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**I WAS AMELIA EARHART,
AND OTHER SECRETS OF THIS THE ONE WORLD
STORIES**

**A thesis submitted to
the Regis College
Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with honors**

by
Gabe Harper

May 2016

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Acknowledgments

Portions of this collection have appeared elsewhere. “The Three Missing Sisters” was published in the spring of 2016 by the Regis University journal *Loophole*. The National Undergraduate Literature Conference accepted “Moan Baby” in the spring of 2016. “Metamorphosis” was accepted by NULC in the spring of 2015. “Self Portrait” was accepted by NULC in the spring of 2014.

Eleanor Swanson and David Hicks. Thank you for your help, and for your constant affirmation.

Tom Howe, Cath Kleier, Martin Garnar, and the Honors Program. Thank you for giving me this space.

To the very first people I ever met.

Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad. Hi, Todd.

Tell all the truth but tell it slant –

Emily Dickinson

The power of language lies in its absence. We learn to read, and write, and not say a word, but no one taught anyone to believe us because there is an etymological suffering in our silence; smother being its synonym. Smother: to choke, to repress. Because “survivor” just feels like a dead language that is our job to translate. And even then we will always be asked if we are telling the truth.

Sienna Burnett

And above all, watch with glimmering eyes the whole world around you, because the greatest secrets are always hidden in the most unlikely places. Those who don't believe in magic will never find it.

Roald Dahl

Introduction

The world is unavoidable. Right now you and I, the both of us, are operating under the authority of the universe, of the spinning world, of gravity, and of time. We are unwilling passengers strapped to a hunk of nothing tearing through space. How dizzy are you!

Down here on the surface we – nauseated – are commanded by the rules of the world, as well. We are told to stop at red lights. We are told to not murder one another. We are told to wash our hands, to consider the poor, and to wait our turn. We are told to engage. We are told to buckle our seat belts, to focus up, to not pick our noses. We are told to respect those who came before us. We are told to eat our vegetables. So, too, are we told not to tell.

I went to preschool at a placed called Crayon College. I would hear my very first secret there: Morgan Weinrich was somersaulting, head over heels for Jon Forristall. Morgan and Jon were neighbors and – as I understood it – were destined to be together forever. Morgan liked how Jon’s head was too big for his body. She liked the shape of his eyes. She liked that he always said, “Thank you.” Sometimes, she told me, she even moved her mat close to his during naptime, preemptively seizing any opportunity should he get scared and need to hold someone’s hand. Morgan liked that Jon wasn’t afraid to

play with dolls. She liked that he didn't mind playing house, even if his idea of role-playing had him characterized not as the father or the son or even the dog, but the destructive tornado. Morgan was in love, she thought, because Jon was lovable, and that was that. She whispered all of this to me one day while we were yanking up handfuls of grass and daring each other to eat whatever worldly thing we unearthed. Morgan punctuated what she said with a simple command: *Don't tell anyone, promise.* I ate four leaves and a worm, and then we locked pinkies to seal the deal.

Sorry, Morgan, but I guess the cat is out of the bag.

I have revealed plenty of secrets in my life, which is the nicer way of saying I have broken a lot of promises, but I have never told anyone that Morgan was in love with Jon. I did not tell even when he moved away to the big city and ruptured her heart. I am only ending my silence on this pressing issue now because there's nothing more ridiculous than unrequited preschool love, and after so many years the secret has finally lost its sheen.

But not every secret is so dainty, so neat and playful, nor so innocent. And so! In my young adult life I have come to respect secrets. Sometimes I fear them. They are commanding, and nowadays the things I know, the things I am told, and the secrets I share are typically earnest and wildly profound. If I were to attach a metaphor, I would say secrets are heavy. I would say secrets come in buckets that bear no handles.

This is not to invalidate the consequence of childhood affection, or the strength it takes to conceal and share it. I must concede at the time Morgan's confession was quite serious. Any betrayal of her trust could have severely damaged her self-esteem and

fractured our friendship. As a child, I did not have this complex forethought. Instead, I opted to keep Morgan's secret because I felt the new thrill of being trusted. Though I didn't have the vocabulary to verbalize it, I relished her selection of me as a vessel for her vulnerable truth. I felt very deeply the tantalizing choice and agency Morgan's secret afforded me. I could tell, or I could not tell.

*

It is much easier to spill someone else's beans than to spill your own. I know this. Even when I write in private journals I sometimes catch myself hesitating, and maybe this is because I feel that any form of exposure is threatening. Writing about your feelings is different from experiencing them, because you leave whatever is written behind. Leaving something behind means subjecting it to the forces of the world. When we tell, we push information out into the world, and we cease to be in charge of whatever we've exposed. It is Christopher N. Poulus who wonders

What if memories and the secrets they birth are like Aspen trees, sending out their rhizomes in many directions, disrupting their own earthen burial sites with new sprouts, all of which are connected in some way to the ultimate realities of our shared universe?

Like roots curling about one another and fusing together, our secrets shoot throughout our bodies and fashion our sense of reality. Like roots hidden underground, our secrets become our foundation and our fortitude. And! Navigating through the world is like navigating through your own personal forest. To tell a secret is to invite someone into this forest. Who knows if they will come to explore or destroy? Telling is the tool, then – the

match – allowing another being to witness the truth of your ultimate reality or burn it all to the ground. To save our lives we can, of course, bite our tongues. I do it just as often as not.

I recognize that my words expose some inner parts of me that I have deemed – for whatever reason – particularly precious. I suppose you could name anything a secret, so long as it remains unspoken, and particularly so if you are consciously concealing it. Revealing a secret makes a precious chunk of yourself vulnerable. When you keep quiet, you disallow any tampering with the facts, with the truth, with the secret, with your soul.

I look back now and understand I was keeping Morgan’s secret in defense of her vulnerability. If there is anything she wanted more than to love Jon, it was that Jon never learned the truth of her affection. “*I love you, says the heart, but you will never look upon me.*” That was Eleanor Swanson.

*

During my first year at Regis University, because I thought it would impress the faculty, I rather foolishly registered for a 400-division English course exploring the evolutionary relationships between William Shakespeare’s comedic and tragic plays. Here’s a secret for you: I don’t even like Shakespeare.

But picture me: lugging around the Norton anthology, a book the size of Venezuela and as heavy as a medicine ball. True to my dramatic nature, I took it everywhere, as if to say *listen up, all of you, I’m pitiful and I’m educated!* But then something changed. I learned the truth of most pitiful of them all.

Her name was Lavinia. This poor character, if you haven't heard of her misfortune yet, appears in the play *Titus Andronicus*. She is reminiscent of Philomel, the ancient Greek character who is raped and then brutalized even further by glossectomy. That's a highbrow way of saying her rapist cuts out her tongue when he's finished. This is done so Philomel may never speak the truth of her rape. To the appeasement of the audience, we learn the rapist rather foolishly left her hands, both of which she uses to weave an elaborate tapestry revealing the story of her trauma. After obtaining revenge, Philomel turns into a bird (a nightingale) and flies away.

The end to Lavinia's story is absolutely worse. Her rapists are not so foolish, and they makes off with her tongue *and* her hands. Thus, Lavinia spends the rest of the play before she is murdered (by her father no less) a walking blood clot. She moans. She bleeds from her mouth and from her stump arms. She embodies pain, and though she eventually finds a way to reveal what happened, the pain of witnessing her trauma never left me. Morgan gave me the gift of agency, and I loved that feeling. Lavinia's tragedy lies in her being stripped of this same agency. Her silence is commanded by a fate-like, New-Testament authority. She will not speak, because that is her only option.

*

Emily Dickinson said, "Forever – is composed of Nows –" and I say the unavoidable world is composed of Everythings. Mine is this the one world, and yours too. Our engagement with anything is, somehow, also our engagement with it all, in total; and so too our disengagement. We can embrace or we can recoil. In other words, being on the world forces us in two directions: exposure, or enclosure. When Lavinia finally takes a

stick in her mouth and drags it with her stump arms through the sand, she does more than list the names of the men who ruined her. She writes the story of a secret she had been sentenced to endure forever. Through writing and through the crafting of her story, Lavinia pushes what is enclosed into the realm of the exposed. Lavinia teaches us that we can always embrace, even when we know that speaking will be difficult. Even if we know that we will cry. Even if we know there will be pain. It is my idea that this world begs us to do more than speak about what happens on its surface. Angela Carter wrote, “To speak is one thing. To sing is quite another.” And what then for those moments where it makes more sense to bite our tongue? With the world in our throats, the choice is ours. Should we swallow? I know this process of deciding is meaningful, for it is as we move between self-enclosure and self-exposure that our secrets and our narratives are fashioned.

*

Put in easy terms: there is a secret about me in each of the following pieces. I’ve done this to make things interesting. This is the exercise I’ve taken on, because I want to write stories, and I want to keep secrets. I want to expose myself, and I want to enclose myself. I want to tell all of my secrets, but they must stay hidden to qualify as such.

To me, this process of writing feels a lot like falling as you make your way up the stairs. Only there aren’t any real stairs, no. Nobody could spend their days climbing stairs. But I sense in my very quick a tongue that knows it all, and everywhere I look I see a world made of stories. I am sometimes overwhelmed by the strange pull to release them all, but I recognize that is ridiculous. Mary Oliver says, “There are things you can’t

reach. But you can reach out to them, and all day long.” This is the nice way of saying you will bruise your knees. You will fall.

You know the sensation: your bare toes slip, you fly forward, and the teakettle in your head starts to whistle so that all your nerves ignite under the pressure of the steam. Sometimes when I fall I think about God, like maybe God wants me to turn around. Jeanette Winterson wrote, “When Lot’s wife looked over her shoulder, she turned into a pillar of salt. Pillars hold things up, and salt keeps things clean, but it’s a poor exchange for losing yourself.” At some point, I resolved myself to reach the landing, even if I end up there broken on my hands and knees.

I think this is me.

I think this is my world.

I think this is writing.

The construction of a text is particular in that it invites the writer and the reader to the same location. We agree on a meeting place, and I drop the parcel off. Later, you come and take the goods, and that is that. This time around, I am ditching fictions and stealing away before you can ask anything substantive. I do this because I am scared. I am scared because I have deliberately placed my secrets on these pages. Though any reader can never be certain where they are or what they look like, their possession means my exposure, and they become a culpable figure in the revision of my narrative. We meet at this intersection so that things may be changed. This intersection is a collection of worldly fictions beset with personal secrets; in other words, stories that never were but forever will be.

Of course, you say, I could just leave the secrets out. Right?

No. I know a secret is anything, that merely not-saying means secret-keeping. My world, this the one world, is bright enough to have its own say. It says, very plainly, “Speak, or hush up.” And always I am hearing or telling secrets; hearing or telling stories; so when I write, I feel called to do both.

Listen: I have a notebook with me probably most of the time I am awake. If ever you catch me empty-handed, the truth is that I’ve only stowed my materials somewhere nearby. For as much as I write, I equally chuck notebooks into corners; and so it seems I am never more than twelve steps from a page. This page, these pages, they have their own force and they bear their own weight.

I write and I ignore the lines and I go straight to the edges of the margins. I make lists of beautiful words, ghosts I’ve encountered, names and wishes, sentences I find myself repeating, the colors I see on birds, moments I am surprised by water, what I wish I would have said, all of my secrets, and the other some- or any- things translucent enough to let the light in.

I wonder about the vanity of calling myself a writer and floating about with an invisible, proverbial pencil tucked behind my ear. I set the pencil down and put lotion on the side of my hand. The world runs my body raw.

The world solicits me. I solicit the world. I come up with more secrets, and I put them on the page. Annie Dillard says, “That page will teach you to write.”

*

Here's a question for you. What are you without language? What is your personal mythology? What are you in the deep? Is there a rainbow in all the nonverbal darkness? The literary scholars tell us the whole world operates under the authority of language so that even if you truly knew who you were outside of words and symbols, you would have to use words and symbols to express that part of you. But speaking plainly redefines those hidden truths and ruins the exercise. How truthful would you be if you called something spoken a secret? I'm writing these stories in this way to reject this exact paradox. The same way a magician uses distraction to thrill, I am framing my hidden truths with falsehoods so that you may learn so much about me without learning anything.

*

Luise White tells us, "Experience, we know, is mediated by experience." This is a roundabout way of saying things will always look and feel like milk. Being on the world means dealing constantly with the unclear. How we understand something as it happens presently can never be the same as how we think back to it later, because we feel differently and we know more. The type of love we feel for an individual depends on whether or not they survive their fall, their surgery, their addiction, their heartbreak. Don't you think so? Everything shifts with time. We do, and so do our secrets, and keeping a secret means concealing with care any words the world's great puppet strings tug at. Like a growing organism, the concealed secret evolves and adapts to each environment that begs its telling, its reconstitution.

I strike the world, face-first, and this informs my secret, and my secret informs the shape of the bruise on my cheek.

Another metaphor: it's somewhat of a dance. The world holds the small of my back and it dips me, and then the shuffling of our feet over the ballroom floor produces sibilance. I am as much a secret as I am the world.

It is all very confusing, but I know this means it is vital we put value in the secrets we hear, keep, and tell. We ought to do this, because whatever remains hidden is much more remarkable than our plain sense of things. We ought to recognize we are as much our secrets as we are the world. We ought to deliberate with the world, because the world is numinous.

Forgiving it for being a chunk of dirt waffling through space, the world gives us treasures, and the most precious moments. Secrets carve us closer to all the remarkable slants of the world – the glitters and glimmers and glints that sparkle and awe us more than any starched, dusty, exposed truth ever could. Having a secret means acting contemplatively in the grand scheme, at every single point where the world intersects with itself. Crafting these stories is a way of situating myself at this intersection.

The same way a spiritual person might employ strange roots and crystals to enhance their overall mysticism, the insemination of my stories with personal secrets seems to be absolutely necessary. What is a baptism without holy water? Or an exorcism for that matter? And what is a fortune told without thrown bones? What is a story I've written if not some hunk of my essential nature? And within these carved hunks, what is true, and what is fiction? What is the secret? Perhaps I'll never tell. Perhaps I will:

I was Lavinia. I was a missing sister. I was a box full of birds. I was the rape victim at the corner of a solar eclipse. I was Dasha, and then I was Daniel. I was Small the ghost. I was Posy. I was at the feet of Saint Maria Goretti. I was Ellen, Theodore's eye, and the orange butterfly. I was the letter *R*. I was Phyllis, covered in blood. I was Aster biting my tongue. I was a snake at the bottom of the lake, and I was a child learning to breathe. I was Moan Baby. I was the feral cat, the unknown cyclist, Hideaway Susan, and I was Joy. I was Lilith. I was Pidge, and I was Amelia Earhart. Maybe I still am.

*I Was Amelia Earhart,
and Other Secrets of this the One World*

stories

She Played With Birds

Before she was born, she learned to float. When she was born, she learned to breathe. Her first memory: trying to breathe just like her grandmother. It happened before mass began, in one of those preposterous moments where gathered families compete to see how loud they can be while staying quiet. Which is to say that a whisper on its own is nothing to the world, but the noise formed when everyone whispers suggests perhaps no one should bother whispering at all. But everyone knew Jesus was hiding in the golden chest on the altar, shielded behind a dazzling chain-link wall, and his expensive chamber took so much effort to procure that its finder effectively bolted it down as soon as he brought it down the aisle in his son's red wagon. The altar itself was massive and sturdy, and it was stained a deep shade of richness serving as a colored metaphor for the depth of God's unending love, or something; and to complement this vision a heavy lock was fastened onto the tabernacle to protect all of Jesus's blessings, to keep anyone from actually grabbing at them. It was for this and all of this that they kept themselves whispering.

But on that particular day, the day of her first memory, she remembers making noise. She remembers that her grandmother wore a wool blazer the color of her grandfather's pants, and her pants were the same shade as his jacket, and she whispered –

in vain, “We didn’t plan this, but after so many years of being in love, these things just...”

She remembers her grandmother’s nose sagging out at a treacherous angle and rounding down into the wrinkled flesh of her cheeks like a melting iceberg. She remembers peering into her grandmother’s face and thinking she was God, that God was a woman, that she could be satisfied knowing she had heaven’s most important, most perfect face. She remembers the endless supply of donut-shaped breath mints in every one of her pockets, each individually wrapped, and she remembers the nettled look that settled between her father’s eyes as he peered down at the rustling between her fingers. For all that noise, he ripped the plastic out of her hands, reaching across her grandmother’s lap and startling her. With the other hand, he snapped and gave a look, and he pointed at the kneeling pads. Prayer was always a punishment.

Being too little to see over the back of the pew in front of her, she lifted her clasped hands to perch on the edge and allowed her head to hang low. There was shuffling to her right, and she felt her grandmother scoot down onto the kneeler. Peering up, she saw her bony elbows resting on the pew as she prayed like burls on two bent twigs. Her fingers twisted about each other in loose tangles, her eyes were closed, and her whole body shifted with each breath. In and out, like a wind chime in the softest breeze, she moved.

She held her breath until her grandmother let hers out, and – together – they filled themselves. When she exhaled, so did the other, and when she was sure they were synchronized she hung her head once again and looked at the ground. The space beneath

the pews was dark and dusty, so unlike the bright slivers of light that glinted off the tabernacle's edges. It didn't matter where Jesus liked to hide, so long as she had God to her right.

By the end of mass, the sun had shifted enough that it entered the church by way of stained windows and painted their faces orange, yellow, and violet. They were sitting again, and in the space between their legs a burst of purple highlighted a dark and swirling knot underneath the wooden pew's varnish. From that mark came a few twists where the veneer dipped, and you could catch your fingernail in the divots and guide it through the winding streaks. She traced her pinky around and around in circles like a figure skater, and when she finally bumped into her grandmother's leg, she grabbed her wrist.

She held her breath and looked up into her face, but she did not look back. Instead, she turned her palm upwards and placed another mint there. This one was unwrapped, so she popped it in her mouth. She was young enough that simple things like mints overwhelmed her, and she tossed the rock back and forth between her teeth, and it burned her nerves. Its tangy bite tore into the crease of her tongue, sizzling and bracing. She had the idea the experience might end sooner if she chewed through it, but this only spread the flavor more evenly. Just as a robed boy rang a handful of bells, and the priest lifted a round wafer into the air, she started to cry. Her mouth was fire. Her grandmother's heart was fire, and she thumped her fist on her chest. *Amen*. When the ringing quit, the church was silent, save for her burning sniffs.

Thinking perhaps how thrilling it would be that God's great mystery brought his child to tears, her father almost wept. She was confused. She felt like a joke, and she wiped the wetness from her face, staring down again at the dusty space beneath the pew and wishing the swirling vortices in the wood might swallow her up. She whispered, "I'd like to go, now."

*

Many years later, as she helped her father and his father box up some of her grandmother's things, she came across a locked chest. She searched the vanity for the key, rummaged through shoeboxes in the back of her closet, opened every cabinet and drawer in the kitchen. When finally she decided the key was lost for good, she removed the screws securing the lid's hinges, and tore at the slivered opening with such force the wood cracked. The chest was open, but broken beyond repair. She heard the voice of her grandmother somewhere in her head, "Remember, honey, what's broken can always be fixed, but what's fixed will always have been broken."

She settled at the edge of the egg incubator with the bottom half of the chest, leaving the lid destroyed in the cabinet. Thin, white cards with metal chips were piled haphazardly. Each card had a label with the name of a bird, and some bore crude watercolor renderings of wings, or eggs, or nests. Beneath a jumble of cards she found the electronic box. It was white, heavy, and dated, with only a few buttons and a dusty slot. She slid a card labeled "hermit thrush" into the box and held the switch.

The sound of the bird's cry escaped from the treasure, and she was so startled she jumped back. The machine dropped and crashed into the corner of the incubator,

splintering into three different pieces. The card was ruptured, the batteries ejected. She collapsed, screaming, scraping her hands through the grassy shag carpet. She searched for the scattered fragments, entirely breathless at the discovery of something so beautiful her grandmother kept it locked up. She felt an orange flower's stem at the corner of her eyes.

Her father hurried into the living room, his shirt stained with himself from moving boxes all morning long. He looked around the room and found her on the ground. "Oh, good," he said. "I heard a crash and thought you broke something important."

*

She fell down onto the shag carpet in her grandparents' living room after brunch. Serving as a coffee table, an antique egg incubator lay dormant on the carpet, bright sea foam green and trampled nearly flat years ago by her father's childhood. The incubator was made of dark, wooden planks and edged by a thin rusted metal. On its left and right sides were operational doors, knobs, and switches. On top, a vase of orange flowers winked in the breeze from a nearby window. The floorboards beneath the carpet were worn, too, and her body bounced as they strained beneath passing footsteps. Maybe her fingers imagined the strands to be grass, because she tugged at the carpet, and her father gave her a disapproving look from his chair across the room. When her grandmother entered from the kitchen, he rose – deliberately – to allow a place for her to sit, but she chose the floor.

She kicked her legs and swung her body around so that her head rested in her grandmother's lap, the top of her skull pressed softly into the pillow of her stomach. When she breathed, her flesh expanded, and she felt the pressure on the crown of her head.

Her grandmother plucked a droopy-looking flower from the table and traced her features with the bottom of its stem, which dripped warm water onto her face. She started by drifting around her chin, moving up and around her hairline, marking the borders. When the perimeter of her face was closed, the stem jumped to her lips, parting them enough so that she could taste the earth. She tugged more at the carpet. From her cupid's bow, she dragged the flower up her nose, to the bridge, and then down again to the rounds of her nostrils. She laughed at the tendrils she poked into the darkness. Then, her eyebrows were marked, and they stuck flat against her skin.

At last, she passed over her eyes, and the water off the stem pooled around the corners before slipping down her cheeks. Her grandmother leaned forward. She said, "You look like you've been crying."

The Three Missing Sisters

You cry to the Lord for mercy. Your face is wet with tears and it rubs against the brown stain on the carpet, and you cry for mercy. Your whole life has been that stain, and the lives of your babies. Living, most dead, they entered here – there – on the floor where you cry. When you pray, you think of baking soda, because you should have used baking soda and peroxide to scrub the blood from the floor before it became final. But you hesitated, and it fixed itself as a flattened pancake of love and suffering, baked brown into the carpet's threads, and so it is.

Three of your babies are dead.

They came like all babies, dead or alive: from your body with great pain. Onto the carpet they dropped, directly on or at least near the brown stain so that its imprint was either darkened or expanded or both. The stain itself looks like a cloud. You only curse (and always under your breath) when guests come and point at the cloud and try to decipher objects in its body, like little children making a game. Once your guests leave you repent – crying on the stain no less – for swearing, and as you think of the Lord you think of baking soda.

You used to sprinkle some baking soda onto the toothbrushes of your living child in the morning until one day you realized your three dead daughters never grew any teeth whatsoever. This hurt, and you started drinking. When your husband found you drunk that morning, he was gruff.

He told you, “If you start throwing out everything that reminds you of those dead babies, soon we won’t even have the socks on our toes. Will you let us eat once you realize they too had stomachs?”

Recalling that moment set you off, and now you are crying to the Lord for mercy.

Having convinced yourself your babies had no will to see you or to meet you, you scream. You pinch your nose and blow invisible steam from your ears. You tug at the strands of the carpet. You feel warm inside, like maybe you ripped the oven from its place in the kitchen and tried to swallow it whole, only it got lodged in your throat, puffing smoke and burning you black. And there in the kitchen, where the stove had been, you imagine putting your heart on the floor and stomping.

Your rage bears itself from a divine jealousy. You pray four rosaries a day, each time a complete circuit round the glass beads, in honor of your children. Only one is alive. Your heart is shredded, because your daughters are floating in a liquor of eternity, and you crawl atop the earth’s surface breaking your back under the weight of spiritual obligation.

You pray in silence, lying prostrate on the living room floor and breathing in dust from the carpet, a faded fabric stained brown from your home deliveries. Never. You will never scrub the carpet. You will never bleach away the shape of your pain. You grow into

every sacrament from your shrunken perch, falling deep into the ecstasy of Christ's love so incredibly much that the rug itself has become a sacred talisman. The rug is a dynamo from which you gain and to which you sacrifice your strength. The rug is, and you wish your daughters could be. From this perch you pray and look toward an eternal future, the ultimate completion of your lazy relationship with the Lord, built over the past thirty years like a thin bridge on wobbly stilts.

Your future smiles back at you. You imagine it looks like compassion and satisfaction. You imagine it burns with the fiery rage of the Lord's love. You think you are wrong, but you don't admit it.

There, on the stain, you slowly begin the process of resenting your dead children. You hate the pitiful, stillborn daughters for their short pit stop on the surface of the earth. Who did they think they were? You know the answer to this question.

They were in heaven, of course, the three selfish girls who never held a rosary, who never received communion, who never genuflected, who were never anointed with oils, who never learned catechism, who never struggled through adoration, who never bore witness, who never learned their prayers, who never mourned the passion, who never confessed, who never heard scripture, who never passed the collection plate, who never held palms, who never choked under the smog of burning incense, who never fasted, who never signed the cross, who never did anything but stop breathing as soon as they started. You love them. You hate them, and you cry to the Lord for mercy.

You stand knee-deep in chance, a rushing body of water taking no heed to the things it churns and dislodges. It is all a matter of chance.

Water, you pray, I need water. You have cried yourself to desiccation. Lord, be a raindrop.

If chance is an evil river, your heart is a water wheel on the side of a dusty mill, and you can never rest. Your sadness revolves, and thinking of that evil river puts bumps on your thighs.

You were baptized in a river, but the water had been warm and people had been singing when it happened. Untroubled and slow, the water possessed just enough force to gather your white dress between your legs like heat in a hot air balloon. You left home and came to the church, educated and alone. You craved love, and so you allowed a man with only nine fingers to dunk you into a river one morning. It was a full-immersion baptism, something your atheistic parents might have called fantastic, or hysterical, but it filled you with mysticism. The church taught you how to learn a lesson, and you never stopped learning.

You learned how to surrender. How to praise the Lord from a riverbed. How to see God in smooth pebbles. How to exhale the old breath of a sinner, and how to inhale the sacred air of someone who is saved. How to pray. How to fall in love with the Lord. How to bury a child. How to bury another child. How to stop giving names to children before you meet them. How to name them anyway. How to say goodbye to Ruth, Anagrette, and Tess. How to not actually, ever, say goodbye. How to pray, again. How to say it.

“Thank you,” you said to your only living child, by then fully grown, on your birthday when he brought you a heavy trunk. Inside there were three carvings about the

size of bowling pins. They were slender and smooth, made from dark wood, and made to look like little people. Each carving held the same sleepy face with closed eyes and fine smile. You knew instantly who they were meant to be, but you asked just to be sure.

“Look on their bases,” he told you. You turned one over in your hands, and on the bottom you saw the etched name: Anagrette.

“Well, I’ll be,” hummed your husband, gruff as ever. “The three missing sisters.”

For the first time in a very long time, you did not move to the brown stain to cry. You hugged the carvings close to your breast and shook. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

As it happened, you discovered soon enough that just looking at the carvings was so emotionally devastating that you were forced to hide them in the linen closet to keep the thin walls of your sanity from crumbling. True to your nature, you promptly forgot they were in there hiding until later when you went to retrieve a tea towel your great-grandmother embroidered as a wedding gift. You had let in a guest, a simple widow from your congregation who was learning needlework to fill the void of her husband’s leave-taking. You had done the neighborly thing by inviting her into your home to teach her a few pointers about strings and fabrics. She did the neighborly thing when she lifted you – defeated – from your puddle on the floor.

You blamed anemia for your collapse, and once she was gone you stashed the three missing sisters in the basement behind the radiator and turned the thermostat down. Your husband came home from work to see you on your hands and knees, face deep in the brown stain and wearing a scarf. He didn’t ask.

Of course, he asked what the hell happened – not of you, but of the plumber – when you two started seeing your own breath. When the plumber arrived, you noticed his clothes and took a liking to him. He was a man who wore his stains. He gave you a nod, and he deduced the sequence of events as such:

Someone (you) had been too heavy-handed with their twist of the thermostat, and the pipes froze. Then, they burst. The water level rose from the basement floor until the radiator was submerged and it failed. Your breath became visible.

Your husband left the house without speaking, and the plumber chased after him hollering about money, and now you are crying to the Lord for mercy.

But you wonder as you cry if the three missing sisters aren't still down there, floating in the chilly waters like hardened cells in a womb. Of course they're down there, where would they have gone? The thought of leaving them worries you, but how could you relive that pain again? How could you survive the removal of their cold bodies from somewhere beneath you? Could you bear it?

Could you bear allowing them to drown because you were too anxious to rescue them, to give them the second chance you always wished for them? Could you ever forgive yourself if you left them with the water seeping into their wooden pores and destroying their simple features? Could you let them rot?

You are unsure of all you could do, but you are certain of what you *are* doing, and so you are knee-deep in sadness. You are frozen to the quick. You see the busted radiator in the corner, and next to that stands the shelf haphazardly stacked with buckets of paint. Floating in the water, there are little paper cards meant to coordinate with different colors

that must have been freed when the water started to rise. They are everywhere, floating atop the whole surface. You wade deep into the rainbow lake and begin your search for the statues.

Though the chill has stolen all sensation from your toes, you feel the round of a wooden body when you step on it. It rolls beneath your foot and you tumble forward, landing with a splash on your hands and knees. The water touches your chin. From your perch, you wonder about the eggs that are your daughters. They are fertilized eggs, silly, with damages too severe to be born. They are eggs turned rotten without so much sense to start floating. You want to cry.

Back on your feet, you shuffle slowly, scooping your hands through a collection of blue-green cards. Ruth and Tess are side-by-side when you find them. You tug them from the basement's amniotic fluid and – though they are made to appear asleep – they do not look happy to see you. The slits meant to be closed eyes now look disgusted, as if the two babies you saved would rather have drowned. And their etched smiles glower so mischievously! The imprecise smile on Ruth's face makes her look like she's gossiping. In your other hand, Tess hears Ruth whispering and she grins. Your shaking fingers push the two wooden bodies together, and the clattering reverberates off the slimy concrete walls. You move back to the steps and place the two girls there, facing away from you and your task.

You discover Anagrette near the shelf of paint. She, too, gives you a sly glance, but you are so happy to be finished searching that you pay her no mind. Before you turn to head for the stairs, you grab an empty pail from the paint shelf.

Your wet feet leave strange, dark footprints on the stairs as you stumble up them, struggling to juggle your dead children, the bucket, and your sanity. At the top of the landing, you look back at the funny ovals and shiver. You are so cold you wonder if they might turn to ice.

Using your great-grandmother's tea towels, you wrap and dry the statues. You leave their damp bodies on the windowsill and hope the sun will bake out whatever maliciousness they absorbed in the basement. After, you fill the metal bucket with peroxide, soak the damp tea towels, and move to the living room to pray. When your husband comes home, you know, he will find you scrubbing blood from the carpet.

Alas, I Cannot Swim

We found it hiding just off the rocky path. Hewn from blond wood, with light streaks running across its body, the grand piano stood on three legs and two wheels. The leg missing its round shoe broke out into the air. Its slivers disfigured our foundling's leg so that it seemed to breathe and swell as bits of dust blew around it. Looking less like a leg and more like a bulging termite hill, the whole picture was alive and resplendent and strange.

As if I would know, Alex looked at me and asked, "How did that get here?"

We stopped ascending the mountain trail and moved closer. We heaved the piano's wooden chest open to take a look at its metal heartstrings. The cords stretched into breaking, and just like blood or nightmares, everything was the color of rust.

Alex thought it might be curious to hear the piano's tarnished singing voice. "I took a few lessons, once," he told me. "It's all about middle C."

The insides of the giant instrument were too damaged to sound, and I stared hard at the cracking keys. The piano's silence surrounded us. How many passersby had it tricked into stopping here at an intersection of such a quiet, peculiar world?

"Oh well," he hummed. "The quiet isn't so bad."

“Yes it is.” The words surprised me. Alex gave me a funny look, holding his questions in the corners of his mouth, and an electric pulse dragged itself across the surface of my skin, up my neck and from my eyes to his, down his arms and fingers, right into Middle C. “No, that’s wrong,” I added.

It *was* wrong, I decided. Silence is no harmful thing, even if it captures the moment or dangles something you want to hold or see or hear just right there, exactly where your hands can’t get. You can always keep reaching. Like the entrance to a cave, silence can swallow anything, and make you wonder. Silence holds you and the entire world in its mouth. Silence chews it all up and never talks with its mouth full. His mouth. Is Silence a man? I looked back at the piano. Silence is not bad at all. Silence is not a boy. Silence is just another way for us to come home to ourselves.

*

We came upon the canvas cot that same Sunday afternoon. We pushed one another into a heavy copse of trees and journeyed away from the path, searching for a river. Instead, we found a large formation of rocks in a clearing. A massive piece of the earth came from its side like a broken nose. Near the top of the wall – on the tip of the face’s forehead – a small bird like a busy louse worked at building her messy nest, but she stopped to watch us as she approached. Both she and the rock glared at us. The bird twitched her ovular body and flared her wicked feathers. She needed no introduction. She called her own name: *chickadee, chickadee, chickadee-dee-dee*.

I traced a crack from where it began below her nest down the rock’s face and around the side of its head. There, it joined another crack, and the two split into a

mysterious crevice. The cave beckoned to us; if the rock could speak, its voice would have been smooth and secretive, a whisper not any louder than the bird's call.

Forced to decide whether to trust the misplaced mouth, I lingered in the tall grass. Alex rushed ahead of me. He moved like a wild animal, and I loved him. He stopped kicking and turned around, smiling with teeth the color of blueberries. Though I don't remember ever mentioning it, he brought me a lemon-lime snow cone – my favorite flavor – when he came to get me that day. He had already eaten his, and if I had kissed him good morning his mouth would have tasted just like blue-raspberry. Still now, his teeth were stained a crooked indigo, like fresh bruises on pale skin yet to purple. On the way up the mountain, I heard sour stories from his sour tongue.

*

Once, he said, a poor woman woke beneath a willow in the middle of the forest with absolutely no memory. She was frightened, but she felt alive. After coming to her senses, she followed the sound of rushing water through the brush until she came upon a pleasant stream. The water swirled in tricky patterns, and it smelled like sugar and milk. Just across the river stood a great blue house, and bordering this house there were buckets and buckets of roses. The poor woman felt drawn to this house. Alex named her Margot in the middle of his tale. Thinking perhaps she used to live there, thinking perhaps those flowers were hers, thinking perhaps she ought to get home before the potatoes on the stovetop burned, or the baby woke up from its nap, or the mailman came needing her to sign, she stepped forward into the babbling river. As soon as her toes were wet, though, she remembered she had forgotten everything, ha! And how would she swim across the river,

then, knowing nothing? She couldn't, so she stood there with one foot in and one foot out, staring at her hopelessness in the twisting water. Eventually, her confusion and shame brought the end to her, and she collapsed plain into that river under the weight of all that – and then Alex's story almost made me cry, so he didn't finish.

*

I followed Alex through the rock's mouth, vibrating with emotion, and in an instant I felt myself being swallowed by the darkness. I had nightmares about this sort of thing: the terrifying power of the world, threatening and squeezing and unceasing. It made my skin itch. It made me sweat.

We moved deeper into the cave, and the light of day disappeared behind us. A soft breeze blew through the tunnel, twirling about my bare legs with light, hissing sounds. I clenched my jaw. I needed to be brave, I thought, or this rock might swallow me whole.

Suddenly, the gentle breeze found its passion and blasted around us, and its millions of invisible hands rushed against the stone wall. The rock's throat gave a low, ethereal howl. The wind tossed bits of sand into my eyes, so when it died down my face was wet with tears. I had only started brushing the dampness off cheeks when I stepped face-first into a spider-web.

“No!” I spun, landing in Alex's arms.

He caught me. “Shh,” I felt his warm breath near my face. I breathed deeply, smelling the moist, dusty earth hidden underneath his sugary, blue words. “I'm right here with you.”

I tried to sound tough. I feigned the sound of dry heaving, and we laughed together. I imagined his blue teeth sparkling in the blackness.

“Would you rather be Charlotte, or her web?” I asked. He sucked in to think, but I spoke first. “Rhetorical question.”

When the moment passed, Alex let go of my waist, and I pushed away from him. I felt him walking deliberately close behind me.

The tunnel let out on the other side of the rocky wall into a natural sort of courtyard. We stood where the rocky creature’s brain must once have lived, and in the center there was a tent. Just beyond the tent was a dying – though nearly dead – tree with dry, crinkled bark. Three grayish, brownish birds sat on its branches, looking away from us. I noticed the familiar, white tips of their tails. Eastern kingbirds. Alex and I moved toward the tent and looked through the shredded nylon at our broken, abandoned sanctuary. We saw an old, canvas cot.

And on the cot, someone had placed an enchanting heap of wildflowers, perhaps once divine and beautiful, but now lifeless and forgotten. I recognized the shriveled head of an eclipsed sunflower atop the withered bodies of unnamable specimens. I could only imagine what they could be, that their bright colors, scarlets and whites and blues, had faded into ashy nothings. Round the sorrowful bed the lifeless bell-shaped heads of others, maybe mallows, were sprinkled about the tent’s floor. Their brown stems looked like delicate, starving worms.

Somewhere behind us, on the other side of the rock wall, a woodpecker began drumming into a dead tree limb. I closed my eyes and turned my ear over my shoulder

toward the noise, picturing the thin beak's conquest of the hollow bark. I wondered how far away the bird must be. With my eyes still closed, Alex placed his hand on my chin, turned it around, and kissed me.

When we stopped, I opened my eyes, and we were lying on the bed of dried flowers. Our clothes were scattered about the bottom of the tent atop the flowery remains. Alex propped himself above me on his elbows. Sweat came from the edge of his brown, curling hair and rolled, slowly, down either of his cheeks. He took one finger and traced a thin scar on my chest.

"How'd you get this?" he asked, and I swallowed a bit of bile as it came into my mouth, a terrible lump back down my throat that made me want to cry.

*

There were hands on my back – two hands – shoving me into the wall and pushing me down, turning me around. As I slid to the floor, my flailing arms hit the light switch, and leaving the two of us in the hazy blue glow of the television. An angry face, clouded in the dim light, came yelling and spitting. The program was on mute. Two hands dug into my stomach, striking my nose and chest, trying to steal the frightened air within me. Blood dripped past my chin and pooled in my hands. I was being emptied. When I looked up, the fists opened like wild, exploding firecrackers, and the electronic light caught their edges. Somewhere in my crumpled huddle, he found my ankles and dragged me to his bedroom.

He tossed me onto the mattress, which had no bedframe and rested in the corner of the room opposite the door. When I landed my head knocked into the wall, and my wet

hands left red stains on the sheets. He stood blocking the door. Like a snake, he slipped out of his top layer, preparing for a strike.

“No!” I shouted, and the word had sharp edges that tore at the inside of my throat. He was upon me, on top of me, shoving me out of my clothes. I did not stop fighting until there was a knife pressed against my skin, so close to my heart that if it had been alive its own metallic beat might have synced with mine. The tear in my skin was small, but burning, and I learned my lesson. I told myself this was the night I would die if I was not quiet. I did not want to go.

But then he put himself inside of me and I wanted to go. I was trapped. My terror ran in the blood from my nose and my chest, and I looked hurriedly around the room, thinking not of pain but of escape, and refusing to see the face of my smotherer. But he had mirrors everywhere. No matter where I looked I caught sight of my own face, my own panic, my own exposure, and always near my face the glittering knife sparkled in his grip, growing sharper with each minute.

Littered about the room were disposable coffee cups, polishing the air with the foul scent of milk in all stages of rot. Above this, I could smell his armpits, and stale marijuana, and lavender. I decided there must have been a candle burning, but I was too dizzy to look for it. Still, I named the flower in my head, over and over, wishing he would be done with me.

I was being ruined, but soon, he was too tired to keep up, and he had to stop. He turned me over onto my stomach, and my face landed in a mess of my own blood. He

pushed on the nape of my neck and shoved me down into it all. I thought I ought to prepare for the end, but he stood. He let me go.

With the residue of shock in my nail beds, I struggled to my feet. I struggled away from him. I struggled to gather my clothes. I redressed quickly, fumbling with my underwear and the sleeves of my sweater that had been turned inside out. I was trying to put myself back together, but I was rushed and disorganized, like the stippled look of a scar on your body born when some skin comes back faster than other bits after you've been scratched. I was like something incomplete, or completed the wrong way; in the wrong order, at the wrong time; by the wrong hands; being watched by the wrong eyes. I was all wrong.

Like the wind, a pressurized jolt, I remembered I was a virgin before he called me over to his house. I cried for the first time, thinking not of myself but of my parents, and I did not care if he saw. I had nothing to lose. It was gone, and I was gone, and he was laughing.

And I was running, running and running in the parking lot of his apartment complex – thinking, *Isn't this happening in reverse? Isn't he supposed to chase me down and then do it?* I twisted around inside myself, turned inside out, and all of what was left came bursting from my throat and onto the blacktop. I spun and the colors of the world once dazzling swirled, dipped, and then grew dark.

*

I shook my head, swallowing the bile once again, and I stared in Alex's eyes. "I don't remember where it came from." That was the first time I ever lied to him.

He gave me a blue smile, and my mouth widened in reflection. Shame. I was dizzy in love with him and drowning in disgust with myself. I was damaged goods. I was an emotional junkyard. I wanted Alex to be happy, and that meant not telling him – never telling anyone. I felt the love in my chest, the love I desperately wanted to be in, and this love was something so good.

Once, under a microscope, I watched hundreds of little white blood cells flood themselves around a thin, curly parasite that was introduced into the blood smear. Like fireworks bursting in reverse, the dots marched very suddenly onto the body of the foreign thing, and their masses blocked the source light from underneath the microscope's tray. Things got much darker. That is what love felt like. Love was floating in the blood of someone else, and then disappearing. Just like that. With Alex, I was enveloped and devoured and destroyed, washed over by his blood. I did not care. I wanted it to be so, to be in anyone's blood but my own.

“I am given over to you,” I said to him. The world became very silent. He smiled, and I laughed at his stupid teeth. The sound from my body startled me, and it startled the eastern kingbirds behind us in the dead tree. I looked over Alex's shoulder as they hurried off into the fading sky.

*

A group of people near our age, students at the nearby university, surrounded the silent piano. They had made camp at the bottom of the narrow path that lead our winding mission down the incline. As we came upon them a young woman with tangled hair

waved us over, waving at an expensive-looking telescope anchored to the ground with sturdy metal hooks. Everyone was barefoot.

The woman told us today marked the intersection of the moon and the sun; it was a partial solar eclipse. Their convergence had already begun. We stepped once more from the path toward the piano. I watched her bouncing dreadlocks as she led us to the telescope.

Our view through the eyepiece was miraculous. The students placed a protective violet film over the lens of the apparatus, causing the sun's blotted rays to swim into the sky in sprays of purple, enigmatic mystery. I watched the curving border between the two celestial bodies move and slowly expand, as if they were curious about one another, and I imagined that – as the darkness overtook the light – the moon was falling into love with the sun. Their love vibrated, ebbed and flowed, and knew when to say *enough*. It did not invade or evade. It only moved.

As I watched the eclipse, I brought my hand slowly to my chest, feeling the thin scar's raised edges on my skin beneath my skin, bumping at the hurried force of my heart. I fought back my harsh memories, refusing to allow this moment to be penetrated by something so ferocious. I backed away from the telescope so Alex could take a look.

I stepped from the group and craned my neck, staring into the sun's burning gleam. When I blinked, the ghost of the eclipse's light swam behind my eyelids. The hand on my chest trembled, and my knees were weak, but my breathing evened after a few moments. When I looked back to the group again, Alex was finished. He extended

his hand and opened his mouth in a fond, blue smile. His entire face was the word *yes*. I reached out for him, our bodies merged, and the entire sky turned to gold.

The Lemon Tree

The first time Comfort met a ghost, it was morning on a Tuesday. She was standing at the kitchen counter cutting up lemons, and the juice was seeping bit by bit into her torn nail beds. Comfort had a nervous disposition – always biting at her nails – and the chattering of the ghost’s teeth as it approached her from behind made this even worse. Then came the awful scrape of its shadow (ectoplasmic radiation, draping down in tendrils) as it rubbed against the wooden floor. Comfort did not admit to herself the ghost was a ghost until it came upon her, pressing its front onto her back. Shocked, she almost sliced clean through her finger.

The ghost was cordial, asking, “May I please have a lemon slice to suck on?”

Comfort was not. “No, these are *my* lemons,” she said.

“Please, Comfort,” the ghost persisted. It pushed closer to her and sucked in the heat of her blood. It kissed the back of her neck. “One slice,” it murmured, “just one slice.”

“No,” Comfort repeated. Her tongue sat heavy in her mouth. This was the first time she’d ever spoken to a ghost, but she didn’t let that stop her from standing up for herself. “You know what. It’s a sunny morning – my day off – and I’m using these

lemons to brighten up my hair. If you like, you can have *all* of them once I'm finished. Just be patient. I'll be done by noon."

The ghost pondered this for a moment, and Comfort cut another lemon in half. The juice from inside squirted into the air and dissipated. The ghost was mesmerized, and Comfort had begun to transfer the wedges from her cutting board to a round dish before it spoke again:

"I think I'd like a slice now."

The thrill of speaking with a ghost dulled to annoyance, and Comfort was indignant. "They aren't available to you. Now, leave me be."

Having been fashioned from invisible motes of dust, the ghost's bones were transparent and creaky. It was so accustomed to its solitude that Comfort was halfway up the stairs to the attic before it even noticed she was gone, but the ghost gathered its wits and followed her.

As a rule, the ghost spent most of its time in the attic. Seldom did it float down to other parts of the house, and always when it did a curious, otherworldly hand tugged at its invisible hair and stopped it from ever straying too far. The tug was so powerful that if ever the ghost stopped focusing it would drift back to the attic, pulled by some concentrated gravitational force. Like a reoccurring nightmare, the attic was just as familiar as it was discomforting.

The attic was the perfect place for the ghost, not because it was characteristically spooky and dark and full of mildew, but because it caught the warmth of the sun and trapped it. By that point in its existence, the ghost had come to know a thing or two about

itself and the nature of ghosts. The entrance to the world of death was abrupt and exhilarating, and though the ghost could not recall specific personal details – who it had been, what it had seen, how it had died – it could compare its entrance to the world of death to a forged memory of previous life. It wanted to remember stepping out the door into a cruel winter’s day and breathing in a cold so harsh that its throat and lungs might as well have turned to ice. Death was like that, probably, the ghost thought. Death was bracing freeze, and so the ghost’s teeth were always chattering.

But while the attic retained stuffy, pressurized heat, it was no matter. The ghost was still bitter. It is true that even friendly ghosts, harmless like the one plaguing Comfort for fruit, cannot squelch their predilection to despise living beings for their freedom. The ghost came to know itself as trapped entirely in the world, and even more so in the house, and most miserably to the attic. The strange encapsulation of heat in the attic acted as an affirmation, for the ghost was not the only invisible thing powerless to the authority of the spinning world’s rules. Still, the ghost tolerated the attic and had been up there weeping when it first smelled citrus rising through the floorboards.

The ghost bounced up the steps after Comfort until it nuzzled itself again on the back of her. This time it curled its legs and arms inward on itself, and when it was tucked into a speck as insignificant and small as the dust motes that made its bones, it settled just behind Comfort’s right ear. The ghost was pleased. It could absorb the heat of Comfort’s thoughts, and the rush of blood in her brain sounded like a steady breeze. From where the ghost snuggled it could still smell the lemons in the bowl that Comfort carried, and their acidic power made the ghost’s invisible skin tingle.

Comfort was not frightened by the new pressure she felt behind her ear, the weight of a supernatural fleck no bigger than the tip of the blade she used to cut produce. As a young girl, she was certain she knew everything to know about ghosts, and she imagined them always in two's. In her dreams, ghosts were giant pairs of twins made of dirt and joined together at the ankles. They had neither noses nor mouths. Their eyes were made of honey. This lemon beggar was alone, though, and learning she had been wrong about all of it pleased Comfort in a mature, nostalgic sort of way. Now she knew the truth; that much like herself ghosts were solitary and found pleasure in the sour tastes of the world; that ghosts were cold and dead but not unfeeling or unaspiring; that ghosts used their manners; that ghosts were small.

“Small.” Comfort reached the landing at the top of the stairs and smelled the muted stench of mildew. She repeated the word: “Small. Can I call you Small?”

“*Me?*” asked the ghost.

“Or do you have another name?”

The ghost wondered, but could not remember. It told her, “You can call me Small. Now may I please have a lemon slice?”

Comfort laughed a bit and looked at the attic. The nervous girl was careful to avoid looking directly into the darkest corners, because maybe Small had a mean friend it had yet to mention. “Explain to me,” she said, “why it is that you want my lemon slices. You’ve never bothered me for lemons before.”

The ghost twitched. “Slice. I only want one.”

“Slice, then.”

The ghost surveyed Comfort's hair and traced the individual strands to where they met with her flesh. "I had been thinking about who I was," said the ghost. "You know, before I was born."

Comfort put her hands on the window and pushed it upward, sending a mist of dust circling around her head. "Before you died, you mean."

The ghost was surprised by the dust and smiled. It imagined a need to sneeze, and corrected itself, "Before I was *reborn*."

"Reborn."

"Yes," said the ghost. "Reborn. You know, I can't remember anything I'd like to remember about me. What my name was, what I looked like. Where I lived. Why I died. If I smelled like pears or sage. If I were educated. If I were cruel. If I were the type of person who caused pain or the one who helped others heal. I cry each morning because the terror of not knowing has me convinced I was the very worst of you, of us. I think probably my tears could be the source of all this mildew in your attic, and Comfort – my dear – you must really get someone up here to figure out this mildew situation. I can hardly stand to breathe!"

"What?" Comfort interrupted the ghost and started climbing out the window onto the gentle slope of the roof. "You breathe? There's mildew up here?"

"Oh my, yes," the ghost declared. "It's in all the floorboards, and in the air. The rot is overwhelming."

"Is that very bad?" she asked. "Could it kill me?"

“How should I know?” Small teased her. “All I know is it’s there. But think how lucky you’d be to have me here if the mildew got to you. At least I could tell you who you were and how you went. And think what fun I’d have if I made all the details up! Goodness, I’d love to have fun. You would believe anything I said.”

“Okay,” Comfort swallowed. “So, the lemons?”

The ghost swallowed, too. “It was in the midst of my tears that I smelled the lemons you were cutting up, and I had this incredible feeling where my stomach would be if I still had a stomach. It was almost like human nausea, a vague memory. I could see a garden: a great green place I made as a being. There was a sturdy lemon tree in the center. The image glowed to its clarity, and I remembered I love lemons, or at least I did when I was living person. Just the idea of holding a slice in my mouth had me feeling alive again. My only true memory!”

Comfort sat down on the roof. The sun’s rays dropped onto her skin and Small became very warm. “I’d like to give you a lemon,” Comfort told the ghost. “But how will you put anything in your mouth if I can’t even see you?”

This puzzled Small, who had never since entering the world of death tried to hold or taste anything. “Maybe I can pick one up myself,” it suggested. The ghost unfurled its limbs and removed itself from Comfort’s ear.

Small moved around Comfort’s body to face her and hung in the air with its invisible legs crossed. It reached out but could not lift a wedge from the dish. Small could not even feel the texture of the lemon’s skin, nor its innards, nor its juice or seeds.

“I’m not strong enough,” Small whispered, and the whisper grew into silent alarm.

Comfort grabbed at the lemons and started to squeeze them above her head. She ran the juice through the twists of her hair, and her fingers stung. She said, “I’m sorry, Small. Can you try licking it? Would that be enough?”

Small tried to flatten its thoughts, to think and breathe evenly. The ghost settled down soon enough and agreed to try. It leaned over, and the scent became overpowering, intoxicating even. “Wow.”

“Does it taste okay?” asked Comfort.

The ghost laughed, “Oh! I haven’t even tasted it yet. The smell is so fantastic. It is a dream.”

Small caught itself, though, its laughter stopped. It sensed a sudden void in its mouth. Indeed, when Small went to lick a lemon slice near the edge of the dish, the ghost discovered a violent truth. It was missing its tongue. Small sat upright and brought its spectral hand to its invisible mouth. The tears came.

“Oh, oh my, no – no, Comfort!” it wailed. “Is this how it happened?”

“What? What’s wrong?” she asked. “Tell me. Is it too sour for you?” And though the sky was bright and empty, raindrops began to fall onto Comfort’s lap. She wiped them away.

“No!” Small was hysterical. “I can’t taste it! I don’t have a tongue!”

Comfort snorted and her head rolled back. “How can you talk with no tongue?” She forgot she was speaking with a ghost. The laughter shook her chest, and lemon juice flowed down her forehead to her cheeks.

Small rose and moved for the window, spinning in circles, making itself woozy. “I just can,” it cried. The ghost turned, making quick rings about its essence until it stopped and looked over the yard. From where it dangled above Comfort, the ghost saw a curious, hatched line. Two shades of grass met at a curve, where maybe long before there had been a garden. And the garden would have had plants, prime and fresh. Where they would have grown, someone had built a shed. A dull soreness settled in Small’s stomach, the return of its morning nausea, and the borders of pain were defined when the ghost realized the lemon tree had been cut down.

“Jesus!” the ghost shrieked. “Where did my tongue go?”

Small drifted in its tremors of grief toward the window and leapt back into the attic. It howled and sobbed and whimpered, and its tears left a wet trail from the light of day to the darkest corner in the house. The panicked ghost dove into the pocket of an old denim jacket atop a heap of discarded old clothes. It coiled around itself, around all its tears and sadness. Outside on the roof, Comfort bit into her nails as the sun brightened her hair. She sat, and she listened as the poor ghost cried itself into a sleep that was more like nothing than would ever be something.

Two Foxes Two

I heard my father saying it, over and over – *the world is so vast!* My grandparents told him his dreams were too big for his head, and they peeled us from his arms like two scabs. Born just two night's sleep before the turn of century, the same year man became famous for escape, I knew my precious, younger sister was meant to engage profoundly with the world. I knew there were expectations that I would be great, too, and hopes I'd shuck my boyish attitude. Most of all, I knew I would sooner disappear altogether than sleep dormant in such a transient snow globe.

Still now, I wonder if their voices, spoken through the nose – “Settle down, girl!” – made me play harder, run faster and farther away. My grandmother became the loudest of all. I knew she hated our little games, and so we played them in secret.

Even in Kansas, each day gave us a new lesson. It was in the middle of a harsh winter, the same day the telegraph came to say we'd be leaving for boarding school, that I learned my future was hinged upon leaving. My little sister and I trolled through the snowdrifts. The sun glittered through a break in the clouds and made the crisp air feel so physical we could have held it in our hands. The bare trees stood, disciplined. Their ashy trunks shot through heaps of new snow and held them still and present. We stumbled

through the space, and we were impressed by a very plain sense of things. It all came exploding in on us at once: oh yes, the world.

But a muddy spark in the wintery dunes caught us by surprise, disappearing as quickly as it had emerged. It must have been an animal, we thought. It possessed a slender body and wispy tail, with which it maneuvered gracefully, kicking up small measures of powder with each movement before darting into a patch of naked trees. The sight nearly took my breath away.

“Wow! Did you see that, Pidge?” I called, almost gasping, pointing in its direction.

“Millie!” she called. “Wait up!”

I stopped to wait for her. She waddled through a dense patch of snow so high it nearly overtook her hips. The tips of her mittens dragged on the snow’s surface and left hazy lines on either side of her body. A knitted, purple scarf was wrapped around her neck and tucked messily into her oversized coat, the one I had worn two years ago when I was her size. She wore a large hat of the same material on the top of her head, and she had tied its dangling strings under her chin to keep the wind from snatching at it. The tip of her nose was a frosted rosy color, the same as the lips that curled around her open smile. She nodded with spirit in my direction, looking over my shoulders for a glimpse of our invisible visitor – the Houdini fox.

We hurried for the trees, but when we arrived it seemed we were the only two beings on the surface of the world. I was confused. I couldn’t see any signs of tracks.

“You did see it, right?” I asked.

Pidge seemed nervous. "I think so."

We looked back at the open field, and I focused on the deep and journeyed trenches we left in the snow. I wondered what it would be like to vanish, just like that magical red body. How fantastic it would feel to go where one liked, seen only in the moment, and in whatever little evidence one chose to leave behind! Was such a thing possible?

The animal's low voice called, then, from somewhere beyond the trees. Pidge went stiff with fear, and I could tell she wanted to say something, but I brought a finger to her lips. The tips of my gloves had disintegrated long before that day, and I felt the warm air escape from inside her body and curl around my bare skin. The heat of her core reached my very edges, like all the heat remaining in the ground and warming the trees, keeping them alive through the winter. We stood like that until her breathing slowed. Pidge sucked in when the voice pitched into a shaking crescendo and spread itself over the field. My own knees went stiff, and Pidge reached for my hand.

Another voice answered the animal's call from farther away. Pidge looked uneasily at our surroundings. I told myself it could be a passing coal train to calm my nerves. But I wasn't fearful, I was filled with exhilaration. I was filled with wonder.

The first voice sang back in a sweet tone, and then I heard the dainty pattering steps of the animal as it left its hiding place. I not see it go, though, and I was certain it would not leave any tracks this time either. It was as if the creature had never been there at all. Of course, we knew differently.

Pidge let go of me and trudged back into the open space along a new path. I followed her, more slowly than before, and took care to step directly in the marks she left. I wondered if Gretel ever wished that birds would eat the crumbs she left behind.

“Maybe it was a fox,” I said, and my voice sounded wrong. Even my skin tickled differently beneath the wind’s brush. I knew the world didn’t belong to just us, that nobody was damaged after the fox had gone away. “We’ve never seen one of those before.”

“Or maybe it was a snow fairy,” said Pidge, placing her mittened hands on her hips and flapping her elbows back and forth. She turned to face me, extended her arms like the thin, articulated bones of a bird’s wings, and fell back into a deep mound of snow. She landed with grace and the softest thud, sinking deep into the heap toward the frozen earth. She waved her arms and legs back and forth and made the impression of an angel.

“Maybe *you’re* a snow fairy,” I replied. I hopped in her footprints. “Just look at you, now.”

I stared down at the figure she had carved into a drift. It was disproportionate, for such a small frame surely did not need such large wings to fly; and around her head, her scarf had dislodged itself from her coat and spread its fraying edges onto the white bank, framing her face like a magical, dark halo.

“Nope! I’m just your sister, Pidge,” she said.

And I was Amelia Earhart, staring into her face, the new century girl’s face of adventure and curiosity, flushed and shivering in the exhilarating cool of the wind; the

face that opened itself to laughter as its body's hands reached up to clutch my wrists. Pidge tried tugging me down into the snow, but I resisted, wanting to fight the impression I would make next to her. But then, I thought of the spritely animal making a journey through the snow to another creature just like it, and I gave in, because disappearance didn't have to mean abandonment. Leaving and loving were not separate. I landed with an icy puff in the frosty blanket.

The chill of the snow on my body rushed against my back. My teeth chattered, and the metal fillings in my mouth clinked once or twice. I felt very strange and very beautiful. I was a wind chime.

I pulled my arms and legs through the snow, and at the same time it began to appear from the sky. It fell silently, while the rough fabric of my coat rubbed against my cold bed, making a hushing sound. A burst of wind came into my body by way of my nostrils. It rushed into my lungs and spiraled around the warm joy pulsing through my chest. I felt snowflakes melting on the heat of my cheeks.

After some time, I stood eagerly, wiped the moisture from my face, and helped Pidge to her feet so that we could see the marks we had made: two synchronized fairies, one slightly larger than the other. Both were still, and both were flying. We were captured, it seemed, but already we were disappearing under the falling magic from above. We were being erased. Pidge pushed out her tongue, and a few flakes stuck there. I kept my mouth closed, and she gave me a curious look. She had our father's eyes; the father who was always judged for his dreams and stories.

Surely what he said once about snowflakes was a lie. They're supposed to fall like perfect stars, or sweet aliens, with symmetrical designs and dazzling geometry, each one unique to the other. But how could he – anyone – ever know if that was true? Snowflakes could never be perfect, and they melt away the same way they come: quickly and magically, mimicking the air around them. Even if the air is cold, the sun will always win. The world wants to be warm. Even when air takes snowflakes from their perch on tree branches, and you see each millionth bit reflecting the world as it goes, the thrill is in seeing the sun dancing in the current of the wind. Snowflakes – no matter how many – could never compare to the power of bright days and wide skies, or the heat that rose in my chest as I dreamt secretly of evaporating – leaving that place, this world.

Eventually, we made our way back to our grandmother's house, singing sweet melodies, and our lullabies must have put the world to sleep. The sun sank lower into the sky, and the sky grew darker, and everything except for the air became very still. Our voices echoed against the crunching of our feet on the ice, and the gusts of air around us became frigid and mean and tough. Pidge copied me as I braced myself and crossed my arms tightly as the wind pushed against me.

Sometimes the wind blows so quickly and fiercely that you feel and look foolish walking against it. How much easier it would be to simply turn around and let it guide you somewhere else; still moving forward, but in a different kind of forward than before – a kind of forward you didn't ever dream about. To move forward always! But you are – I am – going this way and not that way. Together, we look ahead to something the world does not want us to grasp, and the wind rips at our bodies. We might want to turn around.

But in the sky, birds fly against the wind with such ease, so maybe we can, too. Nothing is unconquerable. It only took believing my mind was special to see things are so.

As we neared home, Pidge led the way and I stepped deliberately in her footprints, pretending that just as I had become a fairy back there in the open space, in the snow, I was now departing. I imagined our tracks behind me, and thought of what they must look like. They told the story of two girls who ventured into the world, one of whom would return while the other vanished completely after following a wintery fairy into the trees. It would be as if I had never existed at all. The creature would disappear, and the snow would melt, but I would know where I had been and what I had seen.

Interlude: The Letter R

i am little and the days are summer and everything is hot hot hot we sit in the back yard in the grass and search the sky for airplanes Mom plays and tells me i can be like amelia earhart but i don't want to be like

we have a raspberry bush and Mom picks ten to put on my fingertips sometimes she looks very sad

you were born in unlucky skin but we can put magic things on our fingers and if you push extra hard all that bad luck can be pushed out she says and then i'll eat the berries and you'll be fixed pleased fixed something good will happen to you

i try to put berries on Mom's hands but her fingers are too big because she is grown mom wears lots of rings berries are about luck if Mom found berries that could fit her that would be lucky and then she wouldn't even be needing the berries

*

I am growing and something terrible happens happens. He looks at me, sitting on his couch and breathing in his breath. He tells me I should stay because we need to talk about us, but I would like to leave, and soon.

I am excited to be in his bed because I learned recently that I love boys. But I have yet to teach love it's meant to be lucky.

I cry because my skin is too soft and he thinks things aren't working out. I tell him I am working very hard. I want love to be *yes* but my whole body is *no* and he pushes me to *maybe*, and once we are finished I feel like bruises. I go to the market dressed in shame and looking for berries. They're out of season.

I know I should have eaten more before I started growing. Had I believed in sour magic I might have shed my unlucky skin before things turned rotten.

*

I am grown and I am precious. I tell myself I am happy when my nose bleeds, when I am alone, because my blood spills – always – the color of berries. Rubies!

I have my skin. I have so much.

One day I will have someone, despite it all. Maybe that some boy will be no-account but all-account, and he will love me because I know how to decide about the luck of my own body. He will believe my skin is magic, only and purely.

Maybe that boy will see me when my nose bleeds. He will know that on the inside my body is the color of rubies. He will never give me up, not even for a casket full of jewels.

Moan Baby

The crime committed on Moan Baby during his birth was called by some – though not many – a gift. Most neighbors spoke of God or Jesus or Mary the Virgin. The blind woman living across the alley from Moan Baby’s mother blamed bumblebees. A few others said it had something to do with the alignment of the universe, and it was all thanks to the forces and fields of planets in the sky. Some used the word *destiny*. Others, *curse*. And so it came to be that nearly everyone in that little town formed some sort of opinion about the storm in Moan Baby’s chest before he himself would ever understand what the thundering could mean.

He surged to life, and like a train’s whistle the sound came from deep inside him. Of course, the doctors who delivered Moan Baby were confused by his song, but once they dismissed the possibility of any threat, they named the noise cosmetic and grew disinterested in silencing it. The nurses waited in the hall, perplexed, listening with compassion to Moan Baby’s breathy cries.

The one dressed in green, David-Ellis Prawn, said, “Those terrible moans! Poor baby!”

And July Kirk, wearing orange, replied, “Poor mother!”

News of Moan Baby's arrival to the world brought vibrancy to the town in a fashion comparable only to Roman-Catholic celebrations. For example, when the Pope came to visit America the year before the townspeople rejoiced and held dances every evening, and they prayed to God. Only the blind woman stayed in her home. With the same communal zeal, everyone welcomed the curious child to their collective, expecting something miraculous out of the fleshy lump carrying such a peculiar burden. Had they realized that everyone held weights on their backs; had they known everyone carried sadness in the corners of their eyes; had they admitted that troubles were like dreams and opinions in that everyone had them; had anyone stopped projecting expectations on the poor child and instead focused their attention inward, something miraculous might have happened.

The reality is that nobody has time for such frivolous things as introspection when there is a distraction to marvel at.

Moan Baby was ogled the way one ogles the sun on a still morning in October – perhaps October 28th at 8:37 – when the rising sun bursts through autumnal leaves and ignites their cold veins. One looked at Moan Baby with a serious mixture of pride, awe, guilt, and dread. One looked at Moan Baby, and Moan Baby looked back. One basked in his sound and wondered.

The sense of disappointment was palpable when Moan Baby matured into a teenager and the dirge in his chest went almost silent. It became instead a steady, buzzing hum. The spiritual blind woman exulted in this drone, recalling her notion that bees were somehow responsible. The change came on Moan Baby's thirteenth birthday when he

woke to his alarm clock with a sticky mess in his underpants. He saw the cloud of smoke lying motionless in the air above his head, and he knew he was becoming a man.

When her child's moans did not answer the ringing alarm, Moan Baby's mother rushed for his bedroom in a relieved panic, fearing the mysterious plague had taken him at last. She crossed herself as she opened the door, thanking the Lord he had died in his sleep. But Moan Baby was alive, and mortified – it should not be forgotten – to be discovered wiping away the viscous fluid smeared over his stomach and sheets.

“Georgia,” his mother said later that same day on the phone, “you’ll never believe it. He had a wet dream!”

“M.B.?” asked her friend. “How do you know? He just told you like that?”

His mother sighed. “Well, no. I walked in on him. He went white, totally embarrassed. And now there’s this fog. It’s white, too.”

“Fog?”

“That’s the thing, you know? His moan is almost gone, and now he’s breathing out smoke. Like a dragon. It comes out of his mouth and nose and I think maybe his ears, but it’s so thick I can’t tell for sure. It just hangs there, and it takes hours to fade. My house is filling with steam.”

“We’ve always known M.B. was special.”

Moan Baby's mother sighed again. “I don’t know, Georgia. Now I’ve got to schedule an appointment with Dr. Him and get contact lenses. My glasses are useless here.”

“Our babies challenge us, Joan. They make us better every day.”

Moan Baby challenged himself, worked against himself, and came to hate himself. He envied people who blended in, an easy task for a walking teakettle. He began to seek solitude in the wheat fields bordering town. He walked their perimeters fast enough that his exhalations left immobilized clouds like enchanted spider webs dangling midair, ten feet apart. The farmers looked out in the late afternoons and said grateful prayers when the bursts hung around their crops, for they believed it was good luck to have Moan Baby stalk their livelihood. They all said “I told you so” to their spouses when Moan Baby grew tired of walking and their yields collectively suffered.

Toward the end of his time in high school, Moan Baby discovered the only way of achieving normalcy was by holding his breath, and he made this a game by floating underwater in the bathtub, in swimming pools, in lakes and in streams. While researching methods to optimize the longevity of his breath, Moan Baby came across an article from 1997 recounting Meghan Heaney-Grier’s record-breaking free dive to a depth of 155 feet. He fell in love.

Having suffered thus far never escaping self-awareness, and having always been conscious of his never-ending breath, he relished the thought of disappearing into the blackness of the sea with just one gulp. He learned, of course, it was not so simple. To break a record, his beloved Meghan trained for hours each day. She ran and swam and did weight training to nurture her endurance. Thus began Moan Baby’s own training. Thus sparked his own dream to hold his breath. Thus became his search for normalcy at the bottom of the ocean where no steam could be seen and no moan could be heard.

The silence that lingered above his grave was almost as troubling as that which came into being the day Moan Baby died. Following his beloved Mehgan's lead, he sucked and sucked at the air for almost half an hour until it seemed his whole body was oxygen, and his personal atmosphere was an opaque, gray vapor. The spectators, the judges, and his mother could not and did not even see his descent because of this haze. Rather, it was only later in the absence of his bee's song that they knew he was sinking toward stardom, toward a submerged constellation of dreams and longing.

Dressed in black and led by David-Ellis Prawn and July Kirk, the people who admired Moan Baby for the miracle that he was sat in the first rows at his funeral and convinced one another he had been conscious long enough to experience record-breaking normalcy before the pressure of the ocean crushed him into suffocation. Spooky rumors floated through circles of children playing after school saying the final strike of Moan Baby's corporeal bells had been trapped in his last breath, which gurgled out of his throat in bubbles and rose to the surface of the water. The mystical blind woman from across the alley confirmed this, saying that beneath the tonal wheeze of the fizzing pockets she could hear Moan Baby laughing, exclaiming, "Free! I am finally free!"

His mother threw away her contact lenses in a fit of flattened anguish and fished for her glasses at the bottom of her sock drawer. Following the funeral, on her very worst days, she would venture out to the cemetery with a thermos full of boiling water and lean back against a tree stump. She would hold the thermos in her lap and allow the steam to rise up. The vapor fogged her lenses so much she became unable to read the carving on the tombstone, to witness Moan Baby's true name, which no one – not even Georgia –

ever bothered to learn. And her low sobs came from within her gut, and they were profound and present and real, not unlike the moans of a sweet boy whose dreams were as wide and deep as a great sea.

Lately

The frogs were screaming and we were sucking on oranges. They woke us from our nap. We were in the yard behind his house on a fresh pile of dirt, somewhere between the porch and the pond. The setting sun burned the tops of our heads, and our toes pointed east. Ford was to my left, humming an easy version of a church hymn I did not recognize. He would never admit a lot of things, including that he loved the Bible even more than he loved me. While he mumbled his words – *amen, amen* – he reached from our mound of dirt and tore handfuls of grass from the earth.

Somewhere to our right Ford's mother rose from the porch swing, and the sound of shaking chains and rattling springs filled the sky with a sweet tinkling. When the screen door slammed and he knew she was inside, Ford's fingers twisted around mine. With the other hand, he sprinkled leaves of grass on my stomach. When I looked at him he showed me an orange peel wedged between his teeth. I moved closer, but much too quickly the rusty yelp of the screen door sang out over the yard, and we knew his mother was watching, and my hand was empty.

Ford rolled away, stood, and moved slowly for the pond and out of my sight. I turned my eyes to the house and found his mother glaring in my direction. She was an

unhappy woman, and she let all her disappointments weigh her skin and heart and bones down. She dragged her feet. She drooped, and I had never known someone with so many wrinkles on their skin, nor so many foul things in their throat. She was positively venomous, and she hated me.

The sky darkened and the wind took the grass away from my skin. The frogs continued to scream back and forth. Until that night, I hadn't known they were there. Lately had been such a loud dog, always fussing. Her incessant barking was the result of acute brain damage following a particularly traumatic Sunday afternoon in which the lift-gate of Ford's truck fell down and bonked the top of her head. Now, she was gone, and Ford wouldn't tell me where she had gone or what had happened to her, but I knew. I knew, and I watched the sky begin to give away its brightness to the night as I drew handfuls of dirt into my fists. I knew.

*

Ford thought he knew everything, and he was always reminding me.

"You don't believe me?" he asked one evening. "I know everything."

To which I said, "I don't believe you."

Ford led me outside then, to prove it to me, and Lately started barking at us from her corner of the yard.

"See what I mean? The dark has so many different faces. Do you feel the night?" he whispered. Before I could protest, he was dragging me around his mother's house to the cellar's trap door. He took me down the steps. "Does it feel different down here?"

"Yes," I answered. "I think so."

“Nothing,” he said, “is the same when it comes to being dark in the in-or-out. You always know if there are walls around you. You can hear them when you breathe.”

“But what if I hold my breath?” I teased.

He paused, and I imagined the funny face he was making. “Now, hold out your hands. When you’re outdoors,” he said, “your hands are invisible in the blackness. Right in front of your face, even, but you could never tell. They aren’t yours anymore. They are just air, and they extend beyond and forever into spacious skies, looping endlessly into all the places we can’t see even when there is light.”

I laughed, and the sound skated across the surface of the cold, cement walls.

“Nobody says things like that, Ford.”

His fingertips found mine still reaching into the black nothing and my heart beat so loudly in my ears that the sound of Lately’s barking disappeared. My hands were no longer mine, just like he said.

*

His ugly mother called out to where I was on the mound of dirt just as the sky went blue-gray and asked – though I knew she wasn’t really asking – if I’d be staying for dinner. It was time to leave, she was pushing me out, so I told her *no, thank you* and left with the sound of screaming frogs in my ears. Ford and I said our see-you-soons and turned away from one another. Behind me, before the screen door had even slammed shut, his mother’s harsh voice damned the afternoon we had spent together. “How can you call someone like that you’re friend? I didn’t raise you to hang around –”

I ran down the dirt road to my house, about half a mile. I was sweating when I reached the screen door. My father was gone most every night, but by then he had traded his position on the church kneeler for a seat at the local tavern, and my mother had moved into my grandmother's basement, so the house was dark and empty. The fridge was empty, too, so I filled a glass with water from the kitchen tap, carried it up the stairs to my bedroom in the attic, and told myself I wasn't hungry for the fourth night in a row. I placed the cup on my dresser.

By then it was dark, but I left the lights off and sat on the edge of my bed, caught in the waxing moonlight. The blinds covering the window were busted and curved away from one another like the starched sleeves of a very important and holy person's sterile clothing. They hung from plastic clips that swung on a cheap metal rod my father had repurposed, and I could hardly say they did their job. Outside, a light shone over our humble yard. This was home.

And at home, at night, the brilliant safety light wiggled through the gaps between my blinds that – had my father more money – would not have been there. That same unwelcome, penetrating light I turned my back to in that moment snuck through the slivers between the blinds and casting reverse-shadows on my eastern wall – narrow and fine and expressive, with dazzling and defined points. There were nine, all the same size, and the moderate breeze coming from the cracks in the glass moved them left and right like peculiar dancers, so very wild.

I typically lit candles, but that night, when the sun was finally down, I remained in the dark. The light outside burned continuously, so the darkness was incomplete, but the

darkness could never compare to the everlasting needles on my wall. I wondered how I might go about catching their glittering bodies, so that I might keep them all to myself. I could share them with whomever I chose to share my bed with.

Looking like falling stars, the needles burned. Needles, shining steel, slender and surgical things, are made for sewing and suturing. They are tools meant for mending broken bonds and coming to pierce me and the very night itself, stringing us together, closing the parts of me that I should never have opened. They are tools that might connect me to the special ones in my bed and sew our love in tight, warm stitches.

I could see the needles on my wall, but I could not see the glass on my dresser. I knew it was there, and I told myself I would not drink until Ford told me the truth of what he had done. I knew he would confess, because that was in his nature. The morning after our first and only kiss, he was on my front porch at dawn with a freshly shaved face and a tight bowtie. He told me we had to go to the church to confess our sins. I remember laughing, and that really hurt him. He went without me.

*

It was in the tacit, outdoors-sort-of-darkness that the rain came down upon us. The rain put our clothes against our skin and made us shiver. I could see one streetlamp marking an intersection ahead of us, where one or two cars zipped through fresh puddles. A quick charge of lightning surprised me, us, like a nudge from God, and Ford shuffled closer to me. In the glowing aftermath of the burst, I realized our aimless walk had led us to the steps of his church. The cracked bricks led up to a rounded arch that hung over a worn, wooden door.

The water did us no favors and drenched us in every way. We were chilled skeletons before we even began climbing the holy stairs to the dark alcove; and once there, we found it was too small to shield us both, so the rain continued pelting us with a sad sort of fury.

Overcome, though expecting we'd be locked out, I reached for the doorknob. When I was only a boy, my father had a golden key on his belt that he could use to unlock all the church doors. He was a singer, a leader in our congregation, so my family had unlimited access. Confused, I grew up thinking churches were locked to everyone who wasn't special, who wasn't explicitly welcome. When I told the world I loved boys instead of girls, the church locked my entire family out. Even my dad.

The night it rained, the terrible boom of thunder behind us pushed me down onto the floor of the foyer. I fell out of the rain, onto my knees, into a picture of perfect Christian guilt. The weak light from behind me cast Ford's shadow like a smudge on the opposite wall. Between my fingers, I felt a stiff rubber mat, and by the light of three burning candles I saw framed images of Jesus and bulleted Christian agendas on the walls, everywhere. It looked so much like my old church that my stomach found itself in my mouth, and I nearly let it all go. Frightened, I jumped to my feet, pulled Ford inside, and pushed the door shut with a slam. There, in the holy dark burning, I felt out of place. When I looked at Ford, my heart swelled, and I knew absolutely I did not belong.

*

Looking like a ghost she stood, barefoot and framed in mahogany, on a platform of white lilies. A blue dress hung below her knees, and a cartoonish heart burst through the

buttons running down the length of her chest. She held a bloody dagger in her right hand and clutched a beaded rosary in the other. I leaned forward and gazed up at her from the edge of our pew. We had entered the main hall of the church, where the lights were on, and sat down. She was smiling, and her white face, dripping with tears, was absolutely terrifying.

“Who is she?” I asked, thinking Ford would know.

He did. “Her name was Maria.”

“What’s the matter with her?”

“She was twelve when a man forced himself on her. She resisted, and he tried to murder her.”

“Stop,” I told him.

He didn’t listen. “Before Maria died at the hospital,” he said, “she forgave the man who stabbed her, and he spent his entire prison sentence repenting his sins. She’s a saint.”

The emptiness of the church pressed heavily upon us. I looked down at my hands, at my dirty cuticles. The creases in the skin around my knuckles reminded me of Ford’s mother and her poisonous scowl. I swallowed, turned my eyes back to the portrait of Maria, and I stared at the painted smoothness of her pallid, perfect face.

“She forgave him?” I asked incredulously. “Some things should not be forgiven. Some monsters.”

“He wasn’t a monster,” Ford told me. “He confessed, eventually. He was sorry.”

“Eventually,” I repeated. “I’m guessing she wasn’t around to hear him apologize.”

We fell silent for a moment, and the thrum of rain and wind against the walls of the church droned louder.

“What does it matter if she heard or not?” he asked.

“What is a voice if no one is listening?” The words surprised me so much, I thought they only could have been born from my very soul. The question lingered in my throat and I settled into it.

Then came another burst of lightning, and the soft lights of the church went out. Surrendering to the moment, we stopped talking, and Ford leaned his head on shoulder. Without knowing, I kissed the top of his head. He whispered something, but the pound of thunder took his words up high into the vaulted ceilings. I gave him another kiss on the top of his head, and then another, and soon we were breathing into each other’s mouths. The lights flickered and fought their way back to life. There, in their glow, Ford caught himself and looked at me with panic.

“What have we done?” he asked.

*

He was sobbing, and I could barely make out what he was saying. His moans were deep and his body was shaking. In my arms he heaved, and even his bones trembled. I gripped his shoulders and rocked him back and forth. His tears soaked my shirt.

“What have I done?” he cried. “What have I done?”

His mother made him do it. Her face, torn with lines like meat under a butcher’s knife, gave him the instructions. Lately! She was out of control. Her condition was too severe to bear. She was miserable. Her swelling brain was driving her mad.

The night it happened, she was stumbling across the grass, whining and begging for relief. She had stretched her chain tight, trying to get to the back porch. Ford's mother woke to Lately's barking and demanded Ford do something immediately.

With his father's shotgun, Ford said, he ended Lately's suffering in seconds. He buried her body in the back yard between the porch and the pond. Many days later, he was still unable to shake the reality of his new identity: he was a killer, and how merciful is a killer if their task is merely execution, if the killed has no moment to breathe, nor to forgive? The guilt rose up his body slowly like a thick tar, drowning his organs and swallowing his heart before congealing completely, leaving him to suffocate. When he confessed to me, he was hyperventilating, wanting just one clean and redemptive breath. We stayed for long in that position, and when his sorrow was drained I wiped the moisture from his face.

*

The morning after, I rose from my bed and went over to my dresser. I hadn't touched the cup of water since the night I had gone hungry, and on its surface a dusty film had settled. When I lifted the glass, I saw a blond ring burned into the dark wood. It was Sunday. I held the water up to my face, swished the cup, and watched as the dirt circled into the contents and disappeared. It was clean, I thought, but in my mouth the water tasted stale and contaminated. I opened the window and poured the rest of it.

When I had dressed, I got into the car and drove to Ford's house. His mother answered the door, and very plainly asked me to wait outside.

We walked into the foyer of the church together, and the parishioners went ghostly at the sight of me – of us, together. Through another pair of doors leading into the main hall, Maria’s ghostly image stared directly at us, too. We sat in the same pew as the night I met her. People murmured, waiting for the worship session to begin, and I nudged Ford. We looked up at Maria’s crying eyes. Ford squeezed my hand, and we rose as the first hymn began. The priest entered. He was a wrinkled old man in flowing, orange robes. He moved slowly toward the altar, and then turned to face us as we sang.

Through all the tumult and the strife

I hear its music ringing

It sounds an echo in my soul

How can I keep from singing?

No storm can shake my inmost calm

While to the rock I’m clinging

Since Love is Lord of heaven and hearth

How can I keep from singing?

Self Portrait

When Dasha was seventeen her youth pastor took her driving. She had saved her money for two years working as a lifeguard to discover the only car she could afford was one she had no idea how to drive. The manual transmission wobbled in her hand, vibrating and synchronized with the engine. The knob was smooth but firm, and it filled her whole fist, a foreign object that made her eyes water. She thought of a snake, of a garden, of Eve's nakedness.

“Remember to feather the clutch,” he told her, stretched comfortably in the passenger side. He did not buckle his seatbelt. He extended his left arm and grabbed at the edge of Dasha's seat. The tips of his fingers were on her shoulders. From where she sat she could see his yellow teeth, rotting from a new habit of chewing tobacco, and the skin of his face was cracking and baggy, like the flesh on an old turtle's neck.

She took her foot from the brake and slowly gave the engine some gas, taking pressure from the clutch. The car rolled forward a few inches.

“There!” he said.

And the car lurched, then. The loose glass windows shook, and the two were jerked forward. The engine lost its life, cutting the power from the buzzing radio, and the air conditioner whirred to sleep.

“Almost,” he told her. “Try again.”

Dasha moved the stick back into a neutral position, pushed the pedals down, and turned the key. The AC blasted her hair back. Feather. She wasn’t sure what that meant.

Again, the car sputtered, quickened, jumped, and died. The air lost its gust. She tightened her grip on the wheel.

“Hey,” he said, squeezing her shoulder. “Don’t stress about this. You’ll find your groove.”

“I’m the only girl in youth group who doesn’t have her license,” Dasha whined. “I know Katie is tired of giving me rides, and I’m sick of playing second fiddle to her boyfriend.”

“Morgan?” he asked. “I thought you and Morgan were friends.”

Dasha sighed. “I need to know how to do this. I *need* to do something.”

She made the attempt nine more times, each time her frustration growing and concentrating itself between her eyebrows like a heavy thumbprint. She was nearly ready to give up completely when – suddenly – she was making laps behind the church, shifting from first to second gear, back down to first, laughing, catching glimpses of her dimples in the rear-view mirror.

“I told you,” he said. “Wait till Katie sees what you can do.” Dasha squeaked. “And your mother, too!”

Dasha punched the clutch, and the engine failed. The car bumped to a stop.

“A few wrinkles to iron out,” he assured her, “but you’ll pass. You’ll pass.”

Without thinking, Dasha turned and pulled him in for a tight embrace. “Make sure you do something special on the day you take your test,” he said into her ear. “You’ll want to look beautiful. You’ll look like a beautiful, new woman.”

*

When Dasha was eleven she was crowded, shoulder-to-shoulder, by other girls in front of the whole congregation. It was 7:45 A.M., but the church was dark. The lights were dimmed and the people were hushed. Dasha shifted her weight, bouncing on the wet carpet. Thinking everyone could hear the squishing sounds, feeling their eyes on her back, she hummed and prayed to God, thanking him for this opportunity and apologizing for staining it with her concerns for vanity.

With a splash and a gurgle, her youth pastor brought a girl from below the water’s surface. She had been submerged headfirst to her shoulders in a metal tank, one normally used for watering horses or cattle, and the whole act had brought clapping and then silence to the hall.

Now, her youth pastor screamed from the center of the pulpit, congratulating the girl on her commitment to Christ’s ministry: “My family, welcome this new light.” He extended a hand towards those in the pews, the other still firm on the girl’s back. The crowd looked frozen, paralyzed, and their empty eyes showed the girl, freezing and dripping, no mercy. “Please welcome your newest sister, Esther.”

“Welcome, Esther,” Dasha cried, along with the others.

Esther turned red from the attention, and she stepped away from the tank the moment the youth pastor released his hold. Her bright red hair had turned a golden auburn in its wetness and hung down in long, straight spears. She took a place back in the line of young girls. Her bare feet squished, too.

“Now it is time for another child to become one with Christ,” said the youth pastor. He looked at Dasha.

She walked slowly towards him, the rusting tank, and she became afraid that the water would be too cold, that the chill would shock her, cause her to cry out, embarrass her. She looked into the youth pastor’s face. It was round and made from warm colors, like a fresh ball of dough. In the center of his face his teeth shone a pristine and frightening white, like the color of a spider’s sac of eggs. Dasha shook.

“Daughter,” he began, “are you prepared to sacrifice your humanly life for the goodness of God?”

Daughter. “I am,” she whispered.

“Louder!”

“I am,” she nodded. “I am.” Somewhere in the crowd, her mother hummed.

“And do you, daughter, believe in the ultimate solemnity of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ?”

“Yes,” Dasha said. “I do.”

“And what do you ask of God?”

She turned to the faces in the pews, to the reflections atop the bodies like corpses, with minds mimicking and not thinking. The rehearsed lines poured out of her throat like

dusty moths from a drawer kept shut for many months: “I ask that God bless me. I ask that he allow me to fulfill my truest role as his daughter. I ask for his forgiveness and grace in moments that I fail so that I may adventure out into this world in his honor. I ask for the courage to change the world.”

“Very good.” The youth pastor put his hand on the back of her head. “Now, we can purify your soul, and you can advance on your righteous path to God’s holy kingdom.”

Dasha pinched her nose and puffed out her cheeks.

The water was warm, too warm, like the sensation she felt in dreams as a child. She swam through thick liquid, rivers and lakes, soothed and comfortable in the heat, only to discover she had wet herself and the bed. Water had always been a trick.

So, too, was the baptismal ceremony a trick. The youth pastor held her under the water, gripping firmly the nape below her hairline, and she could hear the clapping echo through the church, a noise celebrating her choice to be holy. He held her there until the world grew silent again, until the applause ceased and all she could hear was the sloshing of the bath against the metal walls as it bounced in waves and radiated from her energized shoulders. When she was nearly out of breath, the youth pastor removed his hand and she burst back into the air, gasping.

She frowned, staring at the look of confusion settling on the reflection of her rippled face. She was wet, and cold, and she felt she had made a mistake.

*

When Daniel was thirty-two, he met a woman named Lacey. Daniel had been Daniel for nearly seven years, and Lacey had been Lacey for almost ten. Neither was too keen on looking back, so they must have been looking forward, which is peculiar knowing they met each through a minor traffic accident. Their vehicles retained damages so slight they agreed not to make any big stink with the insurance companies.

“Still,” said Daniel, half-speaking and forcing his voice to be deeper. “It probably wouldn’t hurt to exchange contact information. Just in case.”

Lacey smiled, a curve that highlighted the square of her jaw. She agreed and said, “We should probably get dinner. You know, just in case.”

She went to grab a pen and paper from her car. Daniel followed her, sauntering along the curb and watching her broad shoulders. Lacey rummaged through her glove box, mumbling to herself in pursuit of a pen. After some moments, she groaned, and Daniel turned his head. Over her shoulder, something caught his eye.

“You drive stick?” he asked. “Me, too. Was a total bitch to learn.”

Lacey’s hands stopped searching, and she looked back at him. “Yeah,” she said. “At first I didn’t think I could do it, but this was all I could afford at the time. All my girlfriends think it’s, like, super butch or something, but I think it’s cool. I mean – not that I think I’m cool. Most people drive automatics, you know? They let the machine do all the work. They don’t want to have to make any major decision on their behalf, even if they know it’s the thing that’s most right for them, and especially if that decision is tough.” She gave him a crooked, half-smile, as if she felt she over-shared.

*

When Dasha was fourteen she kissed a boy for the very first time. His name was Morgan Mann. Morgan Mann always arrived to church before Dasha and her family, and he sat with his. From where she sat Dasha could examine the curve of his head. She liked the look of his right ear, which had been deformed by a dog's bite some many years earlier. It reminded Dasha of a hermit crab's shell. She once spent an entire service imagining a trip with Morgan Mann to the beach where she'd bury all of him beneath the sand, leaving only his wonky nub exposed. Armed with a stopwatch, she'd time just how long it would take for an anxious, growing specimen to stumble upon his ear and take up permanent residence. Her mind drifting, she peered about the hall of the church until her eyes found the metal baptismal tank shoved into a corner behind a flower display, and in her mind the ocean's tide washed up over Morgan Mann's ear and pulled the sand away from his body, revealing a breathless corpse. In her daydream she realized he would suffocate there as she sat and waited. It never occurred to her that he would need to breathe.

It was the youth pastor's idea that Dasha and Morgan Mann would work together, supervising the weekly meetings of Elementary Bible Study, a program fostered by the Widow's Association. This group was a dynamic mob of graying ladies abandoned, through death, who ran with fear on their backs toward Christ's calling. The group was constantly in flux, the faces added and removed with time, each lady eventually and oftentimes quickly joining her husband in a cemetery plot. All the money gathered during the collection on Tuesday evening services was used to purchase snacks and Bibles in easy-to-read coloring book format for budding believers ages 5-9.

Dasha and Morgan Mann were given a crisp ten-dollar bill once a month as a reward for their persistent dedication to God and his holiness. After Elementary Bible Study, they walked south three blocks and east four to a diner with sticky tables, and they ordered milkshakes on the widows' dollar. Morgan Mann was the type of boy who wanted all of everything he had to himself, so he sucked his entire drink, pausing only when the chill brought a pain to his forehead. Dasha was an only child, and she was very interested in what it meant to have sisters, but Morgan Mann did not seem interested in talking about his family.

When Dasha asked for a closer look at his broken ear, Morgan Mann gasped, flushed, and hushed her. He cupped his hand over it, and hid it from her view.

"You know," he told her, "I don't think you're as cute when you talk so much." He hunched over toward his straw and worked at the last remaining drops at the bottom of the fluted glass. He was like a vacuum, and the flesh of his cheeks came in between his teeth. He was a seashell boy with fish lips. The suckling noise turned eyes toward their booth and Dasha hid her face.

"You think I'm cute?" she asked.

They kissed in the men's bathroom, which was a gritty, single-stall room with a creaking door and a broken lock. The floor was sticky, and the smell of urine masked the deep-fried scent drifting in from the dining area. Morgan Mann put his tight mouth on her tighter mouth, and her body did not respond. There was no sensation, no butterfly, no tingle, and no thrill. Dasha thought perhaps she belonged in the Widow's Association right then, and decided to wait until Morgan Mann was through playing around. It did not

take long for her to bore him, and before he opened the door on their way out, he burped his chocolate milkshake and blew the air right into her face.

*

When Dasha was six she wandered into the boy's restroom during an outdoor recess at St. Jude's Day Care Center. She had hopped from a supervisor's lap, the one she affectionately called Plum, because she was so round and always wore purple. Plum was sitting at a table in the shade with Dasha and four other girls. They were stringing plastic beads onto elastic bands and passing completed friendship bracelets to one another. By the time she left Plum's lap, Dasha's wrists were covered with pastels. The beads clicked when she swung her arms. She wore twelve on each arm, and this made her a rainbow mosaic, bright and speckled and girlish and childish, like the inside of a birthday cake.

The bathrooms were through the sliding porch doors across the wide yard from where they sat, and Dasha hurried into the sunlight and towards the building. A few older boys were throwing a disc back and forth, and the twirling edge nearly clipped her head and went whizzing around her right side. Its spinning puffed air onto her cheek, and she screamed at the fright.

Plum, who had not seen what happened, looked only to see Dasha as she continued toward the porch doors, and she looked lazily back on the young jewelers.

The sliding glass door was heavy and covered in children's fingerprints. Inside, the air was cool enough to make Dasha shiver. A thick line of orange tape marked the way from the door, down the hall, and to the bathrooms. She tiptoed atop the line like a tightrope walker, and the lights of her blinking sandals sparkled.

Dasha waddled through the hallway, and the flashing lights on her feet strobed against the walls, which were decorated with crayon drawings and photos of her playmates. Hidden somewhere amongst them all, a Polaroid image hung of Dasha wearing a silver knight's costume. In it, she grimaced, wielding a plastic sword, turning orange in the glistening sunset bursting through the window. That evening, her mother had been late to pick up her, so Dasha and Plum opened up the costume box. Plum was wearing a felt visor shaped like a pizza slice with an orange feather boa. Dasha galloped back and forth across the room, fighting invisible dragons, crying, "It is I, Sir Dasha!" Dasha's mom walked in to the ruckus and scolded Plum for allowing her daughter to act out.

Near the end of the hallway stood a water fountain and a wastebasket. On either side there were wooden doors marked "Smart Boys" and "Smart Girls." Dasha paused for a drink of water, then glanced at both signs. She faced her options and rapped her hands against the rounded metal top of the wastebasket. Smart Boys or Smart Girls. She took another drink of water and, in an instant, she slid the rainbow bracelets off her wrists and into the trashcan. She cracked her knuckles and decided to see what the boy's bathroom was all about.

Orange Imago

Ellen wore the same dress to both funerals. She ran her fingernails against the shining acrylic beads sewn into the fabric, which sparkled under the sun the same as her grandmother's dark, wooden casket. It was July. Having lost her mind somewhere in her brain, Ellen's grandmother spent a remarkably detached eight years in a nursing home before she died. She had never met the woman her grandmother truly was, so her death was more confusing than upsetting, and Ellen felt sweaty and uncomfortable in the crowd of strangers dressed for purposeful mourning.

A man in a robe read from a holy book. Ellen yawned, and turned her head over her shoulder to look into her mother's face. Her black, round hat was a dark halo obscuring her features and hiding the wrinkles gathered near her eyes. Tears came slowly. The pastor finished speaking, and the mob offered a solemn *amen*. Ellen's mother forced a smile, and bent to whisper something, but a sudden bump made her bristle.

They both looked to where the casket had been resting. Four men, dressed for the occasion, had lifted the box from its temporary perch near the preaching man and ushered it to a hole in the ground that was too little. The cavity could not hold it all. Still, they persisted, trying to make it fit, trying to make Ellen's grandmother disappear forever.

Thunk, thunk, thunk.

Hushed whispers wound disapprovingly through the assemblage, and a few members cleared their throats to make clear for everyone their disdain. After each bump, the men readjusted their footing and set to task again, but there was no succeeding. It was madness.

Ellen's mother rushed forward with her palms outward at her chest. She quietly reproached them, asking them to cease, but the priest insisted they continue, and she slowly melted back into the crowd. The noises were heavy and blunt. Ellen felt their impact radiating through the ground and up into her kneecaps.

Thunk, thunk, thunk.

It was obvious Ellen's grandmother was not ready to go. The pallbearers began sweating, and grunting, and Ellen wondered why they did not just give up. They were being ridiculous, she thought, and before long, she was smiling, noticing their sweaty brows, wobbling knees, and white knuckles. It was time to quit, and everyone knew but them.

A heavy thunk, louder than the rest and accompanied by a distraught, absurdly masculine groan came, and laughter burst from Ellen's mouth unexpectedly. She quickly slapped her hand over her mouth, but the damage was done. The joy tickled her chest, but she fought it. She had known this kind of laughter before. It came to her at church, in class, and in the library. It was a sinister and demanding laughter that insisted upon being set free in situations that require a painfully brooding silence, and it was this wrongness that made it feel so great as it throbbed and pumped beneath her skin.

Thunk, thunk, thunk.

Nobody seemed to notice her outburst, though, and when the feeling had left her, she unclasped her mouth. Another massive thinking sound shook her knees and she erupted with wild delight. She did not hide it. Her mother wept, and only then did the pallbearers quit.

*

Ellen's uncle Theodore came to live with her and her mother right after the funeral. He was always, always sad. Ellen was quite often happy, and she loved the summer months the most because her mother – Theresa – was a teacher, and constantly busy during the school year. Theodore's sadness managed to invade every moment. He had interrupted their lives. Before his arrival, Ellen would help her mother make breakfast in the morning, but after, she stayed in the living room with him, for she felt guilty leaving him alone to his unhappy thoughts and the mindlessness of the radio.

In the living room were three large windows placed side-by-side on the western wall bordering the back yard. Before Theodore imploded in on them, Ellen and her mother would spend hours in the garden just beyond these windows, planting and laughing. For the most part, he kept his gaze forward and blank, aimed at the wall behind Ellen's head. She liked to sit near the windows and watch the bumblebees dart between the living green things, pretending he was not there.

On the first day of August Ellen was unhappy too, because school was coming, and that meant the free days with her mother would soon close up on themselves. She sighed, peering out the windows beyond her uncle's face. She stole a quick glance at him

and was not surprised to see he was unmoved. She sighed again. His good eye twisted in her direction. The other, the one made of glass, held its forward gaze.

“What’s wrong, sweet girl?” he asked. His eyebrows jumped with each syllable.

“I hate school,” she said, and then she stuck out her jaw and puffed a few strands of hair away from her forehead. “Hate it.”

Theodore looked toward her and scooted to the edge of the chair. The radio host chuckled, and stopped speaking, and there was a moment of silence before a familiar drumbeat began playing. He reached out one hand to raise the volume while extending the other to her.

Ellen would have normally refused to dance with such a sad man, but this was one of her favorite songs, and before she knew it Theodore was swinging her across the room to the voices of Tommy James and the Shondells. She stood on his feet while they twirled in circles, shaking this Mony Mony, and they sang.

Theodore was not a good singer, but they were laughing and carrying on. Ellen stared into her uncle’s face as the world beyond them became a blurring spiral of colors. She was dizzy, and when they stopped spinning, she let go and struggled to find her balance. She kept shaking her hips and twisting her wrists above her head, waving her hands and bobbing her head. Theodore clapped to the beat, stepping back and forth in small circles. He rolled his shoulders forward, then backward, and bounced them up and down. They joined hands once again, and for just a moment, Ellen shared a harmless bliss with her uncle.

Theresa's voice came singing from the kitchen, catching Ellen, and she freed herself from her uncle's grasp and ran for mother's words. Theresa was at the stovetop, swaying slightly to the beat. Ellen rushed up, sliding on the wooden floor in her thin socks, and she slipped and crashed into her mother's back. This knocked two happy eggs from her hands to the ground. The mess, like mucous, splattered between their feet, but Theresa only smiled, grabbed Ellen's hands, and pulled her back to the living room.

*

The screen door overlooking the back porch slammed as Ellen's mother left them alone in the back yard. She sat across from her neighbor Dewey. In Ellen's hands sat two green caterpillars, chunky and unhurried, like something out of a picture book. Dewey's hands, coated with dried mud, pushed a toy dump truck through the grass. The sun was setting, and somewhere in the distance warbled the sound of an old lawnmower. Over the din, Dewey hummed one of Ellen's favorite hymns. She recognized the melody as something a frail man sang at her grandmother's funeral. The creatures, blind and walking on nubby feet, moved closer to one another, slowly, until their sides touched. They remained still.

"Where do caterpillars kiss?" Ellen asked. She did not look away from her palm.

"On their caterpillar mouths, maybe," said Dewey. He was two years older and always spoke to her as if he knew everything – and he did, thank you very much.

"No," she said. "That's wrong." Ellen kicked one foot out from under her knees and turned away from him. She leaned her head closer to her hands and curled her back. She pretended the smell of the earth beneath her legs was coming from the bugs. "Where

do they go when they want to kiss each other? They must have a special place that we don't know about."

Dewey rolled the monster truck through a patch of dandelions and sent their white fluff into the air. The headless stems sprung up from underneath the toy's trusses, lifeless and empty. He noticed she was no longer watching him, so he pushed his truck toward her. It crashed against her back and she stiffened.

"Dewey."

"Ellen." He paused, and the popping, grinding sound of a rock caught in the lawn mower just down the street startled him. From the corner of her eye, Ellen saw him shrink. She knew he hated loud noises. He became very defensive. "Maybe you've never seen them kiss because you're not special enough."

Ellen spun to look directly at his face. The hand that held the caterpillars stayed soft and warm, but her other was scrunched into a tight fist matching her furrowed brow. She hid her top lip beneath the lower, and she glowered. Dewey rolled his eyes, and she turned away from him.

"My mom says you don't have the imagination I have," Ellen told him. "She says you care about toys and I care about dreams."

She didn't see that, like Theodore's, Dewey's eyes were blank. "I have dreams," he said.

"Everyone has dreams, I think," she replied. Ellen shrugged and brought her hand to eye-level. One caterpillar had escaped the other and found the tip of her finger. It

dangled in the air, the end of its world, and flailed back and forth. “Maybe even these two.”

*

Two days before school was to start, Theodore left the house in the early afternoon and did not return until it had been dark for many hours. Once, the previous year, Ellen had misunderstood her mother’s instructions and waited for her after school in the wrong spot. When Theresa came to find Ellen at the end of her classes at the right place, she was missing, and she would stay that way for over four hours. Ellen could still picture the horrifying look of panic and relief on her mother’s face when she was found. Theresa reprimanded Ellen for her poor listening skills, and made her pinky promise to listen, listen, listen.

When Ellen asked her mother where her uncle was, she saw the same look of alarm quickly pass her mother’s face as she glanced to Theodore’s empty table setting, and then it disappeared below the surface of her skin again. Ellen’s shoulders fell. She was sorry she asked.

Theresa dumped Theodore’s uneaten meal into the trash can, and Ellen watched as her mother’s tears ran the bridge of her nose before forming – one by one – round droplets that fell down onto the greasy, empty dish. Ellen fought the urge to ask what was wrong, why she was crying, and eventually Theresa put the plate in the sink, shook her head, and left the room.

When Theodore finally returned, the noises he made woke Ellen from a nightmare. She heard his heavy footsteps as they stumbled down the dark hallway from

the backdoor to his room just across the hall. She opened her door just enough, and she recognized the smell of alcohol twisting in the air around him. She watched as he sat down on his bed. He cried, and unwrapped the dirty handkerchief in his hands. When she saw the thing inside, Ellen was confused.

She recognized the shape from cartoons on television, but did not think it was something that could exist in the real world. The gun was small, impressive, and mysterious to her. Its metal body glowed in the dim light of his room, and she leaned forward to get a better look. Her weight pushed on the door, and he realized her.

Theodore brought his index finger to his lips, smiled, and tucked the weapon beneath his pillow. His smile was genuine, and recognizing his peculiar happiness, Ellen nodded. But at the sound of her mother's footsteps in the kitchen, Ellen locked herself in her room.

Theresa's voice was strong, rebuking Theodore for his disappearance. Her distress was profound, and he wailed. Ellen ducked under her covers, wishing to escape the sounds of nightmares. She twisted and twirled, curling the blankets around her abdomen until she could barely move her legs; and with her hands, she covered her ears to block out the return of Theodore's familiar sadness.

*

They were out of breakfast supplies, so Ellen held a dry bowl of bland cereal the next morning, but did not eat any of it. She sat in her chair across from Theodore in the living room and ran her fingers through the crumbling bits of granola. He did not look at her.

Ellen sat with him for most of the morning while Theresa dug in the garden, avoiding the both of them.

That afternoon, Theresa took Ellen shopping for groceries, promising the group of three would share a delicious breakfast each day before school began. Theresa told Ellen that a bad breakfast made for a bad day, and Ellen rubbed her empty stomach. At the store, they purchased apples and bananas, and milk and eggs, and they filled their basket with bacon and bread and syrup. Ellen assured her mother they didn't need another box of bran cereal.

On the way home, Theresa let Ellen roll the passenger window down so she could reach her head and arms out to feel the breeze. She told her mother she felt like she was flying, and her mother told her she could do anything if she only believed that it was possible.

Ellen thought of Dewey. She hadn't played with him since he had made fun of her for talking to bugs. She decided Dewey didn't believe in much of anything, and she pushed her arms further out the window, lifting them higher into the air.

When the car stopped in the driveway, Theresa lit a cigarette to relieve her stress and asked Ellen to have Theodore help her carry in the groceries.

She hurried around the house, kicking the sparse dandelions as she went. It was late afternoon, and the sun was already drifting downward. Ellen recognized the song of a bird – a robin – drifting from the leaves above her. Her grandmother had been an avid birdwatcher as a child, and the memory of their calls was the only her thing her mind did

not take with it as it left her, so she had shared it all with Ellen in the nursing home, despite her granddaughter's unrecognizable face.

Glass littered the garden her mother built during the summer, and where the center window had once existed there was now only a broken, jagged passage from the yard into the living room. Ellen called for her mother, but did not stop to wait for her.

She went for the back door and walked into the hallway. It was narrow and – because of the house's unsteady foundation – it had begun to lean. To any adult, the pictures hanging on the wall would look lopsided, but to the child's eye everything was perfectly aligned. The baseboards showed obvious signs of a family's existence, and along the edges bits of their lives were scattered, like a button missing from Theresa's favorite sweater. She called for her uncle. Theodore did not respond. She peered into his room, flicked on the lights, but he was not there. She kept walking. Once more, she called his name. Three of Ellen's crayons. The curved, top portion of a clothes hanger missing its triangular base. Theodore's socks from the day before. The house was silent.

The hallway ran southward, and at its end it opened to the right into the living room. The setting sun painted the left wall a brilliant, oppressive shade of orange that caught Ellen's eyes. She turned the corner and – nearly blinded by the presence of the sun just beyond the broken window, she hardly noticed her uncle sitting in his armchair. The scent of alcohol invaded her nose again. Her eyes readjusted to the light, and she spotted the spilled liquor bottle near the coffee table.

As Ellen came closer to Theodore, the sun fell behind the trees at the edge of the back yard, and she regained her full vision just as she stepped on – and shattered – the

glass eye that had loosed itself from Theodore's head when he'd pulled the trigger. Ellen wrinkled her eyebrows and tilted her head slightly to the right. She did not start screaming until she saw the blood on the walls, on the other windows, on the ceiling and his clothes, and she did not stop screaming until her mother's arms had coiled around her. The force of her mother's sudden grasp sent them tumbling forward onto their knees. At Theodore's feet, Ellen watched as an orange butterfly slipped in through the broken window and landed on her uncle's wrist. Its wings bumped into the gun. They remained still. The sun reappeared beneath the treetops, and the room caught fire.

*

Ellen wore the same dress to both funerals. A large, oppressively gray nimbus blocked the August sun, and Theodore's coffin was a dull and melancholy object, familiar to Ellen in a way she wished she didn't know. They buried him next to his mother. This time, the hole was big enough. This time, both Ellen and Theresa wept.

Dewey came to Ellen's house after the funeral, carrying his toy truck, and still dressed in his black tie. He followed Ellen down the hallway, and they passed Theodore's bedroom, where Theresa lay asleep on his cold bed.

The two friends made their way to the back yard. Dewey ran his toy back and forth. Ellen tore handfuls of grass and spread the leafy bundles in her lap on the beaded, black fabric of her dress.

"I'm sorry I teased you about the bugs," he told her.

Ellen wanted to cry.

“You didn’t know him,” Dewey said, “but I had an older brother before.” He kept rolling the truck back and forth. Its plastic wheels squeaked on the ground and pressed the grass down into two, flat marks. “He was a lot older than me, with a different mom. He was sad, like your uncle.”

Ellen stopped ripping the grass for just a moment, and then purposefully tore a great chunk. Bits of the earth came with it, dirtying her dress.

“Once, we were driving together, just us, when he stopped and got in the back seat. He made me promise not to turn around. He said, ‘No matter what.’ And then there was a loud bang, and I couldn’t hear anything for a while, and he was gone. He left me alone.”

Ellen shaped the mountain in her lap.

“He died on purpose.” Dewey stopped the truck and started twisting his fingers through the grass. Ellen watched as he soon found two small, green bodies. He held them up above their heads, and she saw the vulnerable, emerald bugs shaking against the gray sky.

“My parents told me it wasn’t my fault. He just couldn’t be here anymore. He had to go somewhere else.” Dewey placed the caterpillars near the base of the pile in Ellen’s lap. They climbed slowly to the top and perched, and they reached wildly, blindly, into the air at the end of their world.

Basin Pond, the Great Mouth of the World

It was January, and the kittens were born. Then, they were eaten, consumed by their feral mother, all to the disappointment of three neighbors each anxiously awaiting the arrival of a living, loveable mousetrap. Michigan watched the process, first noticing the white cat with black eyes hiding beneath the dock at the pond some time before the New Year. When he walked home, it followed. It made a den beneath his back porch and began to grow wide. It puffed out like a frosted, rotting fig. Where it hid the snow could not touch it, not even in drifts carried by wind. The cat never meowed, though sometimes it opened its mouth like it had something very important to share.

The creature had barely shared a few earthly moments with its young before she ate them up. Michigan had seen this before, a mother eating a baby. But the meal was always just one baby, and it was always the lame baby. Never had Michigan known an entire, healthy litter to disappear down the chute of a greedy mother. The pond cat must have been special. He should have known.

For a few days, the white cat lay dormant beneath the back porch, digesting its meal and occasionally scratching at a wood beam, and always opening and shutting its mouth in silence. Michigan tried to coax the thing out from its seclusion with treats and

milk and toys. The cat was grossly unaffected. It stared right into the center of Michigan's face with a stale viciousness. Self-righteous and detached, but playful and attentive, the feral animal which consumed – from the pond which itself consumes – rose a week after the birth and slid out of Michigan's life. It left behind a natural, bloody stain in the dirt.

*

It was February, and the snow began to melt, but the ground remained frozen and hard. On the surface of the world, the winter slush mixed with the dusty roads and flung mud everywhere, every direction, and onto the undersides of passing vehicles. The thick clods would spring up, bounce against the floorboards, and pop like corn near a flame. Then, overnight, the tracks would solidify in the negative temperatures and become deep brown valleys like the ones carved by glaciers. The peaks would spike up, jagged and crusted, and young children would stamp their way to school in the middle of the roads, crunching and crackling and forcing the dirt horizontal again.

The worst of these valleys formed near the pond that sat just beyond city limits to the south, alongside the road all the folks who lived in the country would have to take on their way to work. There was a dock, too, that appeared out of nowhere, out of the ground, like a broken bone piercing flesh. There were metal bars keeping human bodies on top of the boards and out of the water, and the dock stretched out over the middle of the pond, stopping just short of the center where the ice first began melting at the start of winter's recession.

In 1965 Jo and Lisa spent Valentine's Day at the pond, their legs dangling over the edge of the dock, their shoulders touching. It was the first time Jo ever said, "I love you."

"I love you, Jo," said Lisa, and the white particles of her breath steamed into her face.

Above them, the light of the sun pierced the clouds in thick beams so heavy they turned the icy surface of the pond back to liquid. This change was quick enough for Lisa to notice, to realize the world was transforming before her, but still too gradual for her to determine it was merely the melting of the ice – and not her connection with Jo – that told her she was moving forward. Some many years later, Lisa would think back to this day in particular, and she would wonder where the sensation of movement had come from that made the tendrils in her chest shake, having finally learned it was not because of Jo. And in fact, it had never been because of Jo.

They were silent for a while, squinting down at the cold film on the still water.

"We can't survive together, not in such a small town," Jo said. From behind them came the sound of a hurried bird taking flight. Jo looked over her shoulder. "The birds are already returning."

"We ought to move away, then," said Lisa.

"Run away?"

"Yes. Let's."

*

It was March and Aster had his first seizure. He was walking the circumference of the pond in the early morning and fretting over his plans for the evening. Aster's distant grandmother had died somewhere outside New Orleans, and his entire family was flying southeast for the funeral. It was the curious chemical smell drifting off the pond's surface that caused it all.

Someone, a girl in his class called Lasso whose family owned most of the wheat fields surrounding town, had told him about being in an airplane. And she should have known. Aster believed what she said because her family spent each winter holiday in the Caribbean, and Lasso always came back from the islands with her hair wound in tight braids against her skull. The pink flesh this revealed clashed against her suntan, but Lasso did not seem to care. She would go weeks before untying the knots.

Lasso's voice rang in his head when he smelled the chemicals. "Airplanes smell funny," she editorialized, "because they recycle the air from inside. You're just breathing it in over and over again. Who knows if those people are clean! What if they have bad breath?"

Remembering the flight to come, his skin flushed with heat, and then a chill, and then with heat again. The edges of his vision turned to smoke.

The ground was still mostly frozen, but he was unconscious halfway through his fall, so he did not meet pain when he met impact. As his body writhed, he dreamed of a padlock. It was a silver padlock on a rusting fence. He shook it in his hands, and its metal loop grew stronger with each motion. Engraved on the lock, there was an image of a toad in a bowtie, and he stopped shaking to trace the outlines. As he did this, he noticed finally

that his fingers were bleeding, and the blood coated the entire thing. The toad scowled at him and flicked the blood from its shoulders. When the padlock melted Aster pushed through to the other side.

He awoke on the ground, lying at the top of the pond's sloping embankment with his head near the water. All the blood in his body drained to his skull, to his face. He coughed and vomited, coating his cheeks and soaking his hair.

During this fit, the world seemed to turn gray. His vision was fielded by pain. From where he lay he saw only the sun in the sky, a great shining disc piercing the firmament of the universe. Its sparkle was spectacular and upsetting. It made his whole body go numb. Aster rolled over to his belly, rose to his hands and knees, and made for the edge of the water. He neared the pond's edge and his feeling returned. The searing torture in his mouth was extreme, and he became aware of a blob shaking around in his mouth.

He spit the alien object out into the pond. It landed, soundless. To his horror, he recognized the blob as the tip of his tongue, a chunk nearly the size of a packing peanut. He gasped as it floated away from him, tilting like a fisherman's bob, and blood filled his mouth.

*

It was April when the truck carrying sugar beets blew through town and obliterated an unknown cyclist. Harvey Agatha saw it all happen. He was walking home from the swimming pool, and the asphalt roads were so cooked under the sun he was forced to hop

on his bare feet from crack to crack, teetering like on a tightrope where the damages were filled in with tar.

Harvey Agatha was an old man, and once a terrific swimmer, who in his youth was on track to become an Olympic finalist. In the summer of 1954, complications with surgery rendered him incapacitated for so many months that he lost his scholarship to Boston College. Defeated, he started working with an agricultural irrigation firm that eventually sent him westward, where he settled into a routine of swimming, hopping, and hoping for the snow to melt.

The day the semi came through was the first day of swim season, so Harvey Agatha had soaked in the chlorine for as long as he could, and the day's heat dried his skin tight against his bones. He would probably not shower for a few days, allowing the scent of chlorine and sunscreen to stain every moment of his days. And even after he washed it all off his body, he would convince himself the smell remained in his hair, on the tips of his fingers, at the corners of his mouth, on his pillowcase, and in the cat's milk dish. He would hold on to summer for as long as he could, like he did each year, until finally the snow came and he would quit smiling and cease speaking.

The crash was loud and matter-of-fact, just one of life's hiccups, and then it was over. Harvey Agatha stood, amazed and interested and motionless, and his toes boiled on the road. He watched the semi continue on as if not even phased by the accident, unaware the brakes had failed. The tragedy wrapped tight coils around his chest until a scream was pushed out.

About the time the truck finally came to a complete stop, the police were finished questioning Harvey Agatha and retrieving the poor body. It was torn and limp, as particularly lifeless and unremarkable as one of his towels hung out on a clothesline to dry. Death, they told Harvey Agatha, must have been immediate, or “nearly immediate.” In the cyclist’s backpack they found no identification, no evidence linking him to other human beings in the world. Instead, he carried a crinkled map, a loaf of bread, and a half-finished jar of crunchy peanut butter. In a plastic bag, there was a dirty butter knife and sixteen dollars.

The body, both unclaimed and unclaimable, was cremated at no expense to the police department by the local mortician, and the ashes were dumped onto the surface of the pond. The police did not make a show of this, and again, only Harvey Agatha was there to witness.

It was this second moment – the wetting and sinking of gray dust – that truly frightened him, much more than any collision of metal, speed, and bone. After the police left, Harvey Agatha waded into the pond, still fully clothed, and swam through the ashes until he felt he could breathe again.

*

It was May, so the birds came, and they drifted down from the sky, poised and gliding, before mounting the pond’s surface. Phyllis liked to walk the circle of the pond’s borders in the early mornings, pausing here and there, gazing at their bills. They looked like plastic, she thought, their beaks. They were caution orange, surrounded by feathers of

creamy white and cemetery brown. She would stare and stare, looking hard and long, trying to burn the triangles into her memory for keeps.

She imagined living in a duck's bill and burrowing herself into the shallow groove. The groove would hold water, warm water, and the groove would be her groove, and her groove would be deep enough for her to float – there, forever – but shallow enough that she would never fear drowning. The bill would be enough for her, dark and encasing, trapping the sounds of her body, the rush of her breath and the thrum of her heart song, and all of this noise would reverberate off the thick, oily membrane inside the bill. Once the winter freeze came the duck's instinct would take over and pilot the both of them into the sky, leaping, and they would head southwest, toward Mexico. Phyllis thought they might go as far south as Mérida, maybe the Yucatán.

She lived in a farm house east of town, so she would cut across a neighbor's field to get to the pond, avoiding a walk through town altogether. Only seldom did she venture inside city limits, choosing instead to order milk off the dairy truck. She had arranged with the driver a secret deal, and with every other delivery he brought her a pound of ground beef that she portioned into every lunch and supper meal. She grew most of the rest of her food in her garden. Phyllis did not like going to town because it was a bit of a walk and she could make no use of the tandem bicycle collecting dust in the shed as she lived alone. There was a Chevrolet parked in the shed as well, but the transmission had exhausted itself six years earlier, a few days before man first walked on the moon. So! She did a lot of walking, and staying, and praying, and she was very happy to see the birds.

Now, she found herself at the water's edge. The wind lifted a cool scent from the water, algaeic and chemical. She crossed her arms and rubbed her elbows.

“Hello, ducks,” she called. “Hello.”

And, perhaps in response, a bird came down from the west, squawking and calling, its rapid wings splashing in a panic. A few other ducks flew off in response. The squawking duck continued to thrash, even in the water, and its call was a whiny noise that Phyllis could not tolerate. She was about to turn away from the spoiled tableau of it all when she saw the blood. It was in the water, and on the duck's round body. The duck pulsed, wheezed, and the blood oozed and spilled.

Phyllis looked around, knowing the hunter would be near, just a sliver on the horizon, perhaps sending an energized dog to fetch their catch. It made her stomach clench up on itself, rigid and tight. It sat inside her like a tiny boulder of rage, and she felt wrong to be there, like maybe the real reason she wanted to cry was because she hadn't the sense to stay home that day. But no matter where she looked, the horizon appeared empty, save for the trees that bordered town and the square of her brick home.

Phyllis shook herself, turning once more to the pond, and the squawking creature took flight. It barreled through the air right for her, curving up finally and passing over her head. Its blood came down and splattered her face and her chest. She gasped, stumbled backwards, fell onto her rear. Phyllis craned her neck as the duck twisted and convulsed, hesitating in its agony. It continued, despite it all, to reach higher and higher into the sky. She twisted onto her hands and knees. She prayed to God the bird would survive, that she would one day head south with it to paradise.

*

It was June, and from above, the town looked almost imaginary. It was so still. Her mother had surprised her with a ride in a rickety fertilizer plane as a birthday gift. Eden was twelve, and she had once – *once* – expressed interest in becoming a pilot. From such altitudes, she could not even see the wind passing through the trees. She could not see the squirrels on their branches. She could not see the flowers in the gardens. But she had seen them just that morning, so she believed they were there.

Her mother sat next to her, cooing delight and making gestures to the small town landmarks. She nudged Eden and pointed. She stretched her arm across her daughter's chest.

“Look there!” she said. “That’s the bank. I bet you anything Hideaway Susan is hiding away in the ladies’ room, just like always. She needs to get a grip.”

Eden looked but could not make out the building her mother was referencing. She wondered if she might need glasses. Would it be silly to ask for an eye exam as a birthday gift?

Eden’s mother worked as a bank teller, and if she loved anything more than going to her job it was coming home and telling stories about Hideaway Susan. Though Eden stopped by each day walking home from school, she had never met Susan. She almost believed that her mother had lost it, was making everything up, was lying for attention, was looking for an excuse to talk to her estranged daughter. Surely, a forced fairytale would prevent Eden’s maturation, her mother must have thought. Spooky, Hideaway Susan embodied thirty-year-old anxiety, and her fears came with clock chimes every

fifteen minutes. Her nervousness had her constantly counting squares of toilet tissue in there. Susan's legend would discourage Eden right out of adulthood. Susan's story would stop the widening of Eden's face as she settled into herself. Susan would prevent Eden's chest from bubbling outward. Susan would prevent Eden's ever obtaining a driver's license. The myth of Susan would halt her wedding night. Susan this, Susan that, Susan, Susan, Susan would trap Eden in her lanky tween body and preserve her virginity for eternity.

Perhaps, thought Eden, Hideaway Susan did not even exist.

Perhaps, thought her mother, Susan needed a drink.

Perhaps, thought Susan, the last twelve tests I took were faulty and I better go try again because I know – *I just know* I'm pregnant. I will love my baby Joy Kolee Kipling, daughter of Peter Gosling Kipling, daughter of Susan Plier Kipling, and everyone will think I'm normal because I'm a mother, me. Susan, the mother.

And perhaps they were all right; or they would have been, had it not been for the fact that Peter Gosling Kipling was deceased and therefore incapable of ever rendering the already wildly infertile Susan pregnant. They would have been right had Eden's mother not diagnosed Hideaway Susan with social anxiety but instead a tremendous heft of depression. And they would have been right had Eden only ever believed in what she could see. They would have all be right.

But up above the town, hovering in the back of a rusting, buzzing biplane, Eden learned something was wrong with the world.

“Can we fly over the Basin Pond?” she asked.

“Yes, dear!” her mother squealed. “There’s your sense of adventure. You get that from me.”

As they approached, Eden grew fascinated. The pond looked to be made of silver, and it sat like a wonky, melting medallion on the edge of town. As far as Eden was concerned, it seemed as if God had looked down at the ugly town he made and felt sorrowfully guilty at the sight of his work, and so he added the sparkling water as an afterthought. Eden would not accept God’s apology.

When the plane flew directly over the pond, Eden grew frightened. It appeared (or didn’t appear, one assumes) the reflection of the sky, and the plane, their faces in the plane – all those reflections were no longer there. Instead, the great jewel dug into the ground by the hands of God had turned a milky gray, and Eden was certain she could see writhing bodies beneath the surface of the water. They were crawling, pushing others down, screaming, moving, and reaching up, up, up.

Susan, Susan, Susan, wondered Eden’s mother, what was she up to right now? When would Eden start her period?

Her daughter started to cry, choking, attempting to look away from the torture. The plane cruised away from the pond, and she screamed as she watched the silver shield materialize. The bodies were hidden! Eden swore to herself, as she screamed and screamed, that she would keep her feet planted on solid earth once the plane landed. Never again would she fly, or swim. Never again would she push herself closer to the truth of what she could never know.

*

It was July and a special military aircraft crashed into the Potomac River near Washington, D.C. Meanwhile, the pond was nearly empty, its water evaporating under the record-breaking heat of the sun in the midst of the worst drought the town had ever known. The people of the town prayed for rain and replenishment. Most of them had never suffered through such dry intensity. They had never seen the bright life of the world baked into submission until everything flaked and cracked and became the color of bones. The preachers told them a drought was no different than a tornado, nor a hurricane. All storms come to an end. It was the waiting for this end that became torturous to them in its monotony, and driven mad by the parched colorlessness of the land, many saturated their bodies with alcohol.

Lilith was among the few who perceived change as it happened, always, and no matter how slowly. Each morning, she would saunter out into the burning haze of the day toward the pond, where a dark ring would edge the water's circumference, indicating like sedimentary layers how much water had been sucked into the sky. Inches by inches, the level sank, but Lilith still saw no clouds in the sky, which thought made her believe it was the earth swallowing the pond and not the air at all.

She had heard the stories about the pond, a magic basin, and she believed. Lilith was almost too superstitious for her own taste, and she never went toward the pond without her bells. Bells, she believed, would keep her away from the greedy hands of fairies. Lilith could sense them everywhere, but most especially at the pond. Though peculiarly interested in the occult, she was wary of fairy people because they were not constrained by time. If they caught hold of her, they might drag her into their own

dimension, where the rules of the universe were lopsided and time was all wrong.

Without a concept of time, Lilith thought, she'd be unable to track the progress of the pond's sinking.

On the day of the crash, Lilith came to know why her sense of fairies was so strong near the pond. Since the drought began a few months back, the red pickup truck slowly started to reveal itself as well, the one pushed into the water a few years earlier by that deranged, poor girl who had fallen prey to one of the pathological lies told by a seedy librarian with thin lips. The mice beneath Lilith's bed had told her truth of it all.

Now, the water had dropped far enough to reveal a hoard of brown rattlers in the bed of the truck. They appeared, at first, to be dead and drowned, but at Lilith's approach they hissed and wagged. Their warning clicks echoed. They must have been fairies, she believed. How else could they survive underwater? Lilith hurried back, away from the truck, clutching the silver bell dangling around her neck. The snakes fell back into the trance as she retreated. When she returned home, she said a prayer for rain.

*

It was August when a heavy mist settled over the pond, hovering like a bubble blown up with a noxious gas; and all but one of the townspeople treated the mist as such, fearing the chance an exposure would break the silky membrane and send them – with a great, silent puff – into their deaths.

Charley was too curious to be frightened and walked boldly into the mist's body, which was warm like a fever's breath. When *he* breathed, it felt like he was swallowing a thick and chalky powder. As a child Charley wanted desperately to take gymnastics

lessons, but they always began around his mother's birthday. Trapped in another powder – dust, soot – Charley's family was too poor, and each year when he presented the newspaper clipping that advertised the start of gymnastics to his father the old man sighed and reminded him of his mother: the bank account could only sponsor lessons, or a present. Now, Charley was 16 and much too ridiculous to even consider somersaulting for sport, and just a few hours after he watched his mother tear through the foil wrapping paper, (“A new blender! Yes! Thank you!”) he was heading into the mist to see what, if anything, could survive in such a heavy fog.

Fireflies, it turns out. To his delight, there were hundreds and maybe even a thousand, and their incandescent bodies glowed pale, orange like new pennies, catching the atoms of the mist so the light extended from their bodies and made them appear as orbs. They flitted around like loose daydreams – terrifyingly miraculous – and Charley grinned.

But startled, it seemed, from Charley's sudden appearance, the fireflies began circling in more sporadic patterns, spinning and wheeling in the mist, making themselves dizzy. The glowing orbs around their bodies flickered. A few bugs crashed into one another and dropped noiseless into the water. And indeed, soon they were all bumping neighbors, knocking and falling. Those that avoided a collision still twisted, and their dizzy antics sent them plummeting to the water's surface anyway.

Charley watched as the fireflies tumbled into the pond, individually and yet all at once. The lights faded as the bugs began to drift downward, and the halos lost their sheen completely.

*

It was September when Tilly sank the car. She had known, after four years together, that Spinner never locked the doors, that beneath the bench-seat there was a small pocket the size of a ring box where he could leave his keys. Sometimes he left spare change there as well, a small collection to put toward a pack of chewing tobacco from the Stop and Go sitting at the end of the main drag just before the road curved away and to the west. If you followed that road long enough, you could drive all the way to the state capital, but Spinner never went more than a few miles in any direction, and when he did it was only to hide Tilly in a rural night so dark that even he was unsure if they were really touching.

It was the librarian, a woman who made a career out of silence, who reached out to Tilly on the library steps. Her name was Karen Mae Davis-Wright. She was a quiet woman – naturally – with chicken eyes and pursed lips, and she told Tilly that humid afternoon that Spinner was unfaithful, that he touched other girls, that his hands rifled through the undersides of women's shirts the same way a child searches through a toy box too full: noisily, with haste, not knowing exactly what will be found and finalized on, not caring that small parts are being jostled from their respective wholes to the very darkest bottom. And maybe, one day, that child will grow up and mature and return to the toy box to clean up the space, to repair the mess he's made. He'll happen upon all those pieces in the dark corners like bread crumbs left for rats, and he'll smile as he holds each memory in his palm, and he may feel hopefully sorry. But mostly, he will just feel empty.

When Karen told Tilly, she was filled with rage, with anger the color purple, like spoiled blood. Her rage pushed up on the ceiling of her skin from below, and she bloated

in her suffering. She grew so large until sorrow, a creature with needles for fingers, could not resist the temptation that her ballooned heart presented. She deflated and wept on the library steps in Karen's arms.

"Poor thing," said Karen, patting Tilly's back. "How are you going to get back at him?"

"I don't know," Tilly wailed. But already, her mind was on Spinner's truck, on the metal marsupial pocket holding the exact tool needed to unlock her revenge.

In September it was always humid and raining, so the pond was swollen and cold, with its surface nearly touching the bottom of the dock. Tilly had no difficulties in getting there. The keys were waiting, the gas tank was full, her heart was broken, her body was wrecked. Perched at the lip of the hill, the truck's engine buzzed. Through her tears, the surface of the pond was like a gauzy watercolor not entirely dry. Its shimmers were false and she knew they would disappear.

Tilly was disappointed in Spinner, and she fingered the crisp five dollar bill she found beneath the key ring. She bit the side of her cheek. Sinking the car, she thought, was something she needed to do. But robbery?

When they first started dating, Tilly said "love" within three weeks, unable to discern if the thrill of spending time with someone new was truly that. Unbeknownst to Tilly, by the time love actually caught up to her months later, Spinner was already reaching across the car to other women sitting in the passenger seat.

Thinking back, Tilly told herself the guilt she felt in stealing Spinner's money was also a false emotion, so she slipped the bill into her pocket and slipped out of the truck.

Trapped in its idle and fueled by gravity, it rolled forward and drifted into the water, and the air from the cab gurgled out of the cab until it disappeared to the bottom of the pond, which in itself became a few shades darker. Her eyes were dry by then, and the pond had lost its glisten.

*

It was October and the local hunter's association acquired the pond when they purchased the land surrounding it, a fiscal move confusing to mostly everyone in town for nobody ever thought the pond could count in the domain of real estate.

The president of the hunter's association was one of three identical triplets and the only to have stayed in their place of birth. The others had gone off to the east and developed new, liberal lifestyles. The brother born last succumbed to HIV the year before, unable to afford the medication, after which the president took up hunting. Now he was inviting a team of researchers to the pond to test chemical levels in the water. It was his dream to introduce schools of fish to the pond and creating a reservoir where families could gather and spend quality time.

Dear Mr. Docklin, the letter started. Much to our surprise, it was discovered that the 110tillwater located at 911 E County Road 9 is saltwater. The basin of the pond could be the potential source. There may be thick salt deposits making the habitat unsuitable for the aquatic life you proposed we should introduce. Additionally, high levels of sulfur were found in the water and soil samples we collected, which would make life nearly impossible for saltwater specimens as well. In short: nothing can survive at this location, so we cannot endorse the installation of any animal life. However, we can put you in

contact with some agricultural developers who may be able to provide landscaping in hopes of attracting birds, insects, and squirrels.

Mr. Docklin shredded the letter and paid \$2,000 of crowd-sourced money to have families of saltwater fish placed in the pond, anyway. Within minutes, the lifeless bodies tumbled upwards to the surface of the water in soft splashes. Their cold carcasses bumped into one another, fins pressed into fins, scales into scales, until so many dead fish lingered there that the pond itself was rendered invisible. One might have thought you could walk along the top like a bridge.

Mr. Docklin phoned the local police, cursed the know-nothing scientists, and asked for help. Word spread quickly that there was free fish being given away at the pond, and a lazy exodus followed. To the dismay of the townspeople, it was admitted that a poisonous level of sulfur had brought these fish to their ends, an idea which promptly turned everyone on their heels.

Within an hour, Mr. Docklin was alone. To his embarrassment, net in hand, he gathered the dead fish and shucked them out of the water into a mountainous pile. The smell was brilliantly oppressive, and a murder of black birds flocked. The crows came circling like vultures and dove into the heaps, gorging themselves on stale eyes and stinking flesh, a meal after which many of them died as well. Nothing could survive, the letter said. Mr. Docklin pressed on until the fish were completely removed.

The stench was repelling and the sight was repulsive. The remaining live birds swarmed in frenzies. Their cries of excitement were like the vicious toll of church bells on Sundays in which each clock was off time by a few seconds, so the whole town shook

for minutes with a boisterous, uninterrupted clang. The crows were unforgiving, and so was the newspaper article shaming Mr. Docklin for his hard-headedness published four days later, reading, “Burning Fish Pile Near Basin Pond Produces Bright Green Flames.”

*

It was November and Susan was lying about her uterus again. Peter was sick of her foolishness. He wanted to shake her, wring her around the neck, scream a deep scream into her face. “You cannot be pregnant! You will never be pregnant!”

But he did not scream, or strangle, or shake his wife. He feigned surprise at her announcement, which came singing atop the cold afternoon air as she arrived home from work. She smelled like office supplies, like dirty coins, like the lemon air freshener sprayed automatically every twenty minutes by a plastic restroom robot affixed to the wall above the toilets at the bank. She smelled desperate.

When he first met Susan, she smelled like fruit. Like blackberries. Now, he held his breath around her and avoided her perfumed and deranged kisses.

Susan plopped her purse on the kitchen counter and shed her seasonal outer layers.

“Did you take a test to be sure?” he asked her.

“Yes, dear.” She was so happy she was crying. “I took six – I mean, four, two.”

He swallowed.

“I wanted to keep them so you could see the two happy pink lines. I wonder why they’re pink! A girl? But they were soiled, do you know? I didn’t know what to do. Plus! I couldn’t hide them in my purse. What if one of those girls went snooping around and

came upon the surprise before we announced we're expecting? How would I explain? It's not mine? Of course it's mine! It's ours. It's our miracle. Let's name it Joy."

Peter went out for a drive. It was all very confusing to him: his life, his wife, the blackberry bush at the pond. It was next to a wooden bench, and it was blooming – in the middle of November no less! He gorged himself and his cold fingers turned purple.

After his snack, Peter grabbed his skates from the passenger seat of his car and slid out onto the ice. He had trouble finding his footing, feeling something small and unbearable beneath his left heel; a small lump. He worried about the pain this lump caused. He thought of Susan. She was at home alone, probably imagining she could sense some fetal lump in her abdomen. Was he just imagining the lump in his skate? Was Susan telling the truth?

Peter knew, then, as he looped about the dock, that the lump in his skate was the seed from a blackberry. His poor lunatic wife! He bore down on the singular seed with all his disgust and ferocity. He stamped and stamped, hoping the shock would split the seed and render it useless. Tonight, his wife would sob as she always did on nights she was pregnant. She would mourn, believing she had miscarried a child that was never there. He would feign a different sort of surprise.

It was all very confusing to him: his life, his wife, the blackberry seed in his skate, and the sudden break in the ice that came when he stamped a little too hard. He sank into the frigid water in an instant, terrified and reaching for the shards of ice around him. How precise and miraculous the moment must have been for the skate to break the tension of the frozen water and pull him under. If he were to survive, how would he explain it? And

how much snooping would it take before he was discovered at the bottom of the pond?

Before he was announced dead not merely missing?

Peter fought for his life, but he did not win, and nobody would ever know how courageous his last struggle was. Nobody would ever know his drowning was as miraculous as the birth of his first child (called Joy) would have been if his wife had truly conceived. Unfortunately, Peter only sank, dragged down by the weight of an infinitesimal seed, and that was that.

*

It is December and Posy is sick of the stories. She has had it, up to *here*.

“Well, don’t you know about Lilith?”

“Don’t you know the story of Peter Gosling Kipling?”

“Did anyone ever tell you about the cyclist?”

“There’s a car down there! He broke her heart.”

“I swear I’ve seen that exorcism kid’s tongue floating around.”

“You can hear the bodies screaming if you listen carefully enough.”

“It’s a basin –”

“It’s a mouth –”

“It’s a portal –”

“– to hell.”

Posy is a scientist, so she doesn’t care much for stories that don’t make themselves obvious within empirically collected data. She works at a local branch of a national agricultural firm. In fact, once the chemically poisoned waters sent him to the

grave freckled with cancerous tumors, she was hired to replace Harvey Agatha as the leading researcher. So, it was not long before she heard of the cursed pond.

Now, Posy is walking on the first day of winter thinking of the word *solstice*, how its roots rely on the sun and on the stationary. Posy wonders about the solstice, about whatever is that is so much unlike water unless it is a frozen, burning ice.

“No, I don’t believe,” Posy thinks. She conjures the frozen pond in her mind and grows angry with herself, and then with all the uneducated farming people in her adopted town who tell ghost stories about bodies of water. No, who *believe* ghost stories about bodies of water.

She says the word. “No.” Louder. “No!”

She has a body. She has a mind. Posy has a master’s degree from Brown University that lays dormant during the winter months because the life of the country freezes along with all the world’s moisture as her portion of the world angles itself away from the sun. Waiting for the thaw, Posy walks and stews.

Again, she says it. “No,” and she wraps herself up tightly and makes up her mind.

She heads home and gets in the car. She drives to the pond with a sturdy broadax in her trunk. Having always self-identified as a rational intellectual, this spontaneous choice surprises Posy, but she does not waver.

If it is the solstice and the world refuses to move, she will force it.

Now, she finds herself on the dock, and Posy composes herself. The broadax is poised in her grip, and her fingers begin to lose feeling. She looks down at the ice and bares her teeth.

She is a scientist.

It is a portal to hell.

She huffs, and she throws the broadax over the dock's railing. The wide steel head cuts into the thick sheet halfway before it lodges itself. It is in – stuck. There are no cracks. Nothing erupts.

Posy is so angry she slides under the dock's railing – like a fairy – and stalks over to the broadax. She reaches for the short handle of the tool incapable of splitting the surface, but she hesitates to grab it.

She is a scientist, but she is scared. The wind grows to blistering around her and carries a menacing mix of magic. She is suddenly aware of her faults. Posy backs away, wanting to cry.

The terrified scientist leaps back onto the dock and barrels for her car. She cannot discern if she is shaking for fear or chill. There, on the pond, she had seen something miraculously horrible. She had seen the mouth of hell, dormant in its consumption, threatening to splinter right out of hibernation. She had been pitched at the very entrance to the center of the world. And now, on the stillest day of them all, she is speeding home and sliding on ice.

Epilogue

That page will teach you to write, but what of what's already written there? What do *you* know, when the stories are yours but the secrets are mine?

*

Some people may tell you that a question is what's important, that a well-formed question is much better than any answer you have the strength to conjure, that anything profound mustn't end with a period. If an answer is finite, if an answer is resolution, what is the point? If we wish to continue on, shouldn't we live the question always, so that we may never settle, and so that we may endure?

*

I have in one hand written pages. I have in the other hand a few blank ones. The world is a big question, and I don't have an answer. For now, I am happy to say it surely includes writing, and listening, and loving, and please – always – trying to do the very best thing.

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