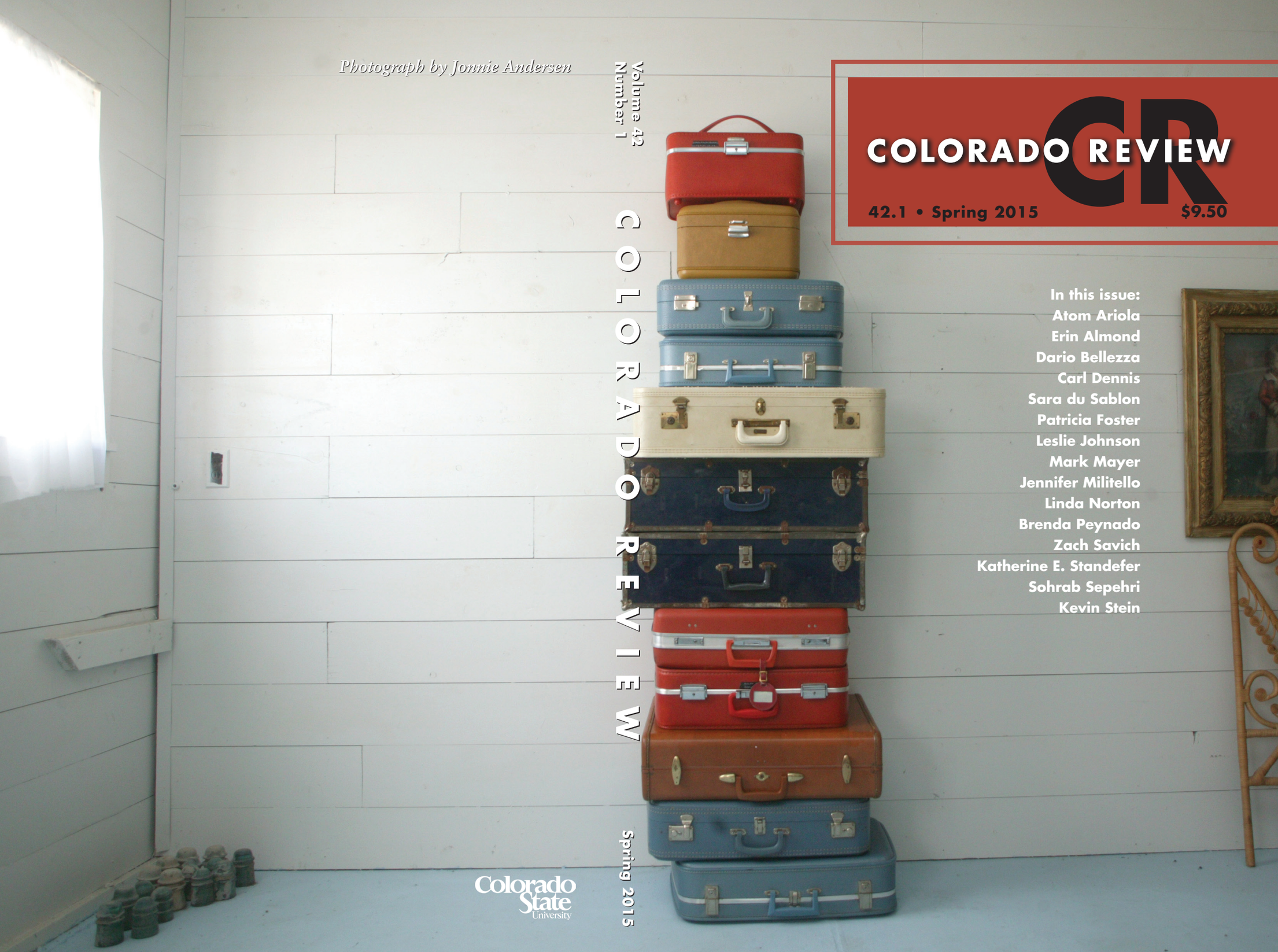

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EDITORS' PAGE

Emerging from the grip of winter, when we've retreated from the cold, holing up in the warmth of our homes and for a time losing touch with the earth, with one another, sometimes even with ourselves, we long to reestablish ties once the green reveals itself again. The fiction and essays gathered here, in this spring issue, bring us stories of people seeking connection in its various forms. Among the stories, we have Erin Almond's "The Dying Game," in which the narrator desires a closer, more loving relationship with her ailing mother, but old grievances stand in the way. A college freshman in the throes of an eating disorder, out of touch with her own body, yearns for connection with someone—*anyone*—in Leslie Johnson's "Midterm." In the aftermath of his parents' divorce, an eleven-year-old boy reckons with the new relationships the three of them form in Mark Mayer's "Strongwoman." And in Brenda Peynado's "Storage," a woman unable to confront her husband's disappearance remains tethered to his memory as she continues to manage the storage complex they've owned for thirty years.

In nonfiction, Patricia Foster's "The Lost Years" revisits a period in her life marked by the isolation of illness and the anonymity of temp work, a time of profound disconnection to health and creative energy. Linda Norton's "Ash Wednesday" offers a glimpse into the emotionally complex bonds—and boundaries—among her siblings. And finally, in "Shock to the Heart," Katherine Standefer contemplates the connections between electricity, her heart, and the device that regulates its rhythms, an internal cardiac defibrillator.

Hang up your coat, loosen your scarf, and come join us in this spring issue.

—STEPHANIE G'SCHWIND

Among the many interviews broadcast surrounding the terrible murders in Paris, there is one I cannot and do not wish to forget. Responding to the question "Do you fear for your life now?" one of the surviving writers for *Charlie Hebdo* replied: "My fear has nowhere to go. My friends are dead." It is the awesome privilege of catastrophe to consider the unimaginable afterlife of this very moment. Yet surely, the unimaginable is defiantly, undeniably real, and travels quietly beside each moment of our lives. I am heartened, reading over the poems now gathered in this issue, to see the ways in which this fellow-traveler is loved by poets . . . loved tenderly in Carl Dennis's "Repetition" as "the same words but spoken with more compassion" . . . or loved ultimately in Roberta Senechal de la Roche's "Vital Signs" as "the sum of taken breaths." The unimaginable is the friend we never thought to see, just now coming into view.

—DONALD REVELL

ERIN ALMOND

THE DYING GAME

I.

My four-year-old daughter, Lydia, is lying on a satin blanket on the living room floor, eyes closed, plastic flowers scattered over her pink dress. Her friend Monique is a year older and has blue eyes and what Lydia calls "princess hair." As in, "Why do I have to have dumb brown hair instead of princess hair like Monique?" I tell her she is beautiful, that her hair isn't dumb brown, but chestnut like her father's, and that brown is the color of chocolate, but all she sees is dirt. "I have brown hair, too," I sometimes say, but Lydia only huffs. "You're my *mom*." Moms cannot be princesses, although occasionally they are mean queens, mysterious beings in possession of poison apples and magic mirrors. At the moment, Monique's golden locks are covered with a black veil (a lacy stocking I allowed Lydia to steal for her dress-up box), and the expression on her round face is uncharacteristically solemn.

"Pretend you're my daughter," Lydia says, her eyes still closed, "and I just died of cancer."

"What kind of cancer?" Monique asks.

"A really bad kind. First you get a fever of 280 degrees, then you have strep, and then it turns into cancer," Lydia says.

"Should I get the doctor? Maybe you need medicine."

"Okay, pretend I'm *about* to die." Lydia sits up. "And every time you visit me in the hospital I remind you what a bad daughter you were."

I'm in the kitchen, washing dishes. Lydia is old enough now that when she has playdates I can get stuff done instead of having to entertain her and her guest. She and Monique are especially good at achieving a state Lydia's preschool teacher calls "flow." Their ideas bubble up and bounce off each other in endless, ever-changing dramas. Lately, with Lydia's grandmother back in the hospital, it's been all about death and dying.

"Sara, Lydia's dying," Monique tells me.

I put a freshly rinsed mug in the dish rack. "That's terrible," I say.

"She needs medicine."

I feel a flutter inside, a kind of urgency. Usually I give them crackers, sometimes strawberries when they're in season. This time I go for the brightly colored tin we keep up on the high shelf and get out the M&M's. "This is really strong stuff," I say, as Monique's face brightens. "It kills cancer fast."

"Pretend even that medicine can't save me!" Lydia calls from her resting place on the living room floor.

Monique bounds over to her. "I think you might live."

Lydia gives her a withering look, takes an M&M, and flops back down on the satin blanket. "Pretend I'm still dying. And you're jealous because I get to go to heaven and you don't. You don't even believe in it."

"Okay," Monique says.

I hang the dish towel on the rack and try to think of another chore for my helpless hands.

II.

I was three years old the first time someone I knew died. I remember my great-grandmother lying on my grandmother's couch, beneath a blue blanket. My parents and I were visiting my grandmother for Easter, and the guest bedroom I stayed in had a framed wedding photo of my great-grandmother and great-grandfather on one of the bedside tables. I had trouble believing that the sickly old woman on the couch was the same woman in the black-and-white photo, with the beautiful, serious face, her lips full and—you could tell, even without color—red. She was tall and buxom and my great-grandfather, who was only nineteen and terribly thin, looked tiny next to her.

The distance between us—her life and mine—was unfathomable, and so death, too, was very far away.

Now my great-grandmother looked tiny, dry and brittle like an old rose pressed between the pages of a Bible, the blue blanket barely moving with her breath. We were alone; the rest of the adults had gone outside to look at the bunnies in the

backyard hutch. It had seemed a good opportunity to raid my Easter basket.

"I'm dying," my great-grandmother said. "I have cancer."

I stared at her and hid my fist behind my back. I already knew what death was, at least the Catholic version. She'd go to heaven and be with God and Jesus and the Virgin Mary. There would be angels with harps and little white wings. Unless she'd been very bad, in which case she'd burn in hell for all eternity. But I didn't think the pale old lady lying beneath the blue blanket had been very bad. I didn't feel sad; I felt fascinated and maybe even relieved. The distance between us—her life and mine—was unfathomable, and so death, too, was very far away.

I opened my hand. The pastel M&M's I'd snuck from my basket had already left little marks of color on my palm. I offered her one, and she shook her head. She closed her eyes and I ran back outside. Later, when I told my mother and grandmother what my great-grandmother had said they refused to believe me.

"My mother would never say that to a little girl," my grandmother said.

"Sara must have overheard us talking about it," my mother said.

But I knew what I saw. I knew what I heard. A few weeks later, my great-grandmother was dead.

III.

There's a playground near our house that is most easily reached by walking through a cemetery. The gravestones are ancient, some of them hundreds of years old. *John Hardy, Lost at Sea,* 1849. *Ebenezer Crouch, Beloved Husband and Father,* 1743–1802. *Baby Rose,* 1915. I walked those shady paths often when Lydia was an infant, reading headstones and doing the math. The babies made my throat ache. I imagined painful births in dank rooms, dirty cribs, and feverish mothers.

When Lydia was two, she wriggled from her stroller and began climbing on the stones. I should have stopped her, out of respect. But there was something reassuring about my young, healthy daughter, with her flushed cheeks and easy laughter, scrambling over those grim markers. She loved the giant statue of the Virgin Mary; raised without religion, she called her, simply, "The Lady." She liked to press her fingertips into the engraved words and point out letters she recognized. Any name

that began with an *L* would cause her to squeal, "Lydia! That says Lydia!"

One afternoon, Lydia spent the whole walk jumping in piles of sunlit leaves, tossing handfuls over her head. The oaks and maples still had plenty left on their branches, and the air was crisp, not yet biting in the way it would be in the coming weeks. My eyes stung—it was almost too much. My beautiful baby was now a rambunctious toddler, hurtling through the world. How much of our allotted time had we already used up? How much more would we get?

My mind wandered, as it often did in those days, to my own childhood. Was it possible that my mother had once felt that way about me? That before she became obsessed with my "purity" and whether or not I was behaving the way a good Catholic girl should, she felt how fleeting our time together was? Could that be part of what made her hold on tighter and tighter—until I felt I had no choice but to run away at sixteen? Even as an adult, living two towns over, with an atheist husband and two-year-old daughter, I felt restless in my mother's presence. I made sure our visits never lasted more than a couple of hours; sometimes I just dropped Lydia off and ran errands. I took note of the lesson: if I want my daughter to stay, I need to let her go. Maybe not so profound, after all, but more difficult than it sounds.

Checking my watch, I realized we'd stayed at the playground too long. I needed to get home and start supper before Harris arrived. He was only an adjunct then, and the hours were brutal, the pay insulting. We'd decided—okay, he'd decided, but I hadn't put up much of a fight—not to try for a second baby until he'd found a more secure position.

Children sense when you're in a hurry, and of course that's when they slow down. Walking back through the cemetery, Lydia wanted to climb all her favorite stones and say hello to The Lady. The light was taking on that grayish purple, late-afternoon hue, there was a chill, and all I kept thinking about was Harris's mood when he came through the door and I'd only just started boiling water. Couldn't Lydia cooperate this once?

But she'd already abandoned me—darting off between rows of flag-festooned military graves, until she got to an ancient stone that had cracked in half sometime in the past two hundred

years. She stood in front of it, not moving, although I called her name over and over.

"I'm going to count," I said. "And I'm getting you if you don't come by three." I counted, and then stomped over. "Lydia, it's very important that when Mommy asks you to come, you come. You have to listen, okay?" She remained eerily still.

"Lydia!"

I was next to her, ready to yank her back to the path. But then I saw what had her so transfixed. The place where the stone was cracked was swarming with bugs—little black beetles packed densely into a seething shroud. Seeing those things made them come alive on my skin. I could feel frantic legs, tiny hungry mouths. "Please," I begged. "Let's go."

But she wouldn't or couldn't move, and I finally had to pick her up and carry her while she screamed. It was dark by the time we got back to the house, Harris's battered Civic parked in the driveway, and the front-porch light on. I could see his silhouette in the living room window, his body a dark shadow behind the white curtains, moving into the dining room and then the kitchen, and I knew that he was pacing, wondering where we were. He might have called my cell phone, but I wouldn't have heard it buried in the diaper bag.

I rushed inside, apologies ready, but stopped when I saw the look on Harris's face.

"Lydia, go wash your hands for supper, honey," I said.

"Your mom called," Harris said gently. "She has cancer. They need to do more tests, to see how far it's spread."

"What?" Mom seemed fit as a fiddle, the kind of widow who kept an immaculate garden and volunteered her time at two or three charities a week. "That can't be right."

The water was still running in the bathroom when Lydia came bounding into our room. She jumped into Harris's arms as if her fury had never existed. "Guess what?" she squealed. "Mommy *hates* bugs!"

IV.

When I was sixteen, I had a boyfriend who hung out in cemeteries. This was back in the early nineties, when I still gauged a man's attractiveness by how closely he resembled Axl Rose. Travis looked a little like a brunette Axl, with his long hair and

skinny jeans, and he was my first real boyfriend since running away from home.

One night, we went to his favorite graveyard, the old one near his house in Vernon. There was a third-quarter moon; the air was still warm and slightly humid. I wasn't scared when I was with Travis. And I was mostly terrified in those days. I'd left my parents' home, along with their stifling religion, but the price of freedom was high: I lived in a friend's basement, worked two part-time jobs after school, and wasn't sure I was going to graduate. I'd started having anxiety attacks, moments when I was convinced my heart was going to burst, or sudden headaches I was sure were caused by tumors. I'd wake in the middle of the night in my borrowed room, the certainty of death all around me. Staring at my hand, I'd imagine it cold and lifeless, or look at my face in the mirror and see the skin melting from my skull. *Someday this will be a long time ago,* I thought. The line came from *Little House on the Prairie,* the book that had first shocked me into full consciousness of my mortality as a child, and it still raised goosebumps on the back of my neck.

She seemed crueler than ever, believing in God at a time like that. Now I know she was in shock, and that her grief was simply locked inside.

Travis led me between the stones, blue and gray in the half-light, silent except for the occasional hum of cicadas and the whoosh of traffic on the main road half a mile away. He stopped at a tall monument, one with a top wide and flat enough for him to sit upon. He climbed up and held out a moonlit hand to help me follow.

"This is Edward," he said when I was next to him. "He died in 1872. Sometimes I come here and visit him."

I put my head on his shoulder, inhaling his Travis-ness—cigarettes and leather. "Hi, Edward," I whispered. I could feel something, a kind of thickness in the air. It wasn't a ghost exactly, but some kind of presence. A gentle tug from the other side.

"Do you feel that?" I asked Travis.

"Feel what?"

I knew then, in a way I've never been able to explain, that Travis was going to leave me. I became hyperaware of the glow-

ing stones, the pearly moon, the feel of Travis's arm around me, which seemed to pulse with heat even through his heavy jacket. I wasn't afraid, then, because I felt my own aliveness so acutely, even though, or perhaps because, my current joy was tinged with a far-off but certain sorrow. We kissed and touched each other as we'd been doing for months, but waited until we were back at Travis's house to make love. We did it there, on his single bed, like the frantic teenagers we were, our bodies live wires, sparking again and again.

A few months later, Travis went backpacking in Europe and took up with an older woman who lived outside Barcelona, and I returned to my parents just in time to see my father before he died.

v.

I'd been back home for three months when I awoke to find my mother sitting alone at the kitchen table. My father was the one who got up first, made the coffee, and walked the dog. But that morning my mother was alone, a look of quiet resignation on her face, the schnauzer's mournful snout resting on her slippered feet.

Mom had her hands curled around her coffee cup, and steam rose up from it to her face, but she made no move to drink. The morning sun streamed through the window behind her, gilding her graying curls and making the tiny hairs on her chin appear like golden dust.

"Dad had a heart attack last night," she said, her voice impossibly calm.

"Why didn't you wake me up?" How could I have slept through it, the paramedics, the screaming ambulance, my mother's inevitable panic?

"There was nothing you could have done," she said in a flat tone. "The Lord called him home."

She seemed crueler than ever, believing in God at a time like that. Now I know she was in shock, and that her grief was simply locked inside, waiting. But then I saw her piety as a punishment, and in my teenage solipsism, that punishment was doled out to me alone. It was—along with all her casual asides about how nice it must be to live rent-free—another way for her to chasten me for leaving home. Now it felt like *she* was the one who was leaving, held aloft by her belief, while I was left to wade in the mess created by my father's death, alone.

VI.

When Lydia was three, somebody retired and Harris was finally offered a tenure-track position. We celebrated with a rare dinner out at our favorite vegetarian restaurant, The Green Queen, and split a bottle of Russian River Valley pinot noir.

Harris almost never drinks, and he was definitely feeling it by the time we got home and paid our babysitter.

He sat, swaying on the bed, and allowed me to gently undress him.

"I know what you've been waiting for," he said, as I unbuckled his belt.

"A new car?"

"Are you kidding? The Civic will last forever!"

Harris had already had that Civic for a few years when we first met. It's midnight blue and still carries the faint scent of the Camel Lights he smoked before I got pregnant. I had an old Tercel, but I gave that up, along with my sommelier job, when Lydia was born. Not that I'd planned on a long-term career in the restaurant arts—I was still searching, I think, for what would become my "thing." Unlike Harris, who knew he wanted to be a writer since the third grade, I collected aspirations like some women collect shoes. In college, I played in the student orchestra and studied abstract painting and French. I met Harris when I was going through a poetry-writing phase—I thought, what better job for someone who's competent in a handful of impractical things?

Looking back now I can see that I was afraid of taking a stand, choosing one thing over another. My parents had chosen their dogma, and it had made their world small. It had made me hate them. I wanted my world to be as large as possible. I wanted to try everything.

Until Lydia. After she was born, my world shrank to fit within the boundaries of breastfeeding and nap time, and that was just fine with me.

"Okay, I'll bite," I said. "What am I waiting for?"

Harris flung his pants across the room. They hit the chair we kept our already-worn clothes on, then dropped to the floor. "All this." He gestured at his half-naked body. "The baby juice."

"I'm probably not even ovulating," I said. "And your sperm are drunk."

Harris pouted. I realize that doesn't sound sexy, but to me his pout is very attractive. So is his bare chest, and he was unbuttoning his shirt. "They're just a little buzzed," he said. "Don't worry."

I stepped out of my stilettos, relics from my restaurant days.

"You sure?"

"You don't want another baby?" His voice was soft, suddenly sober. "*She* would want that for you. Especially now."

The reference to my mom didn't seem quite fair. We didn't know she was terminal yet, but it was obvious things were going downhill. "Of course I do." I sat next to him. "I just don't know if this is the right time."

He reached for my bare foot, kneading where it was sore from the high heels. "It's never the right time. If you wait for that, you'll wait forever."

I met his gaze, and it was like that moment with Travis, only instead of knowing Harris would leave me, I knew that tomorrow there would be papers to grade and troubled students to counsel. I had him now, but not forever, and that made *now* crackle with life.

"Okay." I sank down onto the mattress, my foot still in his hand. "Let's not wait."

VII.

Six months after that night at The Green Queen, I was pregnant. Harris and I walked around for a few weeks, shooting each other conspiratorial smiles, and whispering about how we'd break the news to Lydia. But when I went in for that first important visit, there was no heartbeat, and an ultrasound confirmed what my doctor suspected: a miscarriage.

She advised us to wait, to see if my body would let it go on its own. It took two weeks before the cramping and the blood, two weeks of carrying death in my belly, like a poison apple I'd somehow swallowed by mistake.

VIII.

It was only a matter of time before Monique told Lydia there were corpses under the cemetery stones. Lydia was almost four, and this marked the real beginning of her fascination with death. "Why do people go in the ground when they die?"

she'd ask. "And where do they go after that?" And sometimes, "Where was I before I was born?"

Was it a cruel coincidence that my mother told us her cancer was getting worse—was possibly terminal—that same week? Nearly two years after her initial diagnosis, the doctors were losing hope. They recommended a second round of chemo and more invasive surgery, both of which Mom declined.

"God decides," she told me over the phone. "When your time's up, it's up."

"You've got to get more treatment," I insisted. "Or at least a second opinion. What about 'the Lord helps those who help themselves'?"

But Mom had spent too many years volunteering to take care of the dying in her parish. The way Dad had gone—suddenly, in his sleep—seemed to her preferable than submitting to another poisonous IV drip with questionable benefit.

"It's God's will," she insisted, and I was reminded of my rage. At thirteen, I'd concluded that my parents and I lived in separate worlds. I lived in the "real" world, and they dwelled in a religious fantasy, one that made women second-class citizens and favored dogma over reason. Or maybe I just wanted to go to concerts and wear the same clothes as the other girls my age. Maybe I didn't want to attend church and repeat the same dead words I'd heard all my life, the rote prayers that could never be as sacred as the rock anthems that made me feel alive.

Now I was stuck in another pointless argument with my mother, forced to speak her language instead of mine. "God made doctors," I said. "God made medicine. He would want you to at least try."

"Oh, honey," her voice cracked—and it was with some alarm that I realized it was with laughter, not sadness. "Don't you think I've already prayed on this? If you really want to help me, you could try talking to God yourself."

What could I say? She was a dying woman who'd just made her wishes known. I told her I would pray. I told her I hoped she'd change her mind.

IX.

Mom is still living at home, but her hospital stays are becoming more frequent. It's not unusual for her to be admitted for weeks

at a time, and soon she'll be in hospice. But today is a good day, and she's asked if Lydia can come for a visit. If Lydia notices that her grandmother's papery skin has faded, she doesn't say anything. She asks if Grandma has any cookies—my mother doesn't bake, but keeps a good assortment in stock—and settles in with her to read.

"You sure you're okay?" I ask, before making my getaway.

"Yes, shoo," Mom says. "We're fine."

I'm in motion the whole time, radio loud in the car, the way I never let myself blast it with Lydia. Bank: check. Post office: check. Stop 'n Save: check. I'm fighting death, not with grand gestures but with little ones, by sharpening my focus on the minutiae of everyday life. What we have for supper matters, whether or not Lydia gets a bath before bed. I tell Harris we can't keep throwing our clothes on the already-worn-clothes chair, that we need our spaces to be orderly and clean. He sometimes lets out tiny, impatient puffs, but mostly complies with my new rules.

At thirteen, I'd concluded that my parents and I lived in separate worlds. I lived in the "real" world, and they dwelled in a religious fantasy.

An hour later, I use my key to let myself back into Mom's house. I can hear her and Lydia in the kitchen. Peeking around the corner, I see they're working on a puzzle, something for Easter, in pastel shades.

I should go sit down at that sunny kitchen table, maybe give my mother a hug. But since I'm a coward, I remain in the corner, just out of sight, and listen to them instead.

"What's heaven like?" Lydia asks.

"It's wonderful," Mom says. "I'm going to see my mother, and your grandfather, and all my family and friends who've died."

"Can I go there, too?" Lydia asks.

"Someday," Mom says tentatively. We've talked about how Harris and I don't want our children indoctrinated into Church beliefs.

"When?"

"When *you* die." Mom makes it sound like some special privilege.

"But if Mommy and Daddy don't believe in heaven, does that mean they can't go?"

I peek again, just in time to see Mom handing Lydia the last piece. "Don't worry, Lyddie. I'll be praying for them."

Lydia fits in the puzzle piece and looks up at her grandmother. "Me too."

"Have you been saying your Our Fathers and Hail Marys at night?" Mom asks, and Lydia nods.

They share a secret look and for a moment I'm shocked, both because Mom has done this behind my back, and because Lydia—who compulsively divulges her every thought—has learned both prayer and deception, despite my best efforts.

Why I'm smiling about this, nearly laughing actually, I can't say.

x.

Later that night, when I tuck her into bed, Lydia is full of questions. Harris tells her that when people die, they live on in our memories. I tell her that some people believe our spirits go on, that they watch over the people they love. But my favorite story about death is that we start over again in a new life. "Maybe you get to be a baby again," I say.

"But how do you *know?*" she asks.

I envy Mom her religion in these moments, the answers laid out so neatly. Harris and I have only questions. But how do you explain that to a four-year-old?

"It's a mystery," I say. "You'll just have to wait and see."

"I want to be a baby again," Lydia decides.

"But you haven't even gotten to be a grown-up yet," I say. "There are so many good things ahead of you."

"Grown-ups are always working and cleaning and going blah-blah-blah." Lydia laughs.

"Yes, but grown-ups get to stay up late," I say, rising from her bed.

"Me too!" She holds out her arms for me to pick her up.

"You have to sleep so your body can grow," I say. "Our bodies are done growing."

I close Lydia's door and join Harris in our bedroom, where he's reading a book written by one of his former students. "It's terrible," he says, "but it's going to get a lot of attention."

I lie down next to him and rub my temples.

"Did you call your doctor?" he asks.

"I forgot."

He sucks in his breath. "Sara."

"We were busy. We visited my mom, I ran a ton of errands. It just slipped my mind." This is a lie, of course. I'm not ready to ask my doctor if it's safe to try again. Harris thinks you can just erase death with new life, but he hasn't lost anyone close to him yet. He doesn't know that grief has a lifespan of its own.

"Promise me you'll call tomorrow."

Harris doesn't look at me when he talks. He's still flipping the pages of his book. I get up and walk out to the back porch. It's late spring and too cloudy for stars. But there's a thin moon floating up there, and I watch it for a few minutes before going back inside.

XI.

"Why are you so sad all the time?" Lydia asks. It's dinnertime, and Monique has gone home after a long afternoon of deadly diseases and elaborate funerals involving multiple costume changes. Harris is working; he's at the university around the clock this late in the semester. I've baked us a frozen pizza, and I'm nursing a glass of Malbec while Lydia picks the cheese off her slice.

"Do you think I'm sad?" I ask.

"Daddy says it's because of Grandma."

"Yes," I say. "I'm worried about Grandma."

"Do you still love me?"

"I always love you."

"What about when you're mad? Like, when I accidentally break something?"

This makes me laugh. During one of the "funerals," Lydia or Monique—it's unclear exactly who—sent a pillow flying into one of the living room lamps.

"Even when you accidentally break something."

"Will you love me after you die?" Lydia bites into her decheesed slice.

"Yes."

"Even when there's no more earth or moon or stars? Will you love me then?"

"Yes."

"Good," Lydia says, still chewing. "Me too."

XII.

Mom is in hospice now; I haven't visited in three days. Still, I try to back out of going on Sunday.

"You have to work, Harris. It's okay," I say. "I can stay with Lydia."

He gives me a tired look. There are purple shadows beneath his eyes. "She's your mom," he says.

"Life doesn't just stop," I say. "We have to think of our daughter."

"Lydia's having a blast at Monique's. She's fine. I'll work until she gets back."

The hospice ward is similar to the rest of the hospital, except more intense. The astringent scent of cleaning fluids that can't quite conceal the decay, the creak of beds and the squeak of nurse's shoes. I pass a young woman in the hall and wonder if my face looks as stunned as hers.

Mom's room is small but private, with a view of the river. I sit down in an uncomfortable mauve chair and take her hand. I don't remember it having this many bones. "How are you today?" I ask.

"Father James came," she says. "He's my favorite."

Her bedside table is piled with rosaries and prayer cards and a musty, old Bible. These things seem quaint amidst all the medical equipment, like artifacts from another, more hopeful, age. Next to them is a card from Lydia, crayoned fairies with magic wands, rainbows, and giant hearts. She can spell only a few words: *Mama, Grandma, love,* and even though the letters are sometimes backward, you can tell what she means.

I want nothing more, in that moment, than for my mother to have eternal life. I want it for Lydia, for Harris, for myself.

Mom notices me looking at the card. "She keeps my room pretty," she says, her voice trembling with pain.

I think of my conversation with Lydia the night before, and I can feel my throat tightening. "She asked me if I would love her even after I die," I say.

"What did you say?" Mom closes her eyes.

"I told her I would love her forever." My voice cracks, and I swallow.

"Of course you will," Mom says. "We have eternal life. That's part of God's plan, why Jesus died for our sins."

I wish I lived in her world, that my experience was shaped by such ardent belief. I want nothing more, in that moment, than for my mother to have eternal life. I want it for Lydia, for Harris, for myself.

But then she ruins it. "You may not want to hear this," Mom continues. "But I pray for you every day. I ask God to forgive you."

I cannot live in my mother's world because there I am, and always have been, bad. At sixteen when I lost my virginity, at thirty when I refused to baptize my daughter. And yet part of me—a small but significant part—is able to acknowledge my mother's words for the act of love they are. What else can a dying woman do for her daughter, but take a deep breath, say a prayer, and push her away?

Mom squeezes my hand. "I'm sorry," she whispers.

This surprises me. "For what?"

"I made a lot of mistakes," she says.

My first instinct is to contradict her, to tell her no, she was a wonderful mother, and I was an ungrateful daughter. But with so little time left, we should say what's true.

"Parenting is hard," I say. "I make mistakes with Lydia all the time."

"She's amazing, and I'm so proud of you." Mom is looking straight at me now. "It'll be the same with the new baby."

"Baby?" I never told Mom about my miscarriage.

"Lydia will have a baby sister," she says, like there's no question. "I'm only sad I won't be around to meet her."

I look into my mother's watery blue eyes, and a flash of something moves through me—fear? recognition? "I lost . . ." I begin, but Mom shakes her head.

"I've always loved you," she says.

At first I don't believe her. Did she really love me that time I came home drunk in tenth grade? When she pulled my hair so hard she came away with a clump of it in her hand? At my father's funeral when I refused to join the line for communion and she hissed at me, *How dare you?*

Looking at her now, I don't see just my mother; I see Lydia. The way she gazes at me like I'm the most important person on earth. How she loves me even when I yell. "I've always loved you, too," I say.

Mom smiles faintly and closes her eyes, and I sit beside her until she falls asleep. Then I take the packet of pastel M&M's from my bag and leave them on her bedside table. She probably

won't eat them, but I want to believe that she will. Before getting up from the chair, I close my eyes and see my great-grandmother, not as she was the last time I saw her, during her own battle with the dreaded C, but healed, young again, with that beautiful, serious face, and her lips so red they shine crimson even in black and white. She's sitting beside my mother, waiting.

In the car on my way home, I remember again that moment in the cemetery with Travis, when I sensed Edward. There is something that divides the living and the dead, some thin veil, and there are times, usually when death is near, that the veil flutters open. I believe this now, in some certain but unverifiable way. Maybe I'm just as superstitious as my mother, after all, with her God in heaven surrounded by angels and saints. Or maybe, like children, we all need to turn life and death into a story, or a game, in order to make it okay for us to play.

XIII.

I pull into the driveway, turn off the car, and open my door. It's a stunning, early-summer day. Monique's house is behind ours, and beyond the fence I hear the girls playing in the wading pool. They're good fairies, fighting the mean queen who wants to banish them to some icy land. A friendly wizard—played by Monique's two-year-old brother, Oscar—gives them magic flower petals and I hear Ellyn, Monique's mom, yell at them to stop decimating her marigolds.

There is a loud splash and two high-pitched squeals. "You did it!" Lydia yells.

"You vanquished the mean queen!"

"Now we celebrate with fairy juice!" Monique shouts.

Another loud splash, an indignant yell, and Ellyn's stern voice: "Girls, you're soaking Oscar!"

"Sorry," they call, not sounding like they mean it for a second.

I step out of the Civic and lean against the open door. I want to remember this moment, the smell of the lavender I've planted in the flowerbed next to the driveway, the slight breeze cutting through the humid air. My baby, now almost five, laughing as she frolics with her friend. I can't hold onto any of it; no one can. With every breath the time grows short. But we knew that, didn't we? When we signed up for this crazy deal, when we decided to be babies again? I place my hands on my belly, imagining it swollen with life. I breathe out and wait for it, that feeling of beautiful, stupid hope.

LESLIE JOHNSON

MIDTERM

Midmorning in mid-October, in the middle of the campus, Chandra stopped in the center of the crisscrossing sidewalks. She pulled the phone from her handbag and pretended to be texting someone; she smiled down at the screen as if someone had texted her back. She felt other students brushing past her on the walkway, but didn't look up at their faces.

She had left her dorm room fully intending to go to class, even though she wasn't prepared. Today in Gender Perspectives they were supposed to be discussing sex slaves in third world nations, a series of articles based on the real-life stories of young women who were prisoners in brothels forced to do disgusting things or be brutally punished. Chandra hadn't gotten the reading done, but she could still go to class, and when it was her turn to speak, she could say it was horrible, she couldn't believe that such things were happening to young, helpless girls in this day and age, and how could she be wrong? It *was* horrible. She *couldn't* believe it. If she read the articles, Chandra figured she would probably feel exactly the same way as she felt now anyway. She wasn't afraid to go to class. The professor was nice. If she could tell that Chandra hadn't done the reading, she wouldn't embarrass Chandra in front of everyone. She might ask in a concerned voice to speak to Chandra after class, though, and Chandra could tell her that she was a little behind because she'd had the flu.

Chandra had spent the last two days in her dorm room, pretending to have it. Not that she really needed to put on a show. Her roommate, Jillian, didn't care. They were not enemies, but they were not friends. Between her boyfriend and her sorority, Jillian rarely slept in the room and used it mostly for the closet space. When Chandra had heard the key in the door on Monday morning, she pulled the sheet up to her neck and mumbled that she wasn't feeling well. Jillian wrinkled her nose and opened the window between their beds to let the germs out. Chandra had spent the day watching YouTube videos on her laptop. She had

an open bag of animal crackers in her desk drawer, with seventeen crackers left inside, and she ate four at a time, every three hours, and threw the leftover one, a walrus, out of the window into the night sky.

On Tuesday, she had the same bad feeling that made her stay in her dorm room. Not sick, but not regular—a feeling like something bad was happening and she just didn't know exactly what it was yet.

This morning, Wednesday, Chandra had awoken with fresh resolve. Enough already. *Up and at 'em,* as her mother used to screech through her bedroom door. She made her way to the dorm bathroom down the hallway. After seven weeks at college, it still felt funny to Chandra to wear shower shoes, which were highly recommended to avoid fungus. She always carried an extra towel with her and hung one on the hook outside the showers and kept one wrapped around her body until she was inside the stall. When she let the towel drop and she was standing there in only her shower shoes, she thought sometimes of those porn girls, naked but still wearing high heels.

This morning she had taken her time, even though she knew there were people waiting for their turn. She closed her eyes and turned her face up to the showerhead and let her hands rest on the sharp knobs of her hip bones, which were her favorite part of her body. She would go to class today, and tomorrow, and then all she had on Friday was math lab. Hump day. That's what her dad had always called Wednesday. And the torture chamber was what he always used to call his job. *Oh, boo hoo hoo!* Chandra could remember how her mother used to mock him when they'd fight at night before the divorce. *You have to talk on the phone and write claims and report to a boss! Poor you! Too bad you can't get work at a plastics factory and breathe toxic chemicals all day and die in your fifties!* Because that was how Chandra's grandfather whom she never met—her mom's dad—had died. From lung cancer, even though he never smoked; they all knew it was the plastic fumes. And she'd started to cry a little, not about her grandfather she never met, but at the memory of her dad's voice saying, *It's over-the-hump day, Sweetie Peetie. Can we do it? Can we make it over?*

Now the walkways were clearing, everyone delivering themselves to their 9:50 classes, and Chandra should have been in-

side Auerbach Hall, but she remained in the middle of the intersecting sidewalks. She was wearing her hair tied back with a paisley scarf and her brown boots and black leggings and a long corduroy shirt over a purple knit turtleneck. She looked fine. She should go to class. She looked fine.

The campus was still. The red brick buildings, the bright yellow treetops shimmering in a crisp breeze. Maybe, she thought, she should get a coffee at the student union. And a banana, maybe. She hadn't eaten yesterday except for some peanuts from the vending machine. She could have a banana, and maybe a Pop-Tart with the crusts cut off.

She hated to go to the cafeteria, but she could do it. She could go in there and get a coffee and a Pop-Tart. She was looking toward the union at the end of the walkway, and suddenly someone was standing under the big maple tree next to the building. A guy. A tall guy wearing a peacoat. Where did he come from? He seemed to be standing very straight on purpose. Was he looking at her? It seemed like he was looking at her! Chandra held her phone to her ear and tossed back her head and tapped the toe of her boot on the walkway and laughed, and even though she knew the guy was too far away to hear, she said out loud, "Seriously? Listen, I gotta call you later." Then she dropped the phone into her handbag and walked with purpose on the walkway to the left, toward the union, keeping her eyes on the building, not allowing herself a glance at the tree or the guy standing under it, but then she did glance, and he was gone. Disappeared. She stopped and looked around, but didn't see him walking away in any direction—not toward the library, not toward Dana Hall. She turned in a slow circle.

Not sick, but not regular—a feeling like something bad was happening and she just didn't know exactly what it was yet.

"*Hello*."

She jerked her shoulders, taking a breath—more of a stupid-sounding hiccup, actually. With three more steps toward the union, she could see his body lying flat on the ground like a corpse beneath the tree. He propped himself up, one elbow at a time. His reddish-brown hair stuck up on one side; crumbled

pieces of brown leaves clung to his coat sleeves. Was he smiling at her? His lips were curled up a little, anyway. Chandra's stomach twisted. "Sorry, like, were you," she mumbled, pushing a piece of hair into her scarf, "were you saying something?"

"I said hi."

He had a patch of acne on one side of his jaw, and his Adam's apple looked weird, like a big walnut inserted for no good reason under the skin of his neck. His eyebrows were bristly, but his eyes underneath them were okay. Greenish-brownish. Looking up at her. She said, "Hi."

"You want to see something?"

Chandra didn't answer, but she didn't keep walking either.

He said, "You have to come closer to the tree to see what I'm talking about." He pointed up at something in the branches of the maple. "From underneath."

Three students came out of the union. One of them was saying *Shit! Shit!* in a gleeful voice. Chandra looked over her shoulder at them, long enough to see them huddle together as one of the girls cupped her hands to help the boy get his cigarette lit in the breeze. Chandra looked back at the guy under the tree. He was sitting up normally now, cross-legged, and so she sat down next to him, with a couple of feet or so between them. "What?" She looked up into the branches, where he'd been pointing. "What were you looking at?"

"I'm looking at a particular leaf, the one on the smaller branch that's attached to the largest branch, right *there*—" He pointed above their heads. "The one that's completely red, the deepest red compared to the ones around it. Do you see the one I'm talking about?"

Chandra craned her neck. The maple leaves were mostly lemon yellow, some tinged orange, their tips transitioning to scarlet. A few mostly red. She tried to spot the guy's perfect red leaf among the foliage. "I see it," she lied.

"I'm watching it until it falls."

"Why?"

"Because. I believe it will be worthy of seeing."

"Hmmm." Chandra saw the three students walking away, their laughter fading. The guy stretched out on the ground again, his hands behind his head, and Chandra extended her legs and leaned back on her elbows. Above her, sunlight illuminated the bright leaves; they trembled like chandelier crystals. She said, "I'm supposed to be in class."

"We're all *supposed* to be somewhere. But I can *choose* to see one red maple leaf come to the end of its life. To see the moment it releases from its branch."

"I guess."

"We see only what we look at. To look is an act of choice."

Chandra let her arms splay, relaxed her head on the ground, gazing up at the canopy of golden-plum. "I guess."

"Have you read Berger? *Ways of Seeing?*"

"I take it you have."

He made a noise, a sort of grunting sound. "I sound like an asshole?"

Without moving her head, Chandra shifted her eyes. His face was a couple of feet away from hers on the ground. "Maybe." She pretended to laugh a little, so he would know she was kidding. He smiled, and Chandra felt suddenly aware of her knees. Why was she wearing leggings? What had made her think this morning that she looked good in leggings? Her knees were too knobby for leggings. They stuck out like knots in the middle of her thighs and calves, like that big bulge on the tree branch over her head where another branch must have broken off in a storm or something.

"Ahhh!" The guy's mouth gaped, his eyes suddenly widening. His face flushed so the acne on his jaw didn't look so noticeable. He quickly rolled and lifted from the ground into a crouching position on his knees. "Did you see it? Did you?"

"I did," Chandra lied again. "I saw it."

He smiled, a big smile showing his teeth, which were large and straight, and Chandra wanted to ask him if he had a retainer from his orthodontist that he still wore to bed at night like she did. She said, "I was going to get a coffee."

He pulled up the sleeve of his leafy jacket. There was a watch on his wrist, the kind with hands and Roman numbers, which made Chandra wonder. Who wore a watch? He said, "Let's wait ten minutes. At eleven we can get early lunch."

We. She felt the veins in her neck start to pulse, the way they did when she got nervous. She took out her phone and scrolled Facebook. She clicked on a video link of someone feeding a doll-sized baby bottle to a squirrel in a blanket. She said, "Wanna see something?"

He held up his arms in an X, shaking his head. "I gave it up."

"What?"

"Technology. Personal technology, that is. I understand that

the cafeteria we're waiting to eat in is powered by technology. But you know—my cell phone. My laptop. Even my iPod. That was the hardest, actually. Because I love my music. So much."

"What do you *mean?*"

"I'm unplugged. I disconnected myself from cyberspace and all the gadgets. It's an experiment, right? To see what I discover about myself, living, you know. Without the texts, tweets, sound bites, Instagrams, everything constantly separating us from the life that's happening for real right in front of us. Around us. I'm going to write about it."

Chandra nodded. "Steinmetz gave us that same extra credit, but his was just for cell phones. We were supposed to not use them for a weekend and keep a journal about it. Some people were going to do it, but then he said you actually had to give him your phone for the weekend. He was going to lock them in his desk. So nobody did it."

The guy's mouth twisted to one side. "This isn't *extra credit*."

He looked at his watch again. "You should come with me. After our lunch. Did you know that you're allowed to listen to the rehearsals in Jaffrey Hall? The music students are practicing for the parent weekend concerts, and we can just walk into the auditorium today at 1:10 and listen. I went yesterday for classical. Chamber groups playing Bach concertos. Amazing. When was the last time you actually *felt* the vibration of a cello's strings?"

He stood up, and so did Chandra. He was at least a foot taller than she was. Between the flaps of his coat she could see his gray sweater underneath. He was thin, but not too thin. She could see some extra flesh at his stomach, which she liked. Chandra liked to be much thinner than any guy she was standing near. It made her feel larger somehow, or stronger or something, rather than smaller. Which made no sense, but, she thought, maybe was kind of interesting. Maybe she could put that in the paper she was supposed to be writing for Professor Steinmetz.

Chandra liked to be much thinner than any guy she was standing near. It made her feel larger somehow, or stronger or something, rather than smaller.

He'd begged her not to write about anorexia when they turned in their issue proposals. He was on the young side for an English professor. He wore jeans and sneakers and denim shirts. He was popular with students for the way he'd get all worked up in class. Once he dropped to his knees and begged them to care about a short story by someone named Junot. His forehead would get red where his hair was receding, and Chandra had heard other girls laughing about it after class, but in the way you laugh at someone you think is cute. *Not another eating disorder paper!* He pleaded with her, pretending to be desperate, clutching his hands by his chest. *And not the effect of the media on self-esteem!* She asked Steinmetz why that was a bad topic, and he said it wasn't a *bad* topic, but he'd read so many student essays about it in the last three years that if he got one more, he might break down and start weeping in his office.

The guy was pointing at the iPhone in Chandra's hand. "Try giving it up for just one day—not even a whole day, just till later this afternoon. Just try it."

"I could turn it off for a while, I guess." She didn't turn it off, but she slipped it away, into its spot in the interior pocket of her bag.

He shook his head. "No. It's not the same. You have to be actually separated from it or it doesn't work. Trust me." He looked past her shoulder to the entrance of the union, took a few running steps to it, and returned with a flier he'd ripped off the notice board. "Come on! Give me your phone!"

"So you don't have Steinmetz for comp, right?"

"I had him last year for freshman lit." He rolled his eyes. "What a self call."

When Chandra couldn't think of another topic, Steinmetz had told her that if she *had* to write about anorexia, she'd better make it unique to her own life and relevant to her own generation, or she'd be responsible for making an aneurysm burst inside his skull. But maybe she could write about giving up her cell phone instead, like this guy. Even though she already missed the extra credit, she could probably still write her paper about it. She was supposed to have a rough draft done already and she hadn't even started. As she reached into her bag and handed over her iPhone and watched the guy fold the orange flier around it, she was already forming sentences in her head. *I wrapped my*

phone in a flier for an Alpha Phi Halloween costume contest and placed it in a hole in a big tree, like that character in To Kill a Mockingbird.

The guy covered her phone in the tree's hollow with fallen leaves. She said, "What if someone steals it?"

"Look! It's perfectly camouflaged. No one would ever, ever notice it there." He grinned at her. She felt her heart race, like she was being talked into something dangerous.

If she came back to the tree later and her phone was gone, she'd have to email her mom and get a replacement on their Verizon insurance. They'd had to do that once before, when Chandra left her phone at her dad's apartment, but he said it wasn't there. Chandra's mother had wanted to go over and help her look, but her dad's girlfriend, Melanie, wouldn't allow it. It was Melanie's apartment, technically, so she had the right.

"What's your name, anyway?"

"Eli."

"I'm Chandra."

She followed Eli into the cafeteria. There were a few students at the long tables in the dining room, but the food stations were mostly empty. A cafeteria worker in a paper hat was clearing out the pastry case, and another was stocking the salad bar, getting ready for the lunch wave. Eli moved in long strides to the Grill. Chandra stood a few feet behind him as he ordered a double cheeseburger.

"The grill's gotta heat up," said the bleary-eyed student worker in a stained chef hat. He was separating a stack of frozen patties with a metal spatula. He wore those clear plastic gloves, but Chandra saw him wipe his nose with his gloves on and then start poking at the raw hamburger with the same fingers. She held her empty plastic tray in front of her chest like a shield.

Eli told the grill guy that he'd be back for the burger and pushed his tray along the metal counter to the Chicken Basket, where he ordered nuggets and fries, and to Pizza & Pasta, where he heated up two slices of pepperoni in the serve-yourself microwave. Chandra got a cup of black coffee at the Starbucks counter and a packet of blueberry Pop-Tarts at Toast & Bagels. She peeled apart the foil wrapper and placed one of the Pop-Tarts in a toaster and waited, glancing over at Eli, who'd returned to the grill for his double burger. He waved at her, and she felt herself

smile. She hoped her smile didn't look stupid—too big, maybe, or too small.

They met up at the long counter that led to the cash registers. There was no line at all yet. Chandra wondered why she hadn't figured this out on her own, instead of always fighting the lunch crowd after classes let out at 12:10.

"This is like Disney World," she told Eli. "You have to know all the off times."

"Disney World." Eli repeated the word flatly.

"My mom had a book, like a guide book thing, that told you when to go to the rides and restaurants and stuff at the times when most other people *wouldn't*. So you didn't have to wait so long . . ."

She let her voice trail off and turned her face away, began pushing her tray toward the register. Why was she talking about Disney World? God. Why did she have to be so weird? Her neck was red, she knew it, she could feel it getting hotter, and even though she was wearing a turtleneck the redness probably showed on that part of her skin between her throat and her jaw.

"Hey." Eli bumped the edge of his tray against hers, then hooked his finger around its edge. "That's all you're getting?"

"I told you. I was just going for coffee in the first place."

"Well, put your stuff on my tray, then. That's not enough to waste a swipe on."

She watched as he balanced his pizza on top of his fries and cookies on top of the burger's bun, making room for Chandra's coffee and Pop-Tart. He slid her empty tray out of the way, and she walked beside him to the register, where he discussed with the cashier whether it should be two swipes or three swipes on his meal card; Eli said the pizza was a side dish, but the cashier said it counted as a meal.

Eli shrugged. "Whatever."

Chandra walked with him to the condiment counter. "It's barely midterm. You're going to run out of swipes."

"I'm not worried about it."

He squirted ribbons of ketchup over his chicken and fries; Chandra stirred Equal in her coffee. They sat across from each other at a table by the window with a view of the quad. If she craned her neck, she could see the tree where her phone was hidden, under the leaves in the hollow space of the trunk. What

was she *doing?* She should go out there and get her phone while the quad was still quiet, before classes switched again. Put it back in her bag where it belonged.

Her mom had bought her this bag at Urban Outfitters before college, the same day they shopped for bedding and dorm supplies at Target and Bed, Bath, and Beyond. What if her mom was texting her right now? What if, Chandra wondered, something suddenly happened, like what if her dad had a heart attack out of the blue and her mom didn't want to go to the hospital and sit beside Melanie in the waiting room and wanted Chandra to go in her place?

She knew the chance of something happening the moment you randomly think of it happening was probably like zero. Thinking of it probably made it even less than zero, because when things happened it was never when you thought of them. Someone could be texting her about something right now, though, that she would never ever think of in a million years just sitting here thinking about *different* things.

If she had her phone she would know for sure that nothing was happening. She should go get her phone out of that tree.

"So you have the kind of family," Eli said, "that goes to Disney World together. One of those families?" Beneath his curly hair she could see his forehead wrinkle.

"Not really." She stabbed at her Pop-Tart with the cafeteria fork. "We only went once. When I was eleven."

Eli hunched over his tray, feeding himself with both hands, pizza rolled in one fist, his burger in the other.

"We're not rich," Chandra said, "if that's what you mean."

Eli hurried to chew and swallow, wiped at his mouth. "That's not what I meant. It's not the money thing. It's more about these premade experiences society wants you to have, you know? It's like, *Oh boy, the Magic Kingdom!* Prepackaged family fun."

"It's easy, I guess, for the parents. If you can pay for it."

"Exactly! That's exactly it!" Eli's spine straightened and he tilted forward across the table, like a drawbridge lowering. His swampy green eyes blinked slowly and reopened, focusing in on her face, a sudden zoom lens. Chandra tried to remain still, instead of looking away. She'd read that advice in *Seventeen* a long time ago and still remembered it. Eye contact, the article had said—don't underestimate it! No one had looked at her like this, Chandra realized, since she'd arrived at college. Looked

closely at her face. Except maybe a couple of her professors, like Steinmetz. Chandra's mother used to stare at her now and then, sizing her up, making her lift up her shirt sometimes to check her rib cage, or inspecting her front teeth to make sure they weren't shifting in their gums after how much they'd paid the orthodontist.

Steinmetz. Chandra tried writing a sentence in her head again: *Without my phone I took the time to really look into the eyes of my friends while I was talking to them instead of constantly checking my screen.* She hoped she could remember it later when she got to the writing lab. What time was it? She reached by instinct for her bag, then drew her hand back. There was still time, probably, to knock out a couple pages of a draft before her 2:05 comp class. Even if they were terrible, at least Steinmetz would give her points for making an effort.

"People," said Eli, "want to buy premade experiences because it's easier. Safer, maybe. I think my parents sent me to camp for every vacation of my whole life. Computer camp, rock-climbing camp, video game–design camp, et cetera, and that's the same thing, right? You pay for it, and somebody has figured out every step of the way for you in advance, and you just follow along and you're expected to love it. And if you don't love it, then what's wrong with you, right?"

You pay for it, and somebody has figured out every step of the way for you in advance, and you just follow along and you're expected to love it.

Without thinking Chandra picked up a piece of Pop-Tart, and now it was in her mouth, the dry crumbs mixing with a bit of moist filling on her tongue, and she wanted to spit it out on her napkin, but Eli was still looking right at her. She chewed, and her stomach talked to her the way it did, yelling at her, and she took another piece from her plate. "You're supposed to *appreciate* everything," she said.

"So true! Even if you didn't choose any of it. And college is the same exact thing, right? Pay your money and they give you a program and tell you what to think and what classes to take and you join a fraternity and they tell you what parties to go

to. You can get all the way through your *college experience,* as they call it, without having one actually authentic experience of your own."

Suddenly, the quad's walkways began to fill from four directions, like faucets turning on, students streaming from the buildings. Classes were changing.

"My mom would kill me," Chandra said, "if she knew I skipped class this morning. She told me that skipping just one college class is like flushing $500 down the toilet, when you figure how much you're paying for tuition each semester."

"Can you put a price, though, on an hour of time? Time from your actual *life?*"

"My mom can. She totally guilts me about it. Just last week she texted me: *Better not be wasting grandpa's money.*"

"That's way aggressive."

"That's what's paying my tuition. A lot of people got cancer from the factory where he worked. My grandfather. This was a long time ago, like twenty years or something. Some lawyers started a big lawsuit with all of them, a class action thing. It took a really long time. My grandpa died, and it still was going on, and then finally they ended up winning. My mom was his only family, so she got the money—my grandpa's lawsuit money—and she saved it. And that's what's paying my tuition. Which she likes to remind me."

She felt a pain blossom inside, deep between her stomach and lungs, thinking about what she would say to her mom when the college mailed home her midterm grades next week. Her mom had made Chandra sign the FERPA agreement that let the school disclose her student information. She had a right to know Chandra's grades, her mom had pointed out, if she was the one paying for them.

Eli was still watching her. Listening to her. She felt herself starting to blush and couldn't stop herself from looking away, out the window. She noticed a girl walking by, someone decent looking, who had the same bag as she did from Urban Outfitters, which made Chandra feel sort of good for a moment. Like she knew how to choose things in an okay way. If someone saw her through the window sitting here at the table with Eli, she thought, that would be okay. She imagined for a minute that her roommate might walk by and notice her and ask her about it later and Chandra would have something to say. *Oh, that guy?*

He keeps asking me out on weird dates, like to jazz concerts and stuff. But he's kind of interesting. I have coffee and stuff with him sometimes.

Eli pushed his tray toward her side of the table. "Have a nugget. I ordered too many." There were four ovals of chicken left on the tray, dried ketchup spotted on their greasy tan coating. "Go on. You look like you need to eat."

This guy, Chandra thought—Eli—he was attracted to her. Wasn't he? She picked up one of the greasy chicken pieces and brought it to her lips and waited for a few moments before wrapping it in one of her crumpled napkins.

He pushed back his chair, lifting his arms, palms upturned toward the window. "The day is ours!"

She followed him outside, where a spiral of colored leaves swirled in a sudden wind.

"Do you miss it?"

For a minute she thought he was reading her mind because she was thinking about her old house on Riley Road, where she lived when she was little. Autumn was her dad's favorite season. He liked the leaves. He hated shoveling the driveway in the winter, couldn't stand mowing the lawn in the heat of summer, but for some reason he always liked raking in the fall. He'd build these huge piles, orange and red, right under her swing set and give her pushes while she pumped herself high enough to let go and jump. He'd cover her under the dry crackling leaves, making her disappear. Pretend to start walking away. *Hey, do I hear a squirrel?* And she'd wait, wiggling just a little, waiting for him to reach in and grab her and pull her out.

"Leave it. You can live without it." Eli tugged on the sleeve of her shirt, and she realized they were standing by the tree where her phone was hidden. "*Live* being the key word."

Chandra looped a strand of her hair around her finger, twirled it for a minute before tucking it behind her ear. That was another sign that Chandra had read about that was supposed to hold a guy's attention without words—touching your own hair.

"Let's go over to Jaffrey. The jazz groups are probably starting now."

She shrugged.

"You don't like jazz? Maybe you should try it. You might be surprised."

"I didn't say I didn't like it." Her voice came out with an edge, and she saw the way he noticed it. His head drew back a little, his eyebrows lifting.

"I'm tired of sitting," Chandra said, and realized that this was actually true. "That's all college is, mostly. Sitting around and listening to things."

Eli's lips parted. She'd surprised him; she could tell.

"If I'm skipping class again," she said, her voice still louder than usual, "I want to *do* something. I don't want to sit around."

He looked at the watch under his coat sleeve, then grinned. "I know something we can do. Come on!"

He reached out his hand behind him, and Chandra took it, felt the momentum of his larger body pulling hers along. How long had it been since she'd held a guy's hand? She remembered for the second time today that trip to Disney World with her parents when she was eleven, how they'd walked through Fantasyland with the three of them holding hands, Chandra in the middle, her parents lifting her feet off the ground to a sing-song rhythm on every third step—one two *three!*—and Chandra knew she was too old for it but she didn't care.

Eli was leading them forward, past the library and the computer lab, all the way to the sports complex. They practically jogged past the recreation center, and through the glare on the wide front windows Chandra could see students on the treadmills. She tossed her head back and mimed an uproarious laugh, a silent one so Eli wouldn't notice, to let them know, if any of them recognized her dashing by, that she was on her way to doing something unpredictable and hilarious.

When they turned the corner of the building, Eli slowed up and they walked together to a large red door. "This is where the athletes work out," Eli said, pushing it open. She followed him inside to a gray-carpeted lobby with framed team pictures hung in neat lines on the tan brick walls. Smiling faces, bodies in matching red and white uniforms, posed in gymnasiums or fields or courts. The air smelled like a sweet medicine; fluorescent lights hummed overhead. Something she couldn't see was making a steady ticking noise. "Are we supposed to be in here?"

He grinned at her. "This'll be good. I haven't done this for a long time." She followed him down a short hallway to another door, also painted red.

"What? What are we doing?" She whispered, because Eli's voice was hushed too, like they were in the library.

"I was friends last year with this kid on the lacrosse team. He got put on probation, so they moved him out of the athlete dorm into Warner on my floor. We used to do this sometimes."

Eli pressed a series of numbers on the keypad above the doorknob; the small circle on the pad flickered green. "*Yes.*" Eli opened the door, stepped forward, and gestured like a magician. "Voila!"

She entered a small, darkened room with tiled walls and two small swimming pools, side by side. Eli shut the door behind her. There was a long bench against one wall; on the opposite wall, a freezer and a shelf with stacked towels and a large rolling hamper on wheels. Directly across from Chandra and Eli was a double door made of glass, which led to an adjacent room, also dark, with shadowed shapes of exercise machines.

"Where is everyone?" she whispered. The room felt warm, the air heavy with moisture. "What are we doing here?"

"Welcome to our private spa!" Eli tossed his jacket on the bench. "It's all ours till 2:00. Or 1:45, to be on the safe side. That's when the teams start afternoon practice and the injured guys, or the guys with physical therapy routines, come in here to work with the trainers. But from 10:45 to 1:45, this room is always locked. Unused. Shame to let it go to waste, right?"

He sat down and kicked off his Sperrys, peeled off his socks. He said, "All the athletes have their classes scheduled between 9:25 and 1:30. Then they have afternoon practice, and then dinner and study hall, and then night practice. Like clockwork. My lacrosse friend had to write down everything he did every day and every night while he was banned from the team to prove himself, and then have it signed every week by the team manager."

"Didn't he just make stuff up?"

"Of course he did. And then he would feel guilty and cry sometimes. Actually cry. He told me he felt like a piece of shit for being dishonest and breaking the honor code, like he was in the fucking Navy SEALs or something. And I was like, *Dude, you play lacrosse. For a second-rate conference. Get over yourself.*" He pulled off his long-sleeved shirt. He got up from the bench and padded in his bare feet around the pool. With just his T-shirt on, his biceps looked weaker than she'd imagined.

"People," said Chandra, "are so full of themselves."

"That's right." He pointed at her across the water. "You get it. You know that, Chandra? You so get it."

She was still standing there with her Urban Outfitters bag over her shoulder, sweating in her corduroy shirt. Suddenly, he reached toward the wall, and Chandra covered her eyes, expecting sudden brightness from a light switch, but instead a churning noise started, like a big engine. It was the water in one of the pools, violently bubbling. The smell of chlorine lifted, making her eyes water. Eli pulled off his T-shirt and unzipped his jeans.

"Stop!" Chandra covered her stinging eyes.

"Oh, come on. Your underwear is just like a swimsuit. It's just the same as swimming in our swimsuits."

"What if someone comes in?"

"If someone starts to press the combination on the locked door, we'll hear it and run out the glass door. And if someone comes in the trainers' room from the other side, we'll see them before they see us and run out the other way."

He was wearing boxers. Chandra watched as he sat down by the edge of the pool and lowered both feet in the water. "Aahhh!" He pushed himself off the edge with a splash, standing now in the pool up to his waist, his arms lifted like chicken wings. "And besides," he said, "what if someone did come in and find us? I mean, what's the worst thing that would happen? They'd tell us to leave? We'd get a warning?"

It was dark, Chandra thought. But not so dark that he wouldn't see her body. Could she actually do this? She placed her bag on the bench and took off her shirt. Even though she was wearing a turtleneck underneath it, she felt her heart start to race. She could feel his eyes on her back.

"You said you wanted to *do* something. Get in. Come on."

She balanced on one leg and pulled off her right boot and then the left. She took off her socks. The mats under her feet felt rough and prickly. She curled her arches and moved around the pool toward the shelf of towels with slow, quick steps, like one of those old-time Chinese girls with foot binding that her professor in Gender Perspectives had told them about. She wrapped a towel around her body and tried to figure out if she could take off her turtleneck and leggings and make it to the whirlpool without dropping the towel until she was completely submerged in the dark water.

"Come on. You're wasting time."

The silliness had disappeared from Eli's voice. He sounded annoyed. Pinching the towel at her breastbone with one hand,

Chandra pushed at the elastic band of her leggings with the other, trying to wriggle them off her hips.

She heard him suck in a breath of air and then splash underwater, saw the dark shape of him coiling into a mass on the bottom. Quickly she pulled off her turtleneck and covered up again with the towel. He rose up from the bubbling water with a grunt, shaking his head, flinging drops that hit her bare forearms. She pulled her feet free from her leggings and walked to the metal ladder on the far side of the pool, holding on to it with one hand, keeping her towel secure with the other; she felt with her feet for the textured steps leading down the pool's wall, and then the slippery bottom as she lowered in. Hot water from a jet spray pelted her back. The towel swirled up and she held it like a cape at her neck; it floated behind her shoulders as she folded her arms over her stomach, squatting in the pool up to her neck.

The churning water swirled around Chandra like a force field, protecting her body from scrutiny.

Eli's head bobbed above the surface a few feet away. The darkness of the room made his face look older, Chandra thought—handsome, kind of, with his hair slicked back. His eyes looked deeper in the steamy air, which she hoped was making her own face look better, too, more mysterious maybe, and if her mascara was running, hopefully it wouldn't show. The churning water swirled around Chandra like a force field, protecting her body from scrutiny. Eli was moving toward her now. This was happening. If he kissed her, Chandra decided, she would kiss him back. She was doing it. Finally, she was having a college experience.

"I'm so bad, letting you talk me into this," she said, hoping her voice sounded flirty and mocking in a fun way. "This is the *third day* I'm missing classes. I'm so behind."

"That's nothing." Eli laughed, low and abrupt.

She felt his toe slide against her toe underwater. He said, "This is my fifth week."

"What do you mean?"

He grinned, his teeth glinting in the dark. "I haven't been to classes for five weeks."

She felt the space between their bodies in the water get smaller as he moved closer, the pressure of the waves against her stomach building. "But . . ."

"I had it figured out by the second week. That I was going to live by my own rules for a change, you know? Relinquish the façade."

"Can you do that? Just not go to your classes for that long? Haven't they *said* anything to you?"

"Oh, I'm sure my student email account is full of dire warnings from my professors, at least the ones who bother to take attendance. But, as you know, I'm not reading them. Or anything else online. Because I'm choosing to spend my time actually living my life."

"I didn't know you could *do* that. Just never go to your classes."

"*I'm* doing it." His white teeth flashed.

"But for how long?" Chandra felt a twist of anxiety in her chest.

Eli grunted. "A couple more weeks, probably. The midterm grades will all be submitted by next week, and then the week after that they'll probably come get me out of the dorm. And that'll be it."

"They'll make you leave?"

"I'm already on academic probation from last year. So yeah. They'll undoubtedly request my departure." This time his laugh was louder and seemed to echo off the slippery walls.

"Then you'll go home?"

She saw his shoulders shrug, above and below the water's surface.

"Where do your parents live?" she asked.

His body was so close to hers in the whirlpool. If she lifted her hand, her fingers would touch his chest. "I'm not going there," he whispered, and it sounded to Chandra like he was about to cry.

"Eli," she said, "I'll help you. You can stay in my dorm. They won't know where to look for you."

"I'll disappear." He sucked in a breath. "Poof!"

With a sudden *whoosh* he dunked himself under the water, and then his long legs and one of his knees, or maybe both of them, were pressing against her legs and his hands were on her waist, his thumbs on either side of her belly button and his fin-

gertips on her back, and where was her towel? Her towel was gone, she realized, both frightened and glad, and Eli's head was above hers now, he was gulping at the air, and she leaned back in his hands, arching her neck, the crown of her head touching the water. She let her hands reach up to his shoulders and looked into his eyes.

"*Chandra,*" he said.

His hands loosened their grip on her waist; she felt the support slip away and had to plant the balls of her feet on the bottom of the pool to keep herself from falling backwards into the water.

"Chandra, your *bones*. Jesus."

She pushed off with her feet and flailed with her arms, moving in slow motion through the water away from him. Her towel, where was her towel? She spotted it swirling in a jet stream near the metal ladder and lunged for it.

"God, Chandra, chill *out*. I just, you know . . . It's kind of shocking—"

"Shut up!" She managed to pull herself out of the pool; the rushing of the whirlpool engine seemed to be right inside her head now.

She grabbed at her boots and bag and her big corduroy shirt by the bench, but then as she ran around to the other side of the pool and tried to pick up her turtleneck and leggings, she lost her grip on the towel again and it dropped to the floor. She started to cry, and she could picture herself standing there like a hunchback, cradling her load. She couldn't bear to turn around to look at Eli, watching her from the pool. She could feel her bare back and her soaking panties clinging to her ass in the horrible invisible air.

"It's sad," Eli said. "What this fucked-up society does to people."

"Don't *say* anything!" She pushed against the glass door and ran to one of the treadmills in the physical therapy room, crouched on the other side of it, and waited for a couple minutes, afraid that he would follow her. But he didn't.

She struggled to pull her leggings on over her wet skin, then her two shirts and her boots. She raked her fingers through her tangled hair. She found her way to a different doorway on the other side of the room, back to the lobby, past the rows of team

pictures, all those smiling athletes posing with the Hawk mascot, its cartoonish beak and red wings. Who was the person hidden in that bird costume? Chandra wondered.

As she stepped outside into the October air, the wind wrapped itself around her wet scalp like an icy tourniquet. She held her Urban Outfitters bag against the side of her body and began marching across the campus, headed toward the student union. Had she muted her phone before she let Eli hide it in that hole in the big tree? She couldn't remember! What if someone had texted her, what if her mother had called, and someone walking by heard her Rihanna ringtone—*yellow diamonds*—and found it there. By now maybe Professor Steinmetz had sent her an email about missing class again. To voice his concern. That's how he would say it, or something like that.

Maybe she could write her paper for him about money. She didn't want to write anymore about giving up her cell phone; she had nothing to say about *that* topic. She wished she were smart enough to write an essay about money, about how money could make you hate someone, like the way she guessed Eli hated his parents, like the way her father hated her mother for not giving him her lawsuit money to buy a Sonic burger franchise, which would have been the whole solution to his whole life, or at least that was what he believed. He would have screwed it up, her mother had told her, *guaranteed,* and then where would that have left Chandra, and her college education, and her future wedding, God willing? But Chandra didn't know. She didn't know where that would have left her, or where she was left now.

She didn't know who had bought the house. Her parents never told her, and it seemed somehow too embarrassing to ask them. Shameful, for some reason.

She started walking faster. The union was still far away, and she wanted to be there. She wanted to start running, but that would look so weird, wouldn't it? She was wearing her boots, the ones with high heels. People didn't run in high-heeled boots. But still, she could feel herself picking up her feet between each quickening step.

She used to run all the time. She missed running. Maybe she could write her paper for Professor Steinmetz about running. It was during that horrible summer when she'd started running, the summer when she was fourteen, after her parents had sold the house and moved into their separate apartments in different towns. She would start at her mother's apartment in Vernon and walk all the way to their old house in Woodlen, on Riley Mountain Road. It was a yellow Cape Cod with a slate-blue door and matching shutters. It took her two hours and twenty minutes. When she got there, she would stand by the mailbox for a few minutes. Sometimes, if no one was around, she would walk onto the front yard and stand there. She didn't know who had bought the house. Her parents never told her, and it seemed somehow too embarrassing to ask them. Shameful, for some reason. When she stood on the front lawn, a trespasser, sometimes she would feel her heart start thumping. She would count to ten, or twenty, or sometimes fifty, and then step back to the street.

And then she would run home. She could slow way down on the upward hills, but she had to keep lifting her feet. If she didn't run home, she told herself, then she couldn't go back. It would be the last time.

That's how it started, Chandra thought. At some point during the summer, Melanie commented on how good Chandra was looking. Chandra remembered the day that Melanie seemed to notice her in a new way, surveying her with a lifted eyebrow. Lean, Melanie had said. Lean and fit, not sloppy like so many teenage girls with their belly shirts and pudgy thighs and boobs bouncing around. When school started at the end of August, Chandra had to stop her journeys to the old house, but she found other ways to test herself. She kept going and going.

Right now, all she wanted was her phone back. As she made it past the computer lab, the union came into view, and there was the tree in the distance, its golden leaves glowing in afternoon sunlight. She could feel her fingers twitching in anticipation. She wanted it back so badly. She would text someone, anyone, just to hear it buzz, just to feel it trembling there in the palm of her hand.

STRONGWOMAN

A few weeks after my dad moved out, I played a trick on my mom. I asked to give her a hug, and after we held each other a minute, I stuck a sewing needle in the back of her neck. I had it taped between my fingers with invisible tape.

She'd been wailing at night. Maybe she thought I couldn't hear her, but I could. I understood she was sad, but the sounds she made in the dark were so gigantic and horrible, I didn't know where they came from. There were glow stars above my bed, moons and shooting stars with their tails peeling down, and I watched the yellow light they stored drain out. I hated myself for how I'd stuck them there. They were all clumped in one corner of the big, empty ceiling, too close together to make any constellations. I tried to restick one, but you can't—they just fall. What helped a little was to pretend there was a black hole over the bed. That was what had sucked them together there.

I never said anything about the sounds. I did my homework well and made sure my teachers liked me. I was a good kid, basically, I think, for an eleven-year-old. I loved my mom, but sometimes I would pester her to tears. It was easy to make her sad, but she only wailed like that after she thought I was asleep. She would be up early, cooking breakfast recipes she'd clipped from the paper. "How's my man doing?" she would say if she saw me staring off, and hug me. She was getting fat and I liked hugging it all. There was a good white pad of it behind her neck. She didn't have a talk with me about the needle.

"Ow, crap!" she said. She looked surprised, then sad, but she didn't make the sound.

A few days later, she told me I was going to spend the summer in Denver with my dad. Maybe it had been the plan all along.

I wanted to say I'd done it by accident. First I'd taped my middle finger and ring finger together, only because there was some tape. And then I'd seen the little needle hole between

my fingers, so I put a needle through. And there. I'd figured out from one of their fights that I was an accident, which was OK. What it meant, though, was that maybe everything I did in the world was also an accident, that I was a way for more accidents to happen. I liked that. All the rocks I kicked down the sidewalk, which weren't going to move on their own, all the cars that stopped for me to cross the street. The invisible tape was part of that, and the needle.

It was an hour drive to Denver from Fort Collins, and we hardly talked. She tried to dance a little to the radio, then quit; I watched the neat lanes of traffic, the millions of cars that were supposed to somehow never touch.

My dad had quit being a lawyer and was a property magnate now. He had two apartment buildings and a bowling alley he was fixing up. We spent most of the summer at the alley with his girlfriends and a Mexican handyman named Gus.

"Junior," he said the first day, "start loving it."

There was a claw machine I could play without paying, a spot-the-differences video game called Titty Match-up, and expired Sour Belts that tasted the same. My first job was to leave cigarettes burning in the ashtrays, to cover a smell.

He was so excited to see me that I realized I wasn't going to see him a lot. He called Ling-Ling Palace from the lanes at ten in the morning. "General Tso's breakfast. We got a special occasion here. What? Look, employ your expertise." He plunged the phone's antenna into his palm.

The fancy, sagging business shirts made him look like a sultan, and he was learning to talk like one. He had a thousand keys now and was always throwing them from hand to hand. If they dropped, he would leave them on the floor until it was convenient to pick them up. He didn't nick his mole once all summer. It looked like an ornament on his jaw.

He was trying out names. "*Kingpin's,*" he'd gesture, his watch sledding through arm hair. "Would you grow your gut at a place called *Kingpin's?*"

I missed her. We talked on the phone, but we didn't say anything.

"I want to come home."

"You have two homes."

"*No*. I have two gnomes."

"Oh?"

"And a mustache."

"A mustache?"

"You wouldn't recognize me. I have a robot hand and a shark tattoo and I crash motorcycles."

"I'm thirty feet tall and I eat lightning bolts and juggle tigers."

"We're stupid, Mom."

"I love you back, Junior."

"How's your momma?" my dad asked at work. "She all mended up?"

I thought for a second she'd told him about the needle, but he just meant the divorce.

"Mr. Zenichek," Gus said—we were watching him repair a ball retriever—"my social worker says not to put the children in the middle." He was going through some kind of divorce too. On Wednesdays and weekends, he would bring his three little daughters with him. They played Titty Match-up together, clacking the screen with their bright, fake nails while I tried not to look.

"I don't know," I told my dad. "She's running a marathon."

"No doubt," he said. "My social worker tells me not to lie."

The roof of my mouth was starting to bleed from the Sour Belts. It wasn't a lie. She said she was going to.

"Junior," he said, "don't pretend like I don't care."

"I think she's really sad, Dad."

"Oh, you darling boy," said one of my dad's girlfriends. Her eyes turned shiny on me. Through his silk sleeve, I could see her fingers rubbing his arm where the skin was like an old balloon. With her other hand, she tried to touch my ear. "She's going to be fine. We've all been there."

"Darling boy," he winked at me. "Well. Well, well, well."

My dad said Gus had almost become a lawyer himself. He'd done correspondence classes and then, just when he was going to take the bar, a crazy woman had thrown a twenty-five-pound bag of birdseed from her balcony and knocked him stupid. "This guy," my dad liked to say, "has the best manners of any man I've ever known."

"No," Gus would say. "Don't tease. This isn't so."

Gus kept cocktail napkins with cartoons on them folded in his shirt pocket, but he used a bandana from his back pocket to wipe his forehead or blow his nose. He washed his hands

every hour and was always saying how grateful he was to have his health, even though we all knew he was brain damaged. My dad said he'd pay Gus extra to teach me some etiquette while he worked. He called it my Mexican finishing school. I ate my lunch with Gus, and he would tell me to eat more slowly and put less on my fork. Soft bread should be chewed eight times, meat eighteen times. We each had to make a toast with grape soda before every meal. "Look there," he said and pointed with his insulated mug at the iridescent pink storm on a bowling ball. "Richard Jr., please give a toast to this."

Once, he brought frozen leftovers and at lunch, when they were thawed, he took a bite and cried. I couldn't believe it. Maybe it was something his wife had left in the fridge. It was orange and oily with peppers floating in it. "Try this," he said. "You must absolutely try."

The claw machine had stamped-leather wallets, and I finally retrieved the one that said VIPER on the side. "You son of a dog," my dad said. He was proud of me. Then he said we would have to put it back. I had to cry in order to keep it, and after that I didn't want it anymore.

"Nope," he said, "it's yours now. Bitch like that and you have to keep it."

I did keep it. I hated it, but I still have it.

He said he left my mom because he didn't love her anymore and that that happens. He never said anything about how she was getting fat—maybe that had nothing to do with it—but his girlfriends that summer were very thin. They seemed to like him, so there was no reason not to be happy for him. We would all watch Gus working on a ball retriever, and my dad would reach into the seat next to him and work his heavy, tanned fingers over their small thighs into the narrow where I didn't let myself look. "What can I say? Your mother is a beautiful girl, a beautiful woman." He looked next to him. "All women are beautiful, and all men are ugly, and the most

"All women are beautiful, and all men are ugly, and the most beautiful thing is that they might love you in spite of it."

beautiful thing is that they might love you in spite of it. That's what it is, Junior, your momma loved something very ugly."

He was full of lessons for me.

"Junior," he said, "you're turning twelve. It's Summer of the Boner. Time for a man talk."

"Richard," said his girlfriend. "You're embarrassing him."

"Subject one," he said. "Objectifying women. This is serious—you can really hurt somebody with this stuff. You have to always see the whole bird, not just her cuts."

"Richard, stop."

"Your stiffy isn't going to state its reasons, and your job is to never figure them out. Because the reasons are hurtful. As soon as you think, 'There's a set' or 'Those can walk,' you're turning women into objects. Women should be mysteries, not objects. You get what I'm telling you? Always tell a woman you don't understand why you want her. *It's beyond reason, baby.* Except ugly girls—you can tell ugly girls they're beautiful."

She slapped his thigh. "Dickie! Look how embarrassed he is."

He was so happy and handsome in his alley. "Here we are," he said every morning when we got there. Here we are—like this was who he'd been waiting for us to be.

"Gus, Junior, good news," my dad said at the end of the summer.

A Dancercise place back in Fort Collins was going out of business and would sell Kingpin's its disco balls and light machine on the cheap. Gus could take me back to Mom's and pick up the goods—one trip, tidy.

Gus's old pickup smelled like Christmas candles. "Leather seats need oil every year," he said. "These are imitation, but true leather you must oil."

I spent the car ride watching the cars and programming my new watch. It had eight buttons. "Detonation complete," I said when an alarm went off. "One million people just exploded."

"Richard Jr., you know that is not funny at all."

The Dancercise studio was on Lemay, next to a Flowerama and across from the hospital. It was locked, and Gus had to pat the glass door with the band of his class ring for a long time before a woman came.

"Sorry," she said. "Potty."

She led us into the empty studio. There were long panel mirrors and posters everywhere of women in vibrant Spandex, but with the lights off it was like the inside of a cardboard box.

"I guess you talked with Miranda," she said. "I'm Celia."

"Mucho gusto. Soy Gustavo," Gus said. I could see how helpless he was. She was smiley and curvy and creamy brown. The big dark room should have made her look sad, but it didn't.

She laughed at him. "And you?"

"I'm Junior."

She laughed again. "Not for long."

Gus and I carried two disco balls and the light machine to his truck. She followed with a box of cords and papers. Gus counted out the bills on his tailgate.

"OK," she said. "Hasta la pasta. Bowl some strikes."

Gus looked as if he would cry again. He sat in the driver's seat, wiping his forehead with his bandana and staring through the dash. His door was still open and the cab was dinging. Finally he got out and walked next door to the flower shop. He came back with a polite bouquet. He sat holding them in the dinging for a minute, then handed them to me. "Bring these for your mother," he said.

The door of my house smashed the wrong way against the frame, then swung back, but it was not my mom who answered.

"Mrs. Zenichek?" Gus said.

A tremendous woman stood there. The sinews of her neck filled the doorframe and tugged as she turned her bulgy eyes. Her shoulders and arms, even the muscles of her expression, were all partitioned. She looked like a butcher chart. But it was a woman: she was wearing stretchy pajamas; there was nothing there. She took in Gus, the flowers, me.

"Mom?" I tried to call past her.

"Oh, Junior!" My mom appeared behind the monster and pulled me into the living room with a long hug, but it was different. She did more hugging—more holding and squeezing—but somehow it felt like less hug. She wasn't as soft, which was maybe healthier, but I didn't like it. I felt her arms, not her. "Welcome to Mom's house!" She laughed, and it was long and watery and bright. She held me at arm's length to look at me. Happiness rashed around her eyes.

Two sleeping bags were on the floor of the living room. A box of wine balanced on the arm of the couch. Her Shiva statuette on the bookcase had a pink-and-green ankle sock over its head.

"This is Klara," my mom said.

"He's a dumpling," said Klara. "And flowers!"

I extended them nervously. "Keep 'em," she told me. "I'll grab your shit."

She did, and I know the flowers ended up on the table, but Gus was gone already, and for all my manners, I hadn't even wished him goodbye.

Her name was Klara Loyzaga, and my mom and she had spent most of the summer together. Klara—sometimes she pronounced it the Spanish way, with two flicks of the tongue, sometimes she didn't—was a professional bodybuilder and strongwoman. She had competed all over the world and on cable television, under the name Klara Belle. Our living room was now full of videos of her shiny, brown body in exhibitions of strained perfection and strength.

We spent a lot of good time that fall with Klara. She had a brother who'd died rock climbing, and she made a big deal about enjoying life. She bungee jumped and cooked her own hot sauce and supported important causes I'd never heard of. The Zapatistas. The Tutsis. Fair trade. She read a special newspaper that came once a week from France. Klara and my mom had already been to the Medicine Bows and Escalante and Telluride in Klara's Eurovan, and we went all over together, like a gang. We went to Elitch's and Klara paid the upcharge for the XLR8R, and they strapped the three of us together and towed us up to 150 feet, then dropped us. My mom sobbed the whole way up, but it was different from before. *I hate it! I hate it! I hate it!*—but then she loved it most. After that, I wasn't shy. We watched *Deep Space Nine* and Disney Classics and Klara's tapes in the living room and ate stove-popped popcorn with nutritional yeast and cumin and did massages. We took Klara rollerblading for her first time—she drove over with a

My mom sobbed the whole way up, but it was different from before. I hate it! I hate it! I hate it!*—but then she loved it most.*

Tweety Bird pillow taped to her butt. She left a guitar, which I was allowed to play, behind our TV. She tuned it to open G so I could slap the strings and bonk my knees like Elvis. Her face muscles made her whistle dangerously loud. A couple times we had sleepovers in the living room, the three of us. I explained Dutch ovens and she wanted to make it a competition, but Mom wouldn't have it. If I buried it in my sleeping bag, my watch woke only me, and I could roll toward my mom and listen to her breathe and watch the nylon of her sleeping bag tucking in and out with her breath.

In September, before it got cold, Klara had a beach party. A ditch ran through the back of her subdivision, and she trucked in sand and dumped it ditchside and invited her friends over for daiquiris and sun. There were squirt guns and hulas, Jamaican ginger ales for me, and sidewalk chalk for a watermelon-seed-spitting contest. "Do you know how hard it is to find a watermelon with actual seeds in it?" Klara asked me. "Monsanto wants to neuter my melons!" She drank her margarita out of the paper limeade can.

"Come on, Rico. Gas it!" her friends yelled when I got up to spit, but I kept laughing and screwing up.

They were all accomplished women in their thirties or forties. Potters, Rolfers, a judo sensei, a professor of avalanche science. Somehow my mom knew them all. One had taken bass lessons from Gene Simmons. They balanced me on a surfboard, and I tried to float down the ditch. When I passed one dangling her feet in, she said, "All right, Marlene. He made it: honorary Gorgon."

They all asked me if I had a girlfriend, then pretended not to believe me. Klara spent all fall teasing me about it.

Say we wanted to go to a movie. "What do you think?" she would ask into the paper. "Should we see *Unstrung Heroes?*"

"I don't know," I'd say.

"'So touching the heart almost stops,'" she'd read. "Rico baby, women love that shit."

I tried, but I couldn't look at Klara without seeing anatomy. Muscle overhung her. When she moved, it was an exaggerated demonstration of movement. *This is how the body holds a steering wheel between two fingers like a cigar. This is how the body scratches a chin with a shoulder. This is how the body cuts through a burrito with a fork*. She had a trick where she

wiggled her fingers to make her fat veins pop back and forth over her tendon. Her skin was as firm, tan, and finely wrinkled as an earthworm's. Her gold necklace barely reached her collarbones. Her chest was large, and I watched and tried not to watch to see how much of it was muscle. Her hair was hard, black, wavy, and not as long as it was trying to be. I didn't know—didn't know how to know—if she was beautiful.

She sold my mom a weird, black health tonic called Matol Km, which I pretended to find delicious, and she wore a magnetic bracelet that balanced her blood flow.

"That's made up, right?" I asked. Often it was just me and Klara in the living room, making up stuff on guitar, waiting for my mom to finish whatever she was doing.

"Total bullcrap."

"Why do you wear it then?"

"Ancient knowledge, man. Bullcrap will balance your blood flow."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it's SOP to lie to yourself a little bit."

She said her father had been a strongman, and her grandfather had been a strongman, and her great-grandfather had been the strongest man who ever lived. He could restrain four draft horses, two in each hand.

"How do you know?"

"What's up?"

"How do you know he was the strongest man who ever lived?"

"We're talking big-ass Budweiser horses."

"But how do you know no one else—"

"The fuck, Rico? My grandma told me."

I didn't know adults got bored, but she was bored in minutes. "Let's *do* something," she'd say. She was up for anything.

"Let's make toasts," I said. "I'll get Capri Suns."

I stood on the ottoman and tried to remember what Gus had taught me. "Pick anything," I told her. "Then tell a little story with a compliment at the end."

"Take it away, toastmaster."

"Friends, when I first met Klara's bicep, I thought, *Holy flipping moly. Danger ahead*. But since then, Klara's bicep has become a close personal friend of mine, and I can tell you, he would never even—" I froze.

"*He* would never even *what?*" she said with her jaw cocked.

"Hurt a fly?"

"That so? All right, hear, hear. We'll see about that." She lay back and crushed the couch beneath her shoulder blades. "Let me tell you a toast about this couch. Once upon a time, there was a little puppet named Pinocchio, and he was made out of a chair Geppetto smashed on the ground one night in a drunk. This Pinocchio got his shit into *all* kinds of trouble. He did everything wrong. Turned into a donkey. Joined a circus. Got swallowed up by a fish. One day, he turned into a real boy, but he kept feeling like there was still a splinter in him, and probably there was. 'Help me, Blue,' he kept saying to the fairy, 'Help me, Blue, I don't feel right,' but there was no help. That's the deal with being a real boy. Sometimes he wished he could just be a chair again, but he couldn't. So, here's to my favorite couch, which—thank God—will never turn into a boy." She jabbed the little yellow straw into her Capri Sun.

"OK," I said, "weird."

"What," said Klara, "that's not how Dickie says his toasts?"

"I liked it. It was good."

"Gracious Dickie, making toasts and sending flowers." She sat up and looked over the couch back at Gus's flowers, dried by now into dull clumps of color, like panties by the road. "*My dear wife Marlene,*" she said in a mobstery voice, "*take these flowers from my toady as a token of my deep ruefulness.* What a mensch—and we never even sent him a note. He's a better man than me."

"Really," I said, "I liked it. It was a good toast. I like that couch too."

My mom seemed happier. I didn't hear her crying at night, but I don't think she slept as much as before, either. She watched more TV and talked to Klara on the phone. She was getting healthy, she said. She ran every day. Her voice was different, more cackling and bright.

She had this new way of teasing me.

Like, one night she said it was boys' choice, and I wanted Chubby's for green chile.

"Fuck yeah," said Klara.

They put on their straw cowboy hats. "Look at you," my mom said over her shoulder in the van. "You're embarrassed! Your mom's embarrassing you! I guess this is the beginning of it." She was taking a shrill joy in something.

"Of what?"

"Dudehood, dude," said Klara. She turned up NPR.

"Pink. Socket," said the radio.

"Eye!" said Klara.

"Cold. Loser," said the radio.

"Sore!" said Klara.

"Eyesore!" my mom cheered. They high-fived. I was confused.

A girl I knew from school, Janey Hughes, was at Chubby's with her mom and dad and older brother. She was silent and beautiful, and I'd known her since the first grade but hadn't talked to her since fifth. This was seventh.

"It's Janey!" my mom said, and Janey's mom and dad and brother looked up. Janey did not. "Go say hi."

I tried to direct us toward a booth.

"Come on, Rico," she said. "Quit being so cute."

I gave her a pleading look. Janey's family was watching.

"Need me and K to hold your hand?"

I went over. The red in my face was blinding.

"Hello, slut," I said and walked out the jingling door.

My dad got a call about that one.

"Power play," he said when my mom handed the phone over to me. "Here's how it's going to go." She stood above me, watching my face as I tried to hide my sniffling from the phone. "She'll hate you for a few weeks—don't apologize, just pretty much leave her alone. Sometime after Christmas, you tell her you want her to be your girl."

"I'm embarrassed, Dad. Her—"

"Don't let her see it," he said. "Look, who doesn't like to be teased? Now, your mom's going to make you call her and apologize, but I want you to call me instead."

My mom's face was so worried, it was like I'd been called away to war. "I *want* to apologize," I said.

"Good, good. Your mom's eating that up, no doubt."

"I feel really bad."

"Perfect. OK. I love you, son. I'll talk to you in a minute."

Sometime that fall, Klara stopped coming around, and my mom wailed again at night. The sound was as strange and hideous as before. It was so loud, but also choked, like it clogged her throat getting out. I didn't know how it could come from her.

It seemed like it didn't. I heard it in the bathroom at school or loading the dishwasher—not really, but I'd remember, and it was almost the same.

During the day, she was her same new self. We didn't meet Klara Wednesdays for buffalo wings, but my mom would take me to TCBY or the juice bar at Wild Oats. After the thing at Chubby's, I was grounded from going out for real food, but I didn't care. "That's just your diet trick!" I said. "Don't take your fatness out on me!" We spent a lot of time just being quiet with each other.

Finally I asked where Klara was.

"She fell in love," she said.

"With you?"

"No," she laughed. "With a man."

"Oh," I said. "That's all?"

"I guess," she said, "I guess that's all."

Nights, while she cried, I sometimes snuck downstairs and watched Klara's videos. She competed in a league called Babes of Brawn and represented the Philippines, where she said her family was. In one of her videos, she pulled a pickup truck across a parking lot while the judges stood in the back with a keg. In another event, she heaved sides of beef onto meat hooks that swung through a slaughterhouse. For each feat she had to wear a different bikini and different boots and gloves. Sometimes, I would pause the video on her grimace and study it: her whole face snarled back behind her teeth. I tried my weightlifter's face in the bathroom mirror.

The sound was as strange and hideous as before. It was so loud, but also choked, like it clogged her throat getting out.

Once, I left my mom's rubbery dumbbells on the bathroom counter.

She brought them into the kitchen. "Practicing your clean and jerk?" she said.

"Mom," I said. "Don't." I was coloring Africa for geography.

"You're right," she said, "I'm sorry. That's private." She started pumping the weights. "Didn't used to be private. I remember cleaning your little thing."

"Mom, don't."

"The little birthmark."

"*Mom.*"

"You used to try to push it back in—"

I let my voice go cold. "Yeah," I said, "we were pals. Guess what? I wash my own dick now. Go slit your wrists. I'm busy."

I wanted to be nice. I was trying. I told myself, *Be nice. Be nice. Be good. Be good.* But maybe I knew it didn't matter and we would never be close again. She would always love me. I got that much. It hurt her, but she would anyway.

She cried that night, all night, and in the morning she said, "I forgive you."

"For what I said?"

"Yes. I forgive you."

"I'm sorry."

"I know."

I was finishing my maps. I had them all spread out, and she stood behind them at the kitchen table. She looked huge and strong and far away. She didn't hug me or tousle my hair. "Junior," she said, "I'm not going to tease you anymore."

But this was the difference: when Klara came back, finally, my mom would not forgive her.

It was a Sunday morning, around Christmastime. We were doing the windows like we used to for the holidays: ugly, clay medallions I'd made, stamped with tiny thumbs, God's eyes with yarn that changed colors, a chili pepper in a cowboy hat, a Rudolph with menorah antlers from a magazine glued onto cardboard with a hole punched through, a stained-glass *Shalom,* holiday cards my mom had hung from string. We kept them all year above the laundry, then put them up with suction cups on the windows, and it wasn't a big jolly deal—no cider or cookies or old LPs. I would lick the dust off the suction cups and fart them onto the windows, and my dad had never even helped—but it was different this year, I could tell, because she was crying. Not hard or loud or with any sound, but in the daylight, where I could see.

"I can reach the top," I said. "Look." But that didn't help.

Her face wasn't like mine when I cried or like Klara's in the videos. It was relaxed and still, like she was watching

something and the tears were just a part of seeing it. It was quiet and I waited for the suction cups to make her laugh, but they didn't.

That quiet stayed until Klara knocked on the kitchen door. She had a paper plate of long purple Filipino cakes.

"Where have you been?!" I was excited to see her.

"How's Duke?" my mom said.

"What up, Rico? Merry Christmas, Marlene."

We looked at one another.

For a second Klara's face relaxed, and I could see she was sad. It was proof of love or of something she was here to restore. She looked at me and set the plate on the counter.

"Hug?"

This time I was wearing pajamas. I tried to hug her fast and sit down, but she held me tight.

"Missed you, dude." She strapped her arms around me.

"Whoa. What is this?" my mom said.

"Rico's my bruiser. I'm giving love." She shrugged and kept holding me.

"Easy, Klara." I could feel her magnet armbands digging into me.

"Ain't gonna crush him."

"Klara, let him go."

"It's cool, momma bear." She let me go and stepped back.

There was no way for me to hide it. I couldn't even try.

My mom sighed, looked away.

"You can't just reappear with cakes, Klara. You know what we're going through. You don't treat people like that."

I was in between them with it. I didn't know what to do.

"Look M, I—"

"You 'got all the love in the world,' I know, and we need it."

"Marlene, you're not the only—"

She stopped. They looked at me, at it.

"Junior," my mom said, "why don't you go have some cake."

I ran up to my room with the plate and stared at the purple cakes, fat fingers of steamed rice.

They fought for an hour, longer than she and my dad had ever fought. I couldn't hear what they said. I didn't feel like trying. But I could hear their heat and venom. I heard them laughing too. I heard their noses blowing.

Maybe they were kind to ignore it, not to make any cheap

jokes at my expense. My mom didn't raise her eyebrows and say, "Happy to see her, Rico?" They didn't embarrass me, but I wasn't dumb. If I were one of them, they would have teased me and I could have taken it. But I was something else, something they could excuse, and I'd been excused, to my own room, where I had no idea what to do.

Klara left and my mom came up to my room.

"I forgive you," I said.

"For fighting?"

"I don't know," I said. I was angry. I didn't forgive her.

"She said to say goodbye and she'll see you soon."

"So you're friends again?"

"We don't know. We're going to try."

"How come you didn't think that I might be angry at her too? Don't I get to yell at her?"

"I don't think it works like that."

"Why not?"

"You can tell her—you can tell her how you—"

"You got to yell."

"I know."

"I don't understand."

"I know," she said.

"I don't understand!"

"I know," she said. "I'm sorry."

I had all the blinds down in my room. At the window's edges, cold lines drew sharp boxes on the wall. She pulled a cord and let in some white December light. Backlit, she looked gray and false. I wanted to kick her out of my room, but I'd been waiting all that time for her to come.

"How're those cakes?" she asked.

I could have said, "They look like dildos," and she would have said, "Like dildos, huh?" And I could have said, "Yeah, Mom, you should try one." And she would have laughed, I think, and said, "Go to your room," and laughed again because we were already there. But I shrugged and that was all. I hated her then. Hate was my last way of holding on. She could've choked, and I wouldn't have missed her, not for a while. But I knew I couldn't hate her forever. I would forgive her, soon, and that would be all. We would have to love each other at a distance after that.

They got coffee sometimes. I know they did wine and ceviche, some happy-hour thing, pretty regularly. They were friends, and I was fine. Mostly I left them alone.

I saw my dad for Christmas at his new apartment. He asked me again how my mom was.

"Terrible, Dad. She cries all night."

"Cries?"

"Cries and moans."

"Really?"

"Yes, sir. Just can't get over you, I guess."

"You little shit," he said.

"I mean you must be one hell of a guy for her not to be able to get over you like that."

He laughed. "You're turning out, you know that? You're turning out."

Among other things, he gave me a big electric belt that would rapidly sting me until I grew abs. I was supposed to wrap it around my stomach for fifteen minutes a day. The card read: "To the ladies of Preston Middle School, from Santa."

When presents were over, he said he had some sad news. He was selling Kingpin's. He had to.

It was a long story, he said. In October, he'd gotten a full-page glossy photograph of this hideous she-man in some vile G-string thing. It was signed, "Thanks for the flowers, Dickie dear," in Sharpie. He was confused; he hadn't sent anyone flowers, especially not some tuck-dick beef queen, but he hung the photo in the staff shitter at Kingpin's just for gags.

"A few days later, Gus comes up, all nicey, and says, 'Do you miss her? Is that why you hang the picture of your wife?' 'That is not my wife,' I explain to him most cordially. 'But she is,' he keeps saying. 'I know she is.' This is your mother he's talking about. 'No,' I say, 'that pig roast is nobody's wife.' But he just gives me this great, wise, somber look and says, 'You miss her. I understand. I miss my wife, too.' Then I start to figure it out. I ask him, 'Did you, you

I knew I couldn't hate her forever. I would forgive her, soon, and that would be all. We would have to love each other at a distance after that.

pervert, send Klara Belle flowers and say they were from me?' And he blushes up like a chubby."

The smile slackened out of his stubble.

"So Papa fires the mongoloid," he said. First, however—he raised his eyebrows and thumbed his mole—he'd allegedly slurred Gus with one or two ungenerous and perhaps insensitive labels and thrown a can of XK-12 rental-shoe spray in his direction. There was a suit against him. He'd had to shed the alley.

I tried to tell him it was all right about Kingpin's, but he wanted me to mourn with him, so I did.

"Titty Match-up!" I cried. "Our guts! Where will they grow!"

He smiled. "All she wrote for Gus's custody bid, I'm afraid. You sell an unemployed, brain-dead Mexican to an arbitrator. Plus, he forgot he'd filed back at the start of the divorce for a character reference from me."

"His daughters? Gus lost his Wednesdays and weekends?"

"You dog," he said. "See, you got to move in quick on that shit."

The electric belt hurt. The whole idea was you could just lie there, doing nothing, and it would work out for you, but it was exhausting. Lying there was exhausting. I would lie on Klara's favorite couch at Mom's and sweat and gasp and feel little shocks punching muscle into me.

In the spring, I asked Janey out and she said yes, just like my dad had said she would. It was easy. I had a girlfriend and a discernible six-pack. I hadn't had to do a thing. "Sure," she said into the phone, and the panic spiked.

I didn't tell my mom about Janey, but she found out somehow. "Be nice to that girl," she said from behind me somewhere.

I promised myself I would be nice to Janey, but actually it was all I knew how to do with her. I didn't know how to kiss her. I didn't know how to go on a date. I didn't know how to tell her she was beautiful. I'd always thought she was. I just made myself small and embarrassed around her, and then at night, in bed, imagined the brave and evil things I should have said or done. I could tell she'd be bored with me soon.

We met at the food court one weekend, her, her friend Reina, and I. Mostly Reina talked while I kept us supplied with fries.

"Hold your arms like this," Reina said. She flexed two fists over the fries.

I did what I was told.

"Yep," she said. "That's your jack-off muscle. You're a right hander."

Janey didn't laugh.

"Janey, tell him something dirty and it'll be bigger by Monday."

"No, it's not. I'm learning guitar."

"Wow, that's beautiful. Let's go to the music store and prove it. You can play Janey a song."

That night, under the peeling stars, I would treat myself to the million things I might have said or done. "*Well, if they have a capo, I can play 'Drink My Stick.' It's Neil Young.*" But I just jabbed a fry through the rubbery gaps in the table.

"So never mind, I guess," she said, retrieving her gum from her cup lid. "Not like Janey's gonna *wah wah* with the first guy to learn his chords." But later, at Zumiez, Reina brought me a stretchy shirt and told me to try it on.

"Why?"

"So you can be like, 'Yo Janey, feel this shirt.' She really likes you, you know."

"She does?"

"Put it on. She's a total pervert once you get to know her."

She was my girlfriend for a couple of months, and then she called me one night and told me she wasn't anymore.

"OK," I said. "I'm sorry."

She laughed. "Why are you sorry?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry," I said.

She told me not to be sorry.

Sorry? I thought once she'd hung up and I was safe in bed. *I'll show you sorry.* I tried to imagine wrenching her pretty hair, making her wail. I could hear my mom, at the opposite edge of the house, laughing, cackling on her own phone, "I love it. Tell the whole thing again." *I'll show you sorry,* but I couldn't. I loosened my grip and stared between my misplaced stars and listened for the small muscle in my chest.

STORAGE

Fall has arrived, a chill brushing my bones when I wake. I watch the sun crawl out from the earth on the security cameras, where I can stand its brightness through the black-and-white. The sun hunches on the horizon between storage units 8 and 9, in the space where the renters enter through the gates. Sometimes I can hear the TVs mutter and hum between their cycling, and they whisper to me of loss. They tell me about the whole world outside my storage unit that my husband and I converted into a small office and apartment, that my husband and I used to share.

I watch a professor and his new wife move their house into unit 35 for a year's trip to France. They carry giant photographs of their dog, which they had to give up for the move, boxes of old papers, Egyptian statues, hundreds of shoes in see-through plastic bins. I've stopped being surprised by what people leave behind. I wonder if their storing is an act of love while the rest of the world lives, changes, dies around us, or if everything has come here to a well-organized junkyard, left to rot away to the end.

The little bell clatters in the front office. I wrench my pants up around my waist in the back apartment while whoever it is waits. It's best to be prepared: one day, one of the storage units caught on fire; once, a roof caved in; once, a woman thought she was being followed to her unit; once, someone's back gave out, and an ambulance had to be called. Once, my husband, Evander, disappeared, and I had to go on renting out empty spaces and signing contracts for useless junk to fill them.

I open the door to Mrs. Hendrix, her face red, wrinkles drawn in pinched hysterics, arms crossed in front of her chest like the living dead—the look she gets when my job is about to get harder. "I swear they've got a dead body in there this time," she croaks.

"Really, Mrs. Hendrix?" I say. Mrs. Hendrix, my bird on her skinny, knobbed legs, my serial complainer, my old woman who

cried wolf. Her kids packed her out of the large house filled with all her things and stuffed her inside a retirement community. Anything that she couldn't fit, she put inside a unit, which she now visits every day. She considers herself the watchdog of the storage complex, parked in her beach chair, the remnants of her former life behind her, binoculars glued to her roaming eyes. I say, "Is it the fraternity again? Or the pot smokers? Or the squirrels stealing your buttons?"

"I saw a coffin," she insists. "Those boys were carrying it on their shoulders. And do you think someone as old as me hasn't seen coffins before?" She grabs my hand. Her flesh, scaly with patches of age, rubs rough and cold underneath my fingertips like ice cracked from remnants of the last mammoth age. "Are you okay? Any news about Evander?"

Normally I would offer her coffee, but today watching the sun come up has left me trapped inside myself. "I'll look into the coffin," I say, having no intention of doing so. Stranger things have happened in our storage center, where love, junk, and disappointments are hidden away.

I walk my morning rounds from the office to the end of the winding lot, at unit 173. The ratcheting slide of a door slams down. Clearly something they didn't want me to see. I try to stay out of it. Mockingbirds and thrashers mimic what's just happened; all around me echoes the sound of doors closing from the throats of birds.

Number 17's door looms open, which means Javier is in his unit and awake. He sprawls on his couch, a portable TV on a table near the back of the unit. I pretend I don't know he sleeps here after his wife kicked him out and his job fell through. Javier waves and watches me walk past his unit.

I wave back. I focus on the steps that will take me past him. A fall wind slides over my skin. My pulse creeps from my legs up to my neck, sets my cheeks on fire. He gets up from his couch, and the four chambers of my heart want to leap, want to sink, want to catapult every direction at once, but I make them stay where they've always been.

"I just wanted to say," he says as he reaches me. He's dressed for the occasion of saying: black hair slicked back with water from his thermos, khaki pants and a white Guayabera I know he's gotten from one of the cardboard boxes that house the

things his wife allowed him to take, including a pellet rifle, a wooden sculpture of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and his crocodile bottle opener, which some nights he uses to sling cap after cap on the floor.

"About the other night?" I say.

"Reyna," he says my name, and he says it in Spanish so that I know it means *the queen, my queen, have mercy.*

Both of us step back into his unit to avoid the wind. He runs his hand through his tousled hair. He looks like he wants to touch me; his arms rise for a moment, then drop back by his sides. Had this been twenty years ago, or if I were not still married, I would have grabbed those hands. Once, I would have spoken Spanish with him and smiled at the words that were still mysteries to me. My heart and I tremble, but we do not leap.

A drop of water slides down my forehead. More drops of water cling to the ceiling in a bumpy line.

"There's a leak," Javier says apologetically.

"Oh," I say.

He stays silent. Part of me wants him to say nothing, wants to put everything he feels in a little box where we can lock it away, safe forever until we're ready to open it.

"Was that it?" I say.

"Never mind," he says.

"Fine." I turn toward the door, relieved but angry. "Don't worry, I'll check up on it."

"Reyna, you know that's not what I meant to say."

I shrug. "You can use my bathroom if you want."

He reaches for the key and holds my hand with it between our palms. He pulls me to him. I run my hand over his hair, but keep the other hand pushing firmly between us. My body radiates heat and the dark of his storage unit calls to me.

"It's been more than a year," Javier says. "He left you."

"You don't know that. He disappeared. Something could have happened to him." And I don't know what I would prefer: Evander alive, meaning he left me, or faithful to the end, but lost to the earth.

"I could take you to Mexico," Javier says. He brushes from my cheek the last drop of fallen roof water.

I almost choke on the words. "He's been my husband for thirty years."

"When will you stop waiting?"

I push him. I turn to hold back tears. I climb up the roof to see the leak.

But I've always been waiting. I am in the business of waiting. People sign contracts to leave their treasures in my care, and it is abandonment and it is love to spare them the fate of use, but either way they rot with age, and we wait for the grand return of the owners with no idea what that might bring. We wait for the buildings themselves to fall down around us. Evander's father built the complex on low ground, but then the levies broke and we've been waiting for the mud at the top of the hill, where a Walmart Supercenter sprawls, to come sliding down. The building inspector said, "Give it fifty years." The artifacts of a new civilization—cheaply made toys, mass-produced beauty products, dinners in squeezable pouches—tumbling down in magnificent somersaults before finally coming to rest over the old civilization—antique furniture, children's arts and crafts, hand-stitched quilts, photos of loved ones who've passed away. Once, a couple rented one to set up the remnants of their dead son's bedroom, exactly the way he left it. A man went to jail for life, and his lawyer brought us everything he'd owned: old toothbrush, bristles frayed and bent, half-used nubs of soap, dozens of cans of tomato soup. Antique furniture from a governor's mansion worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, but that governor has since died and his children were all fallen children, determined to escape their legacy, and so here it sits discarded in my rooms. If I believed in ghosts, this place would be full of them, decades' worth in every unit. *Evan, Vander, Evander,* I intone, as if this would bring him back.

People sign contracts to leave their treasures in my care, and it is abandonment and it is love to spare them the fate of use, but either way they rot with age.

On the roof, the stagnant puddles sink into the concrete, pushing down with watery roots. I sit next to the largest puddle, reach my hand in to feel for a crack. Really, I am just pretending to know how to fix a leak. It's something my husband always did, and back then I was content to let him do it. Evander,

shoulders solid even in the decade after my body had softened and rounded. Capable, always attentive to detail, while I was not. I was always making mistakes in the forms, mistakes I now have to correct myself.

The sun has crept up the sky and hovers weakly. Squirrels chitter to each other on the roof and store their nuts for winter. Geese ride October winds that grab me by the throat. They're leaving, flying south, riding hard to Mexico.

Below me, the storage center comes to life. People lug boxes and linger on the pavement between the buildings like ants carrying loads in an ant farm. The regulars have arrived. Through her binoculars, Mrs. Hendrix sweeps the complex from her lawn chair parked in the gravel. In unit 55, Ms. Garcon brings out dolls from her unit's shelves for her daughter Celine to play with. Mr. Garcon never comes. He believes that Celine, who is twenty-five years old now and autistic, has nothing inside her. That she is like a pet, and her smiles, her screams, her tears, her laughter, are automatic responses of the body, scrambled synapses firing randomly. Ms. Garcon knows better. She collects miniature china dolls because Celine, when she holds the dolls' cold faces in her fingertips—sometimes she laughs. Ms. Garcon travels the ends of the earth for these dolls, expensive collectibles, and she has thousands lining the unit, propped up against each other like a giant sleepover party waiting to wake up. The Garcons have all the money in the world, and still they cannot unlock their daughter, their real daughter, who Ms. Garcon imagines is trapped in storage somewhere in Celine's brain. I hear Celine's laughter from the roof, and it tinkles and then gongs like church bells marking the hour.

Tires crunch gravel. Delta Omega, the frat boys who have rented unit 93, though I've never seen what's in it, arrive in their truck. They do indeed have a long wooden box, and when they park and see me looking at them, they slam their unit's door down quickly. Mrs. Hendrix, who, with her binoculars, misses nothing, spots me on the roof and points at 93 vigorously. I told you so, she mouths.

I can hear the leak dripping softly below me. I climb back down the ladder. On the bottom rung, Javier has left me a Post-it note stuck to my key. I'll be back a little later, it says. Meet you tonight?

I get a small rush that starts in my stomach and feels like

a violent shiver, and suddenly I feel alive. What am I doing? I whisper to myself. A part of me wonders if this is all some giant test. If Evan will jump out from behind a bush. Just kidding! he will say. He'll explain that he just wanted to see if I would stay put, if I would wait for him. The ultimate test of our marriage.

The day he disappeared, Delta Omega signed their first year's lease, a pool-cleaning business moved all their chemicals in, and a man's back gave out. The man was storing his apartment for the summer, and I was surprised he tried to move all those boxes himself. When we called 9-1-1 for that man, face down on the gravel, and asked who else we could call for him, he said there was nobody. I was horrified. I remember all of this because Evan and I had argued that day. I thought about how the only people Evander and I had were each other, no kids despite years and thousands of dollars of fertility treatment, no pets, no acquaintances except people we had long since lost contact with from high school, and the people who paid us rent.

"Let's get out of here," I told him. "Let's sell the place."

"Everything my father built."

"Everything that will soon be mud," I reminded him. "We wanted kids. We wanted kids so badly. Now why should we stay?"

But Evan, who had dropped out of college to run this place, who married me the summer after high school, who loved me when I was a spitfire and then when I was not, always knew me better than I knew myself. I didn't know where we'd go, what we'd do, or why. I knew that once, I'd wanted to live in New Mexico, in a desert so white because humans let loose a nuclear bomb to careen into that land, the sand rendered sterile, waiting for life to slip back through the grains. Once, I'd wanted to be a florist, making things grow out of water and air, making old bulbs, dried seeds, and the most seemingly dead things transform into new creatures and greenness. But that was then.

After the ambulance left, I went to bed with Evander amid the whirring hum of moving trucks slipping in and out of the complex. A commotion outside of people burdened with the stuff of their lives, the never-ending stream of cars rocketing back and forth from the Walmart, whooshing past us in the dark. Evander breathing, choked rasps like a clock counting down something I thought would never end. The distance between us on the bed seemed deep as a canyon.

But then his fingers curled into my hair and he brushed his

hand over my throat. The bed creaked as he shifted over me, his dark Cajun eyes like they contained galaxies, everything we could have been. In that moment, after so many years of sleeping next to him, I saw a mystery, some pain he'd locked away because he had to, a depth I couldn't flee. I remembered his sweetest moments, when he'd bring me some present from the gas station or something he found in the woods, and he'd cup it in his wide hands, daring me to guess, slowly unlacing his fingers until I laughed in delight and pried his hands apart to reveal a baby squirrel, a pecan, a ragged flower, the shed skin of a snake.

All I could think of then was how you have to know a thing to leave it. You leave a place because you think it has nothing for you anymore. When you run, you have to name what you flee.

"You know," Evander said, "I've only ever wanted to make you happy."

I said nothing, but I rolled him over and put him inside me. He entered an empty womb, a cavern built for storage with nothing inside. Afterward he rolled over on his stomach and wouldn't touch me. He was asleep, I thought. The next morning, the sheets on his side were pushed back and cold. He was gone.

I put the key Javier left me back on my key ring. Javier must have gone to the McDonald's on the corner for cheap breakfast and to use their bathroom to wash up instead of mine because of his pride. I've seen him there when I drive by for errands. Once, back when he'd only been renting for a few months, I passed and he was crying into his hands, his shoulders heaving and jumping with sobs. Evander had been gone for five months then, and I knew exactly how Javier felt. I almost parked the car and went in to him. But instead, that night, when I saw his headlights irradiate the dark alleys between the units, I invited him into the office and fed him the first real dinner he'd had in weeks. Our friendship began with me feeding him every

After so many years of sleeping next to him, I saw a mystery, some pain he'd locked away because he had to, a depth I couldn't flee.

night like I did for Evander. We spent the nights dissecting our marriages, remembering the past.

A week ago, we moved on in conversation to the native plants in Mexico. He accompanied me on my rounds that night, getting closer as we spiraled in the maze of the storage center back toward my office. At my door, he kissed me. His lips were hard, tense, and when he kissed me he grabbed my arms. His eyes were bright with the reflection of headlights passing on the road, and they were like doors opening, and I refused. My heart jumped into my throat. I slammed the door on him and have tried to avoid him since.

I use my master key to break into Mr. and Mrs. Hitchcock's unit, right next to Javier's and therefore a probable victim of the leak. The slatted door rises, and out falls a skeleton. My heart stops for a moment before I see cradled in its knobby, bony arms a stuffed Easter bunny in overalls sporting several Earth Day pins telling us to save the trees. When I catch my breath, I climb over the classroom Christmas tree. The Hitchcocks are both history teachers, sixth and seventh grade, and really into it, so they collect classroom decorations. I push aside swords from the Civil War, scarabs from Egypt, a bucket cradling amber stones preserving thousand-year-old insects, old farm plows from the 1920s. In the back, I see the leak has punched through to this unit. A steady drip melts a string of paper pumpkins and tissue-paper decorations, so now the paper is all orange mush.

Outside, one of the fraternity boys pounds the vending machine beside the office for a Coke. I grab Javier's pellet gun, not that it would do much, and I follow the frat boy through the labyrinthine rows of units. He looks back at me and twitches, then walks faster. He flails his arm in front of him. At his unit, two of the older brothers nod and throw a tarp over the truck bed. One of them I recognize because he's the treasurer of the frat, so he's the one who comes in to pay me every month.

"Good day, ma'am," he says, his hand resting on the tailgate.

"Mrs. Hendrix has been complaining," I say.

"That's like the tenth time," he says.

"Still." Before they can reach to stop me, I throw back the blue plastic tarp. The box is indeed a coffin, a short one with wider breadth for shoulders, tapered down at the feet, intricately carved with water lilies, lotuses, a landscape full

of animals. For a moment, the ebony wood entrances me, the deep grains like a river that leads me down to the source of all my wants. It looks expensive and old. "What are you doing with this?" I say.

The youngest one bites his lip and jerks toward the other two, who cross their arms. I prey on the weakest boy, the youngest, whose hair clumps in strings around his ears.

"What's it for?" I ask him.

"Umm," he says. "Umm. I can't tell you."

"Listen, ma'am," says the treasurer. "We're really not supposed to say. Super-secret initiation stuff. Scare the pledges and all."

"Ah," I say. Evander had been in a fraternity before he dropped out of college. They'd locked all of his pledge class up naked in a closet full of rats. I'd heard of something like this before: make a boy spend the night in a nailed coffin, trusting he will be let back out again come morning. It's meant to tie those younger boys to the older ones forever by a cordon of fear. Evander never forgot that night, saying it unlocked a fear inside him that once let out, had no bounds. Life was terrifying in a way he couldn't explain after that. It was why he dropped out; it was why he agreed so readily to take over the storage business and move down here. In some ways he'd been battling that fear all those decades. I, on the other hand, had absorbed it as it leaked from him.

The frat boys wedge a crowbar under the lip of the lid, and I catch myself worrying if they've hurt the wood, these clumsy boys. The lid opens with a stale sigh, exhaling smells of cedar and turpentine. The Walmart that will eventually slide over us shrinks its shadow, and doors a few rows over ratchet open and shut. The box gapes empty. For some reason, I am disappointed.

As I walk back to my office, Ms. Garcon staggers out of her unit.

"Celine spoke," Ms. Garcon wails.

"What?" It is unbelievable that the day has finally come. I hug her and look into the unit. Celine blows spit bubbles with her lip, her head relaxing on the back of a tailgate chair. "What did she say?"

"She said, 'No.'"

"Are you sure it wasn't just a sound?" I ask, instantly regretting it.

"She meant it," Ms. Garcon says. "I was spooning her least favorite baby food. Carrots."

We spend hours cooing "No" at Celine and other words, trying to get her to repeat it. I tell her a joke, because Halloween is coming up and I am tired of the same words.

"What does the mommie zombie say to her child?" I say.

"What?" says Mrs. Garcon, so overwhelmed by emotion, she looks like she is about to throw up.

In a gruff, robotic voice, I say, "Eatjor braaaains."

Celine smiles, but I know it is not at my joke. She watches the squirrels chase each other into the trees. I leave the Garcons when her mother starts force-feeding her carrots again to make her say no. Celine makes tiny coughing sounds behind me.

Mrs. Hendrix has forgone her binoculars for telescopes. Outside her unit, she sets up a telescope for each eye. Their layered cones point at the sky in opposite directions.

"I'm looking for Evander," she says. The scopes reach out from her eyes like tentacles.

"How can you see with them in two directions?" I ask her.

"I can see the future this way," she says. "I can see my kids eating dinner without me. I can see their children doing pirouettes on roller skates. I can see my great-great grandson drowning in the swamp. Everything. I can see your future and every way it goes."

"What would you know about that?"

"Don't you want to see?" she asks. She brings her face away from the scopes, her eyes marked with rings from the pressure. At this point I sense she is getting ready to die; this is the craziness before the old give up the earth. She smiles at me, and I offer her tea, and then I leave her to it.

Javier hounds me in the afternoon when he returns. He leans over the office counter insisting that we talk. He smells like the cheap hand soap from gas-station bathrooms. I tell him about Celine and Delta Omega and relinquish his pellet gun. He wants to show me how to fix the leak.

Finally, I hand him the tools. "You fix it," I say. "And you can have rent free." I know he can't afford to turn me down.

His moustache droops.

"That's what this is, isn't it? Free rent?" I don't know why, lately, meanness becomes me.

"You know what I want," he says. He stares at me with burning eyes, like he has finally bottled himself up inside, like he is willing to wait until the end of our lives.

Once, I caught a catfish and I felt the prick of its dorsal fin, the slippery, white belly arching in my hands. Once, I wanted to guide campers down bayou trails; I spoke Creole and Spanish I've since forgotten; I wanted to charm snakes and sing them back into the ground so they would tremble before me. But then Vander's father died, and we made our bed in one of the storage units, and we couldn't afford to hire anyone else, so here I've been, almost every single day the complex has been open for thirty years. I remember all this when Javier looks at me, and I am afraid.

"Fix it," I say, and push him out the door, my hand on the hard knots in his back, the little bell ringing his goodbye.

While Javier hunches over the crack on the roof, his ex-wife visits me, wearing a pink sweater, tight-fitting jeans, and high heels; her new lover has treated her well. She wants the keys to Javier's unit, and she wants to know whom he's been sleeping with.

"He's been sleeping with me," I lie.

She clenches her fist at me, and I stand up behind my desk, and then she looks at where I wrenched my pants over my belly. She laughs.

"I want to take everything that's his," she says.

I know this impulse; sometimes I want all the things I store to stay here, for the owners to leave us alone, for my rooms to be filled. Now, I want to break open. I want to be unnameable. I want to fly at her as if I were a ghost.

I slide her the key.

She hobbles on her heels to his unit. On the CCTVs, I watch her yank up his door, take all the boxes she can drag herself, leaving him the couch and the lamp and one last box of clothes. She leaves him a note and a grocery bag full of what looks like dinner. She closes the unit back up and threads her own lock through the door hook. She writes her name on the lock with a Sharpie.

For the rest of the night, I stay in my office with my monitors. Flickering men and women tremble across the screens. Javier sees the new lock, then struggles against the steel doors by ram-

ming his body into them. He hovers outside my unit for a moment, but he doesn't come in for help. Then he wanders the complex like a ghost. The frat boys make several trips to their unit. They bring in boxes of candles, and I remind myself to tell them about the fine for setting off the fire alarm. A trio of college girls store their dorm room. Larry the antique dealer rolls in a blow-dryer from the 1920s that looks like a giant spiraling seashell mounted on a stand. A lamp store has closed down, and the owner looks like her heart is about to break as every lamp and torchière is carried lightless under her new unit's rolling doors. And who am I to say, as I watch her lips purse and tense, her eyes turn up to the sky: Is this what your life has been reduced to?

How hard and how necessary waiting can be, to understand how you can fall in love with a lock instead of what's inside.

An hour after I've locked the office doors for the night, Javier lingers on the pavement outside the front doors. He needs a place to sleep. I know he suspects I'm watching. He waves one hand at the camera, raising it up like a salute. Behind him, the frat van creeps by, filled with about a dozen new recruits, hooded, like sacks with human bodies. I think now would be a good time to make sure they aren't going to burn the place down. I escape out the back door, leaving Javier to understand how hard and how necessary waiting can be, to understand how you can fall in love with a lock instead of what's inside.

Outside, Celine's voice sings with no words. Mrs. Hendrix's telescopes point toward comets that trickle down the sky. I can see a glowing trail where Javier has passed through the maze of pavement, like the tail of comets, the light pooling where he hovered. The Delta Omega pledge van gasps behind the last row of storage units. The boys crowd in the woods starting up the hill to the Walmart's parking lot. The older boys circle around a cluster of a dozen hooded figures. The older boys hum and chant, but I can't make out the words.

I walk toward them. I can smell amber, smokiness; someone's started their first bonfire of the year. The cold invades me. The treasurer leads the ceremony. He raises his arms to the sky, then

brings them down on the pledges' black-robed shoulders and yells into their hooded faces. I sneak into their unit's row, the trees blocking me.

Their door has been left open. Fingers of flickering light spill out the door and claw at the concrete and the darkness. Inside the unit, thousands of candle flames twist and writhe, perched on shelves and covering the whole floor except bare paths to each of a dozen coffins. I step in and it's like I'm in the center of the sun, the place where all my choices implode on themselves like fusing atoms. The large, carved coffin I saw earlier rests on the floor, next to another identical to it, pushed together like they are married. A dozen smaller, plain coffins surround them. All of their lids lean gently on their sides.

I want so badly to find Evander that I see his face in one of the coffins. Evan, Vander, Evander, and he is pale, clearly dead, preserved so that I can still see his features. Then his eyes open and he sits up.

I have no breath. You're dead, I manage.

I've been waiting for you, he says. He smiles, and his teeth glow white, and his mouth opens like a canyon. His face is dark and smudged with gray. The same clothes he wore the day he disappeared hang off him like swamp debris. He is the landscape come alive, part of the map of America, his eyes a compass rose to the land of waiting.

What happened? I ask. Grief at everything I've lost by finding him floods me. I say, What if I'd left? What if I'd flown the coop? What if I never find you?

I hear everyone is more alive in Mexico, he says. Music, all that brightness, the desert, the heat.

What if I'd left? I cry. I want to hate him for keeping me here.

I know you. You're not going anywhere.

Once, I'd have killed him for his tone, for how he could dismiss me; I would've swiped him with a kitchen knife. I would have driven the jeep all the way to Mexico myself just for being dared to. I would have taken his dead canyon of a mouth and sprouted a cactus to grow out his throat. Once, I thought I could plant a seed inside myself. I would have searched for the seed that grew in the darkest and emptiest of caverns. Once, I was certain a valley of bayou snakes would bow down to me like I was the first woman.

We are kings of this valley, I say.

Yes, he says, and on the other side I can see our child is named Lisette and has blonde hair and speaks French and knows everything we could never know and her voice tinkles like a bell. The mysteries we never follow are that much sweeter.

He holds out his hand. Behind me, the chants of the fraternity get closer. They are coming. I almost take Evander's hand. I almost join him. Instead, something breaks in me like a dam, and I run toward the office.

"You've finally seen your ghost," Javier says when he sees me, a bright comet trail of movement glowing behind him. He's been pacing in the cold and he shivers. Celine's song hums with the spinning of the earth.

I tell him,"No," and then I tell him, "Come inside."

When we reach my bed, he lays me across the quilt. His fingers brush my throat. I close my eyes. Everything I could have been slides down the hill toward us, mud and dirt rolling in marvelous somersaults over us, Louisiana drowning. I feel buried alive, in storage for a thousand years, waiting to rage our lost dreams upon the earth. Javier over me, I tremble for what we'll do when we finally wake.

PATRICIA FOSTER

THE LOST YEARS

It happened so quickly I couldn't remember my other life, the life of the well, that ordinary *wake-up-in-the-morning-have-a-cup-of-coffee-and-get-on-with-it* self. One day I had a routine: I'd write for an hour each morning at the kitchen table, go to work at nine, come home at six, fix dinner with David, and then read or write until midnight. The next thing I knew I was too tired to get out of bed. Something had happened, but for weeks I was too woozy to know what it was. The flu, I assumed. A really bad flu.

My new life *did* begin with the flu, some virus weaving its way through Los Angeles, perhaps carried toward the ocean by Santa Ana winds. For several days, David had lain absolutely still in bed, sandwiched between the sheets, getting up only for full glasses of water and then long pauses in the bathroom. I'd hear the toilet flush and see him stumble back to bed. Then the third morning he emerged as if nothing had happened, fixed a pot of coffee, took a shower, and raced off to work. He'd been gone barely an hour when I felt the first flush of fever, the ache in my limbs, the sudden pull of exhaustion. I knew the drill. I called in sick and slid quietly between the sheets.

This new life began in 1982, the same year that Michael Jackson's "Thriller" hit the stores and teenagers drove in from the Valley, hanging out at Tower Records and Music Plus and Fat Beats. Adults fixated on another icon, real estate, which was booming. Everyone believed they could make a killing.

But I was too sick to make a killing. For weeks and then months, I remained listless, my mind drifting, my head as light as scattered straw. My lymph nodes slightly swollen, my bones aching, I felt as if I still had the flu and longed only to lie in the dark. I knew that something had gone quietly haywire inside my body, but so quietly that nothing definitive showed up on empirical tests. When I'd first become ill, I'd gone to the medical men: an internist, an endocrinologist, an allergist. On such visits I was told, "We can't find anything wrong except maybe

some allergies." I was told, "Go home, young lady, and drink some coffee." I was told, "It might be psychological. You seem an anxious sort. Try not to worry so much."

True, I didn't have cancer or MS or AIDS or any of the other horrible diseases I could list, and yet always there seemed to be a fever behind my eyes, a raw soreness to my throat, an infection swimming through my blood, making me tired. Perhaps worse, my mind felt switched off, as if all the lights inside me had been turned down very low. Why *wouldn't* I worry?

I wonder now if it was because I'd become so curiously ill that so many of the things in my world seemed absurd, or if it was merely a reflection of the times. Exhausted much of the day, I began observing rather than responding to the oddness around me, noting, for instance, that a homeless man slept under my car each night, his head cradled near the left rear wheel, his legs sprawled, flip-flops twisted; that our landlord, a man richer than God—in a penthouse above our apartment—created a maze of newspapers stacked chest high, forming a passageway through his apartment to a wall-sized bird cage where eight cockatiels lived in ornate, stinking squalor; that a new acquaintance at a party insisted on showing me his colostomy bag; that the couple next door, both engineers, dropped in to introduce themselves, the woman topless, her denim shorts, I noticed, neatly hemmed. I'd tried not to stare at the woman's pendulous breasts as I invited them in, offering tea and cookies as if this were the most ordinary introduction to neighbors: *Let me just get the plates and napkins.*

I noticed these things but felt adrift, distracted, unable to react or comment. Or even laugh.

It was late one afternoon in September after I'd been sick for over ten months. I curled up on our blue-striped couch—we now called it the "narcotic couch"—gazing out the sliding glass doors at a smog-filled California sunset flush with colors of dusky rose and lilac and the faded yellow of a bruise. Behind me, the clock ticked loudly and the ceiling fan hummed, while just beyond the sliding glass doors, a long rectangular roof provided me with a 180-degree view of the Pacific Ocean, a dazzling reprieve from our cramped, stuffy apartment. On nights when I felt well, David and I sometimes danced out there under the stars, the day's dry air thickened at night by the humid

swells of the ocean. The horizon was a thin, pale line illuminated by the tiny, diamond lights of a ship or darkened to an eerie flatness. Our next-door neighbors—the topless engineer and her boyfriend, who rented the other apartment opening onto the roof—worked late at their firm, and during the week, David and I claimed proprietary rights.

Though I'd been lying on the couch for three hours, I hadn't had a restful sleep, but a heavy, dreamless collapse. I woke as tired and disordered as the moment I lay down. Now it was early evening and I wondered where David was. He usually came home for dinner if he was working in his Venice studio, where he made beveled glass doors and windows for clients, often bringing home take-out—soup or fajitas or a big salad. I wondered if he'd called or if I was supposed to know where he was.

As if I'd conjured him, the phone rang. It was seven.

David sounded hurried and distracted and slightly irritable. "I'm finishing up a job with Roy and I'll be late." I heard the whine of power saws, the blur of talk, and some harsh scraping like industrial sandpaper against wood. "Coming," he called to someone in the room. Then back to me, "So you'll be okay?"

"I'm on the narcotic couch."

"Poor baby."

But I knew he didn't have time for sympathy. I worried he'd grow tired of being with someone who spent a part of each week languishing on the couch, unable to do grocery shopping or laundry or even go to the movies. Aware of the pause, I wondered if Roy was listening in or grinning at David from across the room, holding out a tiny bag of cocaine. I wondered how much cocaine Roy had already snorted, how late they were going to work. David and I didn't do drugs, but Roy often stayed up forty-eight hours straight to finish a job, and even David, who averaged only five hours of sleep, couldn't keep up with him. Suddenly I sat up, nerves wired for trouble. "Where are you?"

"At Roy's studio," he said. "I just told you." And then quickly, "Gotta go. Gotta get something to eat. It will be a long night."

After I hung up, I wished I'd asked what they were working on—a French country–style bed, a layered deck, or maybe just distressing wood for a floor—and what kind of deadline they had. Roy's clients were mostly Hollywood people, minor TV actors but also producers, the kind who sold a series for $50 million—big bucks in the early eighties—and who scrutinized

every corner, every glaze, every notch of the work Roy did. David, I remembered now, was just helping out.

I settled back on the couch, relieved to know I could just lie there, idle, aching, letting the night absolve me.

After living for a year in Seattle, David and I had returned to Los Angeles in the fall of 1981, the year Boeing laid off over four thousand workers. When we discovered our own jobs were soon to be cut, we rented a U-Haul, packed up our stuff from the little yellow house near Lake Washington, and drove back to Santa Monica, with just enough income to tide us over for a few weeks. To our relief, our old landlord, the Money King, hired David immediately to manage some of his apartment complexes (a part-time job), and I worked temp jobs during the day—long, boring assignments that made the once-a-week, three-hour night class in writing at UCLA my dessert.

Within three months, David shared a studio in Venice with another glass artist, but he lacked contacts and we needed more money. The Los Angeles market for fine craftsmanship was extravagant and fickle, and we'd been gone for over a year, so it was fortuitous when David was introduced to a man named Roy, a man who'd become all the rage in the Hollywood world of designer-everything.

"Everybody says this guy's a wizard," David told me that night as we were fixing stir-fry in our small kitchen. It was one of my good nights and I was helping, cutting up broccoli and peppers and onions and measuring out the brown rice. "Some kind of maverick woodworker, you know, with a lyrical feel for the material." From what David had heard, Roy built and refinished floors, making them look rustic, rough-hewn, and beautiful, by distressing and sanding and then texturing them with five coats of gloss. He also constructed fireplaces and mantels and built massive beds that could have graced seventeenth-century French castles, beds held together with wooden pegs, the headboards thick and primitive and masculine. Later I'd understand that everything Roy made required punishing physical labor, weeks—often months—of intense work, and like everyone in Hollywood, he was always behind schedule, some finicky part of the work delayed.

A week later, we were invited to the desert to meet Roy and his wife. Because it had been one of my good weeks, I was opti-

mistic. I'd worked four temp days at Paramount Pictures Studios and had even finished a new story, working through lunch hours and late into the evenings. I knew that if David could work with Roy—bidding on jobs together or sharing clients—we'd be able to live in relative security and I wouldn't have to worry about my low productivity, my time on the narcotic couch.

That Saturday, as we drove southeast into the desert, the land looked as uniformly brown as a paper bag, only its tedious flatness dimming my enthusiasm. Nothing moved here except a scattering of tumbleweeds in the occasional wind, the sky a relentless, searing blue. After two hours on the road I wondered if we could be lost, as there were no landmarks to guide us, nothing but the gray ribbon of highway on an endless plain. Then a small market came into view, a lone gas pump out front.

"Land," David laughed, bouncing a little in his seat. "We'll stop and get a Coke, check on these directions."

"Get me a popsicle. Raspberry if they have it."

"You'll be lucky to get cherry or grape." He smiled wryly at me as he got out.

Looking out the window past the store at the barrenness, the cacti and stunted trees, the dull, dingy sand, I wondered who this man was, this Roy, this craftsman genius who lived in the desert. Would he change our lives? Would we like him? Would it matter? For the past four months, I'd worried so much about myself it was a pleasant relief to consider someone else. Then, surprising me, David leaned in the window, handing me a cherry popsicle, the wrapper already sticky. We both laughed, and the next thing I knew we were pulling into a graveled driveway where a white Corvette sparkled in the sun.

Cheryl, Roy's wife, took me in hand the minute we were out of the car. Maybe she saw me as the weak link in the chain, as someone easily amused, but perhaps I am being too cynical, too sensitive. She was a tall woman, lean and angular, with dark blonde hair and gray-green eyes that narrowed at the corners, not pretty in a conventional sense, but compelling, dramatic, a personality to be reckoned with. Roy was an outsized man with a large head, large hands, bulky shoulders, and long legs; he moved slowly, as if all his energy were held in check. Dressed in faded jeans and a beige shirt, he pushed at his unruly chestnut hair with thick fingers as he said in a soft, boyish voice, "Welcome to the desert, darlin'." A throwback from the fifties.

I smiled. By the time Cheryl had settled me at one of the tables on the spacious patio beside the swimming pool, David and Roy had wandered away toward Roy's studio.

Cheryl poured me a scotch on the rocks, never losing a beat in her commentary about some tycoon Roy worked for in L.A. She settled down beside me, informing me that she ran Roy's business, that it was she who took the crap, the bullying, the bluffs, the dismissals, the threats of litigation, "those nasty, aggressive phone calls from clients" when work ran over schedule. She looked poised, confident, and then her eyes narrowed. "This movie monster can't let a cunt tell him what to do, know what I mean? Can't give *me* the money for the job, but he'd throw it away on some prick just like himself." I knew her curses were casual, simply part of the rhetoric, part of her tough-woman-who's-seen-it-all attitude. She closed her eyes, her head thrown back, and I saw the faint lattice of lines radiating down her pale neck. "My god, women have it so hard," she whispered, then opened her eyes and sipped her drink. She stared at me. "But I'm not going to let them get me. It breaks my heart what I have to do, but at least it's a hustle. I love a hustle." And then she smiled, her eyes flashing. "If I didn't have these pricks to deal with, I'd find some others. Yes sir, it breaks Roy into tiny pieces, but I *love* it." She took another sip of her drink. "I love my life!" she shouted. "I love my fucking life!"

I'm too sick to have kids, *I thought. David and I had rarely talked about children. We hadn't talked about many things since I'd become ill.*

I smiled too because the scotch felt good going down my throat and today I didn't feel sick.

"You have kids?" Cheryl asked, changing the subject so quickly it surprised me.

I shook my head. *I'm too sick to have kids,* I thought, though David and I had rarely talked about children. We hadn't talked about many things since I'd become ill.

"Too bad. I thought maybe you did. I always wanted kids, wanted a mess of them, but life is funny, isn't it? What you want at one time is what you can't get rid of fast enough at another."

I nodded, not knowing how to reply.

"I had one when I was fifteen. Nearly killed me having it, then when I got well, it was gone. Never really saw it. My mother put it up for adoption, but I didn't care. I wanted a new dress, some high heels. I wanted to see the world, to get on the road and go, go go." She smiled as if remembering. "All I'd done was complain the whole time I was pregnant, and now I can't quit thinking about her. About her being lost." She sloshed whiskey in her glass, poured more, and took a long swallow. I wondered if the pronoun was important or if it had been a slip. "You won't believe it, but after that I went to nursing school. I used to be in charge of this program in Detroit for drug addicts. Heroin. Smack. Devil-catchers." She stared beyond me, her face now saddened, older. I think she'd forgotten I was there. "And I lost again."

"Lost?"

"Yeah, they all died. Kaput with the needle. After all that talking I did . . . Monsters!" She grinned suddenly, a foolish grin. "Well, I can't go back to that, so I stay here in the desert and try to get money out of these movie pricks for Roy."

By now I understood that all Cheryl required was a captive audience and an occasional willing nod. I knew her stories would plot a familiar route: bad relationships, divorces, feuds, plastic surgeries (she confessed these in detail), debts, windfalls, collapses, perverse triumphs, untouchable greed, and resentment—a flood of suffering and redemption that could fill any daytime-TV show. Later, I'd wonder if money was her weapon of control. But money, I decided, was the result. For Cheryl, it would be face-to-face combat, a willingness to confront, to sink the ship, to play dirty—that was her sword. But I was getting tired. Listening had worn me out, brought back the all-too-familiar fatigue, and I was glad when David rescued me, insisting that I see Roy's studio, a huge barn-like structure as big as a warehouse built in a shelter of eucalyptus trees behind their house.

I clasped David's hand as we followed Roy. Dirty skylights opened the ceiling to the sun, yet in the dusty light its brightness was dim, esoteric. Other windows framed two walls, the desert stretching beyond in a smooth flatness. Roy stepped over a dusty piece of lumber, offered his hand to guide me, David right behind. Roy showed us the tools he used, mostly electric saws, cutting tools, a planer the size of my arm. Along the back wall,

raw lumber, old and scrappy, pulled down from barns and condemned buildings, was stacked. It looked pockmarked, dirty. I thought it was funky, no good, but then I saw David's nod of approval.

"That's the stuff," Roy said. "The raunchier the better."

I walked through sawdust toward the wood piled against the wall. The wood's texture was battered, disfigured by wind and weather, the abuse of natural elements. Each piece was unique. Beautiful in its own way.

And then Cheryl appeared. She linked her arm through David's. "So," she said and smiled, tightening her arm, her fingers dancing lightly across his wrist, pulling him close so that their hips touched. "I think we'll be friends." She gazed not at David but at Roy.

When we left the desert that night, it was assumed that David would bid on some of the same jobs as Roy, perhaps sharing clients and thus working jobs together, though Roy's studio would be in the desert and David's in Venice, fifty miles apart.

On the drive home, as David talked excitedly about the prospects, I tried to ignore the flicker of worry that nagged at such euphoria. Roy and Cheryl seemed theatrical and competitive, with a calculated playfulness, as if each were trying to claim us, not for ourselves but for some private agenda. To me, they seemed desperate, not for money but for something I didn't yet know. *Their lives are coming apart,* I thought, and instantly knew it was true. I recognized this. My own life was coming apart, my days haunted, even when I was able to work, by a sense of fatigue and failure, a slow relinquishing of the self I'd known, the curious, ambitious self who wanted to be a writer. In Seattle, for the first time, I'd felt secure in the direction of my life. Though I'd been the rebellious, needy daughter for much of my twenties, the one who couldn't find a place to fit or an ambition to direct her intellect, in Seattle, I discovered that writing stories galvanized me, settled me, as if I'd begun listening to a conversation I wanted to have. But once I became ill, there were many days when

My own life was coming apart, my days haunted, even when I was able to work, by a sense of fatigue and failure, a slow relinquishing of the self I'd known.

I couldn't sustain deep thought, couldn't puzzle out plot or the implications of character, my mind muffled by a fevered body, a broken immune system.

On the drive home, I closed my eyes, half listening to David's thoughts and resenting his high-pitched energy. I knew that soon he'd be very busy, and the thought made me both grateful and worried. He'd get up at five, walk out onto the roof in the early morning sun with a cup of coffee, gazing at the light haze over the ocean that blurred the horizon. He'd be thinking about a problem he needed to solve, and then for hours he'd be immersed in work, coming home near midnight. I would be alone. I would miss him. And like him, I too wanted the agitation of desire.

Maybe that's what kept me pushing against illness, made me experiment with different treatments and diets, cutting out all sugars and prepared foods, taking vitamin C and other supplements. And there would be days when I'd wake up to a veil of light streaming through the blinds and feel a sense of well-being, my body returned. "I'm okay," I'd think. "It's over." I'd wander out into the kitchen, where David was making breakfast, pour myself a cup of coffee, and walk down the driveway to stand drunkenly in the sun.

Two weeks later I'd crawl, exhausted, into the stillness of my bed.

And yet for two weeks, I'd been a woman writing, working, reading, thinking.

As I'd expected, when the jobs with Roy materialized, David's life became hectic, charged with deadlines and meetings, designs and approvals, and then the work itself. To our relief, he was making money again, keeping us solvent while I managed to keep up with my night class at UCLA—my life support—and continued, in my erratic way, to be sick and then well, overwhelmed and optimistic, a lost cause and a writer.

It seemed that this way of living might go on forever. I don't know when it began to go terribly wrong or if we were simply caught in the downward spiral of the hustling ambition that made up so much of life in L.A. I try hard to remember. I remember that in early August, Roy moved his studio to L.A. to be closer to his clients, who'd become more insistent, even bitter, about deadlines, and David began to split his time between

Roy's studio and his own. And then in late fall, quite suddenly—or so it seemed to us—Roy and Cheryl split up. I remember only that their fights were epic, full of threats and physical damage. Lawsuits were filed, cars driven up onto curbs and rammed into doors, wood splintering, glass shattering. Roy began doing coke all the time, working without sleep, his money gone, eaten up by lawyers and the chemical excess he needed to keep going. I also remember David coming home late one night, exhausted by the sordidness, depressed by the weirdness of working with Roy. Roy, he said, was not just doing coke, but had lit a crack pipe that night with an acetylene torch like someone wanting to commit suicide. "And all the creeps around him, the stupid fucks who work for him, were cheering him on as if it was some funny prank—*ha, ha, just get yourself killed*."

He slumped on the couch. "If I didn't need to get paid, I'd never go back. It's like being trapped in dark slime."

But he did need to get paid. All summer, gas fumes from the cars parked in open stalls beneath our apartment complex wafted through our windows, making me sicker. Even when we kept the windows closed, there was always the lingering smell of gasoline and oil when we stepped out onto the roof, as if even the ocean breeze had betrayed us. We needed to find another apartment, but first we'd have to save the money for a deposit and first and last month's rent.

And then something did change. One afternoon I was working at home, rewriting a story at the kitchen table, when the phone buzzed. "That saw chewed off part of my finger . . . and I'm on the way to the doctor," David said, his voice too high, too faint. He slurred the doctor's address and then hung up.

What part of the finger? Which finger? The whole finger? As I drove into Santa Monica, I thought of a severed middle finger, the *fuck you* finger—bloody strips of skin and veins, calluses thickening the inside edge, the half-moon of a fingernail—dropped into a plastic baggy, an old shirt wrapped tight around the stump. But he'd said "part," so, *please let it be just the tip.*

When I reached the doctor's office, I saw David in the hallway, a woman standing over him, her small, wizened face crisscrossed with wrinkles, her alert brown eyes sharp and focused, much clearer than those of most of the people in our lives. She barely glanced at me. She had the no-nonsense air of a marine sergeant as she leaned over David. "I'll need to see that,"

she said, pulling his hand toward her and removing the bloody cloth.

David looked woozy, started to sway, murmured, "Hail Mary, full of grace . . ." and instantly she whisked something under his nose. "Steady there," she said, and he shifted back into focus. Later we'd learn that she'd been a nurse on the Bataan Death March in the Philippines, and seeing a bloody finger, the tip sliced off, didn't exactly merit high drama. But as I watched her carefully clean the mess, saw David's confused, anguished face, a shiver gathered at the back of my neck. I felt the sudden pull of disaster, the unraveling of a panic I'd knotted and hidden somewhere deep inside. How would we survive now, two people trapped on the fringe of a life in L.A., our resources depleted, our energy sapped by the constant crush of just getting by? Of course we had no insurance. It had never even occurred to us. We used every bit of our income to cover expenses. But my anguish pushed beyond economics to the existential, as if for the first time I allowed myself to really see that we were both fragile and damaged, physically and psychologically spent, our reserves depleted, our lives held together by the thinnest of threads. Though I'd felt untethered for most of my life, I'd also felt driven, intent on overcoming and competing, finding my way and proving my worth. That I might actually falter had never occurred to me until I'd gotten sick last year, my energy leaking out like the air from a spent balloon. Now, watching the nurse lead David into a treatment room so that the doctor could patch his mangled flesh, I knew that behind all his intensity and concentration, he was as uncertain and terrified as I was. It had always been there. I'd just never seen it.

I felt the sudden pull of disaster, the unraveling of a panic I'd knotted and hidden somewhere deep inside. How would we survive now?

I thought of Roy and Cheryl, the way they'd sabotaged each other, competitive and determined to make the other suffer. They too were fragile people, but fear had made them mean and angry, kept them fixated on punishment. David and I were different. I was sure of that. But our difference, I realized, also

included a naiveté about financial stability, a reluctance to assume the worst, to negotiate failure. When confronted by conflict or crisis, our instinct was to back off, to turn away and wait before we acted. Perhaps this was the result of growing up with alcoholics or maybe it was simply a part of our temperament, a fear of losing control, of being pathetic, of making the wrong choice. As I stood outside the treatment-room door, I knew, as if for the first time, that we had no safety net. I knew that we couldn't depend on good intentions or sudden fortune or luck to rescue us. We had nothing but ourselves.

Listening to the doctor's voice talking soothingly to David, the shiver at my neck escalated to a chill. I watched David tuck his bottom lip in and then take a shallow breath. What would we do? What would happen to us now that David wouldn't be able to work?

I had been brought up to believe in the will, to assume that only grit and determination and the driven self mattered. That night after we got home, David medicated and asleep on the narcotic couch, I wondered if I could reclaim—as I'd heard that people often did in the midst of crisis—my old, driven self. I walked out alone onto the roof and stood staring into the darkness of the ocean. There were no twinkling lights in the distance tonight, no ships seeming to skim across the horizon, but the ocean breeze brought with it the smell of the sea, damp and musty and oddly pleasing. I leaned against the railing, uncertain if I had the energy for what lay ahead. For a moment I wished I were like Cheryl. I wished I could say, "I love my fucking life!" and mean the thrill of combat and controversy, the heat of the hunt. But I'd never be like that. For a moment I felt sorry for myself, for how frustrated and unprepared I was, how diminished by illness, how stupid and shamed by my situation. I wanted to whimper, to curl around myself, but then it occurred to me that this was what all the characters in the stories I loved recognized: the inadequacy of the self in the face of new circumstances, the terror of survival at every level of consciousness. I felt the brush of wind on my face, a burst of salt air. I imagined the swell of the sea, the heavy, white-flecked waves. Perhaps my fear was inevitable but endurable.

And then I saw a bracelet of lights far out on the ocean. Just a glimmer—or was I imagining it, wanting it? I narrowed my

eyes, squinting. No, there were pinpoints of light skating in the dark, flickers of movement. Instinctively, I lifted my face to the night air. I knew this might be silly—*Lights? So what? You* wanted *those lights!*—but I told myself it didn't matter. As if the fact of them, the beauty and thrill of seeing them so many miles away, relaxed me, relieving me of some of my terror. I thought, *We can leave, we will leave, somehow, we'll get away.*

While David recovered, I took on more jobs, pretending to be well even when I was sick, making myself do what six months before had seemed impossible. I remember sitting at a desk on perhaps the sixteenth floor of some insurance company, temping two weeks for an employee on vacation, feeling dull and irrelevant, a slug among the bottom feeders, a placeholder at a desk. I'd been exhausted all week, going to sleep on the narcotic couch almost immediately when I got home each day and resenting the effort it took to dress appropriately each morning for such a boring job. One day after lunch, after I'd spoken to no one except to acknowledge the beginning or end of copy to be edited or typed, when I'd passed, as invisible as a ghost, other workers in the halls, I printed out a large sign and put it on my back: TYPING FOR THE MASSES, as if I'd entered the ranks of the socialist labor force. It brought a few punchy comments and some friendly laughs, and for the rest of the week, I didn't feel quite so alone. Of course, I constantly admonished myself for not getting a better job—*Typing! Changing commas! I mean, really!*— but I used all my "good" energy to write stories, to begin to dream again, and I wasn't about to give that up.

After his finger healed, David refused to go back to Roy's studio except to pick up his tools. In a few months he was able to start working again. Small projects. Repairs. He didn't have many commissions, but he'd become more cautious and had begun painting again. And now he came home for supper.

Maybe it was just that—a return to some kind of order, a life without the drama of Roy, a lessening of terror that gave me the courage to apply to MFA programs in creative writing; that would be one way to leave. And on a sultry day in March, the letter arrived, waiting for me after a day at another insurance company, my eyes still aching from staring at a computer screen for eight straight hours. I didn't want to open it, to find out. And then I did, blindly, stupidly yanking out the single page

of acceptance. "Oh, Christ!" Iowa, a place I'd never been and couldn't quite imagine. Thrilled, I ran out onto the roof and shouted to the ocean. "We're going! We're leaving! Fuck you! Goodbye!"

That June we packed up our furniture and books and art supplies and drove across the country to Iowa City, Iowa, with its foursquare farmhouses, its gentle, rolling hills, its studious politeness and perfect rows of corn. "Jesus, we'll be Midwesterners," David said as we passed through the flatness of Nebraska and western Iowa. To our surprise, Iowa City seemed a quaint place, almost a village, thrilling and new, a city of writers. Oddly, as we drove the last twenty miles down I-80, I thought of Cheryl that day we'd visited in the desert. I saw her pouring more whiskey, her eyes seared with sadness, and then as she took one swallow, her chin jutted out and she snapped, "The prick! I'll make him pay!" I wanted to laugh. That was how she survived, pushing, always pushing.

We'd left Los Angeles with such relief, there was only the sun's warmth on the roof to miss on cold, snowy nights in Iowa when the wind howled and bare branches brushed furtively against our windows. I always hoped that eventually I'd see those difficult years in Los Angeles as useful, perhaps even necessary. I hoped I'd be able to extract meaning, to appreciate or at least mourn a painful, confusing time. After all, I still had days of inexplicable fatigue, what would come to be called chronic fatigue syndrome, a medical anomaly with almost no treatment. But this never happened. All I understood from those years was that I was humbled and had endured the mess and muddle of a marginal life.

After we finished unpacking our dishes and organizing our books, I gazed out the second-floor window of our small rental house in Iowa at the peonies and purple coneflowers blooming in a neighbor's yard, feeling grateful, even charmed by their beauty. Outside, birds chirped, the sky a blue-white haze, but inside my small, still-empty study it was quiet and shadowed by trees. I glanced down at my notebook, words already written, a story in the making. Quickly, I sat down atop two stacked boxes and turned on the desk light to read what I'd come here to say.

Note: Some of the names in this essay have been changed.

ASH WEDNESDAY

My brother Frank is on the phone in his cab last night in Boston, answering my call and telling the guy in the backseat: "It's my sister from California."

"Cali-phony-a." Said with relish and a kind of amazement.

"How's the weather there?"

"Oh, beautiful. The usual." I wish it would rain. "What's it doing there?"

"It's bitter, Linda. It's wicked bitter."

He visited once, for my wedding, more than twenty years ago. Boston to San Francisco, the only time he's ever been on a plane. Undiagnosed, unmedicated, he then took a road trip from San Francisco to L.A. with our brother Patrick and his friends. That was when they were all still drinking. They thought they might see some stars.

I can picture it: Frank, excited about the cotton growing along I-5. It looks purple in the fields, not white. Who knew?

"Pull over!" He runs into the fields. He's never seen cotton growing.

I did the same thing the first time I ever saw the cotton along I-5. I made my husband pull over. I picked a few bolls and hurried back to the car. I was excited, it was exotic, and I was a long way from home. I pressed the cotton in my notebook. But I didn't insist that I could make a fortune from cotton; I didn't tell people that cotton spoke to me; I didn't announce that I could weave a shirt right there along the highway and patent the process and sell it to the Japanese. (Always the Japanese.)

"Frank, get back in the fucking car!"

I can't remember a time when he was not talking about the fortune he's about to make from his schemes. Many times he has tried to get through to the car companies in Japan, to talk about his ideas. There was a phase when he stockpiled lots of rotting wood in my parents' cellar.

"Him and his goddamn wood." My father with his grim look, my mother with her rage: "Dick! That wood is a fire hazard!" Our cellar had a dirt floor. The wood was piled on a platform made of rotting wood. The rickety stairs to the cellar were lined with my parents' separate stashes of spices, powdered milk, cans of soup, his and hers; hers with notes taped to the lids: "Dick, don't touch this!"—"Don't" underlined five times.

And they said Frank was weird.

And disobedient. He'd see, once they kicked him out. He'd see. My father regretted there was no draft. The army would break him, would whip him into shape. My father had been drafted and shipped off to Korea when he was twenty. They'd sure shown him.

Ours was the house of blame. My mother said it was my father's fault that Frank was epileptic. It had come from the Irish side of the family. Because my father was a bastard. Not in the same way that other fathers were bastards, but for real. His illegitimacy was a secret, except for when it wasn't.

Frank said his pile of wood was a sure thing: "Like Fort Knox." The Japanese were going to be interested in that wood someday. They'd want it to fuel the line of cars he was inventing.

When he was homeless for the first time, in 1982, my roommates agreed that he could stay with us in Somerville for a while. We'd just graduated from a small Catholic college. At Mass every week the Jesuits reminded us that we had a special mission to be "men and women for others." Sometimes they forgot to add "women" because the school had been all male for 130 years and we girls were still new. But we already knew about sacrifice; our role model was Mary, the epitome of self-negation. And we took our Catholicism seriously even as we were questioning it.

My friends already knew Frank. When we'd lived down the Cape one summer, he rode his shitty bike from Boston to West Yarmouth on an impulse—Seventy-five miles! In the dark! On the highway!—banging on our screens at 5:00 AM. I could smell him in the dark. I remember that Peggy was particularly kind to him; she made him breakfast while I slept in, annoyed and embarrassed, aching to tell him what a loser he was. I had my period. I smelled, too.

A year later, he brought his cardboard boxes and installed himself in the parlor of our rented house on Knapp Street. We soon realized he'd also brought roaches. They'd come along in

his boxes. And he was getting stranger and stranger. One Sunday at Mass on Arch Street (I was still going to Mass in those days), he saw something I didn't see: faces shattering all around him. I just thought he was eccentric, annoying, sad. I thought he should try harder, should be more like me. I didn't know anything about schizophrenia.

On the phone he tells me it's snowing again. He says he is waiting for all his plans "to come to fruitition." Like our mother, he is inventive with the language. Neither one of them has had the kind of formal education that cramps your style. She's "mesmotized" by a sparkling chandelier over my aunt's dining room table. Years ago, she got a restraining order against Frank, but now that he's medicated he's allowed in her kitchen once in a while. That's never pretty. I hear about it. He tries to explain to her that parents are supposed to love their children unconditionally. He saw it on *Oprah.* "Hey, Ma," he says. "You watch *Oprah,* don't you? How about a little unconditional love, Ma?" She laughs in his face.

I worry about Frank. I'm so far away. I have lots of debt and no money. Though not certifiable, I sometimes feel unstable. But I can't lose my mind or my job—can't disappoint my child.

I write to Patrick to ask for a reality check about Frank. He writes back:

> *He is who he is. He gets riled. It can be jarring, but I don't let it upset me anymore and I practically embrace it now. Things seem illogical but I don't try to persuade him, and he's very smart. I learn from him. I go with it. It's okay, even fun a lot of times. He coined a new word that I love:* transchieve. *It's when you transcend and achieve simultaneously. Isn't that a tremendous word?*

Last month Frank called me a dozen times in one day, finally reaching me at midnight (3:00 AM in Boston) after I'd had another shitty day at work. He needed seven hundred dollars immediately. I told him I didn't have it, which was true. I was ashamed that I was unable to give him the money; hadn't I gone to college to better myself and redeem us? But now I was a single mother paying most of my salary in rent, craving a pedicure, needing a new printer cartridge, wanting to take my

daughter to Denver, to see friends, and to study with Fred at Naropa . . .

I mentioned the twenty-dollar bill I'd sent him, and the fifty-dollar check; he told me he was "unimpressed" with those sums, and hung up on me.

Patrick takes the ferry from Hingham to Boston every morning and walks through the Boston Common to his job at the State House. He says that some days, when the weather is especially miserable, Frank will be waiting at the ferry in his cab to give him a ride. They don't see each other much. Patrick has never been inside Frank's place in Chelsea. Frank hasn't been to Patrick's pretty home in Hingham and hasn't seen Patrick's beautiful wife and children in years. Neither have I. That's how it is. Patrick is the only shining thing. The rest of us are damaged or dead.

Frank hasn't seen Patrick's beautiful wife and children in years. Neither have I. That's how it is. Patrick is the only shining thing. The rest of us are damaged or dead.

I haven't seen Patrick and Frank together since Nonnie's funeral in 1993. They were pallbearers, along with our cousins Vinnie and Frank and our uncles Vinnie and Frank. It was April, and it was pouring as they brought her coffin to the grave where our grandfather Giuseppe was buried in 1950. Frank was wearing a white polyester shirt; Patrick was in a suit. Both of them were too big for their clothes, their shoulders almost bursting the seams as they sobbed under the weight of the box. My sister and I walked behind them, not crying. My sister held on to her son's arm; I helped my mother across the mud. My father, too, was crying; the tall Irishman among the short, stocky Sicilians.

As Patrick tells me, in his gruff way, about Frank's kindness in the rain and snow on winter mornings in Boston, I start to cry, thinking of the two of them in the cab, talking or barely talking. I remember the smell of wet wool, floor mats, Frank's scalp, and citrus air freshener.

"Do you give him money?" I ask Patrick.

"Hell no."

"I can't see him or even talk with him without giving him money. And I don't have it to give."

"Just keep your wallet closed. It's that simple."

I'm not tough like them.

I'm not sweet the way they are, either; I'm too cosmopolitan, too far away.

Sometimes Frank gets a long-haul cab fare. He goes up to Maine and back, or does a round trip to Hartford, near the house where my father's Irish aunts retired after thirty years as servants on a Yankee estate in Natick. I wonder if he remembers our annual visits—one hundred candles on a birthday cake for Auntie Mary; picking and eating blackberries in the alley behind cinder block garages; waiting in line with the other cousins to use the only bathroom and wondering if one of the aunties had fallen asleep on the toilet. And our cousins, the Blacks, all boys, who came up from Brooklyn and slept packed in with us on the closed-in porch upstairs.

Frank works hard. "He even went to Montreal once," Patrick told me. "Drove for twenty-four hours straight."

He has a gig driving blind children to and from their special school. It seems to be his only sure thing as far as income goes. Many of them live in the projects. Our aunts used to live in the projects when we were kids, and we were always over there. But then all the white people moved out.

Frank's got a soft spot for one of the blind girls, his passenger Bronte. Her father is too disabled to come out to get his beautiful daughter at the curb. My brother walks her right to the door. The father thanks him a hundred times and offers Frank rice and beans with goat meat. But Frank can't leave the cab alone there for long.

Sometimes Frank picks up black people at night and takes them right into the projects. They call him a crazy white man.

He is enormous now, a bear, bald since he was in his twenties, with blue eyes and wisps of dark hair. He was a beautiful boy, and the nurses at the epilepsy clinic loved him, though Sister Jean and the other nuns did not; he was too strange to be obedient in class, and a little too good to deserve a beating.

In high school he carried a copy of Pascal and wore his pants pulled up too high. There was no escaping my brothers and

sister at school. Four of us, so close in age, trying to ignore one another in public. When I'd see Frank in the hallway, I'd turn away.

Two years ago, when he turned fifty, they had a birthday party for him at the blind school. One of the girls asked him if she could touch his face. He told me she put her arms around his waist to see how fat he was and smoothed his head, laughing because he was bald—"I never knew that!" Then she gave him a kiss so sloppy and loud that it made all the other blind kids laugh.

He's always broke. People cheat him, or he buys too much stuff. I don't know. In high school when he worked at the pizza place, he'd forget to cash his checks. My sister and I would find them shredded in his pockets while doing his laundry.

In Boston I was visiting my friend Fanny. The streets were icy; our boots were wet. We took a cab from Cambridge to the South End with her friend Rae. Poets piled into the back seat. The driver was a white guy, about my age. I told him my brother was also a cab driver in Boston. "A white guy? No way!" He looked at me in the rearview mirror. "There are only three white guys still driving cabs in Boston. I must know him. What's his name?"

I tell him, but he doesn't recognize the name. As we pay him and get out of the cab, I can hear him talking to the dispatcher: "Do you know a Frank Sullivan?"

In town again on book business, I ask Frank to take me to the airport. It ends up being the opposite of a favor; we have to go drop the cab off with Victor, the guy who owns it. Then Victor will take me to the airport, charging me full price.

I take my brother out to breakfast before we drive to Victor's place in Watertown. I throw in an extra fifty dollars that I don't actually have. I'm in town to give a reading at Harvard, a most unlikely development. To paraphrase Langston Hughes: our neighborhood in Dorchester was as far from Harvard as Morningside Heights is from Harlem—a stone's throw across an abyss.

Frank hasn't read my book. He's in it, though—all of my brothers are in my book, especially our dead brother, also a writer—so I feel the urge to give.

But never mind my book. "It's easy to write a book!" He's gonna write his own. "It's a done deal. It's all written in my head. Just get me a contract! I'll give you a cut."

"I'll see what I can do."

Usually he's very loud—he has no "inside voice." In the cab he sings Stevie Nicks or Tracy Chapman or "She Came in Through the Bathroom Window." Or, at top volume, the Clancy Brothers' song about sticking the knife in the baby's head (I sang along on the phone). But today he's preoccupied, distracted, worried.

I ask him to drive me into Mount Auburn Cemetery, one of my favorite places. The poet Robert Creeley is buried here, and Fanny will be; at least, I seem to remember that she said she'd bought her plot. (We were both excited for a minute: "I can hardly wait!" Mount Auburn is glorious in October, when it smells like chestnuts and dusty leaves and books and apples.)

On the way to Victor's place, Frank says, "Linda, when Victor gets in the cab, don't say nothin'."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, just don't say nothin'."

"What? Me? You and Ma and Caroline are always complaining about how quiet I am—how I keep everything to myself. 'Linda, don't say nothin'.' I'm the quietest one in this family!"

"Well," he says, "it's true you are quiet. But sometimes you say outrageous things in a quiet way. So just don't say nothin'."

It's cheap now to call Boston from California, something I'm just old enough to find amazing. Frank answers on the second ring.

"My sister, the famous writer," he tells the man in his cab. (I am not famous.)

Actually, Frank was the first published writer in our family. He wrote a poem called "Greatness." It was published in the local paper. It was grand; one might even say it was grandiose. I knew, even then, that the poem was a rebellion against the soul murder to which he was subjected.

My mother framed it and kept it on the table next to the burbling aquarium in which we kept no fish. Other than the picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, "Greatness" was the only framed item in our house.

I also wanted to be "great." Meaning, good and above reproach. I tried to be normal, clean, quiet, and authentic, to nev-

er forget where I came from, especially when I went off to college with the better class of people, the lace-curtain Irish who showered once or twice a day and always had a fresh change of clothes.

My father, drunk and later sober, with rotten teeth and then with no teeth at all, was always telling us to stay humble, lay low, don't think you're anything special—

But where did we come from? Where did he come from? He was illegitimate—a horrible word that's no longer used. His "real" mother, some Irish girl—fallen. Not to be discussed. A shame. Except that she and the mysterious father—the cad—were to blame for the madness in our family. I mean, it all had to come from the Irish side, right? My mother screamed at us when we acted weird or smart: "You didn't get that from ME!"

We were impure, mixed up, our origins a mystery and a shame. We came from dirt. But so did everyone else. Every year during Lent, the priest smeared our foreheads with ashes: "From dust you came, to dust you shall return." The soil, the humus. Humility. My father was obsessed with humility and my mother knew how to humiliate, and so our house was hell. In Christ, though, we were redeemed. I craved that grace and believed it was available to me, if I could get clean.

We were impure, mixed up, our origins a mystery and a shame. We came from dirt. But so did everyone else.

As the eldest child, I was a kind of fascist state with a free spirit. I applied for scholarships at the kitchen table under a stained glass lamp that Joey shattered when he threw a shoe at my father in a fight. (It was the prettiest thing in the house; Joey later patched it together with glue he bought at a craft store, crying while he worked. He loved beautiful things.)

Though I was the obedient type, I still got into trouble with my mother. I was glad I was right-handed after she broke the middle finger on my left hand, slamming the door on it when I tried to stop a fight between her and Frank (he was a leftie—more evidence that he was the strangest of our strange bunch).

I was sobbing. "I'm studying for the SATs! Stop screaming!" I showed her my broken finger, but she didn't stop.

"You're sick! You're all sick!" What the hell was wrong with her?

Frank was begging her. "Look at Linda's finger! Look what you did, Ma!"

She pushed me out of the way and slapped him across the face. "Don't talk that way to me! I'm your mother!"

I had to get away, had to go to college, no matter what she and my father did to try and stop me. I would be the family alibi: "If I can do it, you can, too. You loser weirdos."

I worked two jobs every summer and three days a week after school. My teachers liked me. I thought I could lead the way (humbly, of course).

(I failed.)

Frank drops his fare and calls me back. He tells me that the government and God protect him. Police leave him alone because his brilliance is well known. If they stop him and go back to their cars and check their radios, they come back and let him go after learning about "all the revenue" he's generated through his "inventions."

"Like the screen behind first base in baseball." He stops to catch his breath. "I invented that."

I wonder if he has stopped taking his medication, but I know better than to ask. Once I slipped and inquired. He responded with sarcasm: "Are you taking *your* meds, Linda?"

"Yes," I said, but too softly for him to hear.

It didn't matter. His was a rhetorical question.

Now I could hear the loneliness in his voice, his Boston accent thick and broad. I recognized it as my own.

He said he'd had a dream about God.

"It wasn't Dad, though he was wearing the same dark jacket and pants."

He said he was protected; said God, *his* God—I shuddered, because he sounded like our father—would protect him, even if it meant killing the other person.

Then he told me about a dream—or was it a dream? The war was real. We were always at war now.

He said he saw women begging God to stop the bombs dropping from the sky—women dressed like the Blessed Mother, but dusty (and they weren't virgins)—and the bombs stopped.

He had to stop talking for a minute to think about that.

"Whose side is God on?" he says. "I know you're wondering. I've thought about that. And I have an answer."

In California, the palms are rustling in the dark. There are rats in the trees. This place is not all it's cracked up to be, but it's my victory. I am three thousand miles and three time zones away.

I have clocked his monologues. Thirty or forty minutes—nothing to him. I can listen to him for another forty-five minutes and still get a good night's sleep as long as I take an Ambien. I adjust my pillows.

"You probably don't think as theologically as I do," he says. "Joey did. We were on the same level."

Silence while we remember Joey, who did everything possible to distinguish himself from us. No shit jobs or Jesuits for him; he went to an Ivy League college, wore only cotton and wool, no polyester, loved German lieder, and won a poetry prize at Columbia. Once, in Riverside Park in 1985, he scoffed at me for worrying about AIDS in 1985. He wouldn't get it, he said. He only went with high-class men: Harvard, Yale, Columbia. A year later he was dying in Lenox Hill Hospital.

"Linda," Frank says, condescending to me, "are you prepared to think theologically?"

Frank, Joseph, and Patrick were altar boys. Two of the priests they served are now on the list of abusers in Boston; dead now. Girls couldn't serve. Couldn't get that close to God.

"Yes, Frank. Sure." I've lapsed into my Boston accent. "Go ahead. Talk."

Note: Some of the names in this essay have been changed.

SHOCK TO THE HEART, OR: A PRIMER ON THE PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF ELECTRICITY

Shock to the Heart.
In the first instant, my hands became claws. Paralyzed, a red-hot whip tearing through my back: *Did somebody kick in my spine?* And then I knew. And I was screaming.

"There's no way you wouldn't scream if you felt it," my sister had said.

A Practical Application.
The intentional use of electricity upon the human body dates back at least 122 years, to the electrocution of William Kemmler in 1890 in New York's Auburn Prison. Kemmler—a native of Buffalo, who murdered his common-law wife, Tillie, with a hatchet—was sentenced to death in 1889, narrowly evading death by hanging. His electric chair was first issue, sparkling clean.

A Review of the Literature.
The amount of electricity it takes to kill or damage a human varies considerably, depending on where the current originates and its contact with critical body parts—namely, the heart and the brain. The level of current is the amount of voltage applied divided by the resistance that voltage encounters. According to *The Physics Factbook,* as little as .06 milliamps can cause fatality by stimulating dangerous arrhythmias in the heart. Humans can generally perceive shocks at 1 to 5 milliamps, and 10 milliamps is the level "where pain is sensed." At 100 milliamps, severe muscular contractions occur; at 200, severe burning.

Shock to the Heart.
I was down on my knees in the soccer field grass, facing the backs of houses, where kitchen lights glinted out the windows—dull, far away. The sky was navy and full of cold. After three years, this was it: my internal cardiac defibrillator firing for the first time.

I imagined I must be searing with light. I imagined everyone could see my bones.

When the defibrillator thumped a second time, I knew I would die, lightning-struck, unable to move. Lightning strapped to my heart: *Why aren't I dizzy? Why am I awake?* My chest and arms shrinking, lava-hot with electricity. The moment unfolding endlessly, a maul to the chest, a thousand needles. "Someone call 9-1-1!" I screamed.

Glossary: Congenital Long QT Syndrome.
A genetic condition in which the heart's electrical preparation for its next beat (repolarization) can take too long. The delay is exacerbated by various types of physiological stress, most related to the release of epinephrine in the body. This delay, throwing off the rhythm of the heart, can trigger fatal arrhythmias. The condition is typically treated with adrenergic-blocking drugs (beta blockers), which decrease the effects of adrenaline. Those with documented cardiac arrest may also have a cardiac defibrillator implanted in their bodies, to restart the heart if it is inadequately pumping blood.

A Practical Application.
From the beginning, Kemmler's lawyers argued that electrocution was "cruel and unusual punishment." But this was the height of the War of Currents, when Nikola Tesla's new transformer for alternating current (AC) had Thomas Edison (and his business-tycoon backers) scrambling to maintain the use of direct current in public utilities, thus protecting their patent royalties. According to Mark Essig's *Edison and the Electric Chair,* Edison attempted to smear the public image of AC by electrocuting animals with AC in high-profile "studies" and secretly paying Harold P. Brown and Arthur Kennelly to invent the electric chair. When Kemmler's lawyers fought for an alternate method of execution, the prosecution received substantial funding from Edison's friend J. P. Morgan. The electrocution would proceed: a demonstration of the treachery of AC to all.

Lightning Flowers.
A sign of blessing. A curse. God's warning, God's vengeance.

Lightning in the body heals illness. Cures deafness, cures blindness.

Nurtures psychic powers.

From the east, a good omen. From the west, ominous.

Sparks hypersexuality.

I devour the stories I hear. I crave a mythology for the lightning of my own body.

Shock to the Heart.

A third shock—*maybe it's misfiring*—pummeled by hot razor blades—*maybe it's never going to stop*. Realizing I could either breathe or scream, what had I learned? *You must breathe*. "You got this, heart," I whispered fiercely, felt my body solid beneath me, began to pull in air, cold heavy breaths. *I am either alive or dead and I choose which.*

The device did not go off again.

"Can I get someone behind me?" I called out from my knees. "I don't trust myself not to fall." Someone cupped my back immediately, supported me on the ground. The sky my full view. The sharp white field lights. A ring of faces. It may be crazy, but what I smelled was burning.

A Review of the Literature.

Doctors call them "electrical storms"—clusters of shocks, three or more within a twenty-four-hour period. Ten to twenty percent of all internal cardiac defibrillator (ICD) patients experience this within the first two years after implantation. Multiple shocks generally indicate malfunction—the ICD firing inappropriately—as one shock should be sufficient to disrupt an arrhythmia. According to Dr. Merritt H. Raitt in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology,* "Multiple shocks are the most frightening for patients, causing them to wonder if the device is really working or if it might even kill them." Even single shocks often cause significant psychological after-effects, including "heightened self-monitoring of bodily functions, increased anxiety, uncertainty, increased dependence, reactive depression, helplessness, and post-traumatic stress disorder."

Lightning Flowers.

In the days after, I bend over my scorched heart. I sleep in fits. I stand before the mirror, eyeing flawless porcelain skin. There are no burns. No lightning flowers spread like pink trees across my breasts. There is no entry point, no exit.

I am both the entry and exit.

Glossary: Terms of Electricity.
If electricity floods my body like a river, voltage measures the pressure of the water. Resistance is the amount the flood is absorbed and diverted. Amperes are the current, the result of pressure diffused—by rocks, riverbanks, skin.

A Practical Application.
On November 11, 2012, at 7:23 pm MST, the St. Jude Atlas II (Model V-268, serial number 375831, 78 grams, implant date 26/OCT/2009) revved its Lithium Silver Vanadium Oxide battery to generate the standard 820 volts of electricity within a thirty-second window. Maybe less. In the first chamber, the capacitor held back the generated voltage until fully amassed. Then it discharged into the center of my heart.

A Review of the Literature.
For lightning-strike victims, the technical name is Lichtenberg figures. These thin, branched burns uncoil from the head, neck, and shoulders, where a strike is most likely. Fern-like, following patterns of moisture—rain, sweat—they are rose-colored lightning bolts frozen onto the body.

Industrial shocks are different, blisters springing up from the hands and wrists where a person worked a machine or made a repair. The tissue scorches along the entire current, the electricity sizzling a path of least resistance through the body, sometimes leaving dead tissue deep inside that becomes black, gangrenous. Here the electricity runs about 20 to 63 kilovolts, the shock lasting half a second. Then the circuit breakers open. Or the body is thrown.

Shock to the Heart.
Jess tucked a sweatshirt over me. She rubbed my arm, hard. People were on the phone with the dispatcher. They were asking me what it was I had in my chest. They were asking me how old I was.

"How do you feel?" someone asked.

"Clear," I said.

A Practical Application.
On August 6, 1890, Kemmler absorbed 1,000 volts of electricity for seventeen seconds. He was pronounced dead: the first death by electrocution! Only he wasn't. Someone noticed he was still

breathing, and another shock of 2,000 volts was required to finish him off. According to witnesses, Kemmler's blood vessels ruptured, the bleeding beneath the skin patching across his face. His hair singed around the electrodes, and the foul smell of burning flesh filled the room so completely that people tried to leave. "They would have done better using an axe," grumbled one witness.

A Review of the Literature.
ICD patients who have been shocked have a higher mortality rate, says Dr. Raitt: the middle layer of heart muscle, the myocardium, can "become damaged." (Does he mean seared? scarred? torn? blunted?) Or maybe the risk of death comes from the way terror seeps into the body, afterward—quiet and dark, ever present.

Shock to the Heart.
The paramedics, with tanned skin and clear blue eyes, drove their ambulance onto the soccer field and tumbled out. Thick fireman hands slid a blood pressure cuff over my bicep, lifted my shirt to affix electrocardiogram electrodes. One man at a time carefully asked me questions. I liked them. One pricked my finger—"It'll be just a little poke." We spoke a language I'd forgotten I was fluent in, the electricity of the heart, QT interval, arrhythmia. They asked the right questions, about blood sugar and dizziness. When my vitals were good, one of them said, "Do you think you can sit up?" and they supported me from behind and watched my heart on the EKG. Then standing: still good. We all looked at each other very seriously. With no arrhythmia present, the ER could do nothing but waste money. One man gently peeled the adhesive electrodes off my belly. They trusted me to go.

Lightning Flowers.
A fulgurite is a lightning flower in quartzose sand or silica. From the Latin *fulgur,* meaning thunderbolt, these hollow glass tubes form when lightning with a temperature of at least 1800 degrees Celsius sizzles through the ground, instantly melting silica on conductive surfaces and fusing grains together. A fulgurite is petrified lightning. Its rocky arms twist, fern-like, lightning flowers preserved. Some lace forty, fifty feet into the earth.

Shock to the Heart.
"Do you need us to call someone?" people asked again and again.

"Not yet," I said. My family members all lived thousands of miles away from my home in Tucson, Arizona. There was no need to spread the word while I was still on my back. After I limped off the field, I called my sister in Colorado first because she too speaks the language of electricity. She has been shocked four times: Twice during physical activity—a problem with her settings. Once when the lead wire shifted in her heart. The last, a jolt of electricity that saved her life.

My call caught my sister in bed, reading in a pile of pillows. "Three times in a row," she kept saying. "Three times in a row!" Unlike everyone else in my life, she could actually imagine what this was like. I pictured her in a tank top, blonde hair falling over her shoulders. Twenty-four years old. Probably touching the pale earthworm scar above her left breast. She didn't think she would sleep that night, she told me, snugged into the covers. "I'm suddenly terrified that it's going to go off. I know that's crazy. But I'd forgotten about it, and now I remember again."

"It's so awful," I said.

"Yes," she said. "Now you know what I meant."

A Practical Application.
As it released the electricity that night on the soccer field, the device recorded a heart rate of 175 beats per minute. The device also recorded sinus tachycardia. That is to say: it recorded an exercise-induced elevated heart rate. It did not record ventricular tachycardia, or the torsades de pointes arrhythmia. It did not record ventricular fibrillation, that death-rattle of the heart. It recorded a woman in black long johns and GoreTex trail running shoes, sweating, breathing hard, after a defensive sprint toward the goal.

The device did not record the crisp November night. Not the white lights across the grass, or the dark neighborhoods etched onto an old desert wash. It missed the water bottles of hot tea waiting by the bleachers, the red and gray T-shirts Sharpied with numbers, the guy on the other team who had tripped and was getting up slowly, brushing his thighs.

And the device missed the woman's confidence—carefully knit by three years of its silence—that it had nothing to say.

Lightning Flowers.
If I excavate my body, will I be full of diamond-studded fulgurites? Are my gems pink, like the tissues that burned, or dark brown, something melted? Did the electricity travel according to moisture, according to veins or muscles? Or in some other fashion, a hot random spread? Am I like the ground? The thin soil cover hot and flashing?

A Practical Application.
The device knew only what devices know: whether or not the criteria were being met. The truth was, some criteria were and some were not, and the machine was confused, if machines can be such a thing. Inside the motherboard, the settings said, "If any." So even though there was no arrhythmia—and even though the heart had not rocketed above its set "200 beats per minute for six beats or more" line in the sand—when the dual-chamber Atlas II Model V-268 noted that my heart had been above 170 for more than three minutes, a criterion was satisfied. "If any." Inside the laser-sealed titanium box—no larger than a pager—the capacitor whirled into generation. The second chamber sent the shock.

A Review of the Literature.
Lightning strikes inhabit the body for just a few milliseconds, but sear more than 300 kilovolts. The heart is the most susceptible to harm from electricity. Then the brain.

Anything above 1 amp can cause permanent cellular damage: coagulation necrosis. The dead cell proteins thicken into a gelatinous mass. The architecture of the dead cell is maintained, ghostly white under a microscope.

"Nerves, designed to carry electrical signals, and muscle and blood vessels, because of their high electrolyte and water content, have a low resistance and are good conductors," write University of Illinois at Chicago researchers Mary Ann Cooper and Timothy G. Price in their report "Electrical and Lightning Injuries." "Bone, tendon and fat . . . have a very high resistance and tend to heat up and coagulate rather than transmit current."

Shock to the Heart.
The question, of course, was why today? And not that other day? Why not when I was traveling in West Africa and that

man was rattling our windows trying to break in and I was so wound up I couldn't sleep? Why not the night, in the icy Colorado spring air, a lover refused to kiss me? Or the hundreds of times since implantation that I've sprinted up a muddy trail, grunted through rock climbing moves, or carried a pack up the backside of a valley?

A Practical Application.
Traditionally, voltages of around 2,000 have been used in the electric chair, although here, too, there is a range: from 500 on the lower end up to 2,300, which was necessary to end the life of 350-pound Allen Lee "Tiny" Davis in 1999. Reports noted muffled screaming and blood oozing from his mouth and chest. Reports always note the clenched fists, the jerking bodies. Some prisoners' heads burst into flames. Some require such lengthy shocks that the transformer itself burns.

Glossary: Terms of Electricity.
I cannot tell you what a fucking joule is. Or, I can, but I do not understand how an equation translates to chest tissue, blood vessels, shock to the heart. A joule is the energy expended in applying a force of one newton for one meter. A joule is the energy expended to produce a watt of power for one second. A joule is the energy expended in passing an electric current of one ampere through a resistance of one ohm for one second.

Shock to the Heart.
"Why this time?" my sister said. "I can't believe I went to the amusement park. I can't believe I went to the haunted house. I can't believe I forgot."

Lightning Flowers.
Is it I who have shocked myself? Is this bit of metal leaning on my heart, with its fingers plugged into the valves, not a part of me? Doesn't it listen to my every move, kiss the inside of my chest? Is it not somehow me, now, when the muscles stopped complaining years ago, and the scar tissue holds it firmly in place? When it is gently covered in waves of clots, flowers of the body cavity?

And if it is not me, what is it? Palmfuls of strip-mined mountain, knived inside my body? A cache of copper from Congo, a

lost bit of motherboard, hidden battery, the laser that sealed it shut?

A Practical Application.
Taser shocks typically last half a second and disrupt the central nervous system, causing "intense pain and muscle contractions." For maximum effectiveness, a Taser should be used on the upper shoulder, upper hip, or below the ribcage. Though the associated current is very low, some sources indicate that a Taser's output can be up to 50 kilovolts, or 50,000 volts, or fifty-eight times the discharge of the Atlas II ICD, or twenty-five to fifty times the voltage used in the electric chair, or one six-thousandth of a bolt of lightning. How much this affects the body depends upon the level of resistance. That is, skin type, moisture, body salinity, shot location, body mass index, and clothing matter, as do the conditions within the weapon circuitry, including the battery and current waveform. And—though the manufacturers insist that Tasers cause no lasting damage, due to a current of just a few milliamps—a 2008 report by Amnesty International documents hundreds of instances in which autopsies suggest that Tasers may have triggered cardiac arrest through repeated or prolonged shocks, or in "vulnerable populations" such as the elderly, people with underlying heart conditions, and those currently under the influence of drugs.

Shock to the Heart.
The next morning, I woke early and called the hospital. The pacemaker clinic could fit me in. I drove myself—somehow the risk of being shocked while driving seemed more tenable than while biking. I am a loner. I live alone. For one morning, this seemed foolish.

I shouldn't have worried. I did not have an arrhythmia. The machine was not broken. The settings were just too conservative. "These would be good settings for a fifty-five- or sixty-year-old," the tech joked. I was actually not surprised; the electrophysiologist who had implanted the device, back in Colorado, was fiercely protective of my sister and me. In his waiting room, we were the only people under sixty. She'd passed out in her dorm room. I'd passed out in a parking lot. Death seemed so close then. No one had ever tweaked the settings in the quiet years afterward.

A Review of the Literature.
As the heart rate approaches a trigger zone, the ICD will automatically begin generating electricity. If the actual trigger is not reached, the electricity is dumped, dissipated, put through a resistor and released as heat into the body. The body—talking to a lover or drinking water at halftime—never knows the difference.

A Practical Application.
The idea, of course, is that the ICD will shock you when you're actually dead. (It was known in the 1980s as the "Lazarus device.") If the heart is fibrillating—if it sits quivering on the ribcage letting oxygen waste out of other organs—maybe a nice 820 volts of electricity is just the thing. Say you're lying on the kitchen floor. Or say you, like my sister, are unconscious in bed after the alarm clock startles your poor heart into a frenzy.

The machine goes off and the arrhythmia is disrupted. The heart flatlines and the natural electrical system of the heart kicks back in. Beating resumes.

Who cares, then, about the myocardium? Who cares about trauma and stress? Who cares, as long as you're not dead?

A Review of the Literature.
A recent study published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* found that "simply raising the heart rate at which the device is set to deliver a shock resulted in an 80 percent to 90 percent drop in unnecessary, distressing and painful shocks for heart rhythms that aren't life threatening." Tweaking this setting, researchers said, could reduce a patient's risk of death by as much as 55 percent.

The study was published five days before my shocks.

Lightning Flowers.
Without this metal box—a tiny computer braced into a shell, stuffed with battery, gold wires smaller than human hairs, components glinting up like rows of solar panels—would I be dead? If it has only ever shocked me in error, should I still consider it a savior?

When I held my arm out for the anesthesia—when I opened my chest to the knife—was it just a permission slip I asked for?

To live, despite the fact of death? Did I understand I would contain lightning, that I would be cut with current, that I would coagulate, that I could, in fact, still die?

A Practical Application.
"Thirty-five to forty joules is the biggest shock," one of St. Jude Medical's engineers tells me. He says they keep the current small. "If you have a high current, you're going to cook someone." This is because there's no skin, highly resistant, to absorb the flash. No Lichtenberg flowers printing the patterns of rain, sweat. There is just the heart: a direct hit.

A Review of the Literature.
Roy Sullivan's astrological chart is available online, but no one has interpreted it. No one can say why he was struck by lightning seven times. He holds the Guinness World Record for this—grudgingly. Or he would be grudging, had he not shot himself at age seventy-one out of unrequited love.

A Practical Application.
Today the electric chair is out of commission in every state but Alabama, Florida, South Carolina, Kentucky, and Virginia. Many states have banned the death penalty altogether; in others, electrocution has been ruled "cruel and unusual punishment" because multiple shocks are often required. Lethal injection is considered more humane (although in a recent botched Arizona execution, it took fifteen injections to kill an inmate, who gasped more than six hundred times and took two hours to die). In states like Arkansas and Oklahoma, the electric chair remains in the wings, to be used if preferred by the prisoner or if other methods are found unconstitutional. The United States is the only country in the world to have institutionally used the electric chair, with the exception of the Philippines during American occupation.

Body Memory.
This is not the first time I have been shocked. My body remembers what I cannot: after they corkscrewed the lead wire into the weedy trabeculae at the bottom of my right ventricle—and before they sewed me up—they stopped my heart to make sure the defibrillator would go off properly.

When I woke, there was no telling. Already, doctors had hollowed a cavern in my body, skin tugging over metal, staples stiff in flesh. There was the deep-down ache of the organ taking wire. If my tissues were sore then from electricity, I didn't know it. Maybe neither did they.

A Practical Application.
In 2007, the United Nation's Committee Against Torture ruled that Tasers were a form of torture. According to Human Rights Watch, the Committee Against Torture was particularly concerned that "there is often no physical sign on the body to show the effects," making it hard to tell when a Taser is being regularly or inappropriately used upon a person, particularly in prisons. They also cite concern about the level of electricity.

Glossary: Beta-adrenergic Blocking Agents.
Small white pills. "Beta blockers," as they are known, impede the effects of adrenaline on the heart, keeping heart rate and blood pressure low. For this reason, they significantly decrease the risk of certain arrhythmias, including those associated with Congenital Long QT Syndrome.

Reasons a person may transition off beta blockers include: Desire to listen to the physical nuances of the heart. Desire to spend kidney energy on things other than metabolizing beta blockers. Desire to no longer experience throat constriction and a masking of low blood sugar symptoms. Desire to rise in the morning feeling clear. Desire to operate at high altitudes. Desire to sprint across a soccer field, top speed, without getting dizzy under that star-spackled sky.

Particularly: Desire to honestly reflect updated agreement with death.

A Review of the Literature.
The chance of getting hit by lightning seven times is roughly 22 septillion to 1. That is 22,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 to 1. It may have been lower for Sullivan, who worked as a park ranger in Shenandoah National Park, where his risk of contact with lightning storms was higher due to location and task.

Sullivan was struck by lightning in a lookout tower. Then in his truck. Then in his front yard. Then inside a ranger station. In this instance, his head caught fire. Failing to smother the

flames with his jacket, he rushed into the bathroom, where his head did not fit beneath the nozzle. The fire was finally extinguished with a wet, slapping towel. After this, he always carried a can of water in his car. He feared death. He assumed there was a dark force after him, and if a storm began while he was driving, he would pull over and curl up in the front seat.

The fifth time Sullivan was struck by lightning, he sighted a cloud boiling up in the park and drove away quickly. He reported that it followed him. When he decided he'd adequately eluded the cloud, he finally left the truck—and was struck by lightning. It lit his head on fire. Still conscious, he belly-crawled back to the truck and poured his can of water on his head.

Repeat this story for the sixth hit: see cloud, outrun, cloud wins.

Shock to the Heart.

I may as well have had no legs, no face, no ribcage. I may as well have been just a receptacle for a defibrillator. In the hospital's pacemaker clinic, the tech clicked at the computer and barely looked at me. He had a gruff voice and a red bandana over gray hair. He did not ask how I was. When I told him I no longer took my medication, he rolled his eyes, shook his head. "Take your medication," he said, "or stop working out. Simple."

The doctor was next, and she spoke looking at the screen. Within her brain existed pages of textbooks, endless studies. I could be grateful for this: she pushed the magic buttons to raise my settings. But when she was done with the computer, she did not turn to me. She did not ask how I was. She, also, did not ask why I was off my medication. She simply picked up her prescription pad, wrote a new one, and handed it to me. "You should probably make an appointment to get established sometime," she said. And walked out.

A Review of the Literature.

The literature does not show who it was that Roy Sullivan loved. The literature does not show the make and model of his truck, whether or not he made a mean steak, how he liked his eggs. The literature does not show his relationship with his father, or if he was lonely. I imagine he was lonely. The literature does show that his coworkers left his side during lightning storms, afraid they would get hit. "See ya later, Roy," edging toward

safety. The literature does show that Roy's wife was once struck beside him, as they draped the laundry on the line.

What does it mean to be stalked by electricity? To believe at any moment, a blast of charge may seek you out? I see him huddled. I see him eyeing the clear sky. (In a coffee shop, I look around. No one knows what I contain.) I print off Sullivan's astrological chart, repost it on the internet, but can find no one to read it. I stare at the symbols. I care because I want to know if it was something *in* him, if it is in me. Was he the bristling storm? Or was he just a man?

On the seventh bolt, lightning hit the top of Sullivan's head while he was fishing, alone. When he turned to his car, a bear tried to steal the trout off the line. Sullivan beat the bear with a stick.

Shock to the Heart.

When I said I felt clear on the soccer field, here is what I meant: I knew every cell in my body. I knew the cells made out of metal and the cells made out of protein. I knew the burned cells and the cells that would heal.

I knew it didn't matter what my settings were. I would die. We all would die.

I was no longer afraid.

Lightning Flowers.

In these three years, my whole body has regenerated: cells, skin, hair. So the machine, over the years, becomes more me than me. In an X-ray, its edges are clear, surrounded by the vague scribbles of my insides. It contains a copper stamp visible by X-ray so that, if I lose my ID cards, the doctors will know I belong to St. Jude.

And yet more and more, I know I belong to no one. In these three years, no doctor has felt the way this heart hitches when I speak to a man. No doctor has crouched with me on the office floor at work when my chest is quivering and thumping, when I am afraid I will fall. Though doctors have held my red heart in their latexed hands, there is no doctor who can teach me how to live. I was down on my knees in the soccer field grass. Only I could remind myself to breathe.

THE PAINTER'S MODEL

I was the woman naked in the grass,
on the chaise, in the water,
pale or rouged like the sunsetted sea.

His pleasure was amplified
by my pleasure: a book, a violet,
a thought, a smile in oil.

I had no desire for valor.
I was the one easily dominated by fire;
God had no balm or sagacity.

I was once a prima donna,
with blood colliding, regaling—
I was the snow dissolving

into tears that fed the roses
who opened as I did:
ready and svelte.

I was the death of that scent.
Because there is nothing worse
than entrance, lost elegance,

the sorceries of autumn. I was
the open lawn in the far distance
between our houses.

I was the only delicious hatred,
slicked with horsehair, despised
with yellows. Sentenced by the hand

of my creator, I was as strong
as a woman could be.
I was gilded, a queenly delirium

for the sake of standing beside him.

ADVANCED FANTASIES OF THE CROSS-BRONX EXPRESSWAY

Here the Crotona Pool should be, here still
It is. We don't erase ourselves. We don't
Ply our bodies with asphalt and barriers.
Our walls are pinned with some of what
Exists, but one cannot notice every tulip,
All the flora and fauna given a name
Haven't been given one by us. The people
List as traffic. Thus traffic grows. It roars
When locked in place, then when it moves.
It piles around us, above us, like papers
We haven't attended to. We have too many
Solutions. Nights our offices pool with
Us. We overflow ourselves, and cannot
See from where we are about to go.

SAMUEL AMADON

VISIONARY LABORS OF THE ASTORIA POOL

He only likes to build it. He doesn't live
Where he swims, where the city has pieces,
He means to mend them, to tear the city
Pieces where it can be mended. Here
At my desk, I engage in a crisis among us.
What I'm doing is with my development.
What I'm doing these days is cutting out
The part I've done before. Done it for.
Our stability isn't in question if it's
Always in question. We can figure it out
From swimming, that we have to keep
Moving. Not just to float, but because
We can't help ourselves. It works like this:
I build what I see, and you try to stop me.

CODICIL

The day your father died,
I pitied the rain
In its quiet shining,
And as I slept in your bed of ash leaves
I drank only whisky and dead
Opera right from the well,
The sky becoming a vast interval of sound,
Its O held between my fingers,
The quorum of light
That takes 1,000 years
To reach the center
Of our eyes finally falling.
Now, behind the barn,
My face shatters
When you speak to me in secret,
Its pieces drifting
Back into the small pockets
Of a day. I remember, we
Latched hands to hands
And hands to dirt,
Loved for that brief instant

Life allows such things to grow.
And at the single moment it all ceases to be,
We closed the room to
The piano's blue fermata—
Learning to kill the way January always does.
The day you were born
It took 1,000 years for
Your voice to reach the center of my body.
You never left. Still,
The other name for sun
Is a bright white winter.
Have you seen its blossoms in the hills?
Pull the words from my mouth
As they cleave the air behind
Your lovely trespass. Pull the breath
From my nostrils with your breath.
I'll meet you there
At the viola's crescendo,
My hands breaking words
Under the sky
Your eyes created.
Far above us, the wind,
Also, is a river.
Lines of smog and dusk will
Tell me nothing.

DARIO BELLEZZA

FROM "PRAISE FOR THE MALE BODY"

Translated from the Italian by Peter Covino

Neither male nor female, that gaze.
From outside the serene air invades
reality. I don't see, blind
from the beginning; I deface myself to think
about the happy contests of a different age,
devoid of death's vice.

FROM "PRAISE FOR THE MALE BODY"

Translated from the Italian by Peter Covino

Hey boy down there, hidden treasure
with your mannequin torso
hanging from its heart, manipulated
first by you, o mangle of the inane
and vigorous middle classes that want my blood!
Yes, manhandled by you first, but calmly
those nights with you when you returned
late . . . It was youth, thieving passion
of extraordinary events:
guitar and wine, bread and salad
and victory over your body
martyred by Desire . . .

I'll live within your sorrow
waiting for celestial punishments
for my frivolity, but I am no longer
a poet of love, nor does today's
consolation allow me to evoke the Past.
I close my eyes, and think if only I could
return to what I was. As I will never be again.

TO HART CRANE

Translated from the Italian by Peter Covino

Terrible Eros, oh anguish
anguish, joy of sex
just before you touch his excess!

Changeable one, listen to me, changeable one
destroy me as the boy's thin face daily
brightens with misfortune,
he comes, he faints, he revives
in the warm morning bed
to cry his ardor
that flows slowly, without sensuality
or purity in love with himself alone
and nothing else!

That's how you cried out Hart, dear Hart
American poet dead by suicide
that's how you cried to the nocturnal wind
from the great precipitous bridge
into death's funereal abyss.

EASTER

Whatever inspired that first live cell
to pull a little line down the center

and so become, as two, both and neither,
it must have known what a child knows

when he looks up at a house on fire,
until, ascending, the night is day again.

When I was his age, I put my ear
against the train tracks to hear the future.

It sounded like the metal it was made of.
Be fruitful and multiply, said one future.

The heavy engine is coming, said another.
Seeing off in the distance cut two ways.

I learned to survive in light of it.
I learned to long to survive myself.

Ear to the steel, I felt the cold expire.
I learned the moan of the locomotive

carries better after dark. I lay awake
each night, waiting, listening. And then I fell.

I do not know when I first began
to love, though I suspect long before

I knew a thing about it. My first words
rushed to fill the absence of the mother

who left the room. To think I grew out
of that absence, out of the body inside it.

The night my house burned down, I looked up
amazed how bright a missing house can be,

how steepled in light. Streets filled with neighbors,
strangers, my mother's eyes with tears of awe.

Whatever inspired that first live cell,
it was one part dread, another desire.

It would make, as two, a heaven of one.
More light, more light, said the future. Or this:

in the beginning there were two boys.
There was skin. One side of which was fire.

One boy stepped from the flames of the other,
paused scared, looked back. Let us call him

knowledge, the boy who left his body to burn.
Let us write in smoke his solitary name.

MAGGIE COLVETT

TERRITORY QUICKER THAN THE MAP

And, reading backward, I know in a mirrored way
how daughters break away and vanish
into the separate world

like deer, who appear with a startle
and hold, for a holy moment, your singular gaze,
then fold themselves into the trees again

with the shock of the apparition
still hanging in your body.

I have myself been stunned in place
by a sudden reflection, an animal shape
standing strange and self-possessed across the glass:

how could it be that I'd confront it alone?
Yet I recognized the stillness of those eyes,
their wary loneliness, and knew

the country they watched was no less wild
for all they understood that they belonged to it.

CHANGE

Don't be chagrined that your novel,
Which yesterday seemed done at last,
Is revealed in the light of morning
To be only your latest draft.
Take it as evidence that your vision
Cleared as you slumbered,
That your sense of beauty
Grows in the night like corn or bamboo.

A novel about the power of time
To sweep away all trace of the beautiful
Still needs time for its seeds to open,
For leaves to push out on sturdy stems.

Not nearly done, but the present version
Is already more generous than the one before it,
Providing your characters with deeper problems.
Your protagonist, still self-deceived,
Is on his way to learning something
He needs to learn before the climax.

Now you think of each draft as repetition,
With the same quick start followed by the same
Loss of momentum. But later each will appear
As another chapter in a single story
Slowly unfolding, in which you learn
By trial and error what the plot requires.

In the meantime, let me assure you
The current end, though it still needs work,
Is more convincing than all the others,
With the hero more shaken by his good fortune,
Not reciting speeches already written

But groping for words. Not sure
What he'll say until he says it.

It won't be long now before you're willing
To let him decide if it's time for him
To be satisfied with his latest effort
Or to ready himself for one more try.

REPETITION

Do you think we can set aside for a day
Our search for variety and have lunch
At the same cafe where we had lunch yesterday
And order the same avocado and Gouda sandwich
On whole wheat bread, toasted and buttered?

Do you think we can stroll again after lunch
To the river and back? I'll be glad to notice
You're wearing the very blouse you wore yesterday,
A sign you're still the person I think you are,
That this is the walk you want to take,
The one you didn't get your fill of before.

A loose-fitting blouse of solid blue,
Which later, enhanced by a few accessories,
Will prove appropriate
For another evening at the theater.

Last night the play had its first performance.
The actors had to work through their fears
Of missing their cues and dropping lines,
Of moving across the stage too slowly or quickly.
Tonight they can focus entirely
On losing themselves in their characters,
Just as we'll focus on affirming ours.

Will our conversation after the play be dull
If it merely repeats our comments of yesterday?
The same words, but spoken with more compassion
For those who don't know what the day will bring them,
Don't know if later they'll want to forget it
Or to live it again when they can unchanged.

POEM

if death, then
I am his
movement:

like a small boy

slipping under
the bounds of sleep,

I run the loop
between

the house he leaves

and the house he
returns to

and all the fields in between

JEAN HOLLANDER

PLATO AND THE CLOWN

"Love of Beauty leads to the Good," Plato said
and the clown uncrossed his legs and laughed.

I should get up now, but it is too late
to drown my nightmare in fresh oranges.

Somewhere in Africa last night I led
a shivering lamb through rain and lightning blast

to shelter in a tiger's cave, the lamb and tiger stark
in their bright terror at each stroke of light

the tiger's growl erased in thunder's bark.
Carefully I fed the tiger beans and gruelled mash

and petted its striations into belly purr.
The lamb ate grass. Carved stories

flickered from stone walls. Oxen on their way
to pasture or to slaughter, ancient history

of hunger or of hope. A cleared moon shone.
After I left, the tiger bit into the lamb

and dragged the remnant bone and flesh
out to the moon for bustard birds to feed on

and for crows to peck. After I left,
the clown recrossed his legs and laughed.

BENJAMIN JONES

LATE AUTUMN

At the end of November,
shoots of yellow
almost lemon-hued trees
dotted across the land
like someone carelessly
titled a bucket of gold-spin
Some like amber;
small cocoons of juvenescence!
And the blue sky map reminds that
it did what was expected—
Orange and yellow
amber and gold
quick before December begins—

BENJAMIN LANDRY

PRIVATE BOOTH

It's disturbing to recall
the child's analogy of adult desire:

how you were certain to be
in parlor view

of your grandmother's cuckoo clock
moments before the hour.

That's the suggestive silence
of all the engines at rest,

every toggle switch
in the OFF position,

the warehouse
of robotic arms recumbent.

If you've a mind for irony,
think of it as any dovecote,

the drowse inside
as thick as feathers,

the brooding of the cubbies
like the winter-muffle of an empty cauldron.

All that changes
with the final *chink*

of two dollars
in widely circulated coins.

The deliciousness of that silence
set to brass lights,

then trance music
picking up a slow grind,

hackles stirring
beyond smoked glass.

A body, choreographed,
ruffles its feathers,

sets the fittings taut before
stepping into the time allotted.

NIGHT

1

Property is death: they had a

Body crammed in a mailbox and

It was just a blue suit with

Bones sticking out:

2

"Just

Say missiles,

Just

Say drones"

3

she said, she said joy, she said voice,

blue-green voice; she said violet, blue

wind pushes, river light, birches, she

said,

4

your stain of faded storm light in my mouth:

heartland, methland: over the river and

through the woods: I'm writing inside death,

I'm in the room—"we made this sky of

drones to eat your eyes"—"the sky is money,

privatize the sky"—angel, say angel, your

ocean dies,

5

we're all dead, he says,

so, yes, joy, the lost

one, the sweet fool, and fathers lost in

blowing snow, and mothers lost in blowing

leaves, when the soul opens, there will be

a cheap hotel: dead face, open mouth, dead

face: the first snow and wrapping paper:

6

we become dark matter, it has to be that,

she said, she told me, she promised—kept

saying it has to be—no getting out of the

universe—we have to be something—

he's

crying

(God)

"home"—

7

revolution:

everything

means you

in that

dying:

what is

your face—

what you

threw out—

8

more songs, more flame, more strange blue light, your ocean dies, and Google owns the light inside your eyes—democracy is resource wars, democracy is buying—*("clean coal" ate my face)*

9

"Just

Say missiles,

Just

Say drones"

[PRAYER]

Can there be any there
    can't be any thing to accuse
me of excuse me I am

exhausted my body is
    haunted is it you
who is it that is hunted

who is hunting, it is that
    you are, what are you
doing to try to do to find

the space any
    space that exists because
there is some thing that is not

that surrounds it
    is around it to dispute it
somehow. Dispute me

some how this
    thing should exist already, is all
ready to serve you like you

serving us with chaos is
    it really real is it really
chaotic density the way chain

mail can drape
    and protect all at once—
a fragment of a figure

chosen as fragment
    will disarm your expectation
for foreground while I

can access those
    harmonic echoes,
voices heard through thoughts now

untangled. Abbreviate it.
    Abbreviate what it
is. What is it that you want.

NINA LINDSAY

OVER THERE

mistranslation after Rilke

Oh the wild were with us,
the morals borne upon their dingy tapestries.
The inkling: soaking wet. Tidy but not neat.
Who knows where they came from.

The South Wing, its cool web of windows,
is home for people tired of shrieking.
If all of the ferns are forgotten,
and the zippers, and the bitter root—
then the last shining bit of my humanity
should trod across the plains of Myth towards love.

THOU

While I stood there, bewildered,
I must have looked a long time
back to that other world,
which held the best of me:

the pasture with its broken tractor,
an old roan who loved sugar,
a brother dead before birth,
the summer cool of a storm cellar,

its rich odor of dirt. I don't remember
much before the forms changed,
before the pungent colors chimed
to charm the wary creatures forth.

Eyes shining, they led me here
unharmed. Earth's common light
was strewn about, my eyes were strewn
with weeping, also with flowers.

ROMANCE FOR SWITCHBACKS

By maddening grass and muddy flash that slopes the forest's
rising hem, you hike up, singing until he comes unsung
or comes down from the city you made love inside.
Watts and walls filter want through the world until a cold
spine is the axis of one beloved eclipsing the other,
made dust by dawn. Dark heart, vow down. This time, you will

will what's breakneck in you beyond breaking. And the unmade
forests' eros racing to its exit, and the groaning, green shudders by
rain that did so, and the wet coast—he'll press to the curve as if
a spine
unsung inside you, and curve your moving under. You used to rise
coldly in the city's rooms, until what's kingdom was what's
inside them still, unmoving. Once he saw you at the door,

or dreamt the handle turning, you letting him inside.
Made of love you came, and, remade, you leave, he knew, made ill.
What spools between feeling's apertures contracted in the cold
by which you saw forests
rise over you like lovers who kneeled in his place. Now he's sun-stung,
spine your old arrow at rest, and what he spills resembles rain,

rain spills scent like a body each time it's laid under a pine,
inside nothing, and you weep. You've seen what's steeper than a door.
Unsung signal banged it down the day domesticating cries
willed what's forest out of your room, and the fires that made
forests swallow their selves almost passed you by.
Cold, bedded in the ash, germ and gold, a doubled past passes what's

whatever winter mistook him for. You, too, fell asleep in a cold,
spinning rain:
by the bright, fluorescing roots of a city, all shut doors gesture at forest.
Do or double back—enter and be entered as men pick a fruit with
no inside.

Unmaking love—did you confess it all? He will
rise inside your tonight, cross the body all over, and name what unsung

sun guns down the trees' ghosts, the wind a gold needle rising
cold over the earthly flesh. Surely, an echo is what's
willing to be fed to, cut down, turned over in a hollow and
remade—
rain everywhere you look, love repeating in stereo, your name plus
pine.
Inside a city, he loved you clearly, the end between you like a door.
For that, reforest. Two faces undress and walk by, and by, and by.

JENNIFER MILITELLO

MUSCOSKELETAL

Are fused.
Make up the maxilla.

Are fused.
Delimit the exterior emptiness of sockets.
Delimit the margins of sutures.
Delimit interior movement.

Each is a niche.
The marrow grooves through it.
Is said to reside.

Nasal, dental. Optic.

I walk through evening's fontanels, hallways of soft tissue, membranes undamaged by my impact on each placenta filtered of light.

Doorways are the organs of a room.

The face is a greater wing of lesser bone.
Its atlas allows for movement.

CHARISMATIC DELIVERANCE

I could have sworn this was a cave
with thin gray branches at the opening,
a perfect ellipse. No one's home but home.
No whistle over the opening. A man empties
his lungs entirely, so he can sing, so we can sing.
He looks down at the ground. I look at the cave
and then up at a hawk who left his streetlight
to be here for this occasion of our murmuring
in the presence of animals.

I wish things were different, that the doorway
had no door, crème paint flaking from fifty years
of painting and a smell like new paint, soft from heat,
afternoon sun, flakes a golden white color, and behind me
a breeze. I know there were two of us here, and I don't know
where the other is. I can't see the room. Maybe it's not a room
anymore. Maybe it's someone's idea: staircase in the closet,
seven layers of wallpaper and all of them showing.

The cat who died is still mewling by the bathtub,
and I didn't know her in life. Half a deer is in two tubs
in the refrigerator. One leg is shoving out of a tub,
like a peony, hoof in bloom.

Light brown, the trees closest to me have succumbed
to the cold, their leaves are around my feet,
some I can hear hitting the train in the wind
in little slaps, little slaps of water against
my cheeks. I am so high in the mountains
that the mountains are not mountains,
and sleep is in my chest, making its way
to my throat, the bearer of good news.

A shell's spirit shares a sound.
The ocean in this case. So, not so empty.
Not an abandoned house. The bed is ready.
The fire is ready.

We have lived *here;* and we have *lived* here.

DEPOSITION

Let the graves make their confession
—Herbert

After all the centuries' time stamps
are rendered tiny tin soldiers, foreshadowed
dung on the balustrade, none
of its fashion adding up to anything
more than some faceless dawn, or limp
lungs hung over a half-folded fence,
we might've looked back to now
as some kind of rejoinder—the perfect
pitch ringing in our ears, the twin
galaxies that dart across our field of vision
without ever arriving at its vertex—
sight's engirdled suffrage.

Somewhere in a country
no longer empty, castrated stillness overtakes
all opacity as absence renders
presence's dominion and all movement
grows namelessly brutal without brutality,
without a jury's bona fide *snap* or
wrinkle. Sure that our sadness is debuting,
we cry unlike all the other times
we've cried just like this. Somewhere it's
midnight and somewhere it's tomorrow's
today, and we've no way of fiddling
with it, of backtracking to another ingrown
hour that didn't so much pass us by
as die another minor *snap*—
just a fly we killed out of boredom and
nothing more.

Maybe our jaw
has locked up again, or again we've fallen
into another basement that has risen
to the surface—dawn: another

pharmaceutical we found on the bank
of an empty river—or it's the wish
to flay one's own flesh for food.
Unlike the road we decided not to take,
or unlike the clarity with which we know our
history's bemused injuries as scars
kept not on flesh or on the land but
in some dried-up ocean, we're
still breathing between breaths, tracing
driveways up our arms, around our
necks until the muffled impulse to speak
cries out and we, again, sleep.

AUBADE

All's aubade.
Sunrise swells the first strains
of a yellow song
rippling across the white motes.
The song begins with the word *goodbye*
and ends *goodbye,*
don't you remember how we began, goodbye—

I step from my bedroom,
and the door's other side unlatches
an earlier city's earlier
bedroom. Memory,
there you are, such an earlier riser.
Sun shines in and stirs
some nostalgia who pulls a pillow over its head.

The happiest is heartbreaking.
The broken brings
the sweetly lidded eye to me
as if I
could graze it with my thumb again.
Yellow song, yellow
lily in my palm. The door
frames the sepal curl
of the body I loved to see sleep.

The happiest
ebbs. The happiest
is another city. One morning,
she put me in a car and drove me
to a garden where every word I said was true.

JOHN PALMER

SILENCE SOUNDS CLOSE TO BRANCHES

Unflagged, back
in white, my ebb-
words packing
a littler breaking

heart, I give you
ice. There's just room
for that, and air
with one last dicing

breath suspended. Apple-
shaping-star, eye-
rise over book,
earth made fast

in your throat. Prayer
is mine, exhaustion
fit for no one or
a tiny pageantry,

finer palatines. I
come now, so, in
different tongue, budding
weight.

HE OF THE LONG WAIT

Every morning he invited the wind
into his open window. Then he would lean
out and believing the trees were listening

would whisper, "Welcome back." He
wanted the weeds to nod, the birds
to carry his breathing to their nests.

In the afternoon he sat in the theater
of sparrows, juncos, nuthatches
under the loft and languid passing

of clouds and imagined applauding
the man two doors down who walked
by with his three dogs. He loved

the ubiquity of time. In his basement
he had a puppet stage painted pale blue
with a crimson curtain where each night

the puppets—a rabbit in a beret, a mole
with a walking stick, a man with a beard
full of nettles, and a woman holding

a golden basket of pears—talked about
their day. Then he went to sleep, the sky
deepening behind the ceiling of stars.

ZACH SAVICH

ORCHARD

the eye still winds at any climbing thing
calls it *ivy*
it's ivy then
each season made to see

I wake clean and used
lattice braced in the amaryllis bed

each motion shaped
did the waist begin in the throat
if the hands
if the hands began in the breath
so one heaved one
restrained
a scent of rain perhaps
perhaps for days
in the makeshift delphiniums
on the makeshift weight bench
a yard conveying primed assent
if the hair began
if the eyes

so the place that felt the most
made all the others feel

CAITLIN SCARANO

MERELY BIRD AND BONNET

In my smallest room, a gold-green
finch afflicted with the voice
of a human infant. The smell
of nursery in reverse. The finch
suffocating on window
glass. What we let in
during the night: my little sister
killing things not to kill
herself. I will always think of her
without a daughter. The finch
and the robin. How she caught
them while the watching
world slept. What we do
not to kill, what we do not kill,
these are not the same. I refuse
to acknowledge her as a mother,
merely bird, merely bonnet.
That lice and seed shell littered
country between us. We are still
daughters. The robin's
body beaten into the nursery
rug. The finch on the windowsill
warm with its death. I will make her
monster, not mother (these are not
the same). Wake me with feathers
in my teeth. A gold-green smear
for a mouth. Ask me which one
of us collects baby bodies
in the night.

VITAL SIGNS

It all comes down
to trying to get the last word in,
a red bird turning silent in the mouth.

I say we had it once
in a brief hollow of time,
breathless

cadences of small wings above
sounding soft like a slough
of systole all around us,

rising to a degree,
feeding flowers into fire,
even cultivating syncope.

It always moves this way,
first more, then less,
and then the sum of taken breaths.

CLARITY, I, FLOWER, WATER

Translated from the Persian by Jean Valentine and Kaveh Bassiri

There is no cloud.
No wind.
I sit at the edge of the pond:
the circling of fishes, clarity, I, flower, water.
The purity of the cluster of life.

My mother is picking basil.
Bread, basil, and cheese, a cloudless sky, wet petunias.
Salvation near: between the flowers in the yard.

What caresses the light pours into the copper bowl!
The ladder, from the top of the high wall, brings the morning to earth.
Behind a smile is hidden—everything.
The wall of time has a chink, through which my face is visible.
There are things I don't know.
I know if I pick a leaf of grass, I'll die.
I go to the mountaintop: I'm made of wings and feathers.
I see a road in the dark: I'm a lantern.
Light and sand,
forest and tree.
I'm made of the road, the bridge, the river, the wave.
I'm the reflection of a leaf on water:
empty inside.

FROM GREEN TO GREEN

Translated from the Persian by Jean Valentine and Kaveh Bassiri

I in this darkness
think of a bright white lamb
to come graze the grass of my weariness.

I in this darkness
see on my outstretched arms in the rain
the same rain that fell on the first human prayers.

I in this darkness
opened the door to the wheat fields of long ago,
to the golden gods and animals we saw on the walls of the sky.

I in this darkness
saw the roots
and, for the newly sprouting bush of death,
explained the meaning of water.

TIME-OASIS

Translated from the Persian by Jean Valentine and Kaveh Bassiri

If you come looking for me,
I'm in back of the Land of Nothingness.
It's a real place.
In this place the currents of air are filled with dandelion seeds
that carry the news of flowering from the farthest plant on earth.
And on the sand, the hoofprints of gentle riders
who have ridden in the dark of morning up to the hilltop
where the red poppies rise up to God.
In back of the Land of Nothingness, the umbrella of yearning is open:
the breath of thirst runs through the stem of a leaf,
the bell of rain is sounded.
One is alone here,
and in this solitude, the shadow of an elm tree flows to eternity.

If you come looking for me,
come quietly, gently,
so as not to crack the thin porcelain of my loneliness.

JULIA SHIPLEY

THE LASTS

The last daylily, by the looks of it, has wept itself to sleep

Given everything,

I hate to watch it go: Corn—ears, stalks, shocks—all's blitzed into litter

la- la- la- last hurrah,

season's bon vivant of its own mauling I'm no better—

dispatching three lambs into scraps and tossing salt (non-

vivant) on their petal-soft pelts

now dog robs mound for hock

now geese drain down to feed on the least grains of corn spilled

on the kill floor of all of Autumn— this made bed

needs someone (rural savant) to lie

The forest, by the looks of it, has amortized Its stiffs wag toe tags

On the third day the geese (honky, itinerant, why shouldn't they?)

ascend into

elsewhere

KEVIN STEIN

APRIL PROPOSALS

Either way.
That's what the yard's Bleeding Heart
persuades today,

its blossoms strung charms
on the wrist of sky,
each dangling a drop of

these dual
dueling proofs:
That, after all, there is a god—

or that if none,
but still this beauty beckons,
we shall not want.

KEVIN STEIN

EPITHALAMION FOR A THIRTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY

When you came in the room
the first time
there was no room—

only a sparrow's song,

your eyes' blue windows,
hillside lilies awash with bees,
and my breath—

that held thing—

this yellow bell
upturned and ringing
honey.

When I came in you

the first time,
there was no roof
or month—

only frames of light,

the garden's vow of daisies
arrayed like rain
in your hair.

INTERVAL

It shouldn't be rare, this ability
to sit quietly in history, a statue
of St. Francis tucked among woody
trunks of old lilac—a kind of
dopey looking saint my sister gave me
after her husband quit the ministry
left her with the girls
and became an architect over in Ames.
On today's date, a comedian
and a salesperson of air time
are divorcing down my block.
Their teenage daughter fronts a punk band
so collapse immediately becomes chorus.
A looming cloud formation
threatens my biking plans, as distant nail guns
fasten down roofs. Prayer,
an idea, circles like birds
as a breeze sets the chime.
Two translucent insects hover
above irregular stalks of grass
and two families down the alley
have lost sons in the war.
Dogen Marty tells me
"if you're not afraid of death
you're afraid of fear."
And I hate the anger
that spilled out of me yesterday
when I yelled at my children for simple carelessness.
Marty's trying to help me
regain my composure but I think I
pretend, mainly, to understand my motives.
In the popular stories Betsy writes

which I've been reading this morning
in a plastic chair that will outlive me,
the emotional life, inflected
by the brightness of wit,
puts its arm around the intellect
and leads it back inside.

THE LAST TREE

Told of it many times over, he had them take him there.
And when they left, he then, to hear it himself, pressed
his good ear against the bark of that fabled tree. Later
he'd pull others aside and tell it himself: a sound burning
through the proof of souls, perhaps; a splintered echo
like the shattered formula of glass; a hissing of fallacies
that derive music from ash and ash from openings in bird-
song; and then here and there a vacant whistle; and then
another noise, only this time closer to the unfinished voice
of a girl, her hair almost certainly wrapped in a myth
of the times, her body covered in nothing but oils
and rags of a torch dropped through the centuries, her eyes
lit like fields on fire, in which are rooted this very tree
and a man like himself beside it, listening to the sky
blacken as if it were the inside of God's throat.

MEG WILLING

INSTRUCTIONS FOR SWEET SISTER ON HOW TO MAKE MY WEDDING DRESS

clear a spot in the corner of the collapsing island barn scrape
your under-nails of garden dirt but keep the felt-smell
geranium my child-memory swatch let the dog out on her long
leash be blissfully alone mold your own chest
as dress form that's our body dripping white turn
the solar radio loud as it will sing roll a joint spot a wave crest
heed the vision of the arching never-ending thread
a needle start to sew

DEMIURGE

As if a blueprint of author's imagined
garden could begin without the 28 leathern paws
of 7 unassigned dogs halting, holding
their howls at the edge. If you draw me a map
I won't find you. This poem is for the cartographer
offering an alternate arcadia, I mean, a third
arcana. I mean I believe in spoil, wineskins accelerating
unlit wars, ending ends. As if this poem
isn't populated with obese angels and outsized
stars, muzzled strong-men. But this poem is also
for black smart phone screens not networked
or worked and inelegant without intelligence,
molly-mirror unreflective of the un-shiny other's
intent, only an idea in abstraction upon lack
of electrification. This poem is clearly for myself
alone. My mother may have wrapped me in
a cloud. Because of this arrangement, I have
insisted on some theories regarding Ash and Hair.
Instead, I ask myself if I mean Vapor and Ocean,
Air. I got good at this somewhere and now I need
to get de-skilled; I am now only a spouse
to my true nature, a digger of foundation, fence
posts. True. I have stayed here long enough to
achieve, and now my arms are the arms of evident
strength. I really want to be the one in the kitchen,
inhaling mint, wetted basil: artifacts of exposed
hearth. Upon first encounter,
sugar was qualified as honey without bees. This seems to
suggest that strength—for a Cashiered Soldier or Bad
Poet—is only intention without integrity. Howls
echo in the uncharted empty even if the animals are
not near; the nature of the canyon is to act and act again;
reverberation. I mean to admit I remain
in the self-styled wild

not out of an attitude of endurance
but in avoidance of the ultra
charted zone, the solid city
structured and clay-hardened.
Upon identification of the subject,
I collapse. Just as I cannot kiss the counter,
I cannot, cannot caress the fur of the domestic dog,
I cannot even accept
the rope
that made the animal so,
can only
insist a cloud
cannot be contained
or rent

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

Colleen Abel is the author of *Housewifery,* a chapbook (Dancing Girl Press, 2013). A former Diane Middlebrook Poetry Fellow, her work has appeared in numerous venues, including the *Southern Review, Mid-American Review, West Branch, Pleiades, Cincinnati Review, Ploughshares'* blog, and elsewhere. She lives in Wisconsin.

Erin Almond is a graduate of the UC–Irvine MFA program and has published short fiction, essays, and reviews in the *Normal School, Small Spiral Notebook,* the *Boston Globe,* and *Cognoscenti.* She is currently at work on a novel, "Paganini's Dream." Almond lives outside Boston with her husband, Steve, and their three children, Josie, Judah, and Rosalie.

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Kaveh Bassiri's poetry won the *Bellingham Review's* 49th Parallel Award and has been published in *Virginia Quarterly Review, Beloit Poetry Journal, Mississippi Review,* and *Best New Poets 2011.* His translations won the Witter Bynner Poetry Translation Residency and have been published in *Virginia Quarterly Review, Guernica,* and *Massachusetts Review.*

Italian poet, novelist, essayist, playwright, and gay activist **Dario Bellezza** (1944–99), an openly queer writer who died a premature death caused by AIDS-related complications, won wide acclaim, including the Viareggio Prize in 1976, as well as the Montale Prize. Despite consistent accolades, Bellezza's work remains somewhat marginalized and not readily available to an English-speaking audience. These poems are from his prescient transgender-themed collection *Serpenta (Snakewoman),* 1987.

Bruce Bond is the author of fourteen books, including five forthcoming: *Immanent Distance: Poetry and the Metaphysics of the Near at Hand* (University of Michigan Press), *For the Lost Cathedral* (Louisiana State University Press), *Black Anthem* (Tampa Review Prize, University of Tampa Press), *Sacrum* (Four Way Books), and *The Other Sky* (Etruscan).

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Winner of various awards, **Jean Hollander** has published five collections of her poetry. Her poems have been published in literary journals, anthologies, and other collections. Her verse translation (with Robert Hollander) of Dante's *Commedia,* published by Doubleday, has received many favorable reviews. She was awarded the Gold Medal from the City of Florence for this translation.

Leslie Johnson's fiction has been broadcast on NPR and published in journals such as *Glimmer Train, Natural Bridge, Third Coast, Threepenny Review, Chattahoochee Review, Cimarron Review,* and others. She lives in Connecticut, where she teaches at the University of Hartford.

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Mark Mayer was a Teaching-Writing Fellow at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and the Robert P. Dana Emerging Writer Fellow at Cornell College; he is currently a 2014–15 Michener-Copernicus Fellow. "Strongwoman" is from a collection of stories about the contemporary incarnations of circus performers. It won the John Leggett Fiction Prize from Prairie Lights Books.

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Linda Norton is the author of *The Public Gardens: Poems and History* (Pressed Wafer, 2011; introduction by Fanny Howe), a finalist for an LA Times Book Prize. She recently returned from Ireland, where her collages are on exhibit at the Dock Arts Center. She is a recipient of a 2014 Creative Work Fund grant.

Born in Washington, DC, **John Palmer** has degrees from Duke University, the University of Chicago, and the University of Wisconsin–Madison, as well as an MFA from the University of Massachusetts–Amherst. Palmer has had work published in the *Antioch Review, Chariton Review, Denver Quarterly, High Plains Literary Review, Indiana Review, Poetry East, Willow Springs,* and elsewhere. His first book, *Return to a Place Like Seeing,* was published in 2013.

Brenda Peynado has work appearing or forthcoming in the *Threepenny Review, Mid-American Review, Black Warrior Review, Pleiades, Cimarron Review,* and others. She won third place in *Glimmer Train's* Fiction Open Contest. She is currently on a Fulbright grant to the Dominican Republic, writing a novel.

Jack Ridl's *Practicing to Walk Like a Heron* was named one of the two best collections of 2014 by *Indie Review*. His book *Broken Symmetry* was chosen as best book of poetry by the Society of Midland Authors. This year the Michigan Literacy Society awarded him a lifetime honor for his work. More than eighty-five of his former students are now published authors.

Zach Savich's latest collection of poetry is *Century Swept Brutal* (Black Ocean, 2014). He teaches in the BFA Program for Creative Writing at the University of the Arts, in Philadelphia, and co-edits Rescue Press's Open Prose Series.

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Sohrab Sepehri (1928–80) was a leading figure in modern Iranian poetry and painting. His major literary work, *hasht ketab (Eight Books),* has been a steady bestseller. Over forty books have been written about him and his work. His paintings were shown in various exhibitions, including Venice and San Paolo Biennale.

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Kevin Stein has published eleven books, including *Wrestling Li Po for the Remote* (Fifth Star Press, 2013), *Sufficiency of the Actual* (University of Illinois Press, 2009), and *American Ghost Roses* (Illinois, 2005), winner of the Society of Midland Authors Poetry Award. His *Poetry's Afterlife: Verse in the Digital Age* appeared from University of Michigan Press in 2010.

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