

Basement

I don't like to think of the boxes sitting in my parents' basement, and I really don't like to think of the boxes that belong to me, the shantytown of seashells, broken crayons, and lackluster mementos fermenting below the living room. A thousand dead things curled between tattered memories (once I found a family of roaches holed up against my kindergarten art) and the slow creep of mold in cardboard corners. Last time I went down there I stepped on a doll's head, flattened it, put its eyes on two different planes. Later I found a strand of its flaxen hair stuck to my sole. There's dust so thick it could be snow, and dust is at least seventy percent human, so every inhalation is a revival of a self long dead. Bones renew every seven years, skin in twenty-seven days, but the brain is even faster. Every neuron is a bullet firing off into the dark, a series of Christmas lights crammed in a dented box and shifting into infinite shapes. You'll never see the same shape twice. If the mind is a stage, mine is decaying, the actors are aging, I should exit left, pursued by the bear from sophomore English class. "Every breath is the death of something I used to be," and I know this because I wrote it in a half-filled journal from seventh grade (my edgy phase) and I like to act like I've outgrown everything, like I don't drag eighty pounds of participation trophies and faded poster board reports, like the glass eyes of stuffed animals don't make my soul shudder with remorse. At a certain age, you get two choices: burn all your shit or bury yourself in it, and I don't know which is going to hurt more.

When my parents were twenty-eight, newly married, a flood rushed past all the floorboards, turned the basement into a bog, and they tried to save stuff, they did, they slogged down there in rainboots and pulled up waterlogged biology textbooks from when my father wanted to be a teacher instead of a doctor, they submerged their forearms in mud to unmoor my mother's baptismal dress, they set grade school report cards in front of fans to dry them out, the paper rippled and brittle. Over half they had to throw away, and they sat in their empty house, the basement disemboweled, and

they held each other because they'd just lost twenty years of their life to rainwater and they wanted to make sure they were both still solid and breathing. But the flood didn't touch any of my things, not my old clothes, not the lock of hair saved from my first haircut, those were tucked up on the top shelf, because even back then I was taught to be a tiny hoarder. Now I watch for rain clouds with horror and hope weighing on my chest, as if one good disaster could redesign me entirely.

In Catholic school, I learned that blessed items must be buried or burned, not thrown away or desecrated by raccoons. In Catholic school I also learned that clean slates always cost something. Here are the worksheets if you don't believe it. Will my five-year-old self hang me heartless when I purge her twenty drawings of the family cat? I don't want to ask. And someday the ticket stubs I'm collecting won't mean anything, and if I don't throw them out, someone else will, but god, I think they're lovely now. I just want to believe that the body is more than a box used for eighty years, that somewhere in the sublevel darkness I'll always exist, breathing mildew and fumbling for the light switch.