. You could see it from every window in Spokane. It was that cut that pulled those fool people out into the storm.”

“Must have been before I moved here,” I said. “Mac, you want butter?”

“Spokane, Missoula. Everyone.” he said, then: “Everyone went to find it. Don’t know what they thought they were chasing, but if you had seen it, then you would have understood. You just had to find it, whatever it was.”

I saw something had caught him, some thought or idea that he couldn’t shut down. The doctors said this could happen—this lucidity. I turned the television off, set the remote on his tray, and thought about waking Busker. Maybe they could talk about some serious stuff before Mac was gone. Do some healing.

“Here you go,” I said. “Hold on.”

He took the plate and ate the pasta with his fingers. I stood and went toward the bedroom.

“No,” Mac said. “No. Sit down. I have to tell you about Busker.”

I took him seriously, thinking maybe the story-telling might help, too—even if the story was not true. But his clarity sent a fire through me—made me want to ask him all of the questions for which I had accepted that Busker and I would never have answers. I wanted to slap him and ask him if he loved us, but I was sure which one first.

“Busker went by himself,” he said. “Took that Chevy down I-90. Drove an hour and a half. Drove way out past where everyone else thought it safe to stop. He

thought the middle was the best place to start. But, once you pass the middle, you find yourself on your way to the other city, through Montana. Busker didn't want to go so far. He worried that he wouldn't be able to make it back."

I fiddled with my wedding band. It was not a particularly handsome ring. Busker had picked something thick, made of stone, not metal or alloy, silver or gold. He had difficulty deciding on what sort of ring he wanted for me. Men did not typically wear diamonds. And men did not typically marry each other—not here, at least. When he asked me to wear it, he looked into my face from that ridiculous his kneeling position and said, "It's a special stone. Worth more than a diamond. I promise." He had no history of lying—that promise was all for me. I took more convincing than most people because I liked my truth to be tough and chewy as gum. I made sure to get every ounce of flavor out of something before deciding on whether or not it was true. Cotton candy truths—that dissolved into sweetness as soon as they touch the tongue—held no purchase with me. He meant well, and it did not matter, really, that the dark, pewter-like ring was unique in its ugliness. I was not a child who needed something shiny, or I wouldn't have stayed with Busker to begin with. His knee started to shake, the gravel sharp underneath it. "I love it," I said, which was true.

"You still got that Chevy?" Mac said.

"What?" I was the one who left for a moment. It was easier than I thought.

"The Chevy? You still got it?"

"Oh, yeah," I said, then: "You know we do, Mac."

Despite the truck's bed being rusted out, it is good for a haul of wood here and there, so long as we don't take too much.

"I liked that truck," he said.

We were planning to milk every mile out of it. Sandusky's cars sold to households with two bread-winners, or one who had something substantial—something more than work at a fish counter in a place that does not border the ocean or as a night security guard. I would have liked another truck, too. Out here we needed it for the wood and the snow.

"With the storm and the cold, there were four-hundred missing," he said. He nodded, which seemed to be a reassurance to himself. Then: "Most people made it out of the woods after a day. Busker made it out just fine, but he lost his pants along the way."

"You done?" I said, pointing at his paper plate with three noodles on it. I took it. A blindingly bright shaving-cream commercial flashed onto the television.

"Stop interrupting me, goddammit!"

I left the plate where it was, but I felt shaken. The old version of Mac—the one who remembered—was fuming in that chair. Before, he had been hard hard hard. Harder than granite. I had had enough of Mac's hardness—having seen the way it wore Busker down into a compliant and quiet housekeeper. Now, Mac was usually softer than butter, and I can't say that it bothered me much. But after so much friction, you either get into the habit of being hard back or you wear all the way through until you're nothing but a body attached to a mouth that says yes and yes and yes. I don't

think I would have minded so much if it just me—because I knew I was getting hard, too. It was watching Busker get so damn quiet and meek that did it—that made me feel like I should have been angry about that ugly ring he gave me.

“His hands! You goddamn son-of-a-bitch. His hands.” Mac started yelling. His face was red, his breathing heavy. The stoniness rising, mountainous, behind his eyes, which fixed on me.

He said, “You made my son a faggot.”

“No,” I said, “You did. He always was. You did it, Mac.”

I gambled it—thinking that he would not remember. He stared at me hard, his eyebrows pulled together, and then released. After a moment, it seemed as if his anger washed away. The doctor’s said Mac would cycle through versions of himself, to not be alarmed when they came out; that they would not be permanent and were not really him. But the doctors didn’t say anything about what would happen to us—to Busker and me. Doctors’s truths were easy truths, especially because we wanted to believe them.

“Where are you, Mac?”

“Right goddamn here.”

“Whose house is this?”

His attention jumped around the room. His breathing grew soft. Mac looked at me, full in the face, his eyes wet.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

If he registered what I said, then he let it go. There was no one to blame for Busker because Busker was fine.

“Would you finish your story for me?”

He searched my face.

“The one about the star.”

I sat on the couch, across from him, and hoped that my attention would keep him from slipping away. He licked leftover salt from the corners of his mouth.

“Oh, oh, o-oh,” he said. “When Busker came home that night you should have seen how the snow melted from his socks. They dripped as if he had fit all the snow in the forest between the stitching.”

“That’s a lot of snow.”

He swallowed hard and coughed. Spittle shot out onto the arm of his chair, and he wiped it away with the sleeve of his robe. He cleared his throat, began to speak: “Busker searched for that meteorite for hours, searched until the sun rose. He didn’t find it. So, he turned around and gave up.”

Snow was falling. It should have waited. Busker would have to get up earlier, wipe the snow from the truck, and creep through the unplowed streets. That was another thing the truck needed—tires. It needed tires.

“And, just before he got back to the truck, he found it.”

Mac rocked. The chair creaked. I paid him too much attention.

“He found it?”

He laughed—it was wicked, tinged with something mean.

“Yep,” he said, “He never told you.”

So, my husband had found some kind of rock. It was surer to have been some pebble that had been kicked out of a plow-truck than to have fallen from the sky. He would have said something. He would have told me if he found something like that. Probably, he didn't want to come home empty handed, to tell Mac, to tell his mother, that he couldn't do it. He wouldn't have been the only one that couldn't find it, though. It was not anything to be embarrassed about. It was all lucky guesses and timing.

“It's snowing, Mac.”

“Found it less than a hundred feet from that Chevy.”

Then: “Say, you still got that Chevy?”

“We have the Chevy, Mac. He found it?”

“Hadn't noticed it when he set out. Must've been too dark, I think. He said he thought it was a fox-hole. Then he saw the hole steaming when the sun came up. Went and looked right it in, thinking someone had torched a fox, and found something that looked like a diamond. When he picked it up, the whole thing turned black. And you know that hand?”

He was stricken. His face turned red, his mouth crumpled like a ball of paper, from which a moment later, he shouted: “His hands! His goddamn hands.”

“Shh, Mac. Mac, it's okay.”

“His hands.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m here.” He looked around to make sure that he was here.

“Where is here?”

“I’m home,” he said. “I’m with you.”

“What happened to his hands?”

“What?”

His eyes were drooping. His outburst left him tired.

“Busker’s hands?”

His hands had fixed too many things for them to be broken. I had seen those hands, kissed the fingertips, had the palms run over my face and my thighs and my back. They were a workman’s hands, calloused from clenching tools for too many hours a day. This security guard gig was the only job he didn’t come home with hands chapped and sore. He was finally giving them a rest. I encouraged this. So, why did I feel that Mac could give me an explanation for why his hands weren’t doing enough?

“I never found out how he lost his pants,” Mac said, and then, with a sigh, he closed his eyes. Almost as soon as they closed, they exploded open again, and he looked around at a room that must have been all shadows to him. They opened wider. His upper-lip curled back, trembled. Busker’s door creaked.

“Shh, Mac,” I said. I pat him on the shoulder. There was something there, behind his eyes, a small animal stuck in quicksand or primordial mud that lowered and sank the more it struggled for freedom. Whatever it was, it had antlers. Long and full. A ten-point buck. It disappeared, down into whatever was swallowing it up, and he closed his eyes for sleep.

“Is he okay?” Busker asked, “I heard yelling.” He leaned against the wall and rubbed his eyes. Either he had been losing weight without me noticing, or I had never really looked at his legs, which were little gnarled sticks poking out from his overlarge boxers. His hands, which were disproportionately large, had grown to accommodate all the callouses he earned.

“He was telling me a story,” I said.

I stopped short of telling him what it was. It felt stupid—being caught believing Mac. I paid too much attention.

“What?”

I walked toward him. He furrowed his brow. I took his hands and lifted them into the light. There among the callouses, some scars were barely visible. Some were fat, bloodless worms that might eventually fade. He wore his matching wedding band. The dark stone that somehow looked pretty, iridescent from the television’s blue glow and the dim light from the kitchen.

“How did you get these hands?”

Tiny Claws

I.

You knocked the green beer-bottle from Hector's hand. The entire dock, the loud music and laughter, the men like children thrilled by gulls, hushed during the bottle's swan dive and splash into the ocean below. He rotated toward you, his angry, square face disliked you and your embarrassment. Something animal lurked behind his bleary eyes. It threw itself at his pupils. His brown irises dilated from the effort of keeping it contained. He softened, then joked about being angry, about maybe not needing the beer anyway. He spoke like your cousin Patrick.

He engraved the torsion of your shoulders into his memory and decided that he liked your particular twist. You were, like a peach from his own tree, something sweet he deserved to taste. His thick hand landed on your neck, which he rubbed with his thumb as if the friction would create an entry point, as if it would give way to the treasures he imagined finding inside you.

He tells you to follow him, and you lose yourself to the hope that you may taste his skin in his car, or in a stall, or under the dock; that someone might come too close, making you both race to assemble the uniform of your manliness before you're found out.

II.

Twelve little gays craned their necks and were curious about the art teacher's theories on sexuality.

Honey asked if his blue dress with the yellow floral print really performed his gender for him.

It is the same, you said, as when you see a man from the other side of the bar, and you know he is a man.

You can smell him like a sewage plant. See him like a house-fire. Part of it is the shape the shoulders take—like a master-carpenter's balanced shelf supporting the jams and preserves your mother made. Part of it is the swing of his feet, always moving as if there was somewhere they needed to land and could never quite reach.

III.

The floor, the ceiling, and the unfocused row of black lockers: these were your melting points, and, when you looked at them, you slid into the world of muscle and ligament and tendon. When you looked *there*, you convinced them of your harmlessness and announced to them your presence, your awkwardness. They could,

and did, take your measurements. Thickness of the neck, of the wrist, of the thigh. Written down in the language of strength, the accumulation of these numbers, they thought, betrayed you. You did not measure up, and this confirmed their beliefs about you.

Hector was less cautious. He dropped his towel at your feet. His thighs were hairy, dense. It presented as a challenge to you, and to the onlookers. It was proof of his courage. The taste in your mouth acidic, and you remembered your Aunt Liza: when she drove you to the park to feed the ducks. Buckled tight into the carseat, your mouth oozed excitement, ready to tear the dry biscuits she gave you to hold. It had been the first time something flocked to you because it believed you could give it exactly what it wanted.

He put a leg on the bench and asked your name. He broke the rules.

The others hurried their thick feet into sneakers, unsure of how to explain their disgust and their jealousy to themselves.

IV.

Hienie, Hector told the bartender. Then he gestured to you. He was gentle then, smiling, his elbow resting near a watery circle on the bar. A gin and soda, you said, and then handed over your credit-card. Meanwhile, he told you stories about his tours in Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan. How you wouldn't believe the sand and the boredom. How there were spiders bigger than your hand, which he snatched from your lap and then unfurled your fingers to make a point.

The Arab-children would catch them, he said, and would make them fight in arenas fenced off with stones. The females were venomous, and you couldn't tell them apart from the males, except for a stripe of blue on their stomachs. And, he said, the kids would say that, if you've seen it, then you're already dead.

He caught himself laughing and stiffened.

The bartender wiped the counter near his elbow.

He asked where you wanted to go. He looked behind him. A reflex, he said, from his tours of duty. Across the bar, a television flashed light into his eyes. He gazed at you, and you saw something, tiny claws, tearing their way out of the darkness.

'Gansett

Palmer leaned on his truck and watched waves leave seaweed on the shore. His hand, which drew a cigarette to his lips, shook like his bones were loose, like they'd come apart. He raised his head when Ace's truck pulled into the gravel driveway.

Windshield wipers pushed away the snow, and though it fell in blinding sheets, Ace saw his uncle's paint-stained jeans and yellow work-boots. If the salt pond weren't spread wide in front of him, he might have thought Palmer was just another guy from back in B—. Maybe Kenny—who brought their milk. Or Luke, from one of the new families that wore flannel and stopped speaking Spanish to blend in.

In was not safe enough—to blend in. Not after Matt Shepard had been tied to a fencepost twenty miles down the road.

Ace's father had said that it served the faggot right, but his mother cried for days. She cried because she would have to drive past where it happened on her way out of B—, and she was out of touch with ugliness. It was the same road that led to the bar where Ace had gone to feel safe. He had memorized the berms where plows couldn't clear the ice beneath the snow. It was, after all, his only way out.

Ace stepped down from the truck. He did not consider it possible that he had stepped from one danger into another until he saw Palmer's eyes studying him like a large bird examining his prey, memorizing Ace's hunched shoulders, imagining how cartilage might slide underneath his flesh and between his bones.

Palmer's face cracked, and his wide smile gave the impression of clouds splitting in front of the sun. Smoked leaked from the gap on his left side where a tooth was missing. Then:

“Welcome to ‘Gansett,’” Palmer said.

“Thank you, sir.”

Palmer shoved himself off his truck and threw his cigarette to the ground, crushing it under his boot.

“Aren't you going to give me a hug?”

Ace moved forward, arms wide. He held his breath. If his uncle's mean streak was as sudden and violent as his mother had warned, then he would tread as if he stood on a frozen pond that had already fractured beneath his feet.

The house, its bluish paneling beaten gray by the ocean wind, could have been called a cottage. Ace followed Palmer inside it and stopped at dusty white curtains that, through the window, framed the salt-pond in the distance. On the water, small boats sailed figure eights around green buoys.

“Students from the University,” Palmer said.

A motorboat towed four students to the pond’s center. They slid across the surface as silently as ducks, except the occasional twang of metal or mishandled oar.

“Great view, isn’t it?”

Ace nodded.

“It’s beautiful,” he said, “Why did my family leave?”

“Some of them did. Some of them didn’t. Beats the hell outta me why you’d do either— especially for coal,” Palmer said.

People had run off to B— when rumors of oil spread. His family stayed there when coming back with empty pockets would have meant embarrassing explanations. So, they worked in coal instead. Like the other families, they managed, and managing brought about children and then hunger. Fifteen years later, other families came to B — for different reasons. Some of them with hard to pronounce last names. *Gutierrez. Aguilar. Ortega.* Some of them clucking in Spanish. All of them hungry.

Ace opened the window. Snow floated inside and dissolved on the sill. He listened. Thousands of blades of tall grass dancing together—that was how he imagined the ocean would sound. But it didn’t. He couldn’t describe it. From the window, the shore’s grass was taller, the birds were more numerous, and a pleasant

scent, which he couldn't place, was stronger than he could have imagined. His mother's pictures didn't do it justice.

"Here," Palmer said.

He handed Ace a smoke detector. Then:

"If you need help, then let me know. The last person who lived here fell asleep with beans on the stove."

Palmer gathered his toolbox and left.

Before he began to unpack, Ace set out in his truck to explore his new home. He followed one road, despite the storm, to the beach, where he parked and watched thick sheets of snow fall into the ocean.

His mother never would believe that a beach could have snow on it. She would be making breakfast, mixing the batter for pancakes and complaining how, if they lived in Florida, her arthritis wouldn't hurt so bad. She often spoke of the life she dreamt of for herself: "I want two grandchildren. They can call me Meema. And when you visit for Christmas, I'll make them pancakes with molasses."

Ace had nightmares of her dreams. He saw himself from a distance as a waxy mannequin wearing his father's red sweatshirt and faded jeans. He watched the mannequin stack dominoes with the children. Watched it kiss the wife. He would never tell his mother that it was impossible; that he stood near the doorway, separate, while the nightmare version of himself poured molasses over pancakes.

Ace frowned. He put the car in gear and went in the direction of home, ignoring a feeling shaped like sadness, heavy in his gut.

What if she didn't like it—the beach?

He crept around each turn, unsure of how the road would bend, but his mind focused on his mother. Meema? Why does it have to be two? If there was any space in her dream for what he had envisioned for himself, then it was too minuscule for him to cram himself into it.

He needed a distraction. He reached down to turn on the radio, but when he looked up, the road had curved. Ace lost control; and the truck jumped into a deep ditch and collided with an oak tree.

The crack came first, then a sharp pain in his forehead. His eyes drooped—so heavy that he could not keep them open.

Kenny knocked at the window wearing his white uniform. He held a gallon of milk. He chewed something and looked distractedly behind himself. Kenny shouted, but Ace could not hear him. He looked behind himself again. Ace saw that a barn was there, where it hadn't been before, and someone stood on its roof, watching. Kenny was sobbing now, down on his knees, pulling at the door-handle.

A figure appeared behind him, holding a rifle, then another, then more. They grabbed his feet and dragged him away.

The gunshot brought Ace back.

When he woke, the windshield wipers were racing. Steam rose around the windows. A lump on his forehead throbbed, and he shifted the rearview mirror. Blood dripped from his nose to his hands, but the sharpest pain radiated from where his seatbelt had caught him.

Broken sentences fizzled from the radio:

95 Northbound... Governor R— advises... indoors... Many... power southern state... Many are without power... southern part of the state. Snow is expected to continuing falling until late morning.

His ears started and stalled. They could not hold onto sentences and twist meaning from them. A ticking began, like a little bird cracking a seed, then it grew louder, pounding, hard, a hammer meeting a nail.

A man stood at the window, one hand covering his eyes to peer into the car, the other hand slamming the glass.

Ace unlocked the door and let the man pull him from the truck. He clung to the stranger's neck as he was carried through knee-deep snow. They followed the tracks Ace's truck had made and mounted a slope toward the road. Ace slipped. The man caught him by his coat.

"Almost there," the man said. But they were still a ways off.

Soft. The man's voice was surprisingly soft. As if the rest of him had grown into a solid figure, but the voice was a child's.

At the top of the hill, snowflakes danced in the black truck's headlights. The man opened the passenger door, and settled Ace into the warm seat, while he took a red handkerchief from his pocket, wet it with snow, and stepped towards Ace.

He placed his hand under Ace's chin, drew it up, and examined his nose. He wiped away the blood. Would he need a hospital, doctors, the ER? He squinted, then he frowned.

"Not enough light," he said, and disappeared around the back of the truck. The tailgate slammed, and there he was. Slender hands holding a flashlight and a first-aid kit. Snow collected in his brown hair and in the hood of his parka.

He lifted Ace's face and shone the flashlight in his eyes.

Ace trained eyes did not betrayed his fear, or his excitement, but blinked into a brightness he usually tried to avoid.

"Any pain?" he asked.

Ace nodded. He was afraid to speak, afraid that this man would see or hear something he didn't like; that he would leave him in the snow.

"Where?"

He pointed to the lump on his head and then to his stomach. The man lifted Ace's shirt, running his hands over his skin, pressing here, there. Nothing seemed broken. Maybe a fractured rib. He'd need a doctor, but a doctor would prescribe rest and maybe painkillers.

He closed the door, went to the driver's side, sat behind the wheel, and turned on the radio.

We're asking everyone to stay indoors. The roads are too dangerous to drive.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Ace.”

“Ace, I’m Wayne,” he said, “You have a concussion, but I don’t think you need the hospital. You banged your nose, and it’s not broken...”

His voice trailed off, and he looked at the road. Ace felt his head deflating, bending his neck with its weight, forcing his eyelids shut. He turned the air vent away from his face.

Wayne continued: “I’m a nurse. And if that’s good enough for you, then you can stay at my place—until the roads clear. Otherwise, an ambulance...”

A wave of nausea overtook Ace. He couldn’t listen anymore.

“No,” Ace said. “No ambulance.”

Concentrating on the road, Wayne did not speak. Ace fiddled with the vent, the seatbelt, the zippers on his coat. He hadn’t been gone long enough to have forgotten the rules he had learned in B—. A direct look at Wayne would be dangerous, so Ace glanced at him, pretending to look out the window. Melted snow dripped down the bumped slope of Wayne’s nose and rested on his lips. Ace felt weak and then suddenly thirsty. He looked away. Time may never fade some rules completely.

They pulled up to a small house with snowdrift high enough to kiss the windows and a shabby barn, like the one Ace grew up in, on the edge of the forest.

Wayne walked around to Ace's door and opened it. He could get out alone, but he didn't stop Wayne, who pulled his arm around Ace's shoulder and led him to the door.

Inside, it was dark except for dying embers in the fireplace. Wayne put Ace on the sofa and hurried to throw logs on the andirons. Tiny wooden hairs sparkled and burst into flames. The room grew brighter, but Ace was unsure of what he saw. Was it a face pressing itself through the wall or a mask? Was Wayne smiling at him or scowling while he removed his coat, his boots, and his wet pants?

Ace froze. Even through his hazy mind, he knew that this could go wrong. What should he say? He was waiting for Wayne's wife to materialize out of the bedroom, frizzy-haired and worried.

Wayne stepped closer. First he took Ace's boots, then his coat, then his jeans. He laid the bundle of bloody and wet clothing by the fire.

In the kitchen, Wayne let the faucet drip so the pipes wouldn't freeze, and he carried a glass of water to Ace who, wrapped in a blanket, watched the fire dance. The shapes of the house were sharpening. The face on the wall was only a mask, and there were no signs of anyone else. Without his pain to distract him, Ace separated his fear from what he thought might be a dream. He held himself with his chest puffed out, despite the ache in his ribs. He spread his legs wide, like his father did, while he sat.

Wayne wrapped himself in a wool blanket and, lowering himself onto the couch with Ace, said:

“Where are you from?”

“Wyoming,” Ace said.

Wayne frowned.

“Sad what happened there,” he said, “That kid Mike —“

“— Matt.”

They were silent.

Ace had given everything up. He cared enough to know.

“Matt. Right,” Wayne said. He sipped from his glass. Then: “I don’t know what I’d do. You know. If something like that happened here.”

Ace’s eyes drooped.

The fire’s crackling grew louder.

“You could get out,” Ace said. He didn’t know what he was saying anymore.

“You could go somewhere no one would know you and hope it was safe.”

The fire jumped and danced. Higher. It wanted more flames. Wanted to burn down the house. It wanted to trap them inside. Someone’s fingers were laced between his.

“You could,” Wayne said. “But how would you know if you’d ever really made it?”

Ace sighed with the weight of the question. The waxy mannequin of himself had materialized before them. It wore his father’s red sweatshirt and jeans. Its face swirled like storm clouds. Ace watched it step into the fire. For a moment, it resisted

the flames, but then, as his eyes closed, thin white scars melted from the mannequin's hands, his face, his chest, and dripped to the floor.

If We Are Not Fine

The day before his last treatment, Patrick fought with the wicker basket on his hip and struggled to breathe. He did not tease me, although I sat with one leg on top of the other, tongue stuck out in concentration, scratching pencil lines into the shapes of the old sunflower field. The flowers' seedy faces chased the sun across the sky, watching as it neared the horizon. They're hard as anything to draw. He stumbled and set the basket on an uneven patch of grass. His chest heaved.

"How's it coming," he asked.

"Not my best," I said. The lines blended together, and the perspective was all wrong.

"Let me see." He crouched; his knees popped, and his breath was fresh with cucumbers.

"Looks good," he said, "But you didn't add that one sticking out." He pointed to where one sunflower stood taller than the others.

“I know,” I said, “It is out of place.”

He kissed my neck and pushed himself up. He strung a white shirt on the line, which could have been mine, or his.

I held the sketchpad away from my face to see the whole field. Sloppy lines. A mess of ideas. Should I have added the tall one?

Patrick spaced out the clothes as if he held a ruler to measure inches between each one. Funny, what he used as distraction, the way he concentrated on the details instead of pushing them out.

His arms were still as thick as ever, and his strong hands smoothed wrinkles from damp shirts. He inched along, as if the coming night did not portend the day after it.

Out of breath, again. He rested his hands on the line and paused until breath came easy.

He caught my worried glance, and I looked out to the field.

What had Summer had done to the fields and sunflowers? No breeze, no clouds, no birdsong. All the stillness and color, frozen like a painting. I stopped myself from glancing back to him. Stay, I thought, stay like this, please.

A bird flit across the sunflower field.

Once he emptied the basket, he sat next to me and rested his head on my shoulder while I used the last of the sunlight to sketch.

“Have you ever seen a dandelion turn from golden yellow to white fuzz?”

Patrick asked.

“No,” I said, “Have you?”

“It doesn’t happen all at once,” he said. He leaned back onto his elbows and kicked off his shoes.

Wind disturbed the still fabric on the line.

After a long pause he said, “Yeah, they shut themselves up tight, then unwind and unfurl. That’s when you see all the fronds.”

We were usually so synched, he guessing my thoughts, or me his, that I worried he knew that I was thinking of his son, Curtis. How, when we were strolling through the woods, I had gathered him a bouquet of dandelions so big that his small hands couldn’t wrap around it. He examined it. Big brown eyes darted over as if it were cotton candy, and then he leaned forward, took a bite, scrunched up his doughy face, and spat it out. White fronds stuck to his lips, dancing gently when he exhaled.

Patrick brushed Curtis’ lips clean. He scooped him up. He set him on his own shoulders. The wind blew fronds from the remainder of Curtis’ bouquet, floated them into the woods.

“Make a wish,” I said.

“What happens to them?” Curtis asked. He pointed to the fronds, like parachutes, floating high above our heads.

Patrick responded: “If they land, then they might become seeds. They’ll turn into new dandelions.”

But his answer left too much to chance, for Curtis said: “And what about the other ones? The ones that don’t land?”

Even then, talking about the end of something, about death, and the uncertainty of whatever happens after made me shiver. I saw a dandelion that was half gold, half cotton, so I picked it up and said, “Wow, Curtis, look at that.”

I helped Patrick stand, and led him to the house with my unfinished sketch tucked under my arm. He managed the pain without frowning, without complaining. He wanted to seem strong, as if nothing were changing, and for that I did not blame him. I could not, otherwise I would have revealed to him my ugly insecurities. He would have seen me under the patio’s pale yellow light and wondered who the stranger was, staring up at him with eyes that betrayed their shame as wanting to feel needed.

I let go of him. He walked up the stairs unaided. I examined him for signs of weakness, which I think he knew and could withstand when his back was turned to me. I waited to swoop in and catch him if his knees gave out. Waiting — it acknowledged the thing we didn’t talk about, or tried not to talk about: tomorrow, when we would be confronted with news we could or could not understand. Timeframes and percentages. Doctors hazarding guesses. Waiting to see if they were wrong, or right.

The splintered patio creaked under our weight. Patrick stumbled. I couldn't look away. I did not cry out. If I could not make him need me, then I would not make him feel guilty. He crouched and rubbed his thumb across the grain.

"Needs stain," he said.

He stayed, breathing, rubbing his hand over the gray wood, which did need stain. He brought bits of porch debris up to the light to inspect it. His knees shook, and he pulled my arm to help him stand. I smiled.

We opened the door and went in.

I tucked him into bed, then I laid next to him, careful not to bump or jostle him. I listened to his breathing until he fell asleep, and then I held my breath when his stopped and held it until his started again, or until my lungs ached from holding back so much air. Sometimes, although he did not know it, he cried in his sleep. It would happen the night before treatments, and then he'd wake the next day, and we'd keep moving. We would pack our truck for the ride to the hospital.

The ride would be quiet aside from the sticking of tires on the long rain-slick highway. He'd rest his head against the window. I'd play music and check if he slept. If he did, I'd take advantage of the small, private moment to release my anxiety, to grip and release the steering-wheel, and to raise, then lower, the window. If he stayed awake, we wouldn't speak. Talking about what could be done, we'd learned, was like asking if wishing on stars, or forget-me-nots, would bring about the things for which we hoped. Future tense verbs were off-limits, and the past tense clawed away at

something tender. Remembering: speaking as if we had given up. So, all of our verbs would remain in the present tense.

The morning came and Patrick's side of the bed was empty, cold, so I walked into the kitchen in my boxers. The room smelled of the bacon that Patrick cooked and of the coffee he brewed. On the counter, there was a bag packed with books and crossword puzzles. The crosswords jolted me. Patrick has used them during the first few weeks of treatment to strike up conversations with the other patients. Barnaby, a spry Vietnam veteran, taught him the word palindrome when Patrick asked, "What is something spelled the same way forward and backward?" Barnaby gave Patrick his first beanie, red, simple, when Patrick's thick black hair started to wither. Toward the end, they didn't need crosswords to talk about the things that mattered to them, so Patrick stopped packing them.

"Smells great," I said. I rubbed sleep from my eyes.

"How can I help?" I said.

He smiled and took the skillet, shaking it twice before switching off the burner. He piled pancakes on a purple fiesta-ware plate and poured coffee into a matching mug.

"I like the matching," I said.

"It's good luck."

He handed me the plate.

"Is it luck if you can decide?" I asked.

“That’s all luck is anyway,” he said.

Steam swirled up and out of the mug. He didn’t make himself a plate.

He moved from the sink to the refrigerator and hummed. He spent his morning cooking for me, but he would go without food for hours. Or maybe the cooking wasn’t for me; maybe it was to keep his mind away from the day. When he was diagnosed, the doctors suggested that Patrick stop moving boats with Tommy at the marina. And, when he didn’t, Tommy told him to stay home. He said it was for his health. I agreed.

“Twenty-two years,” Patrick said, “Now, what am I supposed to do?”

After he fired him, Tommy invited Patrick to lunch once a week; took Patrick on rides up the White River. The last time he went, Patrick had lost his sea-legs and his lunch, and then settled into the patio’s Adirondack chair, pinching the bridge of his nose to stop himself from vomiting.

Patrick didn’t go out much after, and when I left for work in the morning he pattered around the house, picking crumbs and specks from behind the mirror and between the piano-keys. One day, when I came home, and he’d flipped the couch upside-down, and was vacuuming the lining.

“What the hell are you doing,” I asked. I was laughing.

“Anything to not feel so goddamn useless.”

Patrick banged a pan in the sink, and I dug into the pancakes.

On the hospital's fourth floor Mary scribbled circles onto a steno pad and spoke into the phone tucked under her neck. She hung up, sighed, and smiled at us. Such a perfect, pretty smile. She waddled around the desk and hugged Patrick as if he were her grandfather. He congratulated her on the engagement, the baby, and the new home. She asked when we'd see it. They chatted, and then Mary asked, "Are you ready?"

Patrick kissed my cheek. I held his hand, ready to step forward with him, but he unlaced his fingers from mine.

"Please," he said, "Don't come in today."

"What?"

"Please," he said, again, "I don't want to you see me... hooked up."

Mary made herself busy with her clipboard.

He kissed my cheek again, and I stood, watching, as Patrick followed Mary into room 409.

Did he want me to fight him? To say: I don't care about piss and shit and vomit? I didn't care about any of that, really I didn't. I would spend more time imagining his weakening muscles and turning stomach and yellowing skin if I couldn't hold his hand and say, "What do you want to do tomorrow?" Yes, it was the future tense, but it made no promises.

Or would I be a bad husband if I admitted that, in a sense, not being there was easier? It wasn't that I didn't want to be in the chair next to him reading or watching TV or holding his hand when he reached for mine. It was the others, the Barnabys.

The people who were molting birds with patchy hair and custard skin; who became stick-thin and then one day vanished altogether.

I was not hungry, but I walked in the direction of the cafeteria, hoping that the smell of breakfast might fill the dread pitting in my stomach.

Behind the bays of food, a cook hummed to himself while he scraped burnt potatoes from a chaffing pan. His white apron called attention to dark curly arm hair sprouting between his latex gloves and cotton sleeve. I tried to ignore his full lips and his straight nose, how his shirt pulled tight across his chest when he moved the pan, how he didn't look much different than Patrick, though his wrists were thicker, healthier. They were wrists that, I thought, could support someone. It was shameful to acknowledge that I could still be alerted to someone handsome out of what felt like survival; that my brain would look for another Patrick; that he would be, somehow, replaceable.

I forced myself to look at a tray of baked goods, which I was certain he hadn't made: cookies and dry looking breads. There was nothing I wanted, so I stepped back toward the man and took two spoonfuls of potatoes and a piece of hard chicken. I looked up, and he was there, watching me take the food he'd just set out. Was he waiting for me to criticize it? He was not friendly, did not acknowledge me with a smile or wave, and I was relieved that an unwanted dream could dissolve so quickly. I hurried to the cashier, paid, and sat near the window.

On the other side of the room, I pushed the food around the tray; tasted it, and then pushed it around again. I looked across the room. The man tested the tomato soup, nodded, and went into the back of the kitchen, out of sight. I was alone, aside from the cashier, who, hidden behind a fake potted fern, texted.

A pair wandered in — a mother and daughter judging from the same sloped nose and thin lips. Deep worry lines wrinkled the mother's eyes, and the girl's braided pigtails sagged over her shoulders. The girl sucked her thumb and squinted and rubbed her eyes. She yawned. They must have been new to grief; new to worry and how it kept their eyes open at night, listening to catches in breathing, wondering if, when, to jump in. I wanted to ask if they could still smell that hospital-smell people complain about, because I couldn't. I wished I could.

They walked across the cafeteria. The mother picked through the apples, held each one to the light, and replaced them all. Cereal for the girl. The mother ladled tomato soup into a bowl. The girl grabbed a chocolate chip cookie and held it out to her mother.

"Cookie," she asked. She threw away the commands and adjectives and verbs, like all children, and relied on her mother's understanding of what she wanted.

Maybe the mother would have said no on any other day—she opened her mouth, then closed it without speaking and nodded. Smiling at the cookie, the girl clung to her mother's shirt. The mother surveyed the area, taking mental notes of what to try, what to avoid, paid the cashier and walked away without her change. Her

hollow laughter echoed when he called her and returned the money. She led her daughter as if through a cloud, and sat down on the other side of the cafeteria.

When the mother looked down, I noticed her profile, which cut in and out at sharp angles. Her nose crested in the middle as if it had once been broken. She poked her soup with a black plastic spoon. She started crying. Not loud or angry crying, though anger could have been part of it. It was the kind of crying that releases large, sopping, slow, helpless tears into your tomato soup. The girl started crying, too.

“Momma? Want cookie, Momma?” the girl asked, “Here, cookie, Momma.”

She wiped crumbs and tears from her cheeks and waved the cookie at her mother.

Out of politeness, I looked away, but the girl’s voice snapped off the walls.

“Momma! No cry, Momma.”

Had Curtis ever been like that? Holding a cookie for Patrick? Maybe at one time, when he was younger, he would have tried to help, supported him. Now, he relied, too much, on his mother’s understanding of the world to even call his father.

“Momma!”

I abandoned the chicken and potatoes, and I hurried from the cafeteria between the doctors and the nurses talking in line. In my rush, I nearly collided with a family a small family of four that spoke Spanish that walked arm-in-arm, dragging each other forward. The oldest looking one, a woman with dangling gold earrings, repeated “*Días y ollas*,” which I thought meant, “Days and pots,” but she cooed it like a lullaby, an incantation for sleep, and I wasn’t sure.

Mary wasn't at her desk. Without someone to talk to, I fought the urge to pace, and contented myself with television. Ellen Degeneres danced, her arms flapped like chicken wings. She played three videos of ripped, muscled men auditioning to be her gardener; Patrick would have laughed if he'd seen them. Even before this, most things reminded me of him.

Footsteps echoed from down the hall.

The mother clutched a brown cafeteria napkin, and the girl carried a single, mangled dandelion in one hand while clutching her mother's shirt with the other. I waved at her. The corners of her mouth crested upward into a smile, forgetting, or not knowing, what people waited for in the hospital.

When I could ask the mother? Maybe the daughter would blurt it out, loud, embarrassing. Patrick loved kids because he couldn't hide anything from them. Curtis, that once sweet boy could always find his father's secrets, his chocolate and dollar bills in Patrick's kitchen drawers.

The girl fussed.

"*Shhh*," the mother drew her daughter's head to her breast, patted it, and then rested her head in her palm and stared out the window.

Without thinking, I dialed Curtis' number.

"Hello?"

He sounded like an irascible young man.

"Hello? Who is this?"

I hadn't expected him to pick up.

Mary poked her head into the waiting room.

"Your husband is ready for you," Mary said.

The mother whipped her head from her hand to look at Mary. That's it. Her husband. She looked at me, and thinking Mary was mistaken points at herself: Me?

"No, no," Mary said, "*His* husband."

The mother looked at me. Should she be surprised? Mothers often are. Two men. Husbands? It seemed so small then — an innocent judgement that I was too preoccupied to carry with me outside of the room. And still, it stayed with me. Those little moments of betrayal, when our guard has fall stone silent, have a way of surprising us and harming others.

I mouthed "Thank you," and she nodded.

"Hellooooo?" Curtis said. I was surprised he hadn't given up on the call.

"Curtis?" I said.

"Curtis?" The voice repeated, "I'm sorry, but you have the wrong number."

And then the voice was gone.

Mary led me to a room that was not used for treatment. In it was a small mint-green couch and two hospital beds that were separated by a small table between them, much like a hotel. There was a black scale near the door where Patrick sat while a different nurse, in teal scrubs, took his weight.

“You’ve lost three pounds,” she said. Her voice was cheery, as if losing the weight were something to celebrate.

“It isn’t some kind of diet,” I snapped. “He doesn’t want to loose weight.”

Patrick’s eyes went wide. It was, I think, the first time I said something about his weight, about being afraid for him in general.

“I’m sorry,” I said. My face flushed.

Mary waved the nurse out of the room. I wanted to call her back and explain to her that I was steeling myself for protection; that I could find a threat in anything anyone said. She was a casualty, it wasn’t her fault.

When Mary looked at me, I felt chilled. Not because she wanted to reprimand me, but because the slight shimmer in her eyes where water pooled near the corners, the tilt of her head, her hand on my arm, all of this revealed to me a familiarity with loss and anger. There, looking at me as if I were a cornered animal, she gave me permission to blame all of the flimsy hopes Patrick and I had cast into the world like children releasing clusters of balloons. Hope chokes whales. That’s what I thought. Somehow, I let myself arrive at a place where I could see hope as dangerous and insane while my husband’s chest and wrists were shrinking. Confirmed by a ditzzy nurse.

“Patrick,” Mary said, “Doctor Fineman just needs a few more minutes.”

She took the chart, flipped over a page, signed or wrote something.

Her presence meant something safe for us both. We did not have to guess or wonder. We did not merely sit in silence, for we used Mary to convince ourselves

that, when we were alone, we would talk about the things we needed to, we would wait. But, seeing him, thoughts in future tense crashed down upon me like a collapsing roof.

“Was the wait long?” Patrick asked.

“Longer without you,” I said.

Doctor Fineman entered the room.

Patrick came out of the bathroom, stood, and turned toward Mary. We said goodbye. Patrick walked, lacing his fingers between mine, placing one foot a few inches in front of the other, then the other, taking huge breaths of hospital air deep into his chest, but not stopping or faltering or tripping. I held him under my arm, leading him forward. In the waiting room, the daughter slept, curled into a ball, using her mother’s coat as a blanket and her pocket-book as a pillow. The mother sat across from the other family that had entered the cafeteria as I left it. The dark-haired woman with dangling gold earrings placed her hand onto the mother’s knee and looked into her crying face. She spoke no english, but she repeated, *Días y ollas, mija. Días y ollas*, and her tenderness conveyed all that her words could not.

I could not stop myself from resenting them.

Atascadero

Eat the tongue, Skinny says.

Two funny-guys in scrubs crack jokes behind the curtain. Their laughter tumbles like rocks onto the hospital's sterile floor. Skinny swears that the other guy—the one they shoved into the ambulance—had purple brains.

No, says Round-chin, they were iridescent. Fish-scale brains.

Skinny says: Think his will be fish-scale, too? They're the same breed.

The laughter stops. The curtain pulls back, Skinny and Round-chin march across the tile holding an IV and a bag of fluid, and I offer them the bruises on my wrists like over-ripe plums.

...

They threaten me with anectine, which they used to liquify Other Guy's brains, to make him feel like he's drowning.

Worked great, Skinny says, but the brains didn't leak from his eyes like we hoped.

Hell! Round-chin says, laughing. Tear-brains! Wonder what that tastes like.

Skinny points at me and says: You're on deck, and if the tongue don't disappear, then we'll know for sure if all of you have a problem with the brains inside that pretty, square skull.

Round-chin says that he's damn sure it's rainbow. And two other men, who heard them from hallway, laugh at his joke.

. . .

I had hoped it would be an unremarkable lay in the backseat of Other Guy's car.

He said, We can do it in the pine chips. But I was like No, because that's a carousel and those are monkey bars and your seats have that new leather smell, which smells even better when it's warm.

Plus, I joked, I'm not that kind of pervert.

He had my head pinned, so I watched a shiny nickel in the carpet reflect the blue, the red, the blue, colors that smelled like alarm.

He screamed while they dragged his bare ass over gravel and plastic and glass.

When they took me, my belt chimed like a bell, as if my jean-shackled ankles were a church. The patrol didn't have to say, Don't run. They knew I wasn't going anywhere.

. . .

Nonna told me that, one day, a bill would come due; that it would come, rolled up, in an angry man's fist; that he would be wearing baggy, aquamarine scrubs.

Nonna, I said, everyone has debts to pay.

She plunged her dentures into foamy blue liquid and tongued her gums.

There has to be a transaction, I said, I've gotta take something from someone in order to pay for it. What am I taking, Nonna?

Before Nonna had eight children, seventeen grandchildren, and two spoiled great grandchildren, Nonna worked at Misty's ice-cream parlor and day dreamt while watching men lure little girls to them with cones of maple-walnut. She knew how heavy business transactions were.

What am I taking, Nonna?

...

You cannot be trusted in a gym, I am told during the first treatment, the locker-room is for a certain presidential caliber of talk.

You're not wanted at sporting events, the doctor's say, the young may learn that there is more than one way to be strong.

Please, they say, do not come to church. You are a fire-hazard, and we do not have insurance.

From these denials, I have learned how to slip under the world, between cracks in buildings.

It requires quiet muscles.

Men who wear class-rings pretend to want to seal up these cracks, to stop the flow of me and him, Other Guy, but they leave gaps so that, when no one is looking, they can play in a place where people like me are found ass-up on leather.

I know.

I've seen them shimmy under the foundation.

. . .

I don't bother with the shoe. Other Guy, well, he tried. Started where anyone would have, with the laces. Ground them up with his molars and swallowed. His stomach quit, so they stuck the needle in his arm and placed bets.

I will not eat it.

Skinny breathes on my neck. Round-chin picks lint from his shirt.

Skinny knows I won't eat it.

He points the needle at his parched veins and arches his eyebrows. Maybe it is confusing for him, distinguishing his arm from mine.

Round-chin says, Man, stop screwing around.

The needle enters my arm.

Before my brain shuts off, doubt stumbles into Skinny's eyes. He thinks, for one second, that he might have pricked the wrong arm.

Little Plastic Castles

It is late morning and the oatmeal bowl will not come clean, no matter how much elbow grease you use. Over night, it sat in the sink, gluing itself to the white ceramic. It is scary to imagine what the grains might do to your insides, how they might gum them up. That thought is wrong—you know that. Oatmeal doesn't work like that. But, you keep working at it and forgive yourself for stealing the time that, as a promise to yourself and to Clare, you allotted to getting ideas from the mega-home-remodeling show.

Clare is in the shower, which is where she goes—instead of waiting for you to do whatever it is you do—to feel like she is being productive. But the water-heater is the type that can't provide hot water to more than one source, and Clare doesn't know that she turns the water cool and slows down your scrubbing. You don't mind the shoddy water-heater, or the humming refrigerator, or the flickering overhead light—there are plenty of broken things around the condo for you to fix. Clare seems to think

there is no point fixing them if you are going to move soon. You, on the other hand, when you are out of your son's earshot, you lay out your plans with her as if you were convincing her of the suitability of the condo for a growing family. You tell her that all the problems are small—that you'll get to the water-heater, the fridge, the lights, when you have the chance. She is still in the shower when your son's key turns the lock.

Felix kicks off his shoes. His footfalls are heavy and uneven. It is unlike him to move so slowly, but there he is, beside you now—a small, thin body absorbing heat from your own private atmosphere. You turn toward him, so he cannot tell you or his mother that you make him feel ignored, which shocks you each time you hear it. He seems to trust you more now than he did. It has not been said of you in three months, since March, maybe—that he is afraid to approach you. You collected those months as if they were sobriety. For a moment you feel swollen at the possibility of having learned to balance giving affection and repairing the damage of a poorly timed sentences. Your eyes are fixed on the sink.

“How was your day?” you ask.

Out of the corner of your eye, his hands, cupped under his chin, look as if they are filled with wine. He reaches for the roll of paper towels next to the sink. Whatever he holds, blood you realize, drips and splatters on the counter. His hand floats into your field of vision. The fingernails, all of them, are broken. The fingertips are scrapped, as if he spent the evening clawing his way out of a well. A feeling like strong wind turns you on the spot. You see him. His lip is split. His cheek is bruised

and swollen. Patches of his pale skull show through his brown curly hair. He looks neither like you, nor Clare, when he usually looks like you both. He is unrecognizable, except for his eyes, which are the shape and color of almonds—vaguely like your own.

. . .

Later that afternoon, Clare leans on the balcony. Wind flicks her ponytail, and her limbs poke out from an oversized chambray shirt. She should be cold, but she is not. When she wears your old clothing, she is all seriousness and determination—she is ready to repaint the bathroom, to rip up its tile, to put in new eco-friendly lights, to do away with the scuzzy toothbrush-holder. She looks out at the park below and tells you that she wants to move to Boston, Portland, or San Francisco—some place with skyscrapers that can puncture the atmosphere. You've known her long enough to understand that she thinks her dreams are easier to achieve if she lives in places filled with potential. "I have made an appointment to see a realtor tomorrow," she tells you. This time, it feels like she may make it happen with or without you.

Instead of potential, you see poverty and jagged skylines and charity walks and garbage-filled gutters. All cities have hotdog vendors trying to make a living, supplying the garbage for the gutters. You do not, however, tell her this. She looks into your eyes and guesses at what you're thinking—thinking, herself, that you may not be as brave as you'd like to be. The sky is turning the color of sand.

"Would you like to come with me?" she says, talking about the appointment.

Instead of running away, it might be a test of your bravery to stay put and to teach Felix how to defend himself against thick-throated bigots—to teach him how to be brave. The wiry poles of your arms annoy you with their thinness, and it crosses your mind that Felix might not buy into your show of bravery. Your list of achievements is short: asking Clare to marry you, raising a son. They're badges that you never added to your sash as a boy-scout. You had fire-building and knot-tying. Bowline! Square-knot! Clove hitch! Now: Marriage! Fatherhood! Clare waits for you to respond to her.

“There are always going to be people like that,” you say, “Anywhere.”

She considers this. Looks over the park. Someone's dog runs from one side to the other. Some yellow lab mix, maybe, which holds a tennis-ball in its mouth. It saunters to a man and a woman who hold hands. An ambulance skirts the edge of the park. The flashes of red light distorts the woman's would-be pretty face, which, without glasses, might be a blur of tears and smiling. You had been told that grief was like that—waves of joy and then despair. Ambulances always make you feel the need to pray for whoever is inside, although the way the world has treated your son taught you not to believe in God. The dog brings the ball to the woman, who takes it and then launches it farther than before, releasing the man's hand to get the distance she wants. You think that the man looks relieved to have his hand to himself.

“Did you hear about the kid in Hope?”

You shake your head. The newspapers are full of names these days.

“The parents wanted him to reform,” she says, “Locked him in a basement. No windows or anything. On the news, they said that the parents told the poor thing that God didn’t love him.”

She takes a deep breath.

“Reform is an ugly word,” she says, “It doesn’t mean what they want it to mean.”

“It is the only word they know to use,” you say.

Clare squints at you as if your meaning is a bright and ugly light.

“The town is twenty-five miles west,” she says. She looks over your shoulder toward the bathroom. She makes you believe that the town itself is a cyclone, swirling toward you, and you need to let her usher you all into the bathtub where you’ll wait for the roof to collapse and for the broken windows to pierce all the family photos with shards of glass.

. . .

The next day, you meet a realtor named Gregg. Two Gs. He makes a point of telling you this before he leans over his desk and shakes Clare’s hand and then yours. The air around him is full of the scent of something medicinal that would be, you think, named Ice Pick or Cool Crush if it were men’s deodorant. He smiles, and it is impossible to ignore his teeth, which are straight and square as dominos. Immediately, you distrust him, as you would distrust any other man who dyed his hair gray and wore a jet black suit. He folds his hands into a pyramid and leans back.

“We’re looking to get out of here. Some place bigger,” Clare says.

She lists Seattle, Ann Arbor, Providence, a few other capitals. The longer she thinks, the more obscure the locations become.

“So, you’re looking to get out of here?” he says. Clare does not seem to register that he repeated her sentence as a question.

“Yes,” she says, “This town is just not—”

“—big enough?” he says.

Clare thinks about this.

“No,” she says, “It’s not—”

“—lively enough? You’re a young family. You probably want something more —”

“—No,” she says. “Honey, what do you think?”

Every fish swimming through the three-hundred gallon tank behind you has the same stupid open-mouthed expression. They’re all thinking that the town is fine, more or less, and that the little plastic castle is surprising from every angle. As far as they know, there isn’t algae collecting on the glass, obscuring the world outside. For them, there is an outside, but they’re just not sure what it could give them that they don’t already have. Then the answer sails out of your gapping mouth.

“You think it is not diverse enough.”

Clare frowns.

“It is not diverse enough?” Gregg says. He bites his lip, and his two front teeth appear as if they too are thinking about what kind of diversity it could be possible to want.

“You don’t think so?” she says to you.

Gregg is surprised at how handily he has been ignored. He looks from Clare to you. It feels like he is already on her side. You consider being honest, and then you consider lying. A lie seems to be an expedient end to this situation—the one in which the wife finds a phrase as if it were a hidden cigarette-butt that proves her suspicion.

“Clare,” you say, “I think this is a fine town. There are going to be people like —”

“—Like what?” she says.

Both she and Gregg wait for you to tell them what kind of people you have in mind. How can you separate the people here from yourself? Clare wants you to name the person you were alongside all of the other people from whom she wants to pack boxes and flee. It reads like a reminder and a warning—a test to see if you’ve learned your lesson. But the mid-west that housed you for thirty-five years and programmed your stunning manners—that confrontation and negativity should never linger in your tone. Sweet. Everything should be glossed in frosting sweet cinnamon rolls and Gregg’s smile. But too much sweet sets the decay in motion like candy set to teenage teeth. Soon there are cavities, then root canals to cut out the infected insides.

“Bigots,” you say.

Clare scoffs. She knows that it is not a word you would use on your own—that it is her word, which she has pulled from you.

Gregg’s face flattens. He is not on Clare’s side, which, you realize, means he is not on your side either. You don’t want anyone to be taking sides yet. Gregg sits in

his high-backed chair with his fake hair and his orthodontia. Gregg, with two Gs, is thrilled to say, “Well, I’m sure I can help you folks with that.”

. . .

The next day, Clare asks you to take Felix to your barber. You have been getting your hair shaped into the same inoffensive bulb, tapered on the sides, longer on the top, for years. This time, the barber does not greet you. His large son, golden-haired, with an expression of simplicity, of never having enough to challenge him, appraises Felix, then you. He smirks and then continues sweeping. They are classmates.

“I will not cut his hair,” he says. He is shearing the hair of a child in a baseball uniform. He points to your son with buzzers, which fling a clump of dandruff speckled hair toward him.

“Phil, come on. You too busy today?”

The barber laughs. “Yes, and tomorrow, and the next day.”

You look around and see that only one other person is waiting—a boy, the one sitting in the chair, his father. You find it hard to believe, but Ah, you think, Phil is afraid for himself and for his son. He must have heard about the fight. The moment to protest floats in front of you, and you let it evaporate—not because you are afraid of the fight, but because it is not clear whose side you will ultimately take. Felix’s, you think—it is obvious,—you’re his father. But he should not know—he should never have reason to suspect your uncertainty. You are both trying to protect your children.

“I’m sorry,” you say to the barber.

Felix looks at you. His lip is scabbed. A bruise yellow under his eyes, which are watering and wide. Then he storms outside.

The barber, frowning, does not acknowledge your apology, but he watches you, eyes stoney, as you leave, which makes your footsteps feel inadequate, as if someone swapped your boots with shackles. Even your hands, which pull back the door, making a bell chime, are smaller than you realized. What are they good for? These useless hands. At any moment, you feel like you could shrink and then disappear. It is unlikely that you will ever go back to this barbershop.

Outside, the day is warm. Felix walks a few feet ahead of you, which you deserve. Being close to him makes your insides twist, which will cause you to spend time later feeling guilty while you uncoil them. Among the tangled threads of your thoughts, you can't tell whether you're mad at him, or at yourself, or both. Some knots don't budge. Right now, you are embarrassed, or you were—inside the shop.

Felix stops to look into the bookstore window. He wipes his eyes. His hands are maps of continents. His hands are bigger than your hands—more powerful, more useful. His hands are covered in scrapes and cuts. You look at your own, which are unblemished, and know that, somehow, they couldn't even clean the murky window that he looks into.

“You apologized to the barber,” he says. His back is turned to you.

“I—”

—“*He* should have apologized to *me*,” he says, “To *us*”.

Felix's voice is getting loud, heads inside the bookstore are turning.

“Felix—”

—“No,” he says, “You could have done something, but you decided not to.

You decided.”

Had you known this would have happened, you would have brought him to a different barber. This one was closest—that’s all. It was just the closest one. Sure, you could have asked where he wanted to go, but he was feeling sensitive, and this one was just the closest. You get your hair cut there all the time. He should have apologized—that barber who is just the closest one. He should have apologized to us.

. . .

Nothing smells in dreams, but you smell smoke. Their arms are gnarled tubers, their legs unremarkable, unchanged, are the high-socked legs of angry teenage boys. And with those legs, the four of them chase you. Each one of them wears a red trucker hat. Of course, their faces are melted pools of peach and tan, dripping like ice-cream, and you feel like they are everywhere. They part like water around a woman who pauses to look at advertisements of people with better teeth. Considerate, you think. She is no threat to them. You cannot outrun them.

Clare sleeps with her back toward you. She clutches the pillow, her fingers tense. The nightmare’s tremor lingers, and you kick off the blankets. As you ease yourself from the bed, she stirs, so you close the door with great care because it will be better if she does not know that you have been dreaming about being afraid.

A sliver of light glows from Felix’s bedroom door. He’s awake, and you pause outside of his door wondering if it would be too much to check on him. You have

some tips to share about healing a split lip, which works no matter who split it and why. The day you waited for as if it were a late dinner-guest has arrived in a drunken stupor, and, of the million plans you dreamt up to calm it down, you're unable to put any of them into action.

When Felix was ready to call himself gay, it was Clare who told you. He called her into his bedroom one night, and they closed the door. She was crying when she left the room, and she did not tell you why. She sat upright in bed and stared out at the streetlights while you rubbed her shoulder, wondering what the hell happened. Eventually, her head nodded forward and her mouth went slack. You got out of bed to check on Felix. The door was unlocked, but it held fast, closed, as if nothing but a cannonball could break it down. The next day, Clare told you that he had pushed his bed in front of the door because he was afraid that you would come for him in the night. This is what made her cry—that she told him to push the bed in front of the door—that it had been her idea. Now, outside his door, the answer is clear to you: you are not allowed to knock. Even if the advice you give him is pure genius, your knock is a sign of aggression.

He does not want you to do anything, except for maybe pass his room as if the door were invisible and go into the kitchen. You do exactly this, thinking that it is for his own good—to learn to be strong. You're protecting him. There can be ground rules. No more tight pants. That might help. "No more tight pants," you will say to him tomorrow morning over the pancakes you'll make just for him. To everyone else, you will say nothing because it is safest.

In the kitchen, the bulb flickers once and then, finally, burns out, so you open the refrigerator and pour gin by its light. You have decided on one thing tonight: you are not moving. It is a fight you are ready to have. You turn on the faucet. The noise might wake Clare, and the water is coming out hot, hot, hot, fogging your glasses.

. . . .

If Clare wakes, then she chooses to stay warm, half-awake, on her side of the bed. She does not come into the kitchen to ask you why the dishes are your top priority at two in the morning. You imagine that she opens her eyes every minute or so to look at the yellow of streetlights forcing its way through the curtains. They have never blocked enough light, and she needs total darkness to sleep. See—you do know her. A sense of pride flourishes within you. There is something desperate and frustrated about her resistance to sleep, and you feel like you can finally understand each other. Yes, you know her, but what have you done to fix the curtains? Several ounces of gin float in your stomach, and you plan to add several more. Now the water is running and there aren't any dishes in the sink. The water is cooling, and you're angry. When she has just woken, she is most vulnerable; she is likeliest to be persuaded that staying put is really a gesture of love, of commitment, for your son.

You take your jacket and then hustle down the stairs. The street is totally silent this time of night. Cars don't drive here unless they have a reason, and all of the neighbors are in sales or accounts or marketing or are otherwise people who work regular business hours. There is one librarian who works second shift, but she is off who-knows-where most nights. Has a reputation for her wildness—that one. You

refocus. There was a reason you stumbled out onto the street, though it slips through your mind and leaves a smoky aftertaste. When you can't remember something, you trace your thoughts back in terms of action and location—when you were at the sink, you were thinking.... It does not come to you, but you knew it was about Clare. How Clare can't sleep if there is too much light. Oh, you have it. The streetlight is an innocent and isolated sun.

All of the trees, which are planted into patches of soil encased in the sidewalks, are surrounded with bricks. There is a perfect half-brick, split in two as if by design. This is the one you pick up and cradle in your hand before you close one eye and take aim at the streetlight as if the brick were a rifle. No doubt swims through your mind—that you will miss the light, that you won't be strong enough to break it, or that you should angle yourself so that you are not throwing in the direction of Felix's window. You are powerful and capable. You can do anything. Your arm cocks back and then shoots forward. The brick soars through air, beautiful as a dove, past the streetlight and into your son's window.

...

Clare is holding Felix when you walk into the condo. She pats his hair. They dab their eyes with tissues and sleeves. Your son is shaking.

"Did you see who it was?" Clare says. She looks at your jacket and the red burning across your cheeks. She assumes that you charged down the stairs like a soldier when you heard the crash. So, you think, she was awake that whole time.

To them, a brick through the window in the night is no accident. How could it be? Clare is tracing the logical progression from a brick to a pitchfork to a gun to who-knows-what.

She says, “It’s okay, sweetie. We’re going to get out of here.”

Your son looks like Clare when he cries.

When Clare looks at you, her eyes are feral, and they tell you that this was inevitable—that this is because you had not decided sooner. You want to explain that the way the brick ended up crashing through the window was an accident, and, because you did it, it could happen in San Diego or Minneapolis or Burlington. It was a careless accident, which means you could have avoided it if you had taken the time to aim. The gin still circulates through your stomach and fingertips and head, which makes it easy for you to surprise yourself. The words “I did it” surge up in the back of your throat like bile, and you choke them back down. It is better for them to be afraid of someone out there, than give Felix another reason to fear you.

“No,” you say. “I didn’t see anyone.”

Felix said the same thing about whoever jumped him. They came up from behind, out of the sky or the ground or the spaces where the town’s loose bricks leave gaps between buildings. A blow to the head, several kicks to the ribs. They dragged him down the sidewalk and over patches of tulips and dandelion weeds. He clawed at the pavement. It was a disembodied force with too many hands to count that spirited him down the road. It was that force, Felix thought, that threw a brick into his bedroom window, hoping it might land on and crush his windpipe.

There are more things you want to say. This time, “It’s time to get out of here,” bubbles up and out, over your tongue.

Your son stops crying. He sits straight as a rod on the edge of his bed. He looks at the window, and his eyes go wide as if a shadow were climbing through it. His eyes follow something over the jagged shards of glass that sit in the pane as random as lightning strikes; they skate over the carpet where Clare told him not to walk until she vacuums, and then they climb your legs and connect with your eyes, suspicious of what they find there.

. . .

The next morning, Clare has the phone pressed to her ear before you’re up and out of bed. She sits, cross-legged, in a pool of sunlight that the morning always gives to the kitchen table as if the wood of the table were still a tree needing nourishment. Her hair is a messy ponytail, and she is wearing one of your long shirts, which is stained with white paint around the elbows.

“Can we look at the apartment tomorrow?” she says.

She looks from the empty coffeepot on the stove to you and then covers the receiver. She mouths: Sorry. To which you shake your head and wave your hand in the air as if your hangover were a pesky housefly that you could shoo away without caffeine. You say, “No problem,” and then fill the coffeepot to ten cups.

“Sure, but we’re going to want a place the same size,” she says. “Or bigger.”

She jots down a few notes onto her calendar and brings the pen to her lips.

Once you have the coffeepot gurgling, you inhale deeply and try to breath out some of the cloudiness that settled over you while you slept. After so much gin, it is no wonder your dreams were formless and characterless as oatmeal. The incident with the brick doesn't seem possible. There are no scrapes on your hands from a mishandled brick, no rubble between your fingernails, but there is glass hiding in the fibers of his carpet. Before you know what you're doing, you've pulled the vacuum from the closet and told yourself that, hangover or not, you need to fix the mess you made.

He is not in his room—he slept on the couch—but your neck yanks tight when you touch the doorknob. The shut door reminds you how he would not open it for you—that if he were on the other side, you would be shut out. You could knock and say, “Son,” in a small voice that, you hope, conveys sincerity and authority and reconciliation. But he would not open the door. Not for you, maybe not for a long time. Panic strikes you—that he may not give you the chance to apologize. With this thought in mind, you jam the plug into the wall and vacuum each piece of glass out of the carpet.

When you're done, the kitchen is silent. Coffee is done brewing. Clare is perched, again, on the balcony and watches couples walking through the park.

“I can't stop thinking about that kid in Hope,” she says.

Each word you might say is a lit match held near a straw house. They are words filled with dangerous potential that you cannot afford. You want to see you wife sitting in sunlight and making plans. You want your son to have more peaceful

nights of sleep than you've ever had. You told them that you wanted to move. Down there, on the sidewalk, you can make out the divot where the brick had been. Storm-clouds gather overhead, and rain speckles the sidewalk. Clare steps off the balcony, but you stay for a moment, welcoming the cool change on your skin. The smell of rain gives you peace, and you hope to take it with you—wherever you go.

We the Liars

F. had written all of his secrets on a sheet of yellow paper, which his father had given to him. He looked at his son over stacks of paper and the laptop on his wide desk. He said, "What are you doing?" but the telephone rang, and F. snuck into the hall. He was six at the time. At age ten, he would stand up in the classroom and begin dancing when the teacher's phone rang. At age ten, he would realize that the ringing of a phone did not actually make him invisible.

But without the self-consciousness of that future ten-year-old self, F. numbered the list to twenty. It looked something like this:

1. 1. *I lied about breaking the windo*
2. 2. *Seecrits make my stumick hev*
3. 3. *I ate the chacolut cake at nite and blamed Patty*

And so on.

When he finished, F. examined the list. He was convinced that he was the only six-year-old to have twenty secrets. The number seemed larger than himself, bigger than he could imagine. They could go on forever, he guessed. He wasn't even sure what twenty might look like if his secrets were laid in a row. It was just as high as he could count.

He put the paper into a pine box that had been made to look like a treasure chest. But he was unsatisfied. His secrets inside were vulnerable. He needed something to make it hard to open. Locks, he knew, were shiny brass, heart-shaped, and gumball-sized; that Patty locked her journal, and his father locked his cabinet. His father's lock looked like him: heavy and thick steel, very serious. F. did not know, at this time, about Masterlocks and thought it opened only with magic. Unfortunately, the only magical phrase he knew was "Open Sesame," which had already failed.

Instead, he snuck into Patty's room. She came home from middle-school four hours after him, and F. usually spent that time "Staying quiet," so his father could speak to people named Bill, Jorge, and Hon from his office. Her room smelled as sweet as she was, everything plush and lilac. But F. was not fooled. There were places, like near the closet and by the window, that were littered with frilly yellow socks and underwear and that smelled mean, too. F. was watchful of boobytraps as he searched under the bed, pushing aside a naked Ken doll and a teddybear that she didn't want her friends to see. He often heard Patty making the two dolls kiss, saying that they were married and were going to have babies and that she would take care of it/him/her for them. He liked his sister when she did this. He never saw a reason for

her to hide her toys. When he stood, he pulled on the teal quilt, which moved the pillow and revealed the journal peaking out like the sun from behind the clouds—the lock open as wide as a mouth.

He paused before taking the lock. Until now, he did not wonder what Patty had written that required a lock to keep it safe. Even now, he was not too curious, and this made him hesitate. Shouldn't he want to know? The cover seemed to fall open on its own. He read names he did not recognize “making out,” and “getting to first base,” which he assumed was about baseball. It was, he thought, boring. His secrets were better, more deserving of the lock. So, he put the lock into his pocket and rearranged the pillow. Before he left, he crawled under the bed again and pulled the Ken doll toward the edge so that, when his sister looked down, she might see the doll's foot and, he hoped, play with it.

To get to the backyard, he needed to pass through the kitchen where his father was slicing cucumbers with the phone tucked under his chin. Unafraid that his father would notice him, he walked quickly and held the box in plain-view.

"... well, I don't know if I could leave the kids alone, hon. Hold on—"

He put the phone down. He had spotted F. slinking behind him. F. froze, thinking that it might make him harder to see.

"Do you want to go to Diane's house tonight?"

F. shook his head. No.

He did not like Diane's. It was small and smelled of something pungent and herbal that he could not identify, but would later in life recognize as weed. And he

was happiest when his father looked under the bed for monsters before pulling the covers up to F.'s chin. Diane would not do this. She simply told F. To put himself to bed while she made pizza and taught Patty, who was still not old enough to watch them both, about nail-polish and movies and what boys really wanted. F. was afraid of the particular darkness of Diane's house, which took on a bluish tinge, so he left the bedroom door opened and wondered if what she said about boys was true.

His father crouched down, and F. pressed the box to his stomach so hard that, after he buried it beneath the hostas, the little pressure marks etched above his belly-button didn't disappear for over an hour.

"Would it be better if she comes here? Lizzie and I have tickets to see a play."

F. shrugged his shoulders and pushed open the screen-door. His father mistook F.'s hurry for a sign of apathy, picked up the phone, and continued cutting cucumbers while telling Lizzie that he could be over around 5:00, or whenever he could bring the kids to Diane's, whichever was sooner.

. . .

Patty got pregnant for the second time at twenty-one, and she miscarried that baby, too. After that, she moved back into her childhood bedroom, which had been rearranged to accommodate Lizzie's easel and paints and nightmarish prints. Every night, Patty pumped the air mattress full before laying on it in the dark to watch sitcoms with canned laughter. She lost the fiancé, the baby, and the baby-weight. She no longer kept a journal, even though, F. thought, it may have been cathartic. He did

not know where she went during the day, but hoped that she was eating wherever she went because he had not once seen her with a plate of food at home.

He worried about his sister, but when he came home from school, he had to sit in his room, the door closed, and edit his college application paper under a too-yellow light. If he had more time, then he would have felt guilty for not giving her enough of his own. F. was preoccupied with wanting to study philosophy at R-- University, but his father told him that, unless studied finance or economics, then he would have to pay for it himself. His father had passed down his handsome chin and brown eyes, but not his love or care for money, which, on some days, had made his life better. F. would apply to the community college and, in September, purchase a few composition notebooks and mechanical pencils.

By the time his classes started, Patty had moved into an apartment in the city and promised that she had a good job, but refused to say what it was. She came over for dinner the day before F. started classes and, before she left, kissed him on the forehead to say, "Don't let the learning change you." She winked and then carried her container of leftover meatloaf to the car. F. stood dumbstruck on next to the door. Never before had he thought of himself as someone with an outline, with borders that someone might tease with a magnet or with learning. He caught his reflection in the hallway mirror on his way into the living-room. His edges were intact, solid.

Lizzie and his father were intertwined on the lumpy love-seat. He stood on the threshold and looked from Lizzie's sweating glass of wine to the action movie on the television. His father always picked the films.

"What do you think?" his father said.

"Too much gore for me," Lizzie said.

They nuzzled closer together and did not notice F. until the credits started dancing up the screen.

. . .

Luis took F. by surprise in the campus library. Circulation had given him the duplicate key to study room 222. They did not know that F. was there already, studying Foucault and sweating because he did not understand any of it.

"Sorry, man," he said when he saw F. curled over a pile of thick books.

The silence of the moment before F. smiled thickened the air like a thunderstorm. If he were outside, Luis would have sought shelter, and a window to watch from as the lightning struck the metal chair legs, the doorknob, the hinges around them. This thin guy, his angular chin and average brown, unfocused eyes made his own dilate, which he experienced as slightly blurred vision and a warm sensation across his face.

He closed the door and brought the key to circulation. As soon as the girl behind the counter took it back, he worried that he would never see that guy again.

"Sorry," the assistant said, "Here is a different room."

She passed the brassy key over the counter, and when Luis said, "I changed my mind," she took it back as if it were exactly what it appeared to be -- a small key to a study room. Luis thought she was missing the point; that key was one road, and

he planned on taking another. He ran up the stairs, keyless, to get to the room before time took away his chance.

He stood outside room 222, and convinced himself that it wasn't bad to start off with a lie, so long as it got the guy's attention. He knocked. When F. opened the door, Luis gestured to the chair he had taken from one of the study carrels: "All the rooms are booked. Mind if we share?" F. looked over his own shoulder at the small desk that surely could not accommodate them both without their bodies touching. To him, Luis was the right kind of nice, a blend of the gentleness most guys are ashamed to demonstrate that they are capable of; it takes the form of laughter and smiling -- at the expense of no one, for the joy of it. He motioned for Luis to bring in the chair and pushed his books into a neat pile, leaving just enough space for another narrow body. Luis sat and pretended to do homework, the proximity of F. calming, unthreatening. After an hour, F. stretched his arms over his head, revealing the soft tan skin of his stomach. Luis did not pretend to look away.

A series of unimportant events occurred between when they finished studying and when they ended up on Carbuncle Pond's dock, smoking weed, and pointing out the constellations they knew by name. Ursa Minor and Major. Leo. Cassiopeia. Luis leaned over the railing and pointed at the Moon's reflection.

"What did you think it was before you knew better?" he said.

F. rested his arms next to him, let their arms experience the warmth and familiar closeness that he would associate, for years to come, with a blurring of his

edges; with an indistinct sensation of floating; of being malleable. His outline was not where he had thought it had been. Being with Luis proved this.

"I don't know," F. said, "I never gave it much thought."

. . .

Luis had wanted to tell their parents, so F. terminated their relationship after one year of sneaking around. Despite the nights they spent under the same sheets, which would soon raise suspicion if it hadn't already, and the days riding around, listening to rock, smoking all manner of things, F. was an overfull bookshelf—no space for this version of himself that did not quite fit anyway. Luis transferred his rage into a rock, which he pitched at F.'s car in the middle of the night. The windshield's crack woke Lizzie, who screamed that she was being kidnapped, and F.'s father, practiced in dealing with her night-terrors, let her ride out her fears. F. didn't think it was unreasonable to feel that her peace could be hijacked; she was a bystander to a lovers' quarrel that had nothing to do with her, but was almost entirely her fault.

The next morning, F. and his father inspected the windshield, called someone to fix it, and then sat at the table together, alone for the first time in months, to eat cereal and drink orange-juice. Lizzie locked herself in Patty's old room and painted, from memory, the men she thought were coming for her in her sleep, her sobs occasionally escaping the room. Absent Lizzie, he thought that they might talk about the cracked windshield, or what his father now called, "The Bad Decision" (studying philosophy), and maybe the truth about Luis, about what he and they had done, would

come out slantwise; the heaviness would lift, he would know that the secret hadn't been worth keeping. But his father held the his tablet between them and read the screen, muttering words, an incantation for invisibility, under his breath. He looked old there, at the breakfast table, where he could observe the world through a glass screen, at least for a few minutes, and not be part of it. He was old. His opinions had been formed long ago. Regret had an odd taste, F. decided; it was not familiar or warm, but coppery and cool, like the taste of biting a tongue so hard it bleeds.

The doorbell rang.

"F.? Can you get—"

"—Sure."

He had expected the windshield repairwoman, but when she arrived, F. found himself guilty of wishing it were someone else, someone who knew his secrets. Even Patty would have sufficed — just anyone who did not make feel hemmed in by what they thought they knew about him.

"Yes," he said to the repairwoman, "It's the car in the driveway."

Stepping barefoot in the cold grass, F. led her to it. A note was taped to the windshield. He snatched it before she had a chance to see the word written across it and wonder if it was true; if this young man was really a faggot.

. . .

By the time memories of Luis evaporate into misty clouds and take on the shapes of his other lovers, F. will be forty-nine, and his father will not be killed by the stroke he will have, but by the three heart-attacks that will come to him during his

sleep on his first night back home. His seventy-seven years, and their downward quality, will make the death unsurprising, welcome even. He will be buried next to Lizzie, who, F. isn't sure, his father ever loved, but he will have put up with her night terrors, and she will have dealt with his coldness, for twenty-five years. F. will weep for them both, when he is alone, or when Arun sits next to him at the kitchen table — it will not matter.

Patty will live somewhere out west, in the desert, and he will not know where or how to contact her. Each time she writes, the return address will be different or altogether absent, so he will write her a letter, addressed according to the last postcard, to tell her that their father is dead; that she will probably miss the funeral, and to not bother spending her money on a flight, which he assumes she is hard-up on. He will wonder if age has made Patty look like their mother. She will be older than their mother ever was at this time.

After the funeral, which Patty will not attend because she did not receive the letter and she is in Palo Verde helping teenage girls find abortion clinics, F. will convince Arun to move into his, F.'s, childhood home. Arun will think for a week before saying yes, but he will find the windows too drafty and the backyard in need of serious care.

“It is what happens when people get old,” F. will say, “They forget about the small things that we force ourselves to believe are important.”

They will purchase gardening gloves, rakes, shears, buckets, and a new hose from the local hardware-store, and then they will pluck the too-tall weeds that had

choked out the hostas and foxglove. Arun will dig the dead plants from the earth and find a small pine box, soft from years underground, closed with a small, rusted heart-shaped lock. F. will not recognize the box until he opens it and sees a list of illegible words, faded from water and time, on a once yellow, now brown, piece of paper.

“What is this?” Arun will ask. He will assume it must be from years ago, and he will be right.

F. will be too far away from that day when he felt heavy at the thought of keeping secrets, when not believing in God loomed large and frightening over his head, a hurricane on the horizon, when he misrecognized the boundaries of himself. He will not think of Luis and how, if he had known that there are two kinds of secrets, the ones that grow, and the ones that shrink, and that most of them are the second kind, his life would have been different. His secrets, the ones he remembers and will not share, will not delay his happiness.

Ave, Ernesto!

One day, when Ernesto was not yet a man, Pai told him to sit on the couch. Pai moved the bag of frozen peas and revealed a dark patch of gray fabric where the bag had been thawing under his back. Beneath his push-broom mustache, he gritted his teeth and grunted while shifting his overlarge stomach. Pai had called the pain in his spine *fogo de diabo*—devil’s fire—and said that, when he burped, the pain tasted like bay leaves, cumin, and garlic from Mamãe’s cooking.

Ernesto liked to believe that the memories he had of his father were accurate—that Pai had been guilty of coldness and also of suffering that sapped his willingness to do anything besides breathe the aromas of Mamãe’s *caçõila*, squint at the eight-inch black-and-white television, and cough until he died. There had been a time, Ernesto remembered, when Pai’s lungs were hearty, and he would sing along with the aftershave commercials in a high, honeyed voice. Pai joked that the jingles

helped him practice his *inglês*, which was probably why he had spoken like a Portuguese immigrant until the end.

Ernesto, Pai said, *escute*, you're a man now.

That was it? A man? He blinked at the swollen wrinkles on Pai's forehead. Ernesto had not thought the blossoming of three curly chest hairs and newly fragrant underarms meant he was a man. Working at the mill, eating boring masa and butter sandwiches from a tin pail, and sleeping next to a round woman like Mamãe who smelled of cherries and took up too much of the bed—*that* was how Pai defined his own manhood. When Ernesto imagined this life for himself, he saw a straight-backed man with strong arms and weak lungs, a man who would kiss his wife out of necessity instead of love.

Look at me, Pai said—his two eyebrows pushed together into a single black caterpillar. You'll take my place in the mill, and...

He began coughing into the air. Spittle landed on Ernesto's cheek.

Why couldn't *Pai* go back? He didn't use his arms to cover his mouth when he coughed, but at least he still had both of them—unlike Manny's father, whose right arm had been plucked by the weaving machine like a sweet fig from a branch. He had to bury his own arm in the garden himself, because Manny was too young to hold a shovel, and then he shuffled back to the mill only to have Mauricio, the foreman, tell him there was no work for him anymore. After that, Manny's father had to learn how to eat, how to strike a match, how to love himself with his left hand, and he struggled until Manny was old enough to take his place.

Ernesto remembered how beat up Manny's shoes were after two days of working at the mill. He bit his lip to stop the tears collecting in his eyes. Before, sandlot ball wore holes in his friend's shoes, but now it was friction against unfinished mill floors. Manny complained that dirt under his nails, greasy and blue from the dye, smelled like smoke. Ernesto looked at his own, clean hands.

Pai, I don't want to, Ernesto said.

Pai chuckled. He placed his rough hand on Ernesto's knee and said, It does not matter. You are twelve. Now, you are a man.

Ernesto brought his hand to his chest. The curly chest hairs had not yet exploded into a forest of coarse brown fuzz, but his skin was beginning to smell of cinnamon, and his two separate eyebrows were creeping together to form one.

He didn't argue, afraid that Mamãe would overhear and lumber in with her tea-towel twisted around her wrist to see who needed a reminder that the Carreira family did not argue. Instead, Ernesto sprung a leak, and his air began slipping away, stealing his happiness, too. He discovered that happiness had an opposite, and it was not sadness, or anger, but something so sugary and deep and disappointing that it turned bitter. He hoped that he would one day learn to laugh at that bitterness.

Pai had prearranged it. The next week, Ernesto would work his first shift.

Querido, he said, You are doing for your family.

That night, Ernesto barricaded his bedroom door, sat by the window, and listened to the river rushing beyond the mill. What more could he do? He had told Pai what he wanted, but wanting was not enough. Wanting did not heal Pai's lungs or his

back. Wanting did not stop clouds from hiding the moon. If he could have what he wanted, then he would have floated through the window, across the rooftops and stove pipes, and disappeared into the roof of Manny's house. There, he would stay, safe and unchanged, under the disguise of a different roof. Ernesto prayed for this to happen. He would hide from his father. He would hide from God, who was watching, Ernesto knew, because Mamãe said that when God was watching, he would smell oranges.

...

After Pai died, Ernesto found his father's musty blanket folded neatly on a shelf in the basement. Both he and Mamãe had held on for forty years after the night that he looked out of his window. It surprised Ernesto when Mamãe died first. Pai died not more than a month afterward. He did not want to live alone. Until then, Pai had taken his time with dying and done it thoughtfully, so everything in the house was well-organized for Ernesto to begin the process of grieving. He placed the blanket into a plastic bag and put it in the corner with the other items that he did not have the courage to throw away.

He pulled a small box from the back of the shelf and recognized Mamãe's curlicue handwriting across the top: *Ernesto—recordações—memories*. Nuns would kill for those perfect circles, Pai had said, every letter exactly the same height. Unlike Pai, who had used the Bible, Mamãe had taught herself to read and write with cookbooks. She had been better at mixing spices and meats than praying, so she paid attention to what she liked: to meat temperatures and flavors and using each

ingredient as a prayer itself. Bay-leaves were for her husband's back. Cumin for his lungs. Her favorite was orange—because no fruit was more delicious. She believed them to be a sign of God's love and sprinkled every dish with a pinch of grated peel. Ernesto thought she was the perfect kind of Catholic—one who treated the Bible itself as a recipe book, picking and choosing the parts to use that caused no one else harm.

He opened the box. Turnip-shaped bodies, squat noses, and wide, still eyes looked back at him from family photos. The resemblance was irrefutable, and these people—none of whom he recognized—had passed down their money problems, inexplicable drinking habits, and bad cholesterol. He flipped the photo over. His mother's handwriting marked the photo *São Miguel—1907*. This was what his parents had left behind. He returned it to the box.

Ernesto found the photo in which he made his debut. It was 1942. He was too young to stand, so he sat on Mamãe's lap and looked into the sky as if dreaming. Pai clutched Mamãe's shoulder. They were smiling, not knowing anything about electrical outlets or Social Security or the neighborhoods and markets where it was unsafe to speak Portuguese. These photos were proof that, despite what the neighborhood women said, Ernesto took after his Mamãe, and that Pai really had been the least simian of all the Carreira men. It was something, at least.

He returned the photos to the box and noticed that, at the bottom, there was an envelope: *Para Ernesto*. He took the yellowed paper and tried to read it. He used to be proud of how well he had forgotten the language. Whenever his father spoke,

whether he asked for a glass of water or a handful of grapes, it was not clear to Ernesto, whether he really wanted any of the things for which he asked. And, if Ernesto could never correctly interpret his father's desires, then he was free to do anything he wanted. Now Ernesto was old enough to regret, and to know that understanding was not only about language. What else was it? He didn't know, but he was glad that his parents had always spoken to him in Portuguese. He scanned the letter. One phrase caught his attention. Written twice, underlined—*feliz aniversário, nós te amamos*. A birthday card.

Something in the basement whirred, and Carl came into view, riding the mobile chair down the stairs. Red and white Christmas decorations were piled on his lap.

We should get one of these, he said, grinning. His spindly legs dangled from the chair.

Ernesto waved the letter at Carl.

Your mother's love letters? Carl asked.

If Mamãe had taken a secret lover after Pai, then Carl was the only person she would have told. No one had loved Carl like Mamãe.

Their uncomplicated affection began long before Pai and Mamãe understood the shape of Ernesto and Carl's friendship. They never really understood, but it had been enough that they did not ask questions. Ernesto knew better than to be suspicious of certain types of grace.

The night that Carl joined them for dinner, Pai had almost had Carl taken away in handcuffs. A black man had never before set foot into the Carreira household. He must have been trouble—that was Pai’s reasoning. Mamãe had convinced Pai to put down the phone, that Carl wasn’t a burglar; he and Ernesto were friends. Mamãe said, Come in! You like *caçõila*? Carl nodded—although he’d never heard of it—and sat, his large hands fumbling with the tiny port glasses.

Pai’s eyes bulged and glued themselves to Carl’s dark skin and wiry black hair. Ernesto kicked him under the table, but the pain in father’s spine overshadowed the weak thumps. Mamãe never drank, but she poured herself port and left Pai’s glass empty. To him, she said: I will pluck out those eyes with the sugar spoon and offer them up like Abraham’s lamb if you don’t stop staring. This was all said in Portuguese. Pai fixed his eyes on her. She turned to Carl and said, You like lamb? Carl, who had no idea what he should do while the tiny Portuguese man gripped his spoon like a weapon, did what came most naturally—he laughed. He laughed, and Mamãe loved him.

Back then, when Ernesto and Carl were new to love, Mamãe’s fondness for Carl made it easier for Ernesto to love him. His mother had arranged a shelter under which his devotion for Carl could grow unnoticed. Ernesto could love him because his mother had first. Still, while Ernesto and Carl learned the texture and weight of love—how love was like a cat’s tongue—coarse but pleasant, they fought. After one year together, Carl threw the ceramic-cow creamer against the wall. It shattered like hope, and cream soaked into the yellow floral wallpaper before they calmed down

enough to clean it. Ernesto understood why Carl had thrown it, and a part of him had believed the same lie—that men were not made to love other men. The thought always sounded gruff, like something Pai would say while running his thumb over splintered rosary beads, asking God to make it true.

. . .

Don't breathe, Mauricio said. He pointed to the vat of blue dye with tiny wisps waltzing over its surface. A tarnished silver whistle dangled from his neck. All the foremen at Lippitt Mill wore them.

Deep blue, navy. *Safira*, he had called it.

Turn here, he said. He demonstrated with his hairy hand on the wheel.

New, eager to please, Ernesto placed his hand where Mauricio's had been and turned it. He held his breath. The wheel inched forward and dipped long skeins of fabric into blue-black dye. The machine looked like a fat woman dancing, horizontal to the ground, with bedsheets on her arms. Ernesto didn't share this with Mauricio, who smiled often, but only after calling someone *burro* or *imbecil*.

He is not your friend, Pai had warned.

Mauricio's eyes narrowed on Ernesto. Ernesto was small boy—smaller than his father—with awkward hands and a scared smile.

Now you do it like a man. Faster, Mauricio said.

Mauricio leaned in. His mouth was too close to Ernesto's. His breath sweet like plums. Ernesto pulled and his lungs wept inside him. Pai hadn't warned him that it would hurt, that breathing would fill his lungs with lightning and set fire to his eyes.

Ernesto hoped God was watching, but the scent of chemical dye was too strong to tell.

Mauricio tapped his foot.

I'm itchy, Ernesto told Mauricio. He was on the verge of tears. He wanted to claw away his outsides.

Mauricio blinked at the word "itchy," shrugged his narrow shoulders, and laughed.

He pulled Ernesto away from the wheel to demonstrate changing the skeins. He instructed in soft, broken English, each sentence punctuated with laughter that Ernesto did not understand. Mauricio always gave himself a reason to laugh.

At the end of his first day, Ernesto filed out with men whose lunch pails clanged like church bells at their sides. Outside, the men enjoyed the clean air. They lit their cigarettes and shuffled home.

Manny had crept ahead and was kicking a stone. Ernesto ran up behind him, waving, calling his name.

Manny stood on the curb under a streetlight, and his greased hair shone black. He looked at the way Ernesto scratched his thin forearm and laughed at him. You'll get used to it, he said, The itching, I mean.

You're lucky, Manny said. In the looms, some people lose fingers or...

Ernesto kicked a rock into the street. It bounced against the pavement once, twice, and then fell into a roadside drain. He was standing on sore feet, holding Pai's

tin pail, and looking for his friend in the face of this young, joyless man. It surprised him how quickly Manny had become a man—a disappointed and rageful and impatient man. Ernesto knew he should feel lucky that he himself was not yet angry; that he did not squint at the world as if it were conspiring against him.

They walked in silence until the intersection of Perdu and Ames, where they separated and Ernesto walked home alone.

The house was warm like July, and Pai sat on the couch, listening to the radio. Mamãe prodded pork in the kitchen. She was singing, which meant that Pai had upset her. She once said that, when she was angry with him, he was better played low to the tune *Ave Maria*.

It is so hard to breathe in the mill, Ernesto told his father. He sat down next to him.

The breathing, Pai said, This is not the worst thing. At least you do not have hunger.

He laughed and offered Ernesto a grape from the pile on his lap. It was amusing to Pai—the grapes, the working, watching his son fumble with a role he himself had played so well. He ate a grape and began to cough. The sound gurgled like water sucked through a straw. Ernesto scooted away.

His father closed his eyes and sipped port from a tiny glass. He sucked his teeth, relishing the way port took the ache from them. He loved port, and he loved Mamãe—port when he was in too much pain to speak, and Mamãe when she said something she'd learned from a cashier in the grocery store. As for Ernesto, Pai

pretended that his son would become the man he wanted him to be, that it was as sure as rain, and work, and God.

Pai ate another grape. A commercial for aftershave played in the background.

Filho, he said, will you do me one thing?

Of course, Pai.

Make it louder, he said, pointing to the television with a shaking finger.

. . .

Where do you want this, Ernie? Carl asked.

Carl held the taxidermied crow as if it would pluck his nose from his face.

Set it down there, Ernesto said.

Some things, he would not mind letting go. Carl planted it on the floor and scooted to the far side of the basement. He inspected cobwebs and the creepy door to Pai's workshop.

When Pai had first fallen ill, he had taken it as a sign of imminent death and gone to Jenks's Funeral Home. He asked Mr. Jenks to see his fanciest model, so Mr. Jenks showed him the Gomorrhan, which was a mahogany coffin that was much too expensive. Pai couldn't shake the idea of his death and made one for himself out of Portuguese-immigrant-budget pine. He installed a frame into the velvet lining and nailed in a photo of Mamãe—the one of her in a wedding gown with up-done hair, certain that God would let him look at it all day while he sat on a cloud and ate grapes in heaven. That casket sat in his workshop for forty years, unused, collecting dust, and reminding them all that photos turn yellow with time.

One night, Ernesto found Pai fidgeting on the couch. His face was port-colored, and his right eye was wider than the left. Ernesto didn't ask what happened. Mamãe wasn't singing in the kitchen. She wasn't even cooking.

Sit, Pai said.

Ernesto sat. His father was puffed up, bloated, enraged like a boil.

Through clenched teeth, Pai whispered the story of how Padre Costa had visited and asked if Pai would need the last rites soon, since he hadn't been to church in months and there was a coffin in his basement. He had explained how he suffered, but Padre was unsympathetic.

What about your wife and your son? Padre Costa had asked. A man's duty is to lead the faith of his family...

Pai could not continue. He could not tell Ernesto about duty and faith, having been told that he was weak in both, and stared at the wall as if he could see Mamãe in the kitchen, flipping through a magazine. He unclenched his jaw and said, Tomorrow, we must go to mass and beg his forgiveness.

The next morning, Ernesto wore his father's old black leather shoes, which were already too small for him. Mamãe pinned a plastic sunflower in her hair, and they left for Saint Miguel Costa's to sit through the Portuguese mass.

Mamãe fell asleep during Padre Costa's long, lulling sermon, and then woke when the music began. She shouted *Amen* in accented English and then nodded off

again, her sweet snoring masked by guitar and sonorous choirboys. Ernesto patted her gloved hand to assure her that he was there, suffering through it, too.

After mass, his father, clutching a wooden cane, approached Padre Costa.

Padre, he said, our *filho*, he is lost. Will you make him better?

It was a surprise, especially to Ernesto, who did not believe that he was lost.

Mamãe, who was examining the architecture, the lurid, painted statues, and the weeping saints, said nothing. She had already shown her disagreement with all the decadence by refusing to put money in the donation baskets and could not be troubled to fake guilt to Padre. They did not need another statue or stained-glass window. But Pai had given double, and now he practically knelt before the priest. God would not think the Carreira's were stingy.

Padre Costa placed his hand on Pai's shoulder, and the two men walked to the side, leaving Ernesto with his distracted Mamãe. From a distance, Ernesto noticed how Padre Costa's young face had the symmetry of a portrait, how his blue-eyes were like drops of dirty rain.

Ernesto heard Pai say, *Muito obrigado, Padre. Obrigado.*

When Pai and Padre returned, they were smiling. What would his punishment be? Altar boy service? Handing out sugary *malasadas* at the *feira* during the summer?

We must come to mass every Sunday, Pai said. As a family, we'll come and help you.

Mamãe remained silent. She was already exasperated with the neat ladies in tall hats and pressed black dresses. Ernesto looked at the uncomfortable pews and sighed.

The following week, in the church's basement, where faithful women scrambled from one room to the next carrying pans of chouriço, peppers, and spice, Ernesto learned about guilt, about being a man of God.

A woman sat at the folding table, smoking cigarettes, selling one-dollar tickets for the buffet dinner, and chatting with couples, *Como vai você, senhor?* The Lord is born only once a year, and the church must spare no expense.

Pai handed her three pristine one-dollar bills with a smile. Padre Costa appeared behind them. He wrung his smooth hands and bit his bottom lip. He wore the white surplice and purple stole, in which he received the most compliments about his apple-shaped chin. The downward curves of Padre Costa's cheekbones and quiet, graceful gestures made him handsome. Ernesto blushed. It couldn't have been a sin, he thought, to think the mouth-piece of God was beautiful. He was no different than Mamãe and Pai, Evelyn, or the other parishioners who thought that no one was more humble than Padre Costa.

Senhor, he said to Ernesto, will you help me with something?

He placed his warm hand on Ernesto's shoulder. Ernesto's stomach fluttered. His mouth turned to cotton.

Pai was glowing; his helpful son had been recognized. He would be saved after all, but from what, Pai couldn't say. Nevertheless, Ernesto had become a good man under their guidance. Pai nudged him forward with a hand on the small curve of his son's back.

Claro, Pai said.

Ernesto squirmed at the thought of being close to Padre Costa, of being alone with him. If the priest could hear God, then he would know Ernesto had thoughts that did not make him a man.

Pai nudged Ernesto, who looked at Mamãe to say something. Her mouth crumpled into a frown.

Again, Pai was deciding for him, and Ernesto would have preferred to choose on his own. He still thought that being a man meant having the power to say yes or no when someone asked of him things he might not want to do. Ernesto narrowed his eyes at Pai and wondered how his father had gotten it so wrong. He wondered if Pai would be able to stand with the cane kicked out from under him. Stripping others of choice—was that what it meant to be a man?

Siga-me! Padre Costa whispered. He spoke to God, and he knew that He had an ear pressed to the roof of the church and was prone to headaches. Ernesto followed him.

Padre Costa's office was tranquil. Light filtered through rose bushes outside the window. The room smelled nothing of the vase of lilies on his desk, but of

cinnamon and oranges. God watched them—and His mother, too, painted in oil, looking at the chubby baby in her arms.

When the door closed, the scent of oranges dissolved.

I need you take those boxes to the kitchen while I change, Padre Costa said.

He draped the purple stole over his desk. Ernesto saw no malice in his eyes, only a sincere desire to give a young man purpose. Then Padre Costa lifted the white surplice above his head. Underneath, he wore a white t-shirt and a pair of blue jeans.

If Ernesto were a man like his father, he would have turned away. He would have ignored the heat that erupted on his own cheeks when he saw the tuft of hair sprouting from Padre's waistline. Ernesto's failure to ignore, his desire to see, aimed bellows at a kindling fire within him. All that air made it blossom. The light of the flames shone out from within himself, and he could see the shadows it threw all around him like spokes on a wheel, each one casting him—with his pointed nose and weak chin—as a version of himself that he did not recognize. All of this for a few cumbersome boxes.

Padre Costa asked again if he would carry those boxes there, and he pointed to four of them near the door. He hung his surplice on a clothes-hanger and beat the wrinkles.

Yes, Padre, Ernesto said, but he did not move.

The dryness in his throat threatened to choke him. Ernesto thought of Manny—his slick hair sparkling under the streetlight. He had said, You'll get used to it, but his voice sounded like Pai singing commercials in bad English. Pai, his father—the

man of the house. Pai, the man in pain, who asked Mamãe to bring him a handful of grapes because he could not do many things on his own. Pai, who himself was so afraid of failing as a man, had decided that his son should be enough for both of them. But Ernesto could not look away from Padre Costa, and he did not want to. He was beautiful.

Ernesto imagined Mamãe bringing his father grapes. The fruit was heavy. Her arms shook. Her face, her arms, her roundness. His mind was not tamable. His mother dropped the grapes. She danced in a lush field fenced in with stone walls. Tea towels were draped over her arms, and she spun in circles singing *Ave Maria*, crying, laughing, shouting, *Amen, Amen, Amen*. Shouting because God did not have an ear pressed to the roof. He was not listening. God was never listening.

Ernesto's eyes focused and he saw Padre, who was tilting his head as if Ernesto had projected his thoughts over the portrait of Jesus, and he was worried, worried, worried about the condition of Ernesto's soul.

Ernesto, will you carry these boxes? he asked again.

. . . .

Ernie, will you carry these boxes? Carl asked.

Carl covered his nose with his sleeve to block the smell of the dead crow he had found behind a box of family photos—its claws pointed toward the sky. Ernesto couldn't smell the crow. He was preoccupied with finding space for the box of photographs and overwhelmed by the sudden scent of orange.

He looked from his husband to the boxes, some of which were musty and water damaged.

What is inside? Ernesto asked.

Carl opened one, and together they looked. Like Mamãe's box of *recordações*, Pai had kept a box of things he did not want to forget: pink raffle-tickets that were used each year at the *feira*, a delicate glass snowflake ornament that was too precious to place on the tree, and, among other things, a framed photo of Carl and Ernesto.

Ernesto did not know when or how the photo made its way into Pai's hands, or into this box where it sat alongside other photos of ancestors and people Ernesto had never met but were important to Pai. He and Carl stood in front of the red rock mountains in Sedona. Carl's arm was wrapped around Ernesto's shoulder. He remembered that their car had broken down on the way to the Grand Canyon, but they were smiling. It had just started to rain, and an elderly couple drove past and offered to take their photo.

We don't know how to help you, the old man had said, We can't change a tire.

Pai knew that story, and he had laughed at the two of them. Two men! Can't change a tire!

Ernesto opened the frame, hoping that Pai had written something for him to find. Towards the end, Pai was that sort of man—the kind who knew more than he let on and was afraid to say so. But there was nothing written on the back of the photo. Ernesto and Carl lifted the box, for it was heavier than one person could manage, and placed it on the shelf where water would not damage it if the basement flooded.

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