

5-1-2014

Takes Dying Animals

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Bronson, Brittany Leigh, "Takes Dying Animals" (2014). *UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones*. 2062.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.34917/5836081>

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TAKES DYING ANIMALS

By

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Bachelor of Arts in English

Wheaton College

2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts – Creative Writing

Department of English

College of Liberal Arts

The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

May 2014

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THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

We recommend the thesis prepared under our supervision by

Brittany Leigh Bronson

entitled

Takes Dying Animals

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts - Creative Writing

Department of English

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May 2014

ABSTRACT

Takes Dying Animals

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The following collection represents three years of creative work in the Masters of Fine Arts-Fiction program at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. The majority of these stories operate in the realm of the surreal with comic and farcical leanings. All of the characters portrayed deal with death in some way—whether it a parent, a marriage, an animal, or a friend—and each cope their loss by pushing grief to the periphery, often masking it with humor or denial, until the story requires them to consciously confront it. These stories should not be considered finished work, but as a summation of the stylistic and craft choices I have developed and nurtured throughout my workshops, thesis hours, and personal writing work. I hope these stories entertain—which is the original instinct that drew me to fiction—but more importantly, like all great literature, speak to the human condition in a meaningful and memorable way. I believe most of these stories are still drafts away from completion, but proudly present them here, confident they are well on their way to becoming the best versions of themselves.

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Geology

My friend Gabe stayed over on his way through Bend and brought his new EP. He plays an acoustic guitar that he always brings to parties, and at first you think, “Oh great, another guitar guy at the party,” but then you find out Gabe keeps weed inside his guitar that he likes to share, so instead you think, “This is a good deal.” Gabe knows strange facts about the planet that always get people thinking. He inserts them in conversations the way strangers do the weather. Gabe is the one who told me that in two hundred million years, our continent will collide with Asia. All that tectonic mass will burgeon into mountains high enough to shadow the Himalayas.

I thought Gabe might perform a song from the new album, but he just strummed the same minor chord while he talked about the ground.

“It’s shifting right now,” he said, “But we can’t even feel it.”

“Trippy.”

“And the plates? They move as fast as our fingernails grow.”

Gabe and I met at a party in Portland when I used to live there. He was the best guitar guy out of all the guitar guys there, the kind you listen to and think, this has nothing to do with girls. It was the rain that made me move. It mutated my desert skin into an oily, amphibian layer, and each day, my life slipped from me until my whole body lost traction. Gabe didn’t mind the rain and decided to move because all his friends thought him pretentious and claimed he couldn’t be trusted. He seemed harmless to me, and I enjoyed sitting with him for hours, thinking about the dirt.

“You know what I want to do?” he said. “I want to track down one of those people with the worlds longest fingernails.”

To demonstrate, he set down his guitar and curled all ten fingers into claws. He held his elbows high and away from his body in nonfunctional wings, his mobility now limited. His eyes traced the invisible length of his talons.

“I’d ask them to lay their hands down for just a second,” he said, “Then I’d walk the length of their nails to see how far I made it. Take the whole thing in. My ten-meter long life.”

Like that, Gabe’s arms evolved to normal. He played the album from his muffled cellphone speakers and picked up his guitar. Recorded Gabe belted tenor melodies and strummed lead guitar, while live Gabe sang harmony and picked a rhythmic bass line. I swam above it all, listening to Gabe split his own molecules and multiply in my apartment.

I emerged from my cold shower this morning to discover that Gabe took all the money in my wallet and left the coffee burner on with no coffee left. There wasn’t much I could do—he was already hours south to California where he planned to live in a trailer along the San Andreas vault—so I stepped outside to dry out in the bald sun.

My elderly neighbor, Arlie, was also outside, watering his garden with a milk carton. His garden is actually just several Lava rocks he spray-paints different colors.

“Good morning, Arlie,” I said.

“Everything’s dying,” he said.

Arlie's rocks were in need of a fresh coat. He fears the desert, and tends to overwater. This makes the colors wilt quickly, but whenever he does repaint, he calls the painting *sowing*, and I always make sure to comment on the new buds.

I was unfamiliar with the forecast, but I wanted him to feel hopeful.

"Rain is on the way," I said.

Arlie's bathrobe draped open, the fabric belt off-center with one end trailing behind him while the other hovered dangerously close to the loop. He tilted toward the sky and made eyes at the blue like he could tempt it to storm. "She does what she wants," he said, then emptied the carton over his magenta Lava rock. It was the largest of all the rocks, and I think in Arlie's eyes, the most beautiful. When the sun slipped over the awning, it reflected off the water and sharpened the faded pink to a redder tint, the color it must have been when it first bloomed from the volcanic earth.

Safari Night

At the Meet-Up event, most of the women wore sexy tribal costumes, but I dressed up as Pumba from the Lion King. My snout kept falling down over my mouth. I had trouble holding a conversation with anyone. Julio sat next to me in the bar and lifted the snout over my eyes. “Hakuna Matata,” he said. He was the only one not dressed up, and when I asked why he wasn’t an animal, he said, “I am an animal,” which shut me up pretty quick.

Julio asked how I made the warthog head—turns out he’s something of a seamster himself. “I made this poncho,” he said, extending his arms to showcase the sleeves fraying yarn at the hems. A troublesome purple collar was imprinted into his neck.

“The head opening is too small,” I said.

Julio explained this was intentional, then rolled his neck with adequate circulation. “I’ll vote for you,” he said. He waved his paper ballot around to show me, but when a herd of women in zebra-printed spandex grazed by, didn’t write on it. Julio observed them migrate until their camouflage kicked in at the bar, where they blended into a solitary white stripe.

“How’d they do that?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” Julio said, smiling. He didn’t seem aroused but was definitely looking.

My mother designed my costume during a three-month sewing class at her nursing home and it took her all that time to do the detailing on the removable snout. She watched the movie six times with the taxidermist at the end of her hall, who assisted with

the intricate molding for the head. For the stomach, she used textured burlap with a leathery smell that created the likeness of hide. Before I left home, my roommate added one of her signature bows to soften the masculine ears.

Everyone was impressed, yet best costume went to the guy with an elephant mask tied to his belt. The trunk fell all the way to his knees. Women leashed him around by it all evening, which most people found hilarious.

“Real original,” I told Julio, but he studied the guy and said quietly, “I respect that.”

Julio lived next door to the bar and invited me to his apartment, a studio, where African masks stared down from the walls. One had condoms hanging from the empty eyeholes. I removed my warthog head for a better look as I moved around the apartment.

“This is interesting,” I said, pointing at the condoms.

“It’s abstract,” he said. “Tusks.”

“Ah,” I said.

“You want to see something else cool?”

“Sure,” I said, sitting on the couch. I tried to cross my legs in a sexy way, but my toe hit my lemonade and knocked it off the table. “Sorry about that.”

“That’s okay,” he said. The glass rolled to a stop beneath a dying Acacia tree sodded into the carpet. Julio retrieved what looked like a rolled up parchment from the bookshelf. “I bought this from a guy who went to Africa,” he said. We each grabbed one end of the parchment and walked backward away from each other. The parchment was actually the skin of a giant snake, and soon, we stood at polar ends of the apartment with a giant snakeskin spread out across the floor.

“Sweet, right?” Julio yelled. He scanned the length of the snakeskin, clearly awed, until his gaze funneled up the tail and curled warmly around me. I wondered if this was one of those fetish things.

“Sometimes the men call me a snake,” I said, still trying to be sexy.

“Do they call you a twenty foot boa constrictor?”

“No,” I said. Once a man called me a guinea fowl, but I didn’t tell Julio that because that’s pillow talk, and it’s personal.

There was also a small bag of weed rolled into the snakeskin, so Julio turned on some music while we smoked it. The vacant-eyed masks swirled around the apartment with the recorded chanting, a blurred streak of expressionless faces that cast their judgments like gods. Julio’s end table was a bongo drum as well, and at a deep crescendo, he pushed away the lamp and started pounding along off-rhythm. Later, he tried on my warthog head. He claimed that at the bar, his routine prowl was rattled when he saw the petite yellow bow crowning the warthog’s ears. We took turns wearing the head until for some reason, we retired it to the bathroom sink. The faucet protruded from the mouth like a reptilian, silver tongue. Julio turned the water on and off, laughing.

“Check it out,” he said, “It’s drooling.”

Julio asked if he could keep the warthog head. He seemed to have developed a certain kinship with it and consummated his ownership by tying a bandana around its forehead to make it look more intimidating. I scavenged the kitchen then stuck a butter knife behind its ear so it stuck up through the bandana like a switchblade.

“My costume is wearing a costume,” I said, thinking it ironic.

“He’s a killer now.”

With Julio's additions, the two pearls framing the nostrils looked more like piercings. The violent associations bothered me, and I gave the warthog head a tender pat on the nose. Julio explained that in the wild, warthogs are fairly fierce creatures. He was confident of this fact due to his whole shelf of books devoted to the world's deadliest beasts. The shelf also had an album from his recent photo shoot at the Mountain View Mall, which he kept on hand for whenever strangers accosted him for modeling. The pictures were all of Julio wearing speedos and posing Tarzan-like in front of golden desert landscapes. In every picture, a tattoo ran from his collarbone all the way down his chest and spread out in a fork over his belly button.

"That's me and the pyramids," he said, pointing out the hazy triangles. He turned the plastic pages until his speedo was a pastel blue color against a grainy background, stark white. "Me and the Sahara."

"That's a strange tattoo," I said.

Julio lifted his shirt to reveal the blackened scabs encrusted along his sternum. "It's a scar," he said. He explained scarification, an African tribal tradition, and how his friend helped him do it with a lighter and Swiss Army knife.

"It's Egyptian," he said. "Hieroglyphics."

"What do they say?"

"Fuck me like an Egyptian."

I thought that was a really sexy thing to say and felt turned on. Soon, both of us were naked and wearing masks from his wall. It was all very animalistic and sexy. We did the orangutan beneath the Acacia leaves and the gazelle on the plains of the couch. We were about to try something Julio called the Anaconda when he stood up from

straddling me. “That reminds me,” he said.

Julio went to the bathroom to get some cream. The scar was still healing and required frequent moisturizing. “Got to keep this looking good,” he said, which I thought was directed at me until he added, “Isn’t that right, Poomdawg?”

Julio’s chest and stomach were all slippery after that, which killed the mood for me. Also, he brought the warthog head from the bathroom and forced me to put it on. The fabric, damp with warm water, had bubbles lathering through the mouth and ears. Julio’s palm remained suspended nearby, threatening to push down if I removed it.

“Do I really need it?” I asked. “For the Anaconda?”

He smiled before submerging my mouth beneath the snout. “*I’m* the anaconda.”

It wasn’t long before I went to the nursing home to tell my mother I met someone. “Mom, I’m in love!” I said. Tubes and bandages shielded her face and hid her excitement. While I chronicled Safari Night, she removed all of it, pulled the tubes from her mouth and nostrils one-by-one and piled them in her lap. Her fingers moved faster than they ever did in sewing class, and when she freed the last one from her throat, she said, “Stop calling me mom. I’m not your mother,” then I walked down the hallway to find my actual mom’s room.

Since finishing my costume, her room had overpopulated. Animal print baby blankets nestled into the recliner; infant hippo onesies drowned her habitat of sheets. She appeared to be sewing orange and yellow baby shoes with webbed toes.

“You’re costume,” she said. “It inspired me.”

I held up one of the designs, a sage green baby sweater complete with crocodile

hood and long tail partially grown from the bottom hem. The crocodile teeth were the same pearl beads she used on my warthog snout. “This is cute,” I said, tracing my fingers over the teeth, imagining a little baby Julio cozied within the sweater. He made muffled crocodile sounds and kept reaching back to grab his tail. I dropped the sweater when I pictured Julio swaddling the crocodile baby inside the decomposing warthog head.

“You should stop,” I said.

She continued her work on the shoelace holes that lined the webbed ridges. We were supposed to attend her favorite monthly luau concert in the cafeteria, but due to my late arrival, we missed it.

“There was traffic,” I lied.

“The nurse already told me you got lost.”

“These hallways are confusing.”

“She also told me about Tubey,” she added, then stuck two fingers up her nose and another down her mouth.

To appease her, we went to visit the taxidermist who lived a few rooms down. An unidentifiable animal was mounted to his door. It guarded the entrance like a mythological monster, with the head of a rabbit, the wings of a goose, and one large antler surfacing skyward like a trident.

“He calls them hybrids,” she said. She knocked firmly beneath it, staring up to admire the evolutionary rebellion. The man was not much taller than my mother’s chair. Beneath his oxygen tubing, a black substance spilled over his face like a severe equipment leakage.

“Hello, Elton,” she said.

Elton didn't respond. He alternated glances between my mother and me until he settled on the wheelchair, the only thing he clearly recognized. My mother suggested we go for a stroll, and despite his uncertainty, Elton followed. We took several laps through the yellow hallways, narrowing toward the oval windows that capped the ends. We clogged through, my mother slumped over and barking directions at the corners while Elton's oxygen tank dragged behind him like a dysfunctional third arm. Somewhere in the repetitive maze, my mother flipped her break, halting us. Elton trudged forward until his tank clipped her right wheel.

"You first," she said, looking at me. "Where's my room?"

In our general vicinity, all the doors were bare except for one with a palm tree air freshener dangling optimistically from the doorknob.

"No," she said. "Elton, where's your room?"

Elton looked around briefly before pointing to the same door.

My mother had certainly made her point. She said I couldn't return until I learned to distinguish her from the woman with the pasty, recessed corpse teats. The rest of the afternoon I felt pretty guilty about not recognizing my own mother, and later, I described the incident to Julio. "It's hard to see with all those tubes in a person's face," I said.

"Honest mistake," he reassured me. Julio claimed he also had a poor sense of direction and once guided a raft down an unmarked spillway. During the summers, he was what I understood to be a rafting guide, but Julio called, "hydro turbulence technician." He bought an old school bus that he drove outside the city to lead tourists down whatever river seemed to bear the strongest torrents. He briefly referenced some lawsuit going on but seemed very hush-hush about it.

“Where do you keep the bus?” I asked.

We walked two blocks from his apartment until we came upon a narrow alley. The school bus sat wedged between the brick walls with only inches of space on either side. The back was concealed by a large, orange tarp. “Nice,” I said. Julio folded it neatly and stashed it in a nearby dumpster. He’d left the rooftop emergency exit open, so we scaled the sides and lowered ourselves in through the empty rectangle.

“I have to find a new spot every few days,” he explained.

“Why?”

“People are suspicious of busses.”

There was a wet, dingy smell throughout, but Julio draped all the lifejackets from the room, which projected a nice secure feeling. Most of the seats had torn pits in the centers from too much sitting. At the back of the bus, I found a man sleeping in the last seat. He was covered in what appeared to be one of Julio’s homemade ponchos. I made a face at Julio and pointed at the man.

“*Shh*,” Julio said. “That’s Tom.”

“Oh,” I said.

Julio settled in the driver’s seat and showed me the controls. I sat in his lap while he rehearsed the safety protocol speech he gave to all the rafters.

“Wedge that foot securely down beneath,” he began. “And be ready. Sometimes piranhas jump inside the raft and you’ll need to smash them with the paddles.”

“Wow,” I said, imagining it.

For kicks, Julio spoke in an Australian accent that didn’t sound that Australian at all. “Over here we have what looks like a giant graffiti!” He motioned to the block letters

spray-painted on the brick wall then fluttered his knees like we'd crossed into class four waters. The graffiti was the only thing to look at, so Julio decided to take the bus for a joyride. Some expert reversing and a carefully navigated underpass brought us to a small park. We didn't stay for long because the lot was crowded, allowing us only to circle the perimeter in search of a double space. Plus, Julio was right. All the mothers stared of accusingly. A group of them had collected at the sidewalk corner and fortressed around their strollers.

“Maybe we should leave,” I said.

“We're not doing anything wrong,” Julio argued.

But on our next loop, Julio spooked them by pulling parallel to the sidewalk and beating his fist against the horn. It worked. The pack of mothers scattered when all their babies started crying, except for one, a shorter woman with thick arms and pronounced chin who lifted her baby to my window in a defiant gesture. It goggled at me, limp arms and legs drooping down like a fleshy starfish. Julio made our getaway, and I watched the woman wither to the size of a raisin in the side mirror, baby still outstretched.

“A mother's love,” I said.

Julio didn't know what to make of the whole scene. It took him over an hour to find a new spot for the bus because someone boarded up the alley in the short time we were away. By the time we arrived back at his apartment, Julio was convinced the prosecution had organized some kind of sting operation. We spent the next several hours lighting matches beneath official looking documents and disposing of several bags of weed down the sink. I thought the cleansing finished, but Julio grabbed his photo album from the bookshelf with a tortured look.

“You can’t,” I said.

“It could be demonstrative evidence.”

Julio used permanent marker to deface all the pictures then tore one into pieces that he attempted to swallow. The scraps descended along his throat in a bulge that would have consumed his Adam’s apple if he hadn’t hacked it back up in his palm. Julio entombed the saliva ball beneath the couch cushion. His blacked-out faces flowered the carpet with ancient hieroglyphs, and behind us, the coat rack speared the warthog head like a pagan shrine. If I were the stranger storming in, I would have little to make of it.

“We’re safe now,” Julio said.

Julio grew paranoid and wanted to camp over at my place. I sat on the couch waiting for him to arrive, while my roommate, Karen, sat on the carpet waxing her bikini line. She does this often, faces the television with her legs spread open and a tiny washcloth over her vagina. Sometimes we have entire conversations and she just tears away like Edward Scissorhands, the pieces of cloth making those ripping, Velcro noises. Karen was watching Ultimate Fighting and ripping away when Julio walked in.

“Hi, Karen,” Julio said.

“Hi, Julio,” Karen said. Her butt crack traveled from the bottom of her Desert Brawl T-shirt and disappeared into the cream carpet. Julio eyed the miniature bow tied loosely around her ponytail.

“Karen is just waxing,” I told Julio.

Julio joined me on the couch and we watched the fight. He also watched Karen, but I didn’t blame him. It was a fascinating sight—Karen’s left hand spreading the wax,

her right tearing the cloths, a pile of hairy strips accumulating at her right butt cheek.

“I’m rooting for BJ Penn,” she said.

“He’s a great fighter,” Julio said, removing my hand from where I’d stuck it down his pants. I was trying to get his attention back on me, but Karen started discussing her favorite fighters, glancing down at her labia between sentences. At one point in round three, Karen got very emotional and accidentally knocked over her canister of hot wax. “Bad Call!” she screamed. She tried to clean the wax out of the carpet but it just clung to her fingers in thick goo that rapidly amassed all the dust bunnies.

“It’s African Bee wax,” she explained. After no success, Karen stood up and tried licking the wax from her forearms. Her tongue whirled around her arm hairs and lapped at her dusty paws like a skilled lioness.

Julio smiled. I could tell he liked the licking. On the surface of Karen’s inner thighs, a hairless triangle of tiny red dots bubbled, and a single cloth strip still dangled from her skin. Julio motioned for Karen to step forward, and when she was close enough, pinched his fingers into fangs that snapped forward and removed it.

“Missed one,” he said, handing it to Karen.

Karen welcomed the strip and surveyed it for hairs. She performed one last lick up the length of her middle finger before gathering her waxing items and disappearing into her bedroom. Later, I performed a sexy striptease for Julio, but stopped halfway through because every few minutes, he laughed and repeated, “That Karen,” as if he hadn’t mentioned her.

I didn’t sleep at all, thinking about Julio thinking about Karen. I wanted us to do something romantic the next day, so I had Julio bus us to a carnival outside town. I fed

him pieces of cotton candy as we walked through the rows, forcing my finger through his tight lips when he wouldn't open his mouth. We stopped at a Strongman hammer game, and I asked Julio to try and win me a giant, Rastafarian Banana.

"These games exploit masculinity," he said. "The probability of winning is quite low."

"Don't be silly," I said.

Days before, Julio would have volunteered to attempt the game shirtless, knowing that as he lifted the hammer over his head, all the miniature vipers and sphinxes would flex their arms across his chest.

"I'm not using eight tickets for this game," he said.

The carnival worker gnawed her gum loudly and stared at us. I turned and looked at her.

"Lover's feud," I explained.

"There are people waiting," she said.

The banana stared at me with its glazed, cartoon eyes, and I imagined spooning with the banana, wrapping my arms and thighs around its fuzzy peel and burying my nose in the dreadlocks.

"I really want this banana," I told Julio.

"No," he said, stuffing the strand of tickets down the front of his pants like that would stop me. Julio didn't realize I had my own tickets. I pulled them dramatically from the front of *my* pants just to spite him. A little girl in the bathroom asked me to hold them while she peed, and when she shut her stall, I ran out. I handed the tickets to the carnival worker and told her my boyfriend was going to win me all the prizes.

“He looks kind of scrawny,” she said.

From the side, Julio did look to have lost ten pounds overnight. He kept glancing back distractedly at the Wild n’ Wet Adventure ride. He refused to take the hammer, so I began clawing at his t-shirt, even though there was nothing I could do with his arms crossed. I whined and begged while Julio stood there with his shirt pulled halfway over his head, not saying anything, until I realized I’d irritated the scar so much that blood soaked through his white shirt. He looked rather gruesome. Some of the parents had removed their children from the line.

I abandoned Julio and walked back to the carnival worker. “How many tries do I get?”

“One.”

“For eight tickets?”

“This is our most popular game,” she said, motioning to the line behind us.

“Because of the bananas.”

When I raised the sledgehammer, I imagined Karen’s perfectly Brazilian-waxed lady parts spread open on the target. I grunted as I swung it down, and the puck traveled all the way to the top and struck the bell. “Suck it!” I yelled, dropping the hammer at the worker’s feet. She handed me a banana, still chewing. I ran to Julio for my congratulations, but he was angry.

“Where did you get those tickets?”

“I found them.”

He sensed that I was lying but had no proof. “I think this is where it ends for us.”

“Why?”

He pointed to the blood drying across his chest. “You did this.”

Julio gave me his tickets before he left, which was thoughtful. I spent the next two hours at the Giant Kurly Fries tent eating curly cues and hanging them from my ears, nostrils and the dreadlocks of my banana. The little girl from the bathroom was at the Gyro tent, and she tugged at her Dad’s sleeve, pointing in my direction. I ran toward the parking lot with the banana draped over my shoulders, both ends securely tucked underneath my armpits and called a cab. I held it together until the driver tried to charge me for additional passengers, then I ran upstairs and smeared hot wax all over Karen’s bathroom.

“I immediately regretted it,” I told her after.

She surveyed the dust bunnies stuck to her bows and mirror and toothbrush.

“Breakups make people crazy,” she said. When she grabbed one of the bows to examine the damage, it snaked around her fingers in a sappy tangle.

A few hours into the disaster relief, Julio showed up. Karen sat on the toilet lid monitoring my cleaning. “They always come crawling back,” I told her before opening the door, although they usually do not. Julio was dressed in black clothing and carried a large duffle bag. His hair, recently bleached, had white splotches descending along his bangs like an accelerating mold.

“What do you want, Julio?” I asked.

“I left my phone here,” he said.

“Oh,” I said, and when I returned it, he threw it repeatedly against the ground until the mechanical guts spurted out from behind the battery pack. He pushed the phone scraps toward me with his foot, finished.

“I’m leaving town,” he said.

“Good,” I said.

Karen’s head emerged from the bathroom for a peek and I could tell she was impressed with my forcefulness. She gave Julio a what-a-nasty-dick-shit type look, so I knew she was on my side. Julio unzipped his duffle to reveal the warthog head, the costume now gone and its once perky ears wilting over Karen’s squashed bow. Half the warthog skin had peeled away from the plaster molding. After Julio left, I wore the warthog head around for nostalgia. The bathroom overflowed a mixture of cleaners, and I pulled the snout down over my mouth like a gas mask.

“I forgive you,” Karen said, handing me a rag. “For the wax.”

“*Iwush upshut*,” I said.

“What?”

I lifted the snout back up. “I was upset.”

The next morning, the banana sat at the kitchen counter with a bowl of Raisin Bran. Karen propped him there to cheer me up. She put sunglasses on the banana and a t-shirt that read, “It’s Five O’clock Somewhere.” I couldn’t stand there too long without feeling sad. It was Julio’s t-shirt. He left it on my floor after he used it to wipe cum off the ceiling. I never asked him how it got there. That’s just how it was with Julio. It was *that* good.

I decided to visit my mother. I needed motherly words of wisdom. She sat in the cafeteria with Elton, who wore her most elaborate design yet—a gray tiger shark sweatshirt with orange stripes down the back, sleeves the shape of fins and a pointy

dorsal hood. Two gray socks crowned the top of his oxygen tank, which my mother had sewed together in the shape of a tail fin.

“Hello, mother,” I said.

She didn’t respond. She poked at a yellow substance on her tray that looked like scrambled eggs.

“How’s brunch?” I asked.

“They poisoned it.”

“Oh, mother,” I said, but Elton’s fin nodded solemnly, confirming it. My mother lifted her sleeves to show me the rash breaking out all over her arms.

“That looks serious,” I said.

“But the chicken is good,” she said, taking another bite.

The whole nursing home was abandoned and I wandered the hallways searching for a nurse. It felt apocalyptic. The doors duplicated themselves endlessly down the curve of the hallways, passing over my shoulders like oncoming traffic. An unoccupied wheelchair waited outside one of the empty rooms, so I asked it, “What’s going on here?” then pushed it down the hall just for the effect. It rolled on its own several yards in front of me, wheels squeaking each time they completed a rotation. I imagined my mother in the chair, her long white hair flowing behind her, hands and sewing needle outstretched, reaching toward the bright light of the common room. In my vision, her hair snagged in one of the spokes and jerked her head down until she had thrown herself from her own wheelchair entirely. Her wrinkled body lay still on the cold floor.

“Can I help you?”

I opened my eyes to a male nurse standing in front of me. The wheelchair was on

its side. It appeared that I had slammed it into the wall.

“I need a nurse,” I said.

“I’m a nurse,” he said.

We walked together toward the cafeteria and the whole time, the nurse smiled at me without showing his teeth.

“Nice banana,” he said.

“Thanks,” I said, adjusting it against my hip. By the time we returned to the cafeteria, the bumps had traveled up my mother’s arms and dispersed across her face. Elton, unconcerned, scraped my mother’s non-poisoned food onto his tray. The nurse sat down next to my mother to check her pulse and take her temperature.

“She’s been poisoned,” I explained, motioning toward the eggs.

The nurse stabbed some with my mother’s fork and lifted it below his nose, sniffing.

“That’s poison alright,” he said. He gave my mother a shot, and within minutes, the bumps swarmed down her arms and faded back into her wrists. “I’ll look into this,” the nurse said. He pushed the eggs onto a separate plate with the fork then collected Elton’s, too. In defense, Elton attempted to poke the nurse’s hand with his fork, but his trajectory was slow, and the nurse had already stood by the time Elton’s fork landed somewhere around my mother’s bacon.

Before the nurse left, he tugged on one of the banana’s dreadlocks. “You behave,” he said, winking, then, returning to his professional tone, added, “She might be a bit foggy for the next hour.”

He was right. Halfway through dessert, my mother nudged me with her elbow and

asked, “Is this your boyfriend?”

“Oh, Mother,” I said, but it was too late.

My mother asked the banana about his job and career goals and where he grew up. She wanted to know if he could support her daughter and how he kept a job with that haircut. “Mother,” I said, “That’s rude.” I reached over and patted what I thought might be the banana’s shoulder. I answered her questions in my best impression of Julio, lifting my collar over my mouth to make my voice sound deeper and constantly adjusting my crotch to stay in character. She wanted to hear how we met, and I told her about Safari Night, how Julio saw the pearl tusks on the warthog head from all the way across the room.

“We do good work,” she told the banana, then glanced at Elton whimsically. His raspberry jelly had attacked his chin and shoulders in translucent pink clumps. She retrieved the tail fin from Elton’s oxygen tank and patted the jelly until it formed a bright pink stain across the width of his shoulders.

“How realistic!” she cried.

Elton glanced down at his chest to see the aftermath. His dorsal hood tilted threateningly toward my mother, who seemed thrilled by the destruction of her masterpiece. On our way back to my mother’s room, I memorized the first two left turns, the long trek past the lobby, the seven identical doors we passed on the right, while the entire animal kingdom carried on, one more inhabitant of the wilderness adapting to endure the earth until extinction.

Grout

That afternoon, we went searching through the empty lot behind my cousin Jenny's old place. She recently stopped living with her husband and desired an antique desk. Most items in the lot were indistinguishable, with missing or broken parts, and we found what we recognized as an oversized wooden spool. Jenny was confident she could turn that spool into a table. She hadn't mentioned wanting a table, but it was one of those know-it-when-you-see-it moments, like that time I found the neon lamp shaped like a high-heeled shoe. I never imagined owning a lamp like that, but now when people come over, that's the first thing I show them.

After shoving it on its side, she said, "It could easily seat eight."

Jenny has the ability to see things for what they could be instead of what they are—the gift of do-it-yourselfing. One look at my Mona Lisa afghan, Jenny screamed, "Shower Curtain!" and now the Madonna smiles wryly from my bathtub, soaking up water like museum praise. Jenny studied the spool's knobs, the serrated edges, the large hole through the center the size of a large plate, then decided she could drape a tablecloth over the top and just remember to not put plates there.

"But there will always be that person," I said, picturing a casserole vanishing through the middle.

Jenny continued on in pursuit of an item that would fit nicely in the hole. The lot, divorced from Jenny's old cul-de-sac by a thick, stucco wall, was the last vacant property remaining in the development. Years ago, the street woke up to an abandoned water heater deserted in the middle. The metal cylinder stood alone for weeks, an

extraterrestrial silo, while the homeowner's carried on. They rumored their newest resident a garden sculpture or a sign of contractors to come, until a midnight marauder added a dented washing machine. Almost immediately, the lot brimmed with dissolved scaffoldings of the neighborhood's once-was, used-to-be things.

Jenny tested different fillers for her table's black hole while a nearby homeowner pitched scratched records out his window. The discs flocked toward a distant furniture heap until a rogue one dove at Jenny.

"Watch it!" she yelled, then realized the record wedged inside the spool perfectly. There would be no additional hammering or gluing required, which Jenny interpreted as a kind of do-it-yourself miracle.

We turned that spool on its side and weaved it through burned out cars, over crushed cassette tapes, and through a gate of stainless steel refrigerator doors that reflected the rainy sky and captured clouds around our ankles. We rolled it into Jenny's old living room until it sat next to her previous dining room table like a recently discovered uncle.

"Don't touch anything," she warned.

Her old house was impeccably tidy because her husband likes to clean when he gets upset. I once heard him say, "I swear to God if my mother-in-law calls this house one more time I'll clean the fucking grout with a toothpick," and I don't think he was kidding around. The last six months of their marriage was full of bleach, empty cartons of it stacked up like lazily concealed affairs, and all their fights ending with her husband stripping the sheets for brutal, no-softener washings or nuking the sponges in the microwave to annihilate germs and grease.

Jenny's spool left a set of muddy railroad tracks traversing the white carpet. "Oh no," she said, spotting them. "He'll know we were here." She was so nervous about her husband, Tim, seeing the tracks, that she dimmed all the lights and lowered the blinds.

"That's better," she said.

But Tim just walked through the front door with his house key, looking neither surprised by the mess from the spool or the presence of his future ex-wife sneaking around her old but his current place. Jenny seemed irritated that Tim had entered his house through the front door, rather than the garage, which when it was their place instead of his, was his preferred entry of choice. They stared silently at each other for some time, which although uncomfortable for me, was some form of lucid communication between the two of them.

"It *will* be a table," Jenny said to whatever Tim had inaudibly, but coherently, communicated, then added threateningly, "*Soon.*"

I repeated, "Soon," just to make sure Tim knew whose side I was on in this whole thing. The week before, I spotted him at the flea market, wandering the clothing tents and performing some therapeutic lint rolling. A woman in a thrifted motorcycle vest, and much less attractive than Jenny, tracked his freshly sheared path. In the leather lot, the woman bargained for some Hell's Angel's memorabilia, and I spied on Tim, who stood nearby looking depressed by the absence of suede or cotton. Then I proceeded to layer several coats over myself as a kind of disguise.

Tim was a small man with a thin blonde moustache that shaded his top lip like an awning, but one of those awnings where you still have to lean up against the wall to not get wet when it rains. Jenny once told me that when she looked at Tim she never saw that

moustache but a heavily bearded man with flannelled shoulders so broad he had to walk through doors sideways, or widen the doorways significantly with some aggressive swipes of his axe. She first introduced Tim at our family's spring picnic at Fort Rock Park, and we all joked about that moustache, yelled, "Hey, batter, batter, batter," at Tim, who, when at bat, was a good sport as Jenny's brother lowered to his knees for the pitch and all the nephews nicknamed him the caterpillar. It was a surprise when Jenny ended up marrying Tim and his moustache, which still makes me wonder if you can ever really know a person.

Jenny walked across the spool tracks indifferently, smearing them. "I'm going to keep it here until I find someone with a truck who can help me move it," she said.

"My truck's in the garage," Tim said. "I can deliver it tomorrow."

I thought the whole conflict resolved, but Jenny quickly rebutted, "No thanks."

We all seemed to at least agree the table shouldn't stay there, being shamed by all of Tim's actual furniture, so together, the three of us rolled it into the garage, forming a new set of tracks that grew from the other in tree branches. We brought the spool to a stop next to Tim's truck bed so that when Jenny met a different person with a truck, they could simply back it into her old driveway and the wooden spool would have a clear rolling pathway to it.

"Next up, chairs," Jenny said.

There's really no stopping her once she gets these things started. She usually proceeds forward before finishing prior steps. For their wedding reception, Jenny wanted to debut her crafting with her own birdhouse centerpieces, but she started painting before allowing the glue any time to dry. Her eager brushstrokes caved in the roof, than the

walls, until she stepped back to admire her piles of bird bungalow, looking very proud.

Jenny guided me back to the lot, this time looking for chair-shaped items that she could classify as rustic chic. She described every item we passed with insults about her husband. Looking at a yellow bathtub with clawed feet—“Only Tim would clean a tub this ugly.” Uncovering an old computer monitor the size of a pizza oven—“Tim’s facial hair is slower than this computer.”

We scavenged along the base of the wall where Jenny had a history of prime discoveries. The people who drove in from town and other developments never journeyed far into the lot, simply dumped their items over the ledge and withheld from their junk the dignity of a final, solid throw. Jenny attributed this to everyone’s fear that they were the ones who’d get caught, that someday a distinguished investor would arrive in a helicopter to retrieve his beloved water heater, only to find it buried beneath mounds of decomposing rot.

“Look at this,” I said, unfolding a garbage bag filled with copper seashell drawer knobs. Underwater scenes with mermaids were carved into the copper, and Jenny brass-knuckled several between her fingers like some vintage beach-gang paraphernalia.

“Bring it,” she said.

No other worthwhile items turned up at the wall. Walking again to her old house, she frantically recited plans for the spool—“We’ll stain it! A darker tone for the top. Maybe doilies as stencils? Lacy patterns around the foot!” There was no mention of the knobs in her brainstorming, but I dragged the trove behind me to avoid being discouraging. That table seemed like a new start for Jenny—a clean slate of cracked and mildewed oak! The mermaids screeched throughout their entire migration up Jenny’s old

driveway, and we returned to her old garage to find Tim standing next to the spool, wearing gloves and blue protective goggles, a glossy figure eight ocean suctioned to his face. His moustache puckered out beneath it like a disappointing beach.

“I sanded it,” he explained.

“Why would you do that?” Jenny asked, but her anger quickly dissipated with intrigue at the significant improvement brought about by the sanding. The wavy edges were smoothed down to fine porcelain, and Jenny surfed her bare palm over them without a hitch. Tim returned the electric sander, which looked brand new and still had the plastic twist ties around the chord, to its thin plastic covering. Apparently Tim likes to store things the way they first came out of the box, in the original box they were purchased in. Jenny moved through the garage, opening drawers and cupboards, and her face grew dark red when she discovered the majority of them empty.

Meanwhile, I stayed with the knobs.

“Where’s my paint?” Jenny asked.

“It was old,” Tim said calmly. “I discarded it.”

Jenny’s face twisted into another unclear expression to which Tim offered a sarcastic laugh.

“What was I thinking!” he yelled. “You could have turned it into dinner!”

This caused Jenny to storm through the garage, opening and slamming everything in a minute-long percussion solo, the toolbox high hats, the cupboard door gongs, her feet stomping against the cement in the steady beats of the bass drum. She ripped something from a drawer that was not paint but came in a narrow tube and poured from the nozzle in a thick balsamic glaze. She circled the spool, garnishing it generously.

“Ta-da!” she yelled. “I *love* it.”

Tim claimed he had some cleaning to do and vanished into the house. He left the door open, and Jenny listened as he narrated the various hygienic states of the rooms—
“Got to dust that fan. It’s a giant fucking allergy. Dammit these tiles...Is that soap scum? Fuck. Scum. Where’s my Swiffer?”

“I took it,” she whispered.

“What?”

“It’s not here.”

Jenny searched through the cupboards for some kind of angled object to remove the liquid congealing over the surface in clumps. She then realized the seashell knobs had a curved shape that could be utilized as tools. They fit plush inside her palms, and I beheld her resourcefulness as she magically removed the liquid with firm, repeated strokes.

Jenny never did-it-herselfed anything before she got married and moved into Tim’s place. She filled out all the registries, helped Tim meticulously unwrap and display the items in their happy marriage villa, and she enjoyed them for a while—New things! New boxes!—that Tim stored in such a way that Jenny could get those rush of brand-new-feelings more than just one time. But from their upstairs window, Jenny watched that lot multiply into a boundless field for crafting, then she fell for it more than Tim, and committed adultery on all their furniture.

Tim pounded something inside the house until it was overpowered by a high-pitched squealing sound. Jenny hypothesized that Tim was kneeled on the kitchen tiles, excavating dried food particles via electric kitchen knife.

“Go check,” she said.

“Check what?”

“If he’s upset.”

The scratching accelerated into what resembled a small mammal’s death.

“He’s perfectly safe,” she encouraged.

I wanted to stay put, remain the neutral party, but Tim was previous family and Jenny current family who had a reputation of holding grudges for years. The spool tracks curved through the house from the garage to the backdoor, and I meandered through the carefully staged furniture, searching for Tim from the safety of the marked path. Signs of binge cleaning were everywhere—sheets bleached to the point of yellowing, erratic vacuum prints soiled into the white carpet, and I imagined Tim enduring there for hours in a craze, sucking up the shadows of opposing carpet fibers instead of actual stains. The intersecting rectangles ceased at the tiled floors of the bathroom, where Tim stood on a stool, cleaning the mirror with sections of newspaper.

“It reduces streaks,” he explained.

His proximity to the ceiling light caused his nose to cast a temporary shadow over his mouth, and I couldn’t even see that moustache, might easily have mistaken it for a densely freckled upper lip.

“Does Jenny want to stay married?” he asked.

“I don’t think so.”

“She keeps showing up here.”

“Well...”

“She misses me.”

Elevated to twice his size, Tim seemed like the man Jenny might imagine him to be, who would walk around on an average set of legs instead of his actual shrunken ones. What Jenny missed was the vacant lot, the exhilaration she got muddling through the world's disregarded things. After witnessing Tim's woodwork myself, I was convinced Jenny planned on leaving behind whatever she unearthed from the dirt, knowing Tim would never be able to keep himself from purging the filthiness from it.

"She's unhappy," he said, stepping off the chair. "I know it."

Folded back down to actual size, I could see Tim's knees growing straight from his ankles, bypassing the drama of shins, then watched his stunted legs strut toward the shower with an unfamiliar confidence. With a dramatic swipe of his arm, Tim pushed the curtain back and declared, "Let's saturate these moldy fuckers!" then zeroed in on the grout. I walked back to Jenny to report my findings, listened to Tim's warrior chant of, "Bleach! Bleach! Bleach!"

She was not in the garage but stood at the end of the driveway with a young man who wore a backwards hat and crossed his arms over a fraternity T-shirt.

"This guy has a truck!" she yelled. She dragged him up the driveway and showed him the spool. She managed to remove a majority of the liquid while simultaneously adding a pattern of nails that protruded from the softened edges. The spool resembled what I could only describe as a deflated, industrial-style pincushion.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's a table," Jenny said.

The guy twisted his hat until the bill faced forward, but his gaze funneled toward Tim's truck. Like the rest of Tim's possessions, it looked brand new and had a bed

visibly longer and spacious.

To divert his focus, I asked, “How do you know Jenny?”

“We just met.”

I nodded. “She is very outgoing.”

He adjusted his hat again so the bill cocked toward the roof. “She threw seashells at my windshield until I stopped driving.”

Jenny yelled inside for Tim to help us transport the spool to the guy’s truck, which we later learned he borrowed from a frat brother to dump a load of puke-stained furniture into the empty lot. Together, Tim and the other guy with the truck rolled it down the driveway. Jenny’s nails snagged on their pant legs until they tore a hole through the young guys jeans. When he and I were in the truck, he took his hat off completely and tossed it on the dashboard. I dug through my wallet and offered him forty dollars.

“You’ve been very helpful.”

“Whatever,” he said, but pocketed it.

Jenny was about to jump in the truck until she remembered the remaining knobs.

“I’ll hold onto them,” Tim told her. “Get them next time.”

“We’ll see,” Jenny said, climbing over my knees and nestling her hips between the young man and me.

As Tim watched us depart, I imagined him running back to his house with his reduced strides, bypassing the spool track’s entirely to call that woman from the flea market. I could see her modeling leather jackets, arms extended and revving an imaginary motorcycle, while Tim circumnavigated her in an unusual mating ritual, gently rubbing away the smudges. But what Tim actually did was stand poised at the edge of the garage,

cradling the trash bag with both hands and attempting to send Jenny across the cement expanse an expression I couldn't recognize, and one she never saw, her peripheral vision reduced after trying on the young guy's hat.

Jenny and I spent the rest of the evening at her new apartment. The young man helped roll the spool through her front door, but he barely crossed into Jenny's new foyer when she instructed him to, "Leave it there," next to the cast iron coat rack with no bulb or wiring that Jenny planned on updating to a floor lamp. On her back wall was a dresser with several missing drawers; only two protruded crookedly like decayed teeth.

"Where will you put it?" I asked.

"Put what?"

"The table."

Jenny reclined on her sofa. Only partially reupholstered, it's legs and back clashed violently with the arms.

"Somewhere," she told me. "I'll find a place. What do you think of this?"

It was a wrought iron birdcage perched on a cardboard box, blemished with the occasional rusted rod. The wooden door was held closed by a metal loop.

"It's pretty," I said.

"It's a lampshade."

Jenny held the cage from the top hook so it swirled, suspended, over the cardboard. Soft light would eventually fill up the empty space and erase any associations of birds, the original mavens of tools, who transcended their rivals with rocks braced between their beaks, hammering into the eggs nature forbade them to break until the concealed milk hatched forth.

The Lawn Situation

The week after Grandpa moved in, our lawn started sinking. It shifted around in circles like a whirlpool, with grassy icebergs that floated over the surface until the lawn swallowed them. One week in July, it rained so hard the entire lawn filled up. I carried my little brother's aquarium outside and poured his goldfish into the lawn lake. "Be free!" I yelled. Mom had a long conversation with me in the kitchen after. She said I had to stop killing Joey's fish or it would come out of my allowance each time she had to buy new ones.

Mom talked about the lawn while she cooked dinner. "We'll put in new grass, new dirt," she said. "We'll make it even bigger. We'll stretch it all the way around the house so we have a lawn shaped like an elbow."

"Or a jellybean," Joey said.

"Or a lima bean," Mom said.

"Or Grandpa's broken kidney!" I yelled.

"Lucy," Mom whispered. "Be respectful."

Which is when Grandpa walked out of the bathroom with his hair slicked back and a newspaper tied around his shoulders like a cape. "Is this the visitor center?" he asked.

"The what?"

"The visitor center. Is this it?"

"Dad, are you okay?" Mom asked, sounding worried. "What visitor center?"

"For Crater Lake."

Grandpa laughed so hard at his own joke he started choking on it. The laugh got caught in his throat and went down the wrong tube. He tapped his chest to wedge it out until it dribbled over his lips in a quiet smirk.

Mom walked over to check on him. "Are you okay?"

"No," he said. "I'm dying." Grandpa didn't want to talk anymore so he took his teeth out. He propped them on a couch cushion like a crown, and they smiled at Mom off kilter with an extra large overbite.

"Don't say that," she said.

Grandpa turned on wrestling and watched a man in yellow tights jump off the trampoline ropes and squish the other one. Since moving in, he only watched wrestling or black and white shows with tanks. Out the window, Dad circled the perimeter of the lawn with a long stick. He jabbed it up and down, searching for the invisible drain at the bottom. Grandpa was right about the lawn. From all the way upstairs, it did look like Crater Lake. It had the same ledge of hardened, rocky dirt, and a perfect oval of water pooled at the bottom.

"What's he doing?" I asked.

Dad's stick wasn't working. He knelt down to scoop up handfuls of water and toss them toward the sidewalk.

"He's fixing it," Mom said.

Mom never used to cook before Grandpa moved in. All her ingredients were numbered and organized across the counter. I held up number five.

"What are we having?" I asked.

"Blackened Tilapia."

“This says Chicken.”

Mom checked the label. “Blackened Chicken,” she corrected, then instructed Joey and me to set the table. I got the glasses. Joey got the plates. Mom smiled a mushy smile as we maneuvered cooperatively around the dining table, aligning all the forks. When Mom pulled the ice tray from the freezer, her mushy smile slid off the edge of her chin and fell all the way down to her ankles.

“Lucy, this is *not* funny.”

Mom tilted the tray to show me the rest of Joey’s goldfish, each frozen separately in its own plastic rectangle. I had placed a few inside before I took the others to the lawn hole. Mom twisted the tray, which made the frozen fish jump.

“What were you thinking?”

“I call them Icechovies,” I said. I thought of it right then, but she wasn’t impressed.

Mom dumped the fish cubes on the counter and they glided into the sink. Joey made a high-pitched squealing sound and I yelled over it, “Can someone turn off the smoke alarms in my ears?” before he punched me in the shoulder and ran to his room, crying. All the noise aroused Mom’s concern over Grandpa’s blood pressure, but he just stared at the television with his smeary newspaper cape crumpled up behind him like a gum wrapper.

The commotion brought in Dad, whose clothes were wet and glasses severely clouded with watermarks. He marched into the pantry.

“What’s going on?” he asked the pasta.

Mom retrieved him to guide him to the sink. After cleaning his lenses, he saw the

melting ice cubes, orange tails exposed out the edges like some recently discovered cavefish.

“You need to punish her,” Mom said. “I’m busy.” Mom turned and pointed the spatula threateningly toward the oven timer. “I think it’s done.”

“Now you listen up,” Dad began, pointing at my nose, then my mouth, then my ear. When he noticed the puddle expanding around his feet, he went to change into dry clothes.

Mom burnt the chicken and made me eat every last bite of mine even after my teeth got sore from chewing. Grandpa couldn’t eat his at all. When Mom asked why, he pulled his top teeth out and bounced them off the blackened surface to show her the tinkling sound.

“I get it,” Mom said, and gave up sawing through hers.

“It’s delicious,” Dad said, reaching for another piece.

After dinner, Dad let me sit with Grandpa to watch the Conquistador do somersaults across the screen while his cape rolled around him like a shiny satin wing.

“This is boring,” I said. “Can we change it?”

“What do you want to watch?”

“Cartoons.”

Grandpa changed the channel to Tom and Jerry. Jerry reached out of his mouse hole and lit Tom’s tail on fire. Tom ran all over the screen spitting sparks from his firework butt.

I started cheering.

“You’re a terror, Lucy,” Grandpa said. He laughed again, but this one got stuck

even deeper in his stomach, and he winced his face together like he could pause it.

“Does it hurt?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Can I see?”

Grandpa lifted his shirt. There was nothing to look at but his white, wrinkled belly. “It’s all yellow under there,” he said, pointing to a wrinkle.

“Gross.”

Mom walked out from the office with the set of glossy pamphlets called, ‘The Fog of Grief,’ that she ordered from the Internet. She’d been studying them at night before she went to sleep. Joey followed her, wearing pajamas and glaring at me from behind her hip.

“Lucy,” Mom said, “Apologize to your brother.”

“Joey,” I began, “They’re in a better place.”

Mom’s lips tightened until they disappeared inside her mouth. “That’s not an apology.”

I tried again. “Sorry.”

Mom put Joey to bed, then came back and said I wasn’t allowed to watch wrestling with Grandpa because the violence was clearly influencing my attitude. She asked Grandpa if he wanted her to draw a bath for him, but Grandpa said he’d just wash up in the lawn.

“I’ll get you a flashlight,” Mom said. “And some soap.”

“How about a fancy loofa? For my final days.”

Mom looked at Grandpa with a long look. It accelerated through his forehead then

ricocheted off the opposite wall and eventually found a parking spot between my eyes, which is how I knew it was time for bed. While I brushed my teeth, Mom lounged inside the bathtub, reading one of the pamphlets and using the faucet for an ottoman. The old woman on the cover closed her eyes and tilted toward the string of sunshine weaving through the tree branches. Beneath her, it said, 'Look toward the light.'

I looked at the florescent light bulb over the mirror and squinted my eyes down to slivers. "My eyes hurt," I said through my toothpaste.

Mom looked in the mirror and then mirror mom looked at me. "Lucy?" mirror mom said.

"Yeah?"

"Don't stare at the sun at school tomorrow. That's not what this means."

In the mornings, Dad stood at the edge of the lawn and looked across it like an ocean. Mom called it the physical manifestation of her emotion. All the water dried up and the lawn got so deep, Dad had to build a miniature staircase leading down into it. Our neighbor's dog kept jumping inside the lawn and couldn't climb out. Dad rescued it with a rope the first time, but let it stay in there a few hours before he pulled it out the second. After a month, Dad finally sought professional opinion on the lawn.

"That there is a sinkhole," the professional said.

"What do you recommend?" Dad asked.

The professional stopped chewing on his pencil and placed it behind his ear.

"You're going to need some dirt."

"And?"

“And some rocks.”

“That’s all? Do I just throw them in there?”

“You could try that.”

My father did. He rented a dump truck full of rocks and dirt and took his whole Saturday to unload it into the hole. He raked evenly over the surface and even rolled a few lava rocks on the top to make it look nice, but the lawn gulped it all down overnight, plus a whole section of driveway, which made the hole even deeper. The next morning, I sat on the ledge of the lawn and Dad lay down in the middle of it. The wind had blown all the leaves inside, carpeting the bottom in orange and red. Dad waved his arms up and down like a snow angel, burying himself into the leaves.

“It’s a sign, Lucy,” he said.

“What is?”

He didn’t respond. He placed two leaves over his glasses and stayed perfectly still until Mom yelled down from the upstairs porch, “Get out of there! It’s dangerous. You too, Lucy.”

Dad brushed away the leaf blanket and climbed out to examine the driveway. After taking one bite, the lawn must have decided that cement was too chewy. Dad looked up at the house with a nervous look.

“It’s eating everything,” I told Mom later, and she responded by forbidding Joey and me from playing outside or walking anywhere near the lawn. She also got really sick. Dad said all of her worrying was polluting her insides. We stood in the bathroom, discussing her symptoms.

“Maybe it’s the flu,” Dad said.

“Or food poisoning!” I offered, which seemed more exciting.

“It’s the wrestling,” Mom said to the rim of the toilet.

Dad sighed. “I’ll ask him to watch it in the den.”

“Then the kids will see it.”

“They’re not paying attention,” Dad said. He reached out to flush the toilet, but Mom’s throw up didn’t go anywhere. He tried again.

“It isn’t working?” she asked.

“Nope. It might be the plug.”

“What if it’s the lawn? Do you think it’s affecting the plumbing?”

Dad flushed one last time. The two of us looked down inside to find Mom’s throw up still bobbing in the water like miniature buoys.

“It’s tasting the house,” I whispered.

Dad looked down at our feet like he was considering this. He stomped a few times to check the sturdiness of the floor.

“I’ll call a plumber,” he said, and left for the phone. Mom pressed her cheek up against the bottom of the toilet and wrapped her arms around it in a big hug. Some loose strands of hair stuck to her sweaty face and crisscrossed her cheeks in spider webs. Little polka dot throw up chunks had dried across her chin.

“You look pretty,” I said. I knelt down next to her with my ear flat against the floor. Either Mom’s stomach growled or the lawn licked its lips beneath us, opened its mouth wide for a free sample. To make sure Mom didn’t hear, I tried distracting her.

“Knock, Knock,” I said.

“Not now, Lucy.”

Dad came back in wearing work boots and a headlamp. "I'm going in," he said.

"In the dark?" I asked, impressed.

Dad told me to stay with Mom, but Mom bargained one free night of wrestling with Grandpa if I kept an eye on Dad from the upstairs porch. I took post at the railing, listening carefully for decrescendo sounds while Dad's headlamp drew yellow lines inside the crater.

"Can you see anything?" I yelled.

"No...wait, maybe," he said, then soon added, "Actually, no."

Dad walked around down there for an hour before he came back inside to report his findings.

"It's a hole," he said.

In all that time, Mom rolled the distance from the toilet to the bathtub. "And?"

"And it's deep."

"Anything new? Did you see any pipes?"

By Dad's expression, it was clear he hadn't thought of this. His face was a maraschino cherry while he mumbled something about ancient, volcanic earthworms. He tried to help Mom to her room, but she wanted to stay there. Before he left, he asked her to remind him of the name of the plumber.

"Cash," I said.

Mom opened her eyes, impressed with my memory. "Cash who?"

"No thank you, I prefer peanuts."

One day, Grandpa forgot where he left his teeth. We woke up to find him roaming

the house with the sports section tied around his neck. All morning a lady in a pink skirt played tennis between his shoulders. Mom told Grandpa he should stop taking his teeth out all the time, but Grandpa said false teeth were about as comfortable as the guest room bed. Mom was late for work, so she decided to make a contest out of the whole thing.

“Five dollars to whoever finds them first,” she said.

Joey went straight to Grandpa’s bedroom. I took a different approach and looked in more obscure places—the garage, the linen closet, buried in the soil of our potted plants. I found Grandpa’s teeth on top of the microwave. I warmed them up for ten seconds before giving them back. Grandpa said his teeth slid on like socks that day.

“I reward you five extra dollars for style points,” he said, although it was Mom’s money.

Mom handed me the ten dollars reluctantly. It doubled the allowance I didn’t get the week before from putting two of Joey’s new fish in the broken toilet. They floated in there a few days before anyone realized. It was the plumber who found them. Mom said I had to stay in my room the whole night because I embarrassed her.

Grandpa declared there was an additional award for finding his teeth and we all got to watch wrestling while we ate our cereal. We talked about Bam Bam Bigelow and practiced bam-bamming the sky with our fists. When Mom asked Grandpa if he took his medicine, he removed his teeth again.

“Use a coaster,” I said, sliding one over before Mom saw, but it didn’t matter because she walked straight out the front door after Joey right hooked the couch with his spoon. She didn’t even put down her coffee mug. “I’m going out,” she said. By the time we stopped listening to the television to ask what she said, she had already closed the

door.

Grandpa's newspaper was stiff around his shoulders and looked more like a spacesuit than a cape. Mom claimed he was confusing himself for a wrestler. Dad said he liked confusing Mom.

"What's it for?" I asked.

Grandpa hesitated then adjusted the neck until the paper floated past his ears like an oversized life jacket.

"It's warm under here," he said. He pointed to the forecast printed beneath his elbow and read aloud, "Sunny with a chance of sweat."

Dad came out of his bedroom with no glasses on and a tie knotted around his neck in a giant mess. He stared at Joey's milk, which had knocked out the carpet and my clothes in one quick punch. "Where's your Mom?"

We looked around for a bit because we'd forgotten she left. Dad and I found her standing at the edge of the lawn with the water hose. One hand steered the water and the other held her coffee mug, fingers barely gripping the handle, her arm swaying at her side like a cobweb. From the upstairs porch, it looked like she might drop it in, listen for the clinking sound and estimate the depth.

"What are you doing?" Dad yelled.

Mom lifted the mug to her forehead to block out the sun. When she realized it was Dad and that Dad wore no glasses, she knew he couldn't see from that distance and focused back inside the hole.

"I'm watering the lawn," she said.

"Oh, dear," Dad whispered. He made a face at the river of water streaming into

the lawn's belly. Mom adjusted her thumb over the water so it fanned out in a glittering triangle rainbow, then moved her wrist back and forth steadily, twisting a little at the hips, our newest sprinkler.

“Where does it go?” I asked.

Dad went back to fiddling with his tie and seemed satisfied once he'd fastened it into an uneven bow. The lawn sponged up the water with its grassy tongue while Mom sipped the rest of her coffee. Instead of standing on my tiptoes, I rested my chin on the railing and let it hold me up like a coat hanger. The wind blew mist into Mom's face, and I dangled there watching all of her hairs curl around each other to stay warm.

Everyone forgot Mom's birthday except me—even Mom. I blew up some balloons and woke Mom by popping them with her eyebrow tweezers. Dad said he had to drive to the store to get aspirin because his heart was startled by all the shooting sounds. Grandpa said it was because he forgot to buy Mom something.

Mom had a headache all morning but she made us pancakes anyway. I helped her with reading the directions. There wasn't supposed to be butter, but butter makes things delicious. The pancakes took a long time to cook. Mom kept peeking under them with the spatula.

“Strange,” she said.

“Coffee's cold again,” Grandpa said. He placed his mug in the microwave then removed his teeth. He balanced them on the rim and set the timer for thirty seconds. Joey and I pressed our noses against the door and watched the teeth spin round. The little canals where Grandpa's gums went sparkled in the light.

“Back up,” Mom said. “That’s bad for your brain.”

“Why?” I asked.

“It will turn it to mush.”

“These pancakes are mush,” Grandpa said, holding one up. The pancake broke apart in his fingers before landing on his syrupy plate.

“You need to eat something,” Mom said.

“I don’t even need teeth. I might as well drink this through a straw.”

I decided to try it. My pancake slid up easily through the plastic tunnel. I grabbed another straw, using one for the pancake, the other for the syrup, and tried to drink a whole pancake that way, my white straw fangs dangling from the corners of my mouth. I offered a straw to Grandpa, but Mom intercepted it.

“I’ll make some toast,” she said. She poured Grandpa’s plate of liquid pancakes down the sink then burnt the toast to charcoal in only five minutes. For a long time, she leaned over it, letting it blister, smoke rising from the blackened bread like she’d blown out jumbo-sized birthday candles. When the smoke thinned out enough to see again, I showed Mom the side button so she would remember for next time.

“It’s the emergency exit,” I said.

Mom stabbed a knife into the toaster’s mouth and pulled the bread out like a rotted cavity. “I’m going to shower.”

Once Mom was gone, I tried to get Grandpa to eat but he just took crumbs of scorched bread and pushed them into a banana with his fork.

“Why won’t you eat it?” I asked.

Grandpa looked like he might take his teeth out, but then he rested the banana on

his nose and turned it around to face me. It had grown a mustache and one sad eyebrow. The peel buckled around it like an ornate rhumba skirt. “I won’t taste right,” the banana said.

When Dad got back from the store, he walked into the kitchen carrying a wilted bouquet of flowers. He spotted Mom’s pancakes rising up from the counter in a melted sculpture. The whole house smelt like electricity.

“What happened?” he asked, sniffing.

“Breakfast.”

Dad sniffed again and nodded. When he went to find Mom, I snuck into Joey’s bedroom with the metal bowl that still held half the pancake batter, wanting to see if Joey’s fish were powerful enough to swim through it. Their sharp arrow scales layered their bodies with armor. Mom enlisted four of them after the pet store worker claimed they were the strongest fish in the shop.

“What are you doing?”

Mom leaned against the doorframe, her hair wet from the shower and raining onto her shoulders. She looked tired, like she might fall apart like her pancakes and splatter all over my feet. “I don’t understand this,” she said, sitting on the bed next to me. Her hand rested delicately on the back of my head, like I was a stranger’s dog she thought might bite. “A good mother would understand this.”

“Try it,” I said, handing her the bowl. I was an expert—it only took me a few seconds to catch another fish with the green net. I pinched my fingers together to grab its tail and handed it to Mom while it was still wriggling.

Mom concentrated hard on the fish dancing between her fingertips before she

dropped it into the pancake bowl. We watched it jump around for a bit, flipping up chunks of batter and struggling through it like sinking sand. In a few seconds, the liquid flooded over its fins and it was completely still. Mom stared down at the fish, not saying anything. The pancake bowl rested in her lap, and she cradled the sides like a watermelon.

“Was it fun?” I asked.

“Isn’t it strange, Lucy,” she said, “That things die.”

By November, Mom decided the directions in cookbooks were too complicated and vowed to make all the dinners in the world by only looking at pictures. “Are these tomatoes or carrots?” she asked. We studied the photo of spaghetti sauce and had unanimously settled on carrots, until Grandpa, whose teeth rested on his plate like the appetizer, interjected with, “Too crunchy.” Mom said Grandpa’s mouth was getting smaller, so it hurt to keep his teeth in all the time. He was also starting to turn blue.

“All of me is shrinking,” he said.

“You look great,” Mom said.

Grandpa didn’t look great at all. He looked like he’d gotten mixed up in the washer with dark jeans. His lips seemed smaller without his teeth in to pucker them up, and his cheeks hollow, sunken into his face like giant dimples.

“Stronger then ever,” Grandpa said. With the fork at his place setting, he did two bicep curls before dropping it on the ground.

“Dinner’s ready,” Mom said, handing a new fork to Grandpa. “Get your father, Lucy.”

Dad had recently been spending more time in the garage. He told Mom he discovered a solution to the lawn situation, but whenever I walked in, he was always just reading a magazine.

“Dinner’s ready,” I said.

“Look at this, Lucy.”

I climbed up on the stool next to him. He recently moved his workbench to the center of the garage for better light. It didn’t matter where he sat, because he and Mom couldn’t park their cars in there anymore. The lawn had finished off most of the driveway and there were only enough leftovers for the width of our bikes.

“It’s starting to slow,” he said.

“What is?”

“The hole.”

“How do you know?”

Dad unclipped his measuring tape from his belt then showed me a notebook full of numbers. “I’ve been monitoring it.”

There were several equations in the notebook. There was even a map. It didn’t look anything like our lawn, but I knew what it was because Dad had written, “Lawn” right above it. His words were scribbled chaotically across the next few pages, some written diagonally and upside down and others seemed organized by a secret code of triangles.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Research.”

“What does it say?”

“Our soil isn’t secure,” he said. “The whole town’s like this. A sinking ship.” Dad looked so hard through his glasses I thought he might crack them.

I tried to be encouraging. “You really are working on it,” I said.

“Two inches, to one inch, to half an inch this week.” Dad scanned over his most recent set of notes. “At this rate...”

Dad didn’t continue because Mom opened the door. “Lucy,” she said. “Why did I send you in here?”

I didn’t say anything. I actually had forgotten.

Dad was quiet throughout dinner and just peered out the window like he was making calculations. Joey complained about the tomatoes in the spaghetti. I finished mine in three minutes. Grandpa didn’t eat at all and just shifted the location of the noodles on his plate. Mom circled her eyes around the table examining everyone’s progress.

“Dad, you have to eat,” she said.

Since we sat down, Grandpa’s face moved three whole blue crayons in the Crayola box. “I can’t,” he said.

“Aren’t you hungry? You barely ate lunch.”

“If I was,” he said, lowering his nose to sniff the sauce. “I wouldn’t eat it.”

Mom looked like she might get mad but then said, “Joey, stop picking those out.”

“They smell funny!” Joey cried, pretending to gag.

“Slow down, Lucy. Eat your broccoli.”

“Joey’s not eating his tomatoes!”

“Can I make you something else?” Mom asked Grandpa. “Soup?”

Grandpa didn’t respond. He reached down to grab his teeth. He made a big O with

his mouth to try and fit them back in, but the squishy ends got stuck and disappeared into his cheeks.

“It’s an asymptote,” Dad said quietly. “Infinity.”

Mom slumped her shoulders, deflating entirely. Grandpa never took a bite and left the table to watch wrestling. Joey got sent to his room for whining about everything, and Dad went back to the garage to locate his epiphany. Pretty soon, it was only Mom and me eating. She stared at Grandpa’s plate, his spaghetti stacked high on his teeth in an orange noodle wig.

Grandpa lived in our house for six months before he died of kidney failure. Dad bought two thick pieces of plywood that he built into a bridge that the nurses used to get to the house. Joey and I were at school the last time they came, and when we got home, Grandpa was gone and the lawn stopped sinking. For the first week, Mom forgot she was supposed to feed us. She finally went to the grocery store after spotting me trying to feed Joey chocolate milk powder. Dad decided we couldn’t fix the lawn until the following summer, so he put away his notebook and started cleaning out the attic. After the funeral, Mom spent most mornings reading her pamphlets and discussing the status of Grandpa’s fog while she made breakfast. Dad called it the daily forecast. Joey cried after because he’s afraid of ghosts.

“Dad is out there right now,” she said. “Roaming the house.”

“What’s he doing?”

“I’m not sure.” She spread a strangely speckled icing onto the muffins. “But I can feel him.”

I imagined Grandpa floating over the lawn hole with all of Joey's fish. A stiff newspaper cape flowed behind him while he swam froggy-style through the orange goldfish cloud in long, exaggerated strokes. I felt a tightening in my stomach, wondering if it was Grandpa, then realized it felt a lot more like being hungry.

"I don't feel anything," I said.

"He doesn't want to leave."

"Why not?"

She grabbed her nearby pamphlet like the answer was inside it. Her finger moved down the index until it stopped somewhere near the bottom.

"I'm not sure. He's too stubborn."

Dad came out of Joey's room to talk to Mom, but was distracted when she cracked an egg into the frying pan. All the shell pieces got mixed in with the yolks. Mom turned down the heat and tried to rescue them with a fork.

"You have to stop talking about this stuff in front of Joey," Dad said.

"I'm not going to shelter our children."

"Our son believes your father came back from the dead and lives in the lawn."

Mom looked surprised. "I've never said anything like that."

They both looked at me.

"I only said it once."

Dad sighed. "Lucy, this is a very serious situation."

"But there's muffins," I said, which I had never associated with seriousness.

"No more jokes today."

Mom looked out at the lawn hole with her face squished up, like when you stare

at something far away but try to see it like it's close. Frost outlined the edges with diamonds, and the snowplow had been pushing the snow from the whole block inside. Dad never complained. He said this way, none of our neighbors would get those frozen ice towers at the end of their driveways. All of our indentations were carved across it—Dad's footprints, Mom's arms and legs, the deep oval marks where Joey and I had a contest of who could bury their head in the furthest.

“He's out there,” Mom whispered to Dad, or me, or the eggs

“Maybe he's looking for his teeth,” I said.

“Maybe we don't need a lawn,” Dad suggested. “Maybe we could do something different, like a garden.”

Mom abandoned the surviving shell rafts in the yellow ocean. She dropped the next egg inside, axing the whole shell up with the spatula.

“I'll eat at work,” Dad said. We watched him walk outside, briefcase in one hand, keys in the other, balancing the tightrope driveway until he made it safely to his car. Mom had to leave the kitchen for a minute, so she gave me a muffin still warm from the oven to keep busy. She also pointed at the frying pan.

“Don't get any ideas,” she warned.

But I couldn't even if I wanted to. Mom hadn't bought any new fish since Grandpa died and she killed the last one in the batter. By the time Mom got back, my muffin crumbs had taken control of the counter because the icing was vanilla bean and the batter lemon and I ate it faster than our lawn's ever eaten anything. Mom stared at the crumbs like she was wounded during the invasion. “I'll clean it,” she said, and waved me off to get ready for school. Defeated, she grabbed a paper towel in surrender and cleared

the battlefield.

When I came back with my teeth brushed and backpack on, Mom was reading her pamphlet and eating the half-cooked eggs decorated with white confetti.

“Are they good?” I asked.

Mom slurped up another crunchy, soupy bite. “It’s my best work,” she said.

In the course of turning Grandpa’s room back into the guest room, half of Mom’s pamphlets got thrown away. All she had left was pamphlet three, “Fog Thickening,” and pamphlet seven, “Fog Breaking,” so she alternated back and forth between the two and was usually back to thickening by the time she got home from work.

“It’s so cold out,” she said.

“Maybe you should come inside,” I said through the glass.

Mom sat on the upstairs porch waiting for the snowstorm. The two remaining pamphlets balanced loosely on her knees. It was supposed to snow fourteen inches in less than two hours, and she wanted to watch the lawn fill up. Her ears gleamed purple, and I knocked on the window to try and convince her to come in, but she ignored me, even after I claimed I was starving and she was the only one who could save me. She brought her face close to the window so her breath stained the glass between us and erased her entire face.

“It’s so white,” she said.

I climbed up the ceiling ladder to find Dad in the attic. He was bent beneath the single light bulb, digging through a cardboard box, and surrounded by white moguls of newspapers strewn around his feet.

“Mom won’t come inside,” I said.

“Do you remember these?” he asked. He held up the Walkie-Talkies he got Joey and I for Christmas two years earlier. “How did these get up here? You loved these things.” He fiddled with the controls until the speakers admitted static.

“Should I make her come in?”

He ensured both were on channel two and handed one to me. “Go downstairs,” he said.

Back in the kitchen, Mom had drawn two eyes inside her breath clouds with sparse lashes and pupil hearts. They were my size, and I didn’t even have to stretch to see her through them.

“Lucy, come in,” the Walkie-Talkie said.

I held down the button and listened for the beep. “Copy.”

“What’s the status down there?”

Mom smoked imaginary cigarettes on the other side of the window. She lifted her fingers to her lips, inhaled deeply and blew out a long line of air. She flicked the invisible ash with her finger.

“Mom’s still outside.”

The Walkie-Talkie beeped a few times like Dad was trying to remember Morse code. He finally came through clearly with, “These batteries are incredible,” followed by a sharp squeaking sound like he’d taken them out.

Mom attempted smoke rings with her huffs and I knocked again. “Dad says you have to come in,” I said.

“I bet it’s below freezing,” she said. “Will you check the temperature?”

I thought of any number I knew was too cold to be outside in. “Eleven,” I said.

“Wow,” she said. “Eleven.” She looked all around her like things seemed different, like she could see those elevens everywhere—the railings on the porch, in jet streams across the sky, a hundred different elevens frozen solid between the icicles lining the gutters. She pulled her chair to the edge of the railing, the iron rods supporting her legs like stirrups, and she unfolded the pamphlets to drape them over her chest. “Imagine all those people driving by,” she said. “They won’t even know it’s there.” Her voice sounded underwater, and as she sank deeper into her coat, I wanted to take all my warmth off like a backpack and strap it to her shoulders. I wanted her to wear it to work and show it to her secretary and put her favorite key chains on the zippers.

Dad tucked the ceiling ladder halfway up while I was gone, so even if I jumped, I couldn’t reach the string. But I heard his dulled footsteps propelling him across the attic, searching through all our forgotten things. I lay underneath the ladder and watched the orbiting twine, then brought the walkie-talkie to my lips until I kissed it. Holding the button down, I waited for the beep.

“Is anyone out there?”

A Way to Get Better

The kids took turns sitting in the cockpit. They wanted to help the father with the controls and argued over who was better at turning the wings, but the flight was six hours—eventually all three got bored and stayed in the cabin to play cards. Lately, they liked Slap-Jack. Whenever their hands smacked the fold out tray table, the father imagined it snapping from the cabin wall.

“Careful,” he warned from the cockpit.

“Just hit softer,” the oldest instructed.

The youngest yelled, “I am!” until her next slap ejected all the cards from their places.

The boy was easily bored with games and claimed the youngest cheated, kept her hands too close to the pile. He deserted his cards and moved forward to the copilot’s seat, lengthening his neck to peer over the nose.

“How much longer?” he asked.

“Look there,” the father said, pointing to the GPS.

The boy read the numbers aloud. “Ninety minutes.”

“Till lunch. Then three hours after that.”

The boy slumped at the news. He wore a Mariner’s baseball cap beneath his headset. His favorite position was second base and his favorite player Ken Griffey Junior. Last June, the father flew the boy to Seattle to see a game at the Kingdome, but in baseball that spring, the boy lost track of fly balls and never sprinted around the bases, rarely made it to first with his awkward, lackluster jog. Last practice, the young coach

pulled the father aside to express concern. The boy preferred to camp in the dugout and toss sunflower seeds through the chain link diamonds rather than practice with the other boys.

The father watched him now staring blankly at the instruments. The boy bent his headset wire back and forth so it made a popping sound over the frequency.

“Don’t play with that,” the father said, so the boy stopped.

Behind them, the girls gave up their card game and folded away the tray table. The oldest grabbed a book from her backpack while the youngest kept the deck out and attempted shuffling on her thighs. All the cards plunged to the floor.

“I remember it now,” she told the oldest, bending over to search for a missing Heart. Loose pieces of her ponytail floated around her ears from the static.

The oldest unbuckled to find the card wedged between the wall and seat and easily retrieved it. “Put them back,” she said, returning the card to her sister.

“Once more.”

The oldest watched the trick two more times before the youngest got it right.

Ten thousand feet beneath them, the mountains appeared as purple inkblots smeared across the earth, their peaks drawn with cursive lines of half melted snow. The youngest studied them with partial interest. “Do you think it will explode?” she asked.

“One day,” the father said, “But a long time from now.”

“I hope not too long.” The headset was too big for her, even tightened all the way. When she didn’t pay attention, the receiver slid beneath her chin and failed to transmit

her voice. She continued narrating the scene outside the window, although the father couldn't hear her.

He adjusted the wire so it rested firmly on her chin. "Say it again."

"I want to do volcanoes," she repeated.

"What happened to hurricanes?"

"Volcanoes are better. And I need a poster board when we're back."

"Your sister has one, I'm sure."

The oldest was the most resourceful. She sticky tacked her projects so she could reuse the materials. Often, she coordinated crafts to entertain her siblings and she executed them religiously, outlined numbered instructions, pre-cut or traced the designs.

"I need an orange one," the youngest said.

From the back of the cabin, the oldest confirmed, "I have orange."

The youngest scrunched her face together in disappointment and adjusted her position in the seat. With every movement, the seatbelt loosened until it hung uselessly across her knees. Whenever she got restless, the father assigned her tasks that didn't actually affect the instruments.

"Push that button," he said.

"Why do we need the lights? It's day out."

Before returning to the cabin, she asked to unbuckle, familiar with the rules the father long before established in the plane: no moving seats without permission, no touching the door after its closed, and absolutely no talking while he taxied or communicated with air traffic control. Preferably, he wanted fights saved for after

landing, but this rule was broken most regularly, particularly on the longer flights like the one to and from Arizona.

The father granted his permission and watched the youngest unplug her headset before maneuvering between the front seats. He held the chord up so she wouldn't trip, ensuring she didn't step on any of his charts, which he kept organized in a compartment between the front seats. After situating herself across from her sister, she expertly plugged her headset into the closest jack.

"I need neon orange," the youngest told her, "Or it won't look like lava."

"He's not sharing," the youngest yelled.

"It's mine," the boy argued.

The father looked to the oldest for assistance. She turned away from the instrument panel to face her younger siblings behind her. "It's his Gameboy."

"He has to share."

"You can play when he's finished," the father concluded. The youngest kicked her brother's seat in frustration. The boy sang, "You have to wait," in three different octaves until the youngest removed her headset so she couldn't hear him.

The oldest liked to sit in front when they landed, because the father let her hold the throttle whenever he needed to adjust it. She gripped it loosely, while the father's hand firmly covered hers as guide. At school, she told all her friends and teachers that she knew how to fly a plane. All three wrongly believed their father owned the airport. He was just the manager, and of a municipal runway barely long enough to handle twin prop planes. One Friday, he gave the nanny the afternoon off and arranged for the bus driver to

drop the kids at the airport. Alone in the terminal, he watched them strut from the bus with backpacks hitched high on their shoulders, exuding the confidence of the gang that ruled the block. Behind them, twenty children gawked through the windows at the few planes that had parked overnight on the tarmac.

The oldest pointed to the parallel white lights framing the runway. “There,” she said. With every flight, she got faster at spotting it.

“Great job. What direction is that?”

She located the sun over her right shoulder and the mountains to the west.

“North.”

Before starting their descent, the father motioned for the youngest to put her headset back on. “Clear your ears,” he told them. Immediately, they all plugged their noses and blew out with mouths closed, the technique that he taught them for combating the changing pressure. He instructed them to keep clearing until they heard the pop. For a few minutes, everyone looked like they stuffed marshmallows in their cheeks.

“I’m popped,” the boy said first. He released his fingers and returned them to his Gameboy.

The youngest tended to get earaches after flights. At the start of that trip, she had one for two days. Sometimes the father could release the pressure by blowing hard into her sore ear, but that time, it didn’t help. She fell asleep with her wet face pressed into her father’s side, whispering, “My brain is coming out of my ears.” The next morning, the father ushered them to the condo pool and had the youngest jump in the deep end. He wanted her to swim down to the bottom, but she was afraid of deep water, and couldn’t propel her feather body that far beneath the surface. Finally, with the help of the others,

he convinced her to let him stand gently on her shoulders, and she squeezed his ankles when she needed to come up. The water pressure helped, and later that night, her ears felt less sore.

“You popped honey?” the father asked.

The youngest pinched her nose with one hand and offered a thumbs up with the other. For their entire descent, she kept her nose plugged and gazed out the window in concentration, her cheeks puffing out every few seconds until the ground was firm beneath them.

The father once asked a pilot friend about the earaches. He said his youngest got them too, and that in a couple years, they’d likely stop. The father thought of his children sitting on the ledge of the pool with their legs submerged to their knees, how the youngest clutched the wet cement with purple fingers, sobbing, while her siblings tenderly repeated, “It’s the way to get better.” The father treaded the water in front of them, willing his youngest to let her hands go. She told her siblings to count down from three out loud for her, not too fast, and they did.

“I want a cheeseburger plain,” the boy said. Like a metronome, the youngest tapped his elbow with a steady rhythm in request of the blue crayon. “Just wait,” the boy said, then pushed her hand away.

“Don’t hit.” Feigning a wounded wrist, she looked to see whether the father saw the exchange. Because he did, she settled with the red crayon and scribbled on her menu.

The oldest reached out and broke the blue crayon in half before returning to her word search.

In the empty terminal restaurant, the waitress flirted with the father and the kids as well. She brought them extra crayons so they'd have more colors, and refilled the father's coffee frequently to the brim. The father noticed she was pretty and had three piercings in her ear. The oldest had her ears pierced when she was six-months old, although the father thought it silly to have them done so young. It was less painful for infants, her mother argued, and their daughter would want them pierced eventually; this way, she would never remember the pain, and it would be less dramatic for everyone. Recently, the youngest started asking why she never had hers done.

The boy folded his menu into a crooked fighter jet. "That's a fancy plane," the waitress told him, and he smiled at the compliment.

Unimpressed, the oldest redirected her brother's focus. She was wary of most women, and never humored the girlfriends the father introduced to them in the past. They took their vacation to Arizona three times per year, and the father had brought women before. It helped to have another set of hands with the boat and the condo—the kids knew more about the plane—but mostly to have a companion in conversation, even if he was confident the relationship would never last.

"Where you headed?" the waitress asked.

The youngest loved talking with adults and spoke up first. "Oregon," she said.

"Oh, I love Oregon. All those mountains."

"They're volcanoes."

The waitress laughed. "You're right. They are volcanoes. You know the difference?"

The youngest gaped a bored expression, like the difference was an obvious, well-known fact. She already believed she knew more than the adults around her, and increasingly resembled her mother's dry, sarcastic humor, accompanied with her accelerating habit of continuously talking back.

When the burgers came, none of the kids could get the ketchup out of the glass Heinz bottle. The boy stuck his knife through the spout to get it to pour, which caused the ketchup to drip from the knife and land on his pants. The father cleaned off the spot with a napkin dipped in water, then grabbed the ketchup bottle to show them how to do it.

"Look at this," the father said, holding the bottle up. They leaned forward on their elbows so they could see where he pointed. "See that 57?"

They nodded.

"You have to hit it." The father made a fist and tapped it until the ketchup poured out smoothly over the boy's fries.

"Let me," the boy said. They passed the bottle around the table so that everyone could practice. The youngest poured out so much, it leaked through the wax paper and formed a red ring on her placemat. The father took fries from each of their baskets so no one would complain that the others got more.

Later, the waitress visited their table again to offer the kids dessert. "No dessert," the father said, but the oldest still recited all the options aloud: "Chocolate Fudge Cake. Bread Pudding. Mudpie..."

"Mudpie!" the boy repeated, and the other two cheered. It was the first time all day that the three of them agreed on anything.

The father was working on saying no. Their grandfather thought they were spoiled, that they had too many toys. And it was true—their own rooms, the boat, the plane—the grandfather once listed them all to the father. He claimed that because the father gave them everything, they were failing to learn work ethic, would always expect to have what they did growing up. He also thought flying was unsafe, believed the kids would roughhouse near the nose and the propeller would chop their arms off.

The youngest ate her ice cream too fast and got a brain freeze. The other two yelled out remedies through bites of pie.

“Rub your ears,” the oldest offered.

“Clench your teeth,” the boy said. Ice cream streamed from his bottom lip onto his chin. He barely chewed his oversized bites before swallowing them. “It always works.”

The kids each had their favorite jobs during pre-flight. The oldest was the only one tall enough to reach the wings, so she unhooked the chain tie-downs suspended from beneath them. It was the most envied job, and sometimes the other two fought over who would hand the chain to their sister.

The youngest reminded the father, “I get to do that when I’m bigger.”

“I know you do. I need help with those blocks though.”

A pair of yellow blocks cradled the front tire. The youngest ducked her head beneath the propeller to retrieve them. They were connected by a white string, and after backing away from the plane, she draped it around her neck so the blocks fell behind her

shoulders in bulky wings. She spun in circles, and the blocks floated out behind her. The father grabbed her arm to make her stop.

“Those are filthy,” he said.

When he removed the blocks, the string scraped her chin and left a greasy smudge. The father licked his finger to clean it off, and the youngest whined, “That hurts,” until he stopped rubbing.

The boy liked to check the oil. He had to be lifted to reach the compartment on the nose, so the father held the boy with one arm and a rag with the other. The boy was particularly careful with the dipstick, brought it gently to the rag, because he once got in trouble for dripping oil on the father.

“Full,” the boy said. The stick got stuck momentarily as he maneuvered it back in place until the father reached in to help the boy wiggle it out.

When they were all seated in the cabin with headsets on, the kids passed around the preflight checklist and took turns reading off the items. “Flaps up,” the boy said. The father responded, “Check,” from the cockpit. The boy handed the list to the youngest.

“Car...Carba,” she stuttered.

The oldest leaned over to inspect the word. “Carburetor,” she told her sister.

“Carburetor heat cold!” She tried to read another, but the oldest delegated the rules and took the booklet from her.

Because the kids were not aloud to speak while they taxied, it was usually when they fell asleep. For the first twenty minutes of the flight, the father climbed to cruising altitude in silence. He programmed the autopilot before tossing his chart on the open seat next to him. Outside the window, a fixed line separated the mountains and desert. From

the sky, the earth had harsher angles, and he always noticed it. In his thirties, he spent five years flying seaplanes in Alaska, carried mapmakers over the wilderness to document the forests and peaks, and to give names to the endless expanse of lakes. Once, the father was given the opportunity to christen one, and he named it Boden Lake, after his roommate, a hundred-pound Bernese mountain dog. When the father made deliveries to remote towns and hotels, Boden took the flights with him, filled the entire floor of the cabin. They hiked and fished together, spent five summers swimming in crystal ovals that the father dove into as deep as he was able. When his ears tightened from the pressure, he twisted back, saw Boden's four white paws, suddenly small, peddling, his thick, wet strands floating and sinking about his feet, and he rose lazily toward the surface into the aqua light until there was air, and sky, and Boden, and both their tongues flowing blissfully out the sides of their mouths as they lapped up the holy water.

“Can we skip school tomorrow?” the boy asked.

“No.”

“But I'm sunburnt.” The boy pressed his fingers against his tinted face. When he pulled them away, white, oval fingerprints dotted the space across his cheekbones.

“You have baseball in the afternoon.”

The boy looked like he might cry at the mention of it. The father never had interest in sports and didn't force the boy to play; it was the boy who originally requested it. He spent hours organizing his collection of baseball cards yet dreaded going to practice. The father wondered if he was to blame, if this was just an early sample of what the grandfather had been prophesying—because the boy wasn't automatically

succeeding, he already gave up and ceased trying.

“Put your hand on the throttle,” the father told the boy, trying to distract him.

“That’s okay.”

“Just try.”

The boy didn’t like to touch the throttle because he knew it made the plane go. He was nervous he’d pull it out too far and the propeller would stop. When they went to Seattle, the father pulled it out all the way to show him. He started crying, “Don’t do it Daddy, please don’t,” even after the father did and the propellers continued churning. The father raised his voice and yelled, “It won’t stop,” which made the boy cry harder. The father instructed the boy to breathe, breathe deep, and pushed the throttle in to make the plane speed back up.

The father encouraged him again, but the boy asked to trade places with his sister.

“My turn,” the youngest said. She buckled in then reached for the copilot’s yoke to try and turn the wings.

“Ask first,” the father said.

She huffed, returning her hands to her lap. “Can I go?”

The father nodded and grabbed his yoke as well. “Let’s go right,” he said. Both yokes had control of the ailerons that made the plane turn, and because their feet didn’t reach far enough, the kids didn’t understand that turning also required the rudder pedals. He timed his turn with the erratic pacing of his daughter. When the plane rolled to its side, the ground moved into her window and forced the sky behind her head. For ten minutes, the father let her make occasional turns in the air, pausing in between to return the plane back to the heading.

From behind him, the oldest tried to speak, but her voice broke in and out over the frequency.

“Say it again,” he told her.

“Can you do a G?”

Next to him, the youngest laughed in agreement. “Yes, do a G!”

The father didn’t remember the first time he showed them a g-force, but now they asked for it every flight. They liked the sensation of their bodies stretching out between the earth and sky. Sometimes the maneuver made the boy feel airsick, but when the father glanced back, he saw the boy was smiling too. The father pulled the yoke sharply to make the plane climb. The abrupt force caused their stomachs to drop as the plane rose, and all four felt their bodies drag behind them. The kids yelled “Whoa!” and laughed through the headsets. After the father leveled, the three of them decided that’s what it feels like to be silly putty.

Eventually, the Cascade Mountains welcomed them in the distance. The evening tilt of the sun kindled the tops of the pines trees and draped them with golden hues, and amidst them, countless rivers and streams, some still frozen, carved their paths to the rhythms of the slopes.

The father turned to the youngest. “Do you want to tell them?” he asked.

She nodded, held the microphone wire tight against her lips then turned to face the cabin. “Clear you ears!” she declared. When the other two kept laughing and didn’t reach for their noses, she repeated, “You have to clear right now,” and stared sternly at her siblings until both of them obeyed.

* * *

By the end of their trips, the kids were exhausted and grew less helpful. They knew that when the father turned the engine off and the plane sat still before the hangar, they were supposed to begin their search for garbage beneath the seats. Instead, they stood outside the plane waiting for their father.

“Not until the plane is clean,” he said, also feeling tired.

With displeasure, they climbed back into the plane. The father said they weren’t allowed to exit until they collected at least three pieces.

“Three,” the youngest said. She showed her father the small chunks of lint hovering over her palm. She dropped her findings into the plastic bag that the father held before her.

“Not quite. Two more.”

Once the father let them into the hangar, the girls immediately lined themselves in front of the massive garage door. The boy, the last one inside but the only one to deliver actual trash, screamed, “Wait!” as he ran toward his sisters.

“I’m waiting,” the father said.

“Okay, ready.” The boy signaled for the father to press the green button. With a lethargic pace, the hangar rose, and when it was just above their heads, the kids reached up and grabbed the ledge of it. They had contests of who could hang on the longest, and it steadily lifted them—their favorite kind of flying—until their toes separated from the cement. Their six legs swayed beneath them and their shirts lifted up past their belly buttons. The oldest let go first, then the boy, and the youngest kept hanging on even after her feet passed the heads of her siblings. The father paused the hangar, and walked over to position himself directly beneath her.

“Time to let go,” he said.

“Keep going!”

When she did let go, the father caught her under her armpits. The oldest and the boy grabbed her legs awkwardly to help lower her to the ground. She kept her arms raised in victory, knowing she had won.

“You’re getting too brave,” the father told them. “All of you.”

Full and Hungry

Last September, I quit my job cleaning fossils at the museum. I couldn't take all the equipment—the lab coat, how the rim of my goggles left a red line around my eyes, and all the miniature brushes, the sounds they made scraping against the bones. I stayed in my apartment for three months after, closed the blinds and asked my neighbor from upstairs to take my dog out for walks. She thought I sprained my ankle, brought me meals sometimes and picked up Petra without asking any questions. When I did leave my apartment, it was Christmas morning, and I flew down the three flights of stairs. My arm hit the wall first, followed by my body, the force of which crushed and shattered all the bones in my elbow.

There are four metal pins inside me now. If I stretch my skin a certain way, the outlines appear on the surface of my flesh. They remind me of tiny needles, and I like to imagine them sewing my bones back together. The doctor told me it would be a year before the pins could come out, but even then, it would still bother me. His name was Dr. Zarosinski, and because the pain medication blurred everything, made the room slightly erased, I often focused on the cursive letters stitched on his coat. After the surgery, he arranged for me a Nutritionist, whose name is Dr. Sue Li, but I call her My Nutritionist because her name is too simple. Five letters doesn't seem like enough for her. Every Thursday, I take the bus downtown to her office and we talk about my body and my mind.

That's how I met Charity.

She sat across from me under the bus map, the colors of the different routes

twisting over her head in a distorted rainbow. Her hair was long, streaked red, and friendship bracelets orbited her wrists, the kind I collected in middle school. Whenever she moved, they repelled down her forearms in clumped dreadlocks. I didn't often speak to other people on the bus—my thighs overflowed into the neighboring seats and prevented people from sitting next to me. But Charity wore her apron and nametag from work, and I fixated on the bold, capital letters.

“Do you ever feel pressured by your name?” I asked.

She removed one earbud then unpinned the nametag. “Nope,” she said, dropping it in her purse. I waited for her to put the earbud back in, but she didn't.

“Do you?” she asked.

“Sometimes.”

“What is it?”

“Juliette,” I told her.

“What's wrong with that?”

“I don't know. I think it sets up unrealistic expectations.”

“Why? Because your so fat?”

“I guess.”

“My kid was real fat when he was little,” she said. “His cousins used to put him in the dryer to make him shrink.”

“You have a kid? You look so young.”

“I am young,” she said. “Too young for a kid.”

“What's his name?”

“Jericho. But I call him piece of shit.”

“That’s a beautiful name. Jericho, I mean.”

“You into names or something?”

When I was seven, I found the baby name book my mother bought during her pregnancy with me. The book had three thousand names, and I read them aloud to her, “Agatha, Agda, Agnes,” loving how similar they sounded, the way my tongue popped off the back of my front teeth as it repeated the same motions inside my mouth.

“It’s weird right?” I said. “That everyone just lives with them.”

“Not really,” Charity said. She didn’t share my fascination, but continued to talk with me, told me that Jericho was awaiting trial for robbing a schoolmate’s house. He was seventeen years old, held a nine-year old boy at gunpoint for an Xbox and fifty bucks. “It was a joke,” Charity said, “The kid gave him a hard time at school, so he did it on a dare. The little mother fucker.”

Before her stop, Charity invited me to go to lunch the next day.

“It’s hard for me to leave my apartment,” I said.

“Why?”

I tried to think of a better way to explain it. “It hurts my ankles after.”

“Okay, I’ll bring you food then,” she said. She pulled a pen from her apron and wrote my address on her palm.

Charity brought me soup the next day. She walked into my kitchen like she’d been there before, like she already knew where the silverware drawer was. Taped to my refrigerator, a list of food reminded me of the things I could and could not eat, and I tried to hide all the bad food before she came. The “bad foods” were printed in red, and bold,

and a bigger font so I couldn't keep telling My Nutritionist I didn't see them on there.

"Soup's okay," I told her.

Charity transferred the soup to my ceramic bowls then brought them to the table. She drew a pack of cigarettes from her purse and offered one to me. We smoked instead of ate, the white billows drifting above us, diffusing into the ceiling while the top of the soup condensed with a shallow layer. I told Charity about the notebook from My Nutritionist, how I was supposed to write down everything that I ate. My mother claimed I used food to cope with my insecurities, but My Nutritionist said it was neurological, that there was no chemical distinction between the sensations of full and hungry.

"You ever think she makes up that shit?" Charity asked.

"I've never really thought about it."

"Maybe I work for her and am just pretending to be your friend. You can't really know right?"

"I guess not. But I think it's helping. I used to be fatter."

Charity nodded. "I used to be so cracked out I beat my kid. But I still think about crack all the time. I was thinking about it when I walked up the stairs, because of all those white specks on the walls."

We never touched the food, because I wasn't hungry, or maybe the cigarette filled me. I felt like I could say anything around Charity. When she pulled her braids back into a loop at the base of her neck, I asked if she could do my hair the same way, and she never teased me about it after, just told me white girls' hair is too weak, can't handle braids that tight. Later, she poured the soup down the drain and put the bowls in the dishwasher like I was her guest. When she pulled out the bottom rack, she paused.

“Why are all these bags of chips in here?”

“I’m hiding them from you,” I said.

Charity set the bad food on the counter and replaced it with the bowls. “I get that.”

She invited me for dinner at her place the next week, but I told her I didn’t like leaving Petra, that he barked if I wasn’t there.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll come over again sometime.”

After I locked the door behind her, I turned on the heater in my apartment. It made a low murmuring sound, and I could feel the vibrations through the bottoms of my feet if I sat on the side of the sofa closest to it. For the three months I stayed in my apartment, occasionally I let the heater run for hours until my clothes melted to my skin and I had to peel the sweaty cotton off my body like a wrapper. Petra shook as I picked him up with my good elbow. He was going blind, I had lost weight, and sometimes he didn’t recognize me, barked for hours at my feet. To remind him, I scratched behind his ears in the familiar place he loved the most, where his little bones stuck out like horns.

On the wall of her office, My Nutritionist had a poster with the outline of a nameless person’s head. It was drawn in black sharpie, and arrows pointed from the mouth to the brain to the nerves, where a burst of red stars erupted in the center. “This is what happens when you eat,” she told me. “Pleasure signals fire in your brain like electric shocks.”

She said there were other ways to experience the stars—exercise, sex—and if I worked hard enough, I’d learn to crave these other types more than food.

“Can you think of anything else other than that stimulates that sensation?”

The day I quit my job, the museum received a bison molar in the lab. It was the size of my palm, and I marveled at the preservation, the rich brown and blood red color. The entire chewing surface, enamel, and root were still visible, over ten thousand years later, and it made me think of losing my first tooth in kindergarten, how I loved to rub my tongue along the gummy space. When the paleontologist came in to discuss the restoration, I had the fossil halfway in my mouth, was grinding it between my top and bottom teeth.

“Not really,” I said.

She nodded and scribbled on her legal pad, which she did often, but never bothered me. It just reminded me of all the food I didn't write in my journal. At the end of my appointment, My Nutritionist told me to write down three times during the week when I felt the pleasure signals without food. On the bus home, I remembered the final month of what she called my dark time, how after ordering take-out every night, I ran out of money, so I started chewing on things in the apartment. Paper. The sofa cushions.

When Charity came over again, I told her about the assignment.

“I went to an addicts group for a while,” she said. “They gave us assignments like that too. We had to go to their service twice a month, for communion, and I always took a hit right before, cause I felt so fucked up, you know?” she laughed. “You want some crazy stars?”

The last four cookies in my apartment were hidden inside my sweatshirt pocket. I filled it before Charity arrived and took bites when she wasn't looking or stepped near the window to smoke, although she never would have cared. She claimed she used to crave

sweets too, because of the crack, but now she doesn't like sugar, doesn't even have thoughts about it. The crumbs littered the bottom of the cotton, and I alternated rolling them between my forefinger and thumb so they dissolved into smaller pieces, or pushing them into the constricted space beneath my fingernails.

“You should go with me sometime,” Charity said. “I think you'd like it.”

“Maybe.”

On the opposite wall, teeth marks were printed on the bathroom doorframe. They were near the bottom, a half moon of oval dimples carved into the wood. When Charity went to the bathroom, I placed a handful of cookies in my mouth. They tasted sweet and processed, with heavy grains that sunk into the craters of my molars. I felt the pleasure shocks—they were the sugar stars, the best ones, and I leaned back to watch them fire out of my ears and nose and mouth and surround my head like a halo.

Charity took me to the seven o'clock Mass because she worked at nine and wanted to go to breakfast in between at the Golden Apple. She worked numerous doubles a week to pay for Jericho's lawyer, and sometimes I felt guilty around her because I hadn't worked since September. My Nutritionist said my job was getting healthy, and I told Charity this, although it didn't take long for me to wish I hadn't. If I ever told her to have fun at work, she said, “You too,” and laughed a little bit.

She waited for me on the steps outside the church smoking with a man named Jim. Her streaks had faded into a neon orange color, and her head reminded me of Halloween.

“You came,” she said.

That morning, it took me twenty minutes to walk down my stairs. “Sorry I’m late,” I told her, but Charity didn’t rush us inside, just offered me a cigarette.

“I told Jim you wouldn’t show,” she said, and Jim nodded. His hands were in his jacket pockets, and a cigarette balanced loosely between his lips. He never reached up to adjust it, only opened his lips slightly to exhale around it. The three of us stood, scattered on our own steps, listening to the morning traffic. When Jim finally did lift his arms, I realized he had no hands, just stumps that ended where wrists normally began. He smiled, waved them back and forth like a crossing guard, and when Charity laughed, I realized he did this for fun, surprised people with his stubs.

During the Mass, Charity explained the different parts as they happened. “He has to say those prayers and shit,” she told me. “So it becomes Jesus.”

Until it was time to stand up, I played with the skin at my elbow, rolled the pins underneath, then showed them to Jim, who reached out to feel them. His skin was dough-like and cushioned without the twenty-seven bones that construct the human hand. I’d seen the bones before, when an entire set was sent to our lab. The paleontologist identified them as female, three thousand years old, and I scraped away the fused rock without altering any of the specimens. For weeks, I worked late into the night, thinking if I kept scraping away, her name would rise up through the discoloration of the metacarpals. Gradually, I pieced her hand back together like a paperclip chain.

I kept thinking about those bones, even when the priest put the flaky cracker on my tongue. When he brought the silver cup to my lips, I felt overcome by the sensation of the sturdy surface inside my mouth. He tried to pull it away, but couldn’t, because I had bitten hard into the metal rim, wondering if the sharp edges could slice through the

corners of my mouth. It took him three more tugs before I finally released it.

“Doesn’t it make you feel guilty,” I asked Charity later. “Going there?”

Her cigarette rested loosely between her fingertips. “Guilty for what?”

“Never mind.”

“For the drugs?”

“Yeah. Or, I don’t know, for everything.”

“You kidding me? I don’t regret one moment I got high. When I’m on crack, I rule the fucking world. Nothing is wrong with me or with anything. That’s real life.

That’s the real me. This,” she waved her arm, drawing a curving line of smoke. “This is sloppy seconds.”

At home, I wrote, *Bread, Wine, Cinnamon Roll*, in my notebook and drew stars around the entry. My Nutritionist asked about it during our session the following week. She smiled and told me I didn’t need to write down Communion food.

The day before Jericho’s trial, Charity needed to take her mind off everything, so we rode the bus together and made bets on how many homeless people were selling tickets at each stop. I agreed, because I liked the open space of the busses, how I could always see my feet. We rode around my neighborhood for three hours, and it was the first time I told her about my accident.

“Stupid shit happens, you know? To everybody,” she told me after.

This is how I like to remember Charity—the light from passing buildings coming behind her in flashes, every few minutes igniting her orange streaks and crowning her forehead with bent shadows.

The night after the trial, she begged me to come over, but it took me an hour to get to her. I stood at the top of my stairs thinking about the men who came, how they grunted instructions to maneuver me around the corners, steadied their backs against the walls for support until they had carried me like a coffin down the four flights. By the time I found Charity's apartment, the remnants of cocaine lines sprinkled her coffee table. It reminded me of powdered sugar, and I wanted to lick my finger, dip it in the bag and taste the sweetness.

They charged Jericho as an adult, and I told her everything would be okay, even knowing how irrelevant it sounded. While she cried, I pictured myself sprawled on my kitchen floor, chewing on a cereal box, and before I left, I grabbed the plastic bag of cocaine, sealed it, and went to Charity's kitchen. I stared at her cupboards and sink and refrigerator, then opened the dishwasher and stuffed the bag in the silverware rack next to some dirty forks.

My Nutritionist says that I look healthier every time we meet. I only go to her office once a month now, and it's in a new building, with the furniture arranged the same way it is on Oprah. She said it again today, asked me if I feel as healthy as I look.

"I don't really know the feeling," I said.

"Do you feel different?"

"I feel happier."

"Why do you think you were unhappy?"

"I think I liked it."

"Most people avoid unhappiness."

“I know. But I was good at it. It made me feel numb.”

“Do you still feel numb?” she asked.

“No. I can’t. My elbow hurts all the time.”

“What will happen? When your elbow heals?”

“I’m not sure.”

She set her legal pad on the nearby end table then scooted closer to me. “Do you realize that *you* are doing this, Juliette,” she said. “Not me. *Your* good choices are helping you get better, just like when you chose to leave your apartment on Christmas. You saved yourself.”

That winter morning, I did not think about my life, or my future, or that beyond my apartment walls, mountains towered into a cerulean sky and that below them, white valleys spread. What I thought of was my mother’s honey roasted ham and sourdough rolls, and the delicious pasta salad she makes with pesto. I imagined those little green chunks getting stuck underneath my permanent retainer, behind my bottom teeth. I grabbed a magazine off my coffee table, and I bit into it, clenched my teeth around it and started crying, picturing the Marion Berry cobbler, how she puts crystalized sugar around the edges.

Only I know the truth. I’m not the one who saved me—food did.

When I come to this church on Franklin Street, the bread is given to me to eat. It is the only time when eating is good, the most important thing I can be doing. I don’t understand God, but I understand food, and things seem more certain to me, when I feel the bread inside me, traveling down my esophagus.

Before I walk home after the Mass, I smoke on the front steps, hoping I'll see Charity. After, I take Petra for a walk through the park. I sit at the edge of the fountain, and the sun settles on the tops of my shoulders and neck. I lean over and untie my shoelaces, and feel the slight pain in my elbow. I wonder if there are still shattered bits inside, microscopic pieces of my bones floating up and down my forearm like a current. I lift my legs steadily over the edge, and I place my bare feet in the cloudy water. On my way home, I pass a bakery on Bond Street. When I smell the mixed aromas of rising flour and melting chocolate, I stop inside to buy an éclair. I take the long way back, stopping to look at the buildings, the trees, and alternating Petra's leash between my hands until I've licked the stickiness from my fingertips.

Maiden Voyage

Not long into the party, I decide to drive George's boat. The fact that I've never driven a boat is not a problem to me. From here, the controls seem much simpler than a car. My heels wedge down between the wooden planks when I walk across the dock, but the imbalance only exhilarates me. All the other boats belonging to the other mansions bob quietly next to their docks, looking permanently bored. My emerald dress with ruffled flowers on the back has produced an electric reflection in the water, or at least raised the temperature, and this communion with nature instills a confidence practical experience can't inspire.

We're celebrating George's return from a two week cooking vacation in Italy, but I am here because my mother needs me. Instead of rehearsing her tour commentary, she spent the hour before the party reciting obscure passages of scripture through which to impress George's pastor's wife. She chose the conservative taffeta dress with the blazer in matching fabric since, "George said he liked it!" The blazer hangs unfortunately near her hips and transforms her hourglass figure into an obtuse triangle protruding from a mushy square. When she finally reeled me through the mansion along with George's friends' wives, she bypassed the vaulted ceilings to overture about George's endearing hobby of tying his own flies. The women's pitying looks combined with the dizzying pattern of George's floor tiles, necessitated my stepping outside. My plan was to overturn several of George's potted plants, but the ceramic bases are surprisingly heavy. On my way to the lightest looking one, I found the path to the dock.

George's mansion flutters with clinking champagne glasses and faint laughter,

and I look back at it longingly, wishing I'd brought my drink. My first taste of the open sea air should be consumed with a clean palate. The second course of George's six-course meal is activating my tongue in all the ways he claimed it would, and the accuracy of his prediction, the sweetness at the tips, the saltiness along the edges, irritates me. All evening, George has greeted guests in his Have Faith the Size of a BBQ!™ apron because he wants to appear like a modest, personable millionaire who doesn't unpack after vacations but unwinds with elaborate meals and live bands.

George responds to all compliments on his wealth by clarifying how *blessed* he is. "What a beautiful home, George!" *I'm very blessed*. "What an attractive three-thousand dollar Rolex!" *My life has been blessed*. George is blessed by a large fortune built through his innovative line of biblically themed office products—the Rock of Ages Paper Weight!™, the Make Time For Jesus Desk Clock!™, and the Jesus is Coming, Look Busy!™ post-it-notes, and George's personal favorite, the Don't Get It Twisted, I'm Blessed!™ porcelain coaster set. George has utilized the midweek party to ensure all out-of-town guests are aware that his products, when ordered in bulk, are eligible for free shipping. George's grill tongs have already targeted every CEO on the property with original slogans: "Make meetings more fun! Gift the entire corporate office!" or, "Nothing says appreciation like products inspired by Christian morals and clean jokes!"

Standing right here, I wouldn't match this boat up with a *blessed* man. I've sailed on boats with private crews and glass-enclosed gyms and swimming pools that George's boat could do laps in. George claims there's something innovative about the built-in fish finder and wide bow. Despite bragging about it all evening, George has not walked anyone down to see it, and understandably so—the thing is a major disappointment. A

flag soars from the stern until I knock it down with my elbow, as I imagine this is what pirates do. There is no one around, but I huff out, “Ha-ha!” triumphantly into the night sky simply because it feels good. The flag floats toward shore, a relic of my looting, until the current pulls it beneath the dock where it remains trapped. I remember these flags are safety reflectors of some kind, but the gaps in the dock are wide enough to fit my fingers through, not my knuckles, and retrieving the flag will require at least the length of an arm, so I leave it, dismissing the risk.

Only two minutes into my maiden voyage and I already feel disinterested. Driving George’s boat is less thrilling than expected. All it took was turning the key and pushing the throttle forward. It seems silly to require a license for the thing, there aren’t even lanes! Earlier, George raised a glass to the exceptionally stubborn fish he he’s been attempting to catch for weeks and has creatively named Tom. He held my mother’s geometric waist with one hand, the crystal flute with the other, and toasted, “To Tom! Who has *blessed* me with months of repeated sleepless nights and is in blatant cahoots with the crickets!”

Pressing the throttle forward I think, “Well, who is the one out here taking the advantage? Not you, George.” I envision arriving back to the party somewhere between the mustard parsley lamb chop and the hazelnut-cruste chicken, cradling that ten-pound elephant trout, water streaming from the rainbow scales and meandering through my ruffles. I already hear George’s friends saying, “What a catch!” and me saying, “And I come with a fish!” and the entire room laughing at my funny joke, and his business partner commanding, “Get this trout on the grill,” and everyone forgetting courses four, five, and six because, hey, we’ve got fresh fish.

Without a fishing pole, I wonder if my heel could serve as some kind of spear then realize I'm the most interesting fisherman these fish have ever looked up at. I'll just skim my French manicure over the surface and they'll be jumping suicidal into my boat! The fish finder reveals the pixelated fishes putting on a show for me, swimming diagonally and in swirls across the purple screen like the premier of Swan Lake underwater, me the *prima ballerina*, them the *corps de ballet*, pumping their fins beneath me to jump from the lake in synchronized *poisson* arches. I steer in the direction they seem to be swimming from, and soon, there are not enough pixels to distinguish them all. The curtain's been drawn, the screen completely black, and I think, "This is it! I've hit the goldmine!" Then I feel a large jolt and realize I literally have hit something.

The dock I've smashed into looks much lengthier than the others. It appears I've been driving toward shore for some time and the entire population of the lake has deceptively taken shelter beneath this one dock. I've nearly burst through the width and created another Northwest Passage simply by accident. Everything is spinning, but I distinguish a shadow weaving down the trail from the nearby mansion. It transforms from a dizzy silhouette to a colorful blur and arrives unexpectedly as a handsome man. The handsome man walks halfway down the dock until he reaches the point where it is no longer a dock but the bow of George's boat. He looks at the dock first then the boat and then me last, and not for long, which annoys me.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

I brush some shattered glass into the water casually, and it makes a pleasant sound like wind chimes.

"Boating," I say.

The man points at the water flooding steadily in through the bow. “It appears you are sinking.”

“I see,” I say.

The handsome man is wearing a captain’s hat but it isn’t convincing me of anything. He is right about one thing—the front of the boat does not look to be in great shape. There are shards of wood protruding at multiple angles and I am uncertain as to which fragments belong to George’s boat and which to the man’s dock.

“You realize you will have to pay for this,” he says.

“No problem,” I say, then noticing the man’s confusion, elaborate, “I am a woman of great means.”

And it’s true—the divorcee of a large fortune that unlike George’s doesn’t have to sell cheaply manufactured Christian goods but just multiplies itself from monotony, carrying the ones indefinitely between the first digit and the eighth. In my examination, the man’s structurally inferior dock is barely the cost of the now-dirtied bottom half of this dress, which I imagine from the handsome man’s perspective is standing out in great contrast to the black water. I pirouette to maneuver the moonlight over the satin in a compelling way, but the gown feels heavy at the bottom, and when I look down, I see the water is practically past my shins.

“You should get out,” the man says. “Before it capsizes.”

Getting out is rather easy. The boat is nestled amongst the wooden debris so the driver’s seat and dock have formed a convenient kind of staircase. All I have to do is *jeté* from it. As a resourceful woman of opportunity, I hesitate, envisioning the story this man and I could share—the tearing of wet fabric to prevent hypothermia, two stretched out

naked bodies drying on some kind of animal skin turned rug, and ascending George's staircase wearing only the man's linen shirt, pausing long enough to offer the guests a tip of my newly acquired captain's hat—so I yell out, "Help!" even though the man is right next to me and we've been conversing in moderate tones for several minutes.

"Use the seat," he says.

The man's linen shirt has golden anchor buttons that sink heavily from the slits like they'd prefer to be unfastened. Through the thin fabric, I can already tell the handsome man has handsome muscles and reasonable skin. I offer my hand for him to assist my exit, and he ignores it, reaching instead for the railing along the bow. I'm worried this lack of physical contact disqualifies him as my rescuer. Although I can remove myself from the boat effortlessly without assistance, I attempt to balance my hand on his shoulder. My blurred vision disrupts my aim and lands me somewhere around his chin.

"Please. Stand back," he says.

The handsome man proceeds to lift the warped bow onto the undamaged portion of dock, and despite the weight, partially accomplishes this, enough that the water ceases to pour into the cabin. When he leads me toward his mansion, I look back to see the silhouette of the bow sticking up at a sharp angle, nearly perpendicular, and I think of the Titanic and how I left that movie thinking it all looked so fake. But here I am, a survivor of a freak boating accident, and I'm already feeling different, feeling *blessed*, and not in the George way, but in the two-syllable religious way, because George's bestselling *My Lifeguard Walks On Water!*TM beach towel was not a gimmick but the truth! Except my

lifeguard doesn't walk on water because he's too busy being excessively handsome and rich.

A rebirth is happening in me, like all those nearly dead people talk about, and I vow to be a more honest woman, to tell my mother I'm happy for her hasty engagement, to retract what I said earlier about George's appetizers having a charcoal flavor and leaving a filmy residue in my mouth.

The handsome man moves in front of me and examines my pupils with concern. "What are you saying?"

I've been speaking aloud, and from the tightness in my throat, at high frequency. "I could have drowned."

The handsome man looks back at the lake, considering this. "Not likely," he says. "The water only gets five feet deep."

"But my arm," I say, and show him my right elbow, which is bent in the opposite direction than it should be. I am double-jointed, so this causes me little discomfort, yet I pout my bottom lip out like I am in great pain. It is too dark for him to tell and my flexibility is credible.

"I'll look inside," he says.

Inside is even more elaborate than I anticipate. The handsome man is obviously much wealthier than George, a collector of some kind, with Turkish carpets draping the walls and backlit cases of Oriental ceramics casting turquoise ovals onto them. We walk a hallway with Arabic calligraphy protected by gold frames. The handsome man is no stranger to exotic travel, and I laugh, imagining George anywhere besides the dominion of his mansion, distributing business cards to foreigners, trying to globalize, while my

mother lounges on some beach nearby wearing a deathly floral one piece and a shapeless modesty shawl, bragging about George's accomplishments—customizable slogans for the witty church kid in us all! Everything about the image is pathetic to me, so I try to focus on the handsome man's colorful chandelier, which I can't see well because he isn't turning on any light switches. In the room with the fireplace, it takes him several seconds to find one, but it's actually the switch that ignites the fire. He seems satisfied, leaving it burning. The firelight reflects off my skin in a welcoming bronze color, so I cross my arms and let my teeth chatter mildly, slight enough to produce concern, but not dramatic enough to draw any attention to my jaw which in the past it has been described as skeletal.

“Your arm looks better,” the man says.

It's too late to reverse this mistake but I am quick on my feet. “My dress,” I say, exaggerating the weightiness of the train as I walk. He looks near the general vicinity of my feet where I'm expressing worry.

“What about it?”

The gown is only slightly damp around the bottom and the fabric is drying quickly, so I try again. “It's my dress,” I say.

“There are some clothes in there,” he says.

In the adjacent room, the drawers are filled with long dresses and loose skirts, not one item with a fitted waist, and all this rifling through ugly clothes exhausts me. The handsome man has a wife, who, judging by her impoverished fashion, is severely dissatisfied. Even removing my dress can't aid me in mustering the will to try on a somewhat shapely shirt because the clothing smells flat, like it's been stowed in a

second-hand trash bag beneath a storage container of self-loathing. Briefly, I feel sad for her, can see the handsome man seeing her getting older and thicker, then seeing her again—looking so the same—then I stop feeling sorry, feel only the adrenaline of sex and pillaging. I'm gorgeous and rich, and more importantly, naked, standing in a dimly lit room with breasts firm and skin damp about to offer myself to the handsome man like his own private harem dweller. Without him, I'd be just another dead divorced woman with an exorbitant settlement sunken to the bottom of some lake. I *glissade* toward him, pretending to be deeply engrossed in the painting of the Oriental palace over the fireplace. When I arch my back slightly, my nipples perk up in the direction of the Sultan.

“Nothing fits,” I say.

The handsome man sighs, as if his premonition of my return went something like this. Yet his eyes stay on me like darts, I feel him bite, and next comes the tricky part, the gentle but steady reel. I ponder stretching myself advantageously across the couch until I step back and notice the fire casting my slender shadow across the entirety of the room. The handsome man is not only staring at the naked me, but the amplified shadow of the naked me, and I begin to contort myself into various positions that highlight my generous curves.

“I called Chuck,” he says.

My elegant poise, acquired through the ballet lessons I started after two years of marriage, impresses me. “Who's Chuck?”

“He owns the property.”

I consider my oversight. A man in a captain's hat is clearly not capable of such exotic interior decorating. The handsome man is not a millionaire, although I mistook

him for one easily. His effortless demeanor, like lifting up boats, or saving women, or conversing with naked strangers, arouses me.

“I’ve also called the police,” he adds.

“Why would you do that?”

“You stole a boat. Then crashed it.”

The handsome man’s wording sounds incredibly illegal. My plan was simply to drive it, to prove it wasn’t the mythical fuss George had fabled it out to be. In three miserable weeks, it will be *more* of my boat, and any decent judge will dismiss the case as some petty step-parent, step-child rivalry. I say, “It’s my boat,” which gets a laugh so rough it tosses his anchor buttons about his chest until he takes a deep breath to calm them.

“Everyone knows that’s George’s boat,” he says, sharing a similar awe as the men at George’s party, but his expression is mixed with mourning, like he’s picturing all those floating wooden splinters traveling transmansional back to George’s dock.

“And who are you?”

“I work on all the boats here,” he says. “I was next door at a costume party when I heard the crash.”

The handsome man is a non-millionaire who fixes boats and went to a costume party as a boat captain. His lackluster effort disappoints me, and the revelation that there is another midweek party happening on this manmade lake financed through a millionaires’ homeowner’s association fees sickens me. My sexual fascination with the man relied on anonymity, and I feel all the parts of me go soft, like I’m just now

perceiving the sounds of the boat crashing, the scraping fiberglass, the motor blending up the wooden dock until the chopping dies.

“I feel dizzy,” I say.

“You have a concussion,” the handsome man says. He leads me to the couch, and there are clear signs of his regret as he tosses a blanket over me. I let it fall, or don’t even reach for it, refusing to be rejected by his ugly clothes and poor face. When I turn around, the couch is pushed flush against the wall and all I can do is bang my forehead against it in a kind of aristocratic protest. It doesn’t feel good, actually hurts severely, but I’ll do what is necessary to make a statement. The handsome man has no idea how to make me stop. He feels so uncomfortable that he eventually leaves the room, which requires me to bang more forcefully so he can still hear it.

Two police officers arrive and interview the handsome man next to the fireplace. Instead of my swanlike figure elongating across the room, there are only two murky blobs destroying the ambiance of the fire, and when the fat blob asks, “George’s boat?” the handsome man confirms, “I’m certain,” to which the other blob adds, “How bad?” and the handsome man only shakes his head solemnly. The metal of their handcuffs and their guns and their knives and their Billy Clubs flicker against the flames while they radio the station about no casualties and one survivor. The radio asks, “Who is she?” which is when I decide to resume my pounding, speeding it up into a Grand allegro waltz, my best of all the dances, which I had plenty of time to learn because it was my husband’s favorite, and he only came home every four nights, left me alone with enough space to fit the southern arm of George’s mansion. So our driver took me to the ballet studio, almost every night, so I could hear the instructor describe my pliè as *très belle*

while all those ten-year-olds stared up at me in wonder, thinking—Who is this woman? So beautiful? And so alone? And so rich? Look at her diamond?—their ears budding like soft petals and their hair spiraled at the tops of their heads in stems, and me wanting to reach out and pluck just one of them, take her to the fields of my empty mansion and plant her amidst the furniture and with a grand Mamma Warbucks wave proclaim her inheritress of it all.

“Where is she?”

It’s my mother—entering the room with her panicked voice and incongruous shape while George trails behind her wearing a Hooked on Jesus!™ windbreaker. When he realizes I’m naked beneath the blanket, sees the bright red blood running from my forehead into my eyelashes due to a sharper section of wall plaster, he looks genuinely concerned and horrified. He explains to the officers that I’ve been missing for hours, then shakes their hands to thank them for their selfless public service before advising the whole group to, “Let her mother handle this,” but my mother keeps her distance. George pulls on her shoulders like I’m someone from whom he must protect her, and I hate him for doing this to her, for bringing her into this life, into his mansion of high ceilings and bay windows, because nothing will ever be lonelier than that wingspan of extravagant emptiness, and I’m certain from the look on my mother’s face, which is too tender to bare, too understanding, too filled up with fellow divorcee compassion, that it will only take one season for her to wither into the dark canopy of that house.

The door I escape out of leads to a kitchen, a bedroom, and eventually a sunroom with a sliding glass door that ejects me outside. I’m halfway back to George’s boat when I hear the voices yelling my name, but distantly, like I’ve achieved a significant head

start, and the substantial lead thrills me. At the new edge of the dock where it is still George's boat, I dive in and start swimming toward nothing, or George's mansion, or a new mansion, to someplace with a real millionaire who would never let me escape naked and unravished. My head throbs and lures me beneath the surface like a lead weight sinking. Even though I remember what the handsome man said, I let the water bear me, forge me across the surface, while I remain still and released from the burden of my body. From the edge of the dock, George yells at me to stand and the police yell at their radios the detailed state of George's boat, while the handsome man dismisses our familial drama completely to commiserate with the millionaire who just arrived and will eventually clean up all of it—my dress, the property damage, the neighbors' endless gossip—and my mother, the stranger who grabs George's hands and begins to pray, is desperate to be the bright beacon that draws me back to shore.

Takes Dying Animals

My brother woke me up in the middle of the night to search for the ferret. Most nights David shuts up the house after me, but last night he fell asleep tending to the other ferret's cancer. There are two ferrets with cancer. One has it in pancreas, the other the blood. Cancer is cancer to me, but according to my brother this is not the case.

We stand in the kitchen pondering the ferrets viable escape routes. "The garage allows immediate street access," David says, "But the backdoor leads straight to the pond."

I can't imagine the ferret practiced this level of execution, but David is convinced. I put up my hands. "Okay, brother," I say, because he is the expert. David has a way with animals; there's no denying this. When he was nine-years old, he climbed up to the roof of our foster home and all the sparrows in the city came and perched on his head and arms until he transformed into a giant sparrow crucifix.

It even made the newspapers—"GIANT SPARROW CRUCIFIX"—but these things have a way of dying down.

The ferret we're searching for is pretty noticeable. Most of his hair has fallen out from the pills. Balding is a side effect, and it started two weeks ago around the ferret's tail. It traveled across his belly and whittled a weaving barbed wire shape down the length of his back. The other day I told him, "Cheer up, people pay big money for those tattoos," but it didn't cheer him up one bit. He just stared at me with his red, pointy eyes, his paws dangling limply out the bars of the cage. He sniffed, shifting the two remaining whiskers near his nose.

There's no talking to a ferret is what I've always said.

We eventually search all the bushes in the yard and discover only a small frog with a bloodied leg.

"We're too late," David says.

The frog makes no sounds or movements. Sprawled on David's palm, the webbed foot of the wounded leg slings off the ridge of the thumb. Judging from its bulged eyes, the frog's last sight was not a pleasant one.

"The cruelty of nature," I say. I'm not sure what I mean, but I like how philosophical it sounds and it seems to relate.

David thinks I'm joking and gets upset. "This is your fault," he says.

"Now, Now," I say, then repeat, "Now, now,"—stalling.

David drops the frog in his breast pocket like a valuable clue: the ferret, in the front yard, with the candlestick!

There are reasons we're jogging along the main road at night with no flashlights. Dead batteries are two, but the third is, I love to open—jars, books, windows—it's the pathway to possibilities. The closing, however, I have trouble with, and I left the front, back, garage, and cage doors ajar while David fell asleep administering the ferrets' medications. Normally, the animals are too weak or sick and just glance at their newly acquired getaways with halfhearted longing, resigned to their fate, but this ferret crawled from his cushion toward the cage wall and pressed his nose to my amplified face, begging, and when I unhooked the clasp, he burst from the cage, then the room, at full speed.

I picture his weepy eyes just moments before, and all I can say is, what an act.

If asked, David describes the foster home where we once lived as a large barn with children galloping around everywhere. Because I was so young, I am unable to confirm the specifics, but David seldom exaggerates. He claims it is the place I first exhibited my obsession for opening. The story goes that David sat next to my two-year old self, feeding me mashed sweet potato airplanes while I refused to swallow.

“Close the hangar,” David said.

“Ga, ga,” I said.

“Close the mouth door.”

David emptied large spoonfuls onto my tongue, and I just laughed as the paste melted and leaked from the corners of my mouth. Eventually, he raised and lowered my chin in a forced chewing. An adult probably should have been nearby. The next year, I passed my days opening cupboards, toy boxes, toilet lids, then, when I got taller, the boxes of bulk foods stocked on the higher shelves of the pantry. We shared a corral with three other boys, and David says that after we were put to sleep, I crawled from my bed, swung open the gate then immediately stared back as if daring him to canter through it. There was nowhere else for us, so David stood up and closed what I’d opened, coaxed me back to bed, then watched me fall asleep with my eyes open.

At the top of the hill, our town is a constellation of golden flecks, and some of the house-stars flicker as if they too are opening their eyes to missing things. I long for something to open, to peel back the night sky and find the ferret curled beneath it,

nibbling at the stars like his tiny ferret food pellets. The ferret hasn't eaten for days, just pawed at his insects as if making amends, which David interprets as a sign of his impending passing. David often predicts his residents' deaths to the hour, and I recognize his body language now as he straddles the gravel strip along the cement examining a dying raccoon. The creature has large tears through his stomach carved by what I assume is an animal much larger than a ferret.

“What's happening?” David asks.

Around its eyes, the raccoon's hair is matted with a thick, yellow goo that seeps from its tear ducts. A rectangular band of black hair frames his face like a midnight bandit, and two cutout holes funnel his night vision eye beams. They transit the road now as David drags the raccoon to a more peaceful location in a nearby alfalfa field.

“That's what happens,” David says when he's back. “Everything just swells up in there, looking for holes.”

My brother only takes dying animals. Last summer, he posted the ad on Craig's List for the opening of his animal hospice. He assumed that people pay the money to put down their cats and dogs, but might be more hesitant with the less practical pets like rodents and birds. His first client showed up the next day wearing a leather eye patch and carrying a cardboard box full of creatures that didn't have ears or tails and crawled around each other like obese earthworms.

“What are they?” David asked.

The man raised his eye patch, double-checking.

“Puppies,” he said.

David handled the box pro bono and called the police station. That morning, the box was reported stolen from a nearby lab. Some scientists in lab coats arrived shortly after to confiscate it. Naturally, David felt discouraged after this, so the next day I pulled over when I spotted a squirrel struck badly along the highway. I opened my jacket and nestled the squirrel against my chest in a sort of kangaroo pouch. When I got home, I showed it to my brother.

“Look what I found,” I said.

“This isn’t a zoo,” he said.

The squirrel claws poked out like pencil tips from my inside pocket. I set it down on the carpet, and it laid at our feet belly up in a stunned way. Turns out it was stunned. All it took was the smallest nudge of my brother’s toe to wake that squirrel right up. Luckily, I’d left the front door open, and the squirrel returned miraculously back to the wild. It appeared to be perfectly healthy.

“We saved a life here today,” I said, but David didn’t agree.

At first it was all reptiles—iguanas, snakes—but those things live for years. Duke the turtle has been “dying,” in my favorite fruit bowl for over a year. He guards my bedroom door in his clunky suit of armor, and I fall asleep watching him claw habitually at the edges, dragging his shell in an endless circle along the porcelain curve.

People still try to pawn off animals on David all the time, like the woman with the thirty-five pound cat with three legs that you couldn’t see until you rolled the calico on his back and dug around his ballooned stomach to wedge them out. David now only accepts animals with terminal, not chronic, diseases.

* * *

The first hopeful sign is a pair of headlights that rise like twin suns from the horizon. They expand before us, bursting yellow stars that speed forward from the distance, eclipsed occasionally with the road's sharp turns. We soon realize they belong to a taxi, all the way out here by our place, and I want to declare it a miracle, but David seems skeptical. We wave it down, and the driver decelerates just enough that we have to maintain a brisk jog to explain the situation with the ferret.

"It's a what?" the driver asks.

"A ferret," David repeats.

"It's like a rat combined with a small dog," I offer.

"Oh, yeah," the driver says. "I think I saw that thing."

"Where?"

"A few miles back. Scary looking fucker."

We ask him to retrace his path to the location of the sighting. David sits in the front seat for a better view of the passing fields that blend, indistinguishable, into each other. One hand braces the dashboard, the other floats over the door handle, his whole body tensed and prepared to dislodge from the car at the slightest moving shadow. The driver is fairly chatty and begins to tell us stories. Originally from the city, he recently moved to our side of the mountains. He loves the open spaces, rising every morning to be swallowed up in sky.

"Makes me jealous of clouds," he says. "Hanging suspended in that elastic blue."

David is unimpressed by the poetry and asks him to step on it.

"What's the rush?" the driver asks.

"He could be hypothermic."

In an attempt to increase the urgency I also add, “Or eaten.”

“This isn’t charity,” the driver says. He perches his arm on the open windowsill then taps the meter several times for emphasis.

By chance, David ended up with the two ferrets. At first, he attempted to get them to play together, to form a species-sickness camaraderie, but whenever he aligned them on the carpet with a tactical wall of plush toys between them, the other ferret just looked at the balding one with Darwinian disgust then curled into himself, clearly depressed.

“It’s the worst way to go,” I say, referring to the cancer, its evolutionary slowness, unnoticed at first, than erasing genera entirely.

The driver offers a confirming nod. “My parakeet had a brain tumor. Inoperable.”

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Paralyzed her left wing for a bit. But she stayed chirpy throughout.”

“How inspiring.”

“Can we all just be quiet?” David asks. He normally has a better bedside manner, but he is distracted, leaning out the window with his eyes searching prayerfully across the horizon. He has always been the spiritual one in the family. When Lo was alive, he used to walk her to the neglected church down the street for exercise and to feed her leftover communion wafers. One afternoon a priest showed up and explained to David that animals have no souls then strongly discouraged him from administering the Eucharist to gerbils.

“She’s a Slow Loris,” David corrected.

Lo sat upright on the wooden pew with a wafer between her opposable thumbs.

Her large, porcelain eyes tracked the birds in the rafters, and she continued to lick at her palms even after the priest emptied them. She had liver disease, and the owner couldn't take her to the vet because she was imported illegally, and there are laws about treating exotic, potentially contaminated, animals. For the two weeks that David cared for her, he grew particularly attached to her human-like personality, her adorable sluggishness, the way she sat next to him every morning at the kitchen table while he reviewed his medication chart for the animals then unfolded her five-fingered hand for hers, washing down the white ovals with a shot glass of water.

The meter reaches sixteen dollars before we turn on a narrow path cut cleanly through an alfalfa field. It eventually convenes with an open span of wet grass and reeds. Rising above the roof, clusters of cattails sway heavily at their tops, the skyscrapers of the marsh, while a haystack surges at the middle, the center of this damp, concealed cosmos. The driver turns on his high beams to illuminate it.

“I saw your dog,” he says. “Right there.”

Using the haystack, David draws an imaginary axis across the marsh from which he coordinates our search—I revolve along the outside circumference as David works the infinite diameters. While he waits, the driver keeps the meter running and lounges upside down on the hood of the taxi with his ankles crossed over the windshield and his head capped by the license plate. He examines the milky sky, and I listen to his unintelligible admirations, pretending they are incantations offering David and I good luck.

David presses on, digs through the marsh with a dedicated endurance, even as the clumps of wet grass dampen his pant legs to the knees. Fifteen minutes in, he freezes at

the sound of a splash.

“That was me,” I realize.

“No,” David argues. “I saw the water rise. Over there.”

I am certain it is a false lead, but David wants to wait near the splash anyway.

Around us, the headlights brighten the marsh with a gray, synthetic glow that tarnishes our skin with a ghostlike sheen. No other sounds surface from the muddy water except our condensed breathes, the squishing of the soaked reeds under our feet, and the driver’s whispered spells, all of which speed from this sphere so quickly, I struggle to imagine anything as fast as light. David’s eyes, rimmed red from little sleep, lack hope. Yet, he removes the frog, still dead, from his pocket and reaches toward the splash I’m certain I made. He holds it out as a kind of bait, and I step back, waiting, watching my brother reach into the cloud of millions of invisible particles contained in this tiny universe of air, as if his eyes have fixed on just one of them.

Why is it that this is the moment I am certain we will not find the missing ferret, that there are no mysterious things that come after, that all we can do is close our eyes tight and think of the empty open road, all four paws sinking into the wettest, deepest marsh, knowing none us are the animals that will keep on living?

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Thesis Title: *Takes Dying Animals*

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