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Creative Nonfiction

The Little House

I kept my tiaras on hooks on the walls. Those walls were not reliable. Often the stucco crumbled. The tiaras were crocheted in cotton, strung with beads and sequins. They hung beside my bed, the top bunk of a bed I bought so that Chico would have a place to sleep below me. The night the rats invaded the house, my bed was the safest place to be.

This bedroom was in the front of the house which was barely a house at all. A very small house. We called it “the little house,” *casinha*, in Portuguese. My bedroom was the size of a walk-in closet. Rita occupied the bedroom behind mine. Hers was slightly nicer, decorated with her spare photography. A transparent white canopy hung over her bed. The bedrooms opened up onto the main room, big enough for several more people to sleep on cushions on the floor. Big enough for a refrigerator and a small stove attached to a propane tank. No other furniture. No table or chairs. The cement floor was painted the color of dried blood.

There was a concrete courtyard out back and an outhouse that doubled as a cold water shower. We heated water in a large pot on the stove and lugged it outside for sponge baths in cool weather. We soaked our jeans in a plastic basin, then stretched them out on the concrete and scrubbed them clean with coarse bristles.

In the summer, the louvered windows were shut tight to keep out the heat. When the sun fell below the horizon, darkness arrived heavy as velvet. We unbolted the windows, optimistic that a breeze might blow in. The jasmine air. The *batucada* beats from the valley below us. A single bulb swung from a cord attached to the ceiling. Sometimes we replaced its unflattering light with candles, after our supper of French bread toasted over an open burner and a mug of milky coffee, when the men brought out their guitars. Someone rolled a joint. Five of us lived there then. Me, Rita, Chico. Micau and Orlando. Rita, Chico, and Micau were from a family of twelve siblings, all of whom would pass through the little house at one time

or another but never all at the same time. Orlando was Micau's boyfriend. I had once been someone's girlfriend but that was over now.

There was an iron gate at the top of our street. It was unlocked. Our street was not a street at all. It was a staircase on the verge of disintegration that led down a hill past a handful of houses like ours and then drifted off, unfinished, into the brown grass. There was a dirt path in the distance that traveled further downwards to the place where the priests and priestesses of Candomblé performed their rituals and initiated their acolytes.

I left the little house and I returned. While I was away, I thought of the first night I slept there, when I was seventeen and in love. Ripe and raw and open to everything. When I returned, it was the top bunk, the mildewed sheets, a waning moon, the company of my notebook and the I Ching. It didn't seem right to wear the tiaras out in public anymore so I left them hanging.

When I left Bahia—for good, I thought at the time—I placed the heavy iron key on Rita's bed. It made an imprint on her white sheets. No one was home. A day's dust had settled on the floor. I would not live in the little house again although Rita stayed there awhile longer and other brothers and sisters and strangers from abroad came and went.

Decades later the grillwork gate is locked. A few times Rita and I have pressed our faces against up the bars and called out down the surviving stairs in hope that someone will let us in. But no one ever answers.

The Season of the Itch

There are times, even now, when I swear I can still feel the things. I used to enjoy the spring much more, the unclenching of winter, the waves of balmy air, open windows, the promise of baseball games and taking the kids to the pool. I still love that stuff, but there is also this anxiety—the psychosomatic sensation of tiny insect legs traversing the skin of my bare feet and ankles, imaginary microscopic pincers plunging into my flesh.

In the spring of 2009, my two kids and I had been in our townhouse about two and a half years. We took the keys in October of 2006, just a few days after our St. Louis Cardinals beat the Tigers in the World Series, almost exactly a year from the break-up of my marriage. In the interim, we lived for a year with my father at his six-acre spread in rural St. Charles County in the house where I grew up. My daughter, Laura, was 10 when the divorce was finalized; Nick was only 3.

The townhouse was, at last, our place.

By that spring in 2009, we could walk through the rooms in the dark without bumping into anything and it was *home* for all of us, including our two cats. We adopted Martin in August of '08, eight months after we lost our beloved 15-year-old grey and white tabby, Bianca, to feline breast cancer. She had been small, shy, and withdrawn, hiding under a bed or in a closet when visitors came to the house.

Martin was enormous, black, and gregarious, too smart to fall for the laser pointer, a lovable alley punk turned domestic. Even in his now comfortable life, it was clear he never forgot his time on the street, getting rained on, freezing in the winter, having to fight for his meals.

“Yeah, I’ll play with you, but I’m gonna have my claws out.”

We liked him immediately. The lady at the shelter cried when we took him. No one else had wanted him—too big, not cute enough.

We adopted Josie the following Thanksgiving, a playmate for Martin. A diminutive gray and brown tabby, she had been dubbed Yoga Cat by the shelter for her habit of lying with her legs stretched out behind her like a

cat rug. She also lived a rich fantasy life, spending her evenings chasing imaginary mice, and more than once I have been awakened in the middle of the night to the sound of her crashing into the wall of my bedroom as she lunged after the high beams of passing cars.

Just as most great conflicts have started small—the shot heard ‘round the world, Fort Sumpter, the assassination of the archduke—so it was for that summer of our discontent. It was a Saturday, and I was reading the newspaper on the couch when I felt an insect bite on my right forearm. I looked down expecting to see a mosquito and instead saw—nothing, just a small black dot, like a freckle. As I contemplated the dot, it disappeared.

I had some experience with fleas as a kid on the six-acre spread—a summer in which our cat or dog had brought them into the house. We spent weeks trying one cockeyed scheme after another: flea collars in the vacuum cleaner bags, sticky pads to ensnare them like tar pits, and bowls of water under nightlights, into which the fleas were supposed to leap like lemmings in mass suicide while we slept.

Ultimately, weeks into the infestation, we went to the “nuclear option”—cans of fogger that killed the invaders like a neutron bomb, leaving our home standing and flea-free once and for all.

The thing on my arm could not have been a flea, however. Neither cat went outside. How, then, could the things get in? Armed with such ironclad logic, I did nothing, until before long, we were catching multiple fleas a day as they crawled and jumped on us, and Martin in particular was scratching away his fur around his shoulders, leaving bloody, symmetrical bald spots.

Some time later, the answer presented itself when, driving past my front door on the way to work, I noticed one of the neighborhood strays lounging on the welcome mat. I imagined some of the little vermin staying behind in the bristles of the mat after the cat got up and then leaping onto my pants as I returned from the mailbox. The welcome mat—ironic. I had unwittingly “welcomed” the blood-sucking hoard directly into my home.

Martin was the first to the vet, who seemed to me very qualified but looked to be around 14 years old. Using a flea comb, he confirmed the infestation with the discovery of flea excrement, essentially the cat’s own

digested and congealed blood, in Martin's fur. The vet prescribed a topical product that is applied to the skin between the animal's shoulder blades, where it then spreads over the surface of the skin and kills any flea that bites the cat.

"The fleas must feed to live," he said, scratching at a zit on his chin. "You take away their food source and you'll get the infestation under control."

This sounded great, except that's not what happened. Here are some things that I learned during the few weeks I was waiting for the topical flea killer to do its thing:

- One adult flea can lay up to 50 eggs a day.
- A flea generally lives 100 days, unless it is stupid enough to bite a cat treated with topical flea killer.
- Fleas can live up to two months without biting anything.
- They do not make topical flea killer for human beings.
- If I were a flea, I would be able to jump the length of three football fields in one bound without taking a run at it or, if you prefer, straight up, one and a half times the height of the Gateway Arch.
- Given the available data, during the weeks I indulged in denial and the subsequent weeks waiting for the flea killer to work, I estimated the fleas had established a community in our home roughly equivalent to the human population of New Zealand.

In addition to the real ones, we also experienced itching from no visible source whatsoever, even when we were out of the house, away from the biting throng. They had got into my head and the heads of my children and loved ones; our imaginations had been infiltrated.

Complicating all of this was that three months earlier I had entered into a promising new relationship with a wonderful woman named Jennifer, a psychiatrist with red-brown hair, an off-beat sense of humor, and a love of books and reading that extended to moments like her teeth brushing, the commercial breaks during TV shows, and the intermissions at live music and theatrical performances.

While things had been going very well between us, I was convinced that the flea infestation was the thing I had been dreading that would kill our new relationship. I imagined her telling her friends about me.

“Yes, he’s very nice, though his house *is* overrun with vermin.”

It seemed inevitable she would leave me, after which Laura and Nick would ask to be relieved of their two weeknights and alternating weekends with me as well.

It was time for the nuclear option.

On a sunny Saturday morning we gathered up Martin and Josie and distributed cans of flea fogger throughout the house. Like a demolitions expert planting charges on an enemy’s suspension bridge, I placed them strategically and then activated them one by one as I made my way toward the door.

I closed the front door, the cans hissing behind it in deadly harmony. Beneath the hissing, I could almost detect the sound of millions of microscopic voices screaming.

After the prescribed three hours, we returned and I carefully collected and discarded the empty fogger cans, opened the windows and gave the place a good vacuuming. I thought I might see some evidence of the fleas’ mass demise, maybe the words “You win” spelled out on the living room floor with the dead bodies, but the place looked the same as it always did. The afternoon was blissfully itch-free as we moved about our reclaimed house; they would rue the day they messed with us, yes sir.

That evening, Laura, Jennifer, and I sat in front of the TV playing a game of Tetris while Nick watched, cheering us all on simultaneously. I felt an itch on my bare left foot.

“Imaginary flea,” I thought. “I guess it will take a little while for those to go away.”

I looked down at the foot and saw a familiar black dot, which then disappeared and reappeared a moment later on my shin. I hung my head and, for a moment I am not proud of, contemplated arson as a viable solution to this problem.

In the month and a half that followed, I fogged the house three more times and my vacuuming increased in frequency until I was sucking the dirt and (I hoped) fleas on a semi-hourly basis from the carpets, curtains, linoleum, fireplace hearth, floor registers and cold air return vents, window

sills, bathroom vanities, kitchen counter, stairway banisters, tabletops, basement, and garage. I obsessively washed our sheets and blankets, vacuuming the bare mattresses while they rhythmically swirled in the Maytag downstairs.

Jennifer and the kids noticed a change in my demeanor—I had grown irritable, spending hours online searching out strategies to destroy the aliens. I was Ahab, and my Moby Dick was scattered about the house, not one imposing white whale but a ubiquitous, indestructible force hell bent on sucking every last drop of blood from our withered bodies.

There were a couple bright spots. Instead of leaving me, Jennifer leapt into the fray with me, helping me flea comb the cats every time she was over, one of us holding the cat in question while the other combed the struggling creature, removing dozens of fleas in each session, which we drowned in a bowl of soapy water as we went. It was temporary relief for the cats at best, as the drowned fleas' extended family members waited to leap into the places recently vacated, but at least it felt like we were doing something.

Still, the cats grew despondent. Martin especially just lay in the same spot against the kitchen wall all day, occasionally jumping up onto the table, probably because there were no fleas up there.

In August, near the point at which I was preparing to call an exterminator and hand over my savings to eradicate the pests, I was at the vet with Josie for her check-up and updated him on the flea situation. He told me fogging usually worked.

“Maybe your fleas are resistant to the poisons,” he said.

My fleas.

Yes, that is what they had become. I expected him to suggest I begin naming them, but instead, he said something that changed our lives.

“There is a pill available now,” he began. “It will kill all the fleas on the cat in a half hour, whether they bite it or not. The downside is that it only works for 24 hours.”

“Give it to me,” I said, immediately.

Later that day, Jennifer helped me to force feed the pills to Martin and Josie, after which we went out for a bit. When we returned Martin was in his spot on the kitchen table, surrounded by the bodies of more than 50 dead and dying fleas. He had an oddly satisfied look on his face. There is

no way to tell how many fleas died that day as Josie and Martin roamed about the house—a pair of furry, roving bug zappers—but it was then that the tide of our private war began to turn.

Abandoning the bombs, I switched to a potent flea-killing spray, with which I repeatedly treated their favorite hiding places: the dark corners of the pantry and behind the couch and the nooks and crannies of the basement. Over the remainder of the summer, our flea combing sessions turned up fewer numbers, then single digits, then none, again, and again, and again. We had won.

Each springtime since then, I've braced myself for their return, but they've stayed away. Jennifer, on the other hand, has stuck around, and together we have endured additional trials: stomach flu, monsoons, and my casual disregard for food in the refrigerator that is well past the expiration date. I've stopped dreading the breaking point in our relationship, but as with the fleas, and for reasons that have nothing to do her, I don't think I'll ever be able to relax entirely.

Nick and Laura, of course, have changed the most. Just a little kid back then, Nick is now 10 and preparing for fifth grade while Laura lurches through adolescence, traveling that shaky landscape we have all walked—not a child anymore, not quite an adult. I'm pretty sure she'd prefer if I kept my mouth shut around her friends, and between her fast food job, her choirs, and her musical theatre productions, I don't see her nearly as much as I used to, and I can't recall the last time we all sat down and played Tetris together.

I like to imagine an evening, maybe a dozen or so years from now. We'll all be gathered at someone's house for a barbecue on the first warm weekend of the spring. Nick is a young man, and Laura, perhaps, has a family of her own. The grill sputters and pops, and the lawn chairs press their patterns into the backs of our legs as we sit, sip cool drinks, and talk—fireflies beginning to appear in the yard.

Someone's dog starts scratching frantically on the patio; one of us makes a comment about getting him checked for fleas, and Laura says, "Hey, Dad. Do you remember that time?"

We all laugh and tell the story again, and together, we remember.

How to Make a Cup of Tea

Here is how you make a cup of tea. First, clean the kitchen. Sweep the week's crumbs into the sink. Wipe the splattered food from the stovetop and backsplash. The compost reeks of rotting citrus. When was the last time you had an orange or squeezed a lemon? Take the compost bucket, and the trash, downstairs.

Spend most of the day standing in the middle of the grimy kitchen doing things that do not need doing. Reorganize the spice rack. Dust the stack of bowls on top of the fridge that no one will ever check for dust, or even notice. Flip through outdated cookbooks with faded photos of gelatined desserts on cake stands, pieces of pale, cubed fruit cocktail and red maraschino cherries suspended through the bright orange Jell-O. You wish you had the wherewithal to turn out something so ridiculously majestic, but you can barely manage the effort to rummage in the cabinet to find a pack of cookies.

Fill the kettle with fresh, cold water. Put it on the burner but don't boil it yet.

Set the table with a clean tablecloth. The trick is to make it look like you've done nothing. As though you always have a nicely set table, a clean home. Take the teapot down from the shelf. The big one, the one that can easily serve three or four people, even though it will just be the two of you. There's a few months' worth of kitchen grease on the lid. Wash the teapot in hot water. Leave it to dry beside the stove.

Choose the right kind of tea. If you were alone, like you usually are, you'd go for a smoky earl grey or Russian caravan. Something as strong as the Islay whisky you tell yourself you really should ration. Settle on loose leaf English Breakfast. Innocuous but hearty. It will be better than what your guest is used to. It will make you seem thoughtful.

Spoon some sugar into a small porcelain bowl. Pour some full fat milk into the delicate creamer brought back from your last vacation. Put it back in the fridge to stay cold.

Check the clock. He told you he'd be over by now, but maybe he's just late. Maybe you forgot to change your clock last week. Or maybe he forgot to change his. That whisky is starting to sound better than the tea, but you push that thought out of your mind. Outside, your neighbor is sweeping the landing. It's a comforting sound. Swish, swish.

Grab two mugs from the cabinet. Midnight blue, handmade, the name of the potter scratched into the bottom of each. They are big café-style mugs. You could drown in them. They're good for when he comes around. You think you're so sneaky, refilling his mug when he looks away, telling him he can't leave until he's finished his tea. Stretching a half hour into an hour and a half. But he knows. He has to. Still. You'll take what you can get. You picture his hands wrapped around his mug. His perfectly manicured nails—better than yours. The lopsided wry smile. The way he catches your eyes and holds them, when you usually cannot bear prolonged eye contact from anyone.

Outside, the light has shifted. It is officially late. Turn on the stove to boil the water. Spoon two heaping tablespoons of tea into the teapot. While you wait for the water to boil, even though you don't think you need to bother with it, change your cotton underwear for ones with some lace. Everyday bra for the green one he once told you he liked. Feel ridiculous that you're even making the effort. Put on the gold hoop earrings from your sister. A quick spray of perfume.

The water will boil, the screech of the whistle almost too shrill to bear. Run back into the kitchen to turn it off. Lift the kettle from the burner and fill the teapot. Be careful not to fill it too much or it will overflow and you'll flood the countertop. Put the fancy tea cozy on top of the teapot. It's made of scratchy plaid wool and is thick enough to keep the tea hot for several hours. The apartment will be too quiet. Put on some music. It doesn't matter what. He won't know it anyway. The shadows are starting to climb the walls. Turn on the lights.

You can stand in the kitchen, or sit on the couch, or even sit in the chair by the window and stare out into the street, but it won't make a difference. Like the old adage that a watched pot never boils, a watched street will rarely yield the visitor you long for.

Admit defeat.

In the kitchen, arrange seven cookies on a plate.

Lean up against the counter and eat a couple of cookies straight from the box.

They will be stale. Eat another one.

When the doorbell rings, don't rush to answer it. Finish chewing your cookie. Check your hair in the hallway mirror. When you buzz him in, wait in the doorway for him to climb the stairs.

Collecting Seashells

I

Dad and I walk along the shore of a beach that is too cold for visitors but fits perfectly on our list of free Sunday activities. He collects seashells while I pick up kelp, stuffing it into my plastic pail. At this age, I want to believe that if you hold the things that frighten you, they cannot scare you anymore; this is partly true. I pick up spiders and snakes and lit matches, but I will still scream that afternoon when I feel seaweed wrap around my leg. I will still fear the sea monsters, while going to look for them. At home, each room seems to be decorated with seashells and poetry books, competing for space. The books have claimed the furniture, the seashells hold soap bars beside the sinks. My father's house is soap and verse.

II

When my mum is pregnant, my dad tells her the story of Caitlin Thomas, wife of the poet Dylan. She was a memoirist, a traveler, and a fiercely passionate woman. The name is chosen when I surprise everyone by being a girl. Caitlin Thomas was also tempestuous, a borderline alcoholic, and allegedly threatened to throw herself off of a cliff after Dylan died. My mum is not overjoyed to hear the darker side of the story, but it changes nothing.

I am irrevocably Caitlin.

My grandparents in England also have seashells in their bathrooms and kitchen. They are made of glass and porcelain and clay and I am afraid to touch them. I don't want to break them because they're so pretty. I wonder if my dad thought about taking one of them with him when he followed his American girlfriend across the Atlantic.

III

Dylan and Caitlin's relationship began to break down when Dylan started taking international trips to perform readings of his books. On his last trip

without her, he went to New York and left her at home with their children and their house and perhaps the seashells in their bathroom. When he was admitted to the hospital in New York with pneumonia, Caitlin flew to America. She was so drunk and angry upon arriving that she was put into a straitjacket and committed to a psychiatric facility while she detoxed.

Caitlin: a name of Irish origin meaning an emotional and wholesome person with a strong belief in her own abilities.

The greatest story about Caitlin Thomas is that she threw herself into Dylan's grave at his funeral. She was known for her eccentricities and anything less would probably have been a disappointment. I have watched film of that day and she stays upright as long as the camera is on. She holds onto the arm of a friend, at one point swaying towards the grave, but remains standing. I cannot say what happens when the camera turns off. The newspaper that writes about the funeral will mention that she forgets to wear a traditional widow's hat. I wonder why that matters at all.

IV

I have never asked my dad for his inventory, but I do wonder what he brought with him across the ocean. When I was a child, each time we visited my grandparents, I would bring back something trivial. I would buy stuffed animals for fifty pence or toffee candies that we do not have here to add to my collection of "England Things." I spent every summer unsure if I was English enough to be English or American enough to be American, but certain that I needed something from both places to feel that I half belonged in either. My dad collects a version of the seashells from his childhood home. I wonder if Dylan was Caitlin's home. If, every time he left, she felt like a vagrant.

V

I have decided that when I grieve for my person, I will grieve so fiercely that I forget to wear *anything* to the funeral. Around my neck will be a string of seashells, woven together by kelp. I will carry a poetry book with me or two or three, having abducted them from the fireplace mantle. The procession will consist of sea monsters, in all shapes and sizes. My neck will smell of

soap and I will keep my arms free. I will not feed my grief with alcohol, nor will I wear a goddamn hat. I will mourn for my home, whoever they might be; uncensored, unashamed, truthfully. Like her. Like Caitlin.

Becoming Lovely

When I fell in love with her father, I thought I'd remain detached enough to protect myself. When I moved in, Caroline and her younger brother were only with us half the time; day on, day off, and every other weekend. I cherished what time I had alone, or with my husband.

I saw how tenuous relationships with step-kids could be, how when couples split up, the stepparent often never gets to see the kids again. I saw it up close when the kids' mom and her second husband split up. That was it. Their mother excised him from the kids' lives without warning, overnight.

I thought these children would hate me, grow jealous of my time with their dad, wreak havoc as teenagers, slamming doors and screaming. It hasn't happened, yet; eight years in.

"I love you!" Caroline said, saying goodbye after one of our earliest kid-involved dates. *Love me? You hardly even know me.*

My family of origin, parents and sisters, reserves "I love you" for serious, dramatic occasions. 9/11 (the original). Pre-surgical. Essentially, we say "I love you" when we think we are about to die.

Not this generation. They throw out "I love you" to all their friends. They say it multiple times before hanging up the phone. They use it in place of my usual go-to, the more traditional "goodbye."

I didn't know what to make of it, but early on I knew to say it, too. *These are children.* At the time their dad and I got together, they were just six and eight years old. "I love you, too," I said, and eventually, painfully, I did.

I was standing in the pediatric ICU hallway, denied entry to the room. My name was not on the list, and I lacked the proper ID bracelet. Inside, I heard Caroline crying in her sleep. She was waking up after three days of sedation. In the hallway, a nurse approached.

“My name should be on the list,” I said, “I’m her stepmother.” The nurse nodded and jotted down my name, then she turned and headed back down the hall to find my husband. I texted him. “I’m here, but they won’t let me into the room.” *Where is he?*

The usual hospital sounds surrounded me; the beeps and whirs of machinery, a baby crying. There were quiet murmurs of adults talking. The medical staff behind the desk monitored me with wary eyes. Briefly, I thought of charging through the door, imagined getting cuffed and carried away. It was enough to keep me outside, listening to the nurses inside the room talking to Caroline with hushed voices.

Three days before, my fourteen-year-old stepdaughter was so out of her head from an intentional ibuprofen overdose that she fought and bit at the staff. Knowing her risk and ongoing threats of self-harm, we had locked all the medications in a safe. In desperation she’d walked a couple miles to the grocery store, bought an economy bottle of store-brand ibuprofen and a jug of juice, and downed the pills on the way home. In the ER, having no other choice, they sedated her, and we waited to find out if she would live, and if she’d done permanent damage to her organs.

Naturally, in all that confusion, no one thought to add my name to the list of approved visitors.

I heard Caroline’s voice then, suddenly awake. She cried and wailed over and over. “I just want to die! Why can’t I die?”

My toes strayed over the threshold as I yelled to her, using the name her father calls me.

“I’m here,” I called through the door, through the curtain that hides her. “It’s me, it’s Lovely. I’m here.”

It’s also the name she has adopted for me, a name that will never be on a list.

We waited for test results and learned that she would make a total physical recovery, but that she would be admitted to an inpatient psychiatric facility. It was a terrifying prospect; we didn’t know what that would look like, or how long it would last. But we knew we couldn’t take her home. We knew we could not keep her safe.

I have a scar on the back of my left hand. It is a tiny white crescent, likely noticeable only to me. It is the mark of a willful four-year-old, angry at

being awakened at a rest stop on a 12-hour road trip in a snowstorm. I can still see her look of fury as she dug her fingernail into my hand, looking straight into my eyes as I summoned my strength to withstand the pain with patience and love this small, angry girl.

The scar reminds me of the rage we can feel about things we don't completely understand. It is full of indignation and insult, intolerance and revenge.

I can run the pad of my right index finger over the scar to feel its tiny ridge in my skin. I can use it to remind myself that some people feel things so strongly, they lose control.

I fingered this scar as I sat, bedside, awake over a long night, in the emergency room with my stepdaughter. Her suicide attempt was two weeks before; her sexual assault the previous month. We were in the ER again, the fourth time for her suicidal ideation. I was keeping watch.

Closing in on 23 hours of wakefulness I did stretches and jumping jacks, drank coffee, ate snacks, and took trips to the restroom just for the novelty of it. I read, texted and emailed friends, and struggled to keep my focus on the morning that would eventually arrive.

Caroline slept, long legs hanging off the end of the hospital bed, sheet and blanket askew across her lanky teenaged body. I sat in a straight-backed armchair with vinyl-covered padding. I nodded off and caught myself before I tumbled to the linoleum floor.

Like my own biological daughter, the one who gave me the scar on my hand, this one feels a little too deeply. My daughter, however, before she reached the age Caroline was then, grew into an ability to manage her emotions. She learned coping skills and ways to avoid internalizing the pain of others. Caroline, though, got stuck, replaying the worst of what she's been told, what she's felt, what she believed about herself.

The doctors and the social worker reminded me through the night that I am not a legal guardian, that I cannot sign the paperwork to admit her to an inpatient hospital. *I'm aware. There's time. Let her father sleep for once.*

I was in my late forties. I had witnessed a close friend dying of cancer, experienced the untimely death of my younger brother-in-law. I have seen genuine grief around me. I've felt it, too, mourning losses of all kinds, struggling to let go of some grief that hung on past its expiration date. Before Caroline was in my life, I had never witnessed a person who truly,

deeply wanted to die. It was breathtakingly awful, particularly in someone so young.

For nine months, Caroline had been cutting herself. Scars run from her wrist to the inside of her elbow, and they are a cap-sleeve at her shoulder. Some, I can tell, are deep enough to last. We were told not to worry, that many teenagers cut these days, that it's a release.

No one told us what I learned later; people who cut are nine times more likely to die at their own hands.

Sometimes it's nothing to worry about, sometimes parents ought not to make a big deal about the cutting. Other times it's a warm up to a suicide attempt.

I swung between anger and sorrow, helplessness and action. I tricked myself into heroism: "I can save her!" and acceptance, knowing that Caroline will do what Caroline wants.

Nearly thirty years ago, when I brought my son, my first-born child home from the hospital, I was just nineteen years old. I thought it was crazy that the doctor and nurses were allowing me to take that infant home with me, and that I could not possibly keep him alive. But with each passing day, then week, then month, it amazed me. I celebrated each time we reached another milestone, incredulous that I was keeping this child alive and from harm.

The cycle of ER visits and short stints in acute care inpatient facilities is a blur, nearly two years later. It was that day in the ICU, after she nearly succeeded at ending her life that I knew I'd do anything to help keep this kid alive. She went to acute care for a few days and when the insurance ran out, they sent her home to us again, telling us "Just take her back to the ER" if she was suicidal again, which she was, within hours of her discharge. That was the night I took on, the one I spent by her bedside, giving her exhausted dad a night to sleep, to recover. The cycle was finally broken by a six-month stint in a residential program.

In the kitchen, I make dinner while Caroline works out a tune on the piano in the next room. Something by Taylor Swift. She plays by ear—not like I do, chicken-pecking out note by note—but full on with chords and melody. She has taught herself to play more than a hundred songs.

When I was a child, my older sister was practicing for her final high school piano recital. I was seven when she was seventeen. Each night, I went to sleep listening to Beethoven and Tchaikovsky. I was happy when my sister was there, in the years before she left for college, before she left for married life. After she left was when our parents' marriage crumbled and exploded. At night, when they thought I was asleep, I'd listen to them fight. Piano music, no matter how raucous, means serenity to me.

When I hear Caroline play, I know she's okay. She's been home with her dad and me now for eleven months, following a half-year stay at an adolescent psychiatric facility, the only solution when her attempts to end her life would not stop. Her anxiety is decreasing, her depression, that beast, is in its cage, under her control. In her schoolwork, she is thriving. She has two best friends. She has regained my trust by telling me how she is, every day the moment she gets home from school. I leave the medicine cabinet unlocked.

Helping raise a kid with trauma-induced anxiety and depression is a whole new frontier for me. The experience I had raising my own kids didn't prepare me for this. My kids, adults now, had their own scary moments, for sure. There were bad breakups, encounters with bullies, and periods of depression, but that all felt like normal teenaged stuff. Raising Caroline has been downright terrifying, never knowing if her latest attempt would be the successful one. I learned, though, in family therapy designed to help her safely reintegrate into life after her residential stint. I learned by trusting my husband's deep love for his child, even when it was uncomfortable to do so. And I learned through the passage of time, with each day and night that went by without returning to the ER, without a call to the suicide hotline prompting police officers to show up at our door. I slowly got to a place where I could fully exhale.

I have learned to pay attention to behaviors that confuse or irritate me and to call them what they are; symptoms of anxiety. Why is she afraid to order at a restaurant? Why is it important for her to make sure there's always enough of the juice that she drinks and the food that she will eat? (A related "unspecified" eating disorder makes her appetite fleeting and very specific.) I strive to meet her needs before they send her into a panic. Time is important; plans and schedules need to be honored. Need to pick her up? Don't be even a minute late. When she has an appointment we

leave unnecessarily early, waiting in the car when we arrive. When someone violates these unwritten contracts with her, she starts to pinch the skin at her wrists, her eyes might well with tears, her breathing becomes restricted, and her heart begins to pound. Be on time. I can do that.

With any other kid, one who didn't have her background, I'd see this as indulgent, spoiling behavior. Tough luck, kid. You don't always get what you want. And that has to be true for her, sometimes. But it's the little things I can do, that I can manage, that help her feel safe. I no longer hear her gasp in fear several times during the evening. Instead I hear her play piano from the next room, while I prepare a dinner I know she will eat.

A week into the coronavirus quarantine, my husband, Caroline, and I sit down to dinner after an interminable grey day and a stress-filled week of adjusting to working from home full time and Caroline being home from school. The terrifying news about the spread of COVID-19 is the hum that fills the silence as we eat. It's been two years and three months since she nearly died. She would have, had a neighbor not seen her that day, had no one called the paramedics.

"I just want to let you guys know I'm struggling a bit. My chest is tight and I've been crying most of the night," she says.

Her father and I exchange looks. My fear comes flooding back. In the year of her most desperate depression, she was in the ER five times, and landed in the ICU with potentially deadly overdoses twice. We spent months locked in the cycle of emergency room visit, to inpatient care, to home, then back to the ER. The added risks of going to the ER now make the prospect even less welcome. Time in a residential facility could devastate, rather than heal. Submitting her to a facility but this time, not being able to visit, is an unbearable thought. If she's suicidal, how do we choose between keeping her at home, and facing the risk of exposure to others?

"Is there something Lovely and I can do to help you?" her dad asks.

"No," she says, "I've got this. I called Dr. J and I've been doing all my self-care stuff. I colored last night and crocheted until 3 a.m. And no self-harm, I promise."

I remind myself that neither her dad nor I can be her hero. During the cycle of self-harm, ER visits, acute intervention and back home, a social

worker said to me, “If a determined person really wants to kill themselves, no one can stop them.” I felt angry when she said it. It was impossible for me to hear then, but I understand it better, now.

I can be there for Caroline and help her get access to the support she needs. If I need to, I can drive her to the ER and stay awake all night. I can lock up the sharps and the medicine. I can be vigilant. I can be present, at home when she needs me there; outside her door when she needs to be alone. She knows this beast belongs to her, and she trusts me to be there if she needs me. And I am.

When my parents call and ask after Caroline, I say, “I love you,” before I say goodbye, before I hang up. At first, it’s by accident, a habit Caroline has helped me form. After a while, my parents say it back.

Prose Poems

Perhaps Then

You are mouthfuls of rain and eyes of rolling thunder, snowcapped emotions and she-loves-me-not conundrums. And I am feverish remorse and avalanches of white flags turning red under sarsaparilla skies. I would place dreams on the tails of comets and leave atmospheric burns across your skin if only we could travel to a time before the fireflies escaped and we trapped lightning in bottles. Perhaps then, you can suture the pieces of me that are no longer me and the fragments of you that separate our flesh from bone and love from lust and cauterize truth and hope back together. Perhaps then, we will collapse breathless and shaking, bare and breaking at Eros' altar and claim a heart that beats to the rhythm of forgotten fables. Perhaps then, with a steady hand and haunted heart I will chop love's martyrdom off at the knees so it can no longer run.

Migration

After the hurricane runs aground, its ragged sails billow over Kentucky like salmon running up a swollen river yellowed by streetlights, back to the place of spawning, migrating away from the devouring whirl, from the drowned, from houses washed clean of their hospitality, from blackout heat and humming generators, toward the longing that drives them beyond sustenance, toward the scent of saltless headwaters, toward the nests their mothers made, which they will make anew, where they will coalesce and offer up their glistening eggs.

Recipe for the Girl Who Never Learned to Cook

Cups and overflowing cups of sugar. Fine-grained, cubed, raw. Something else white. Here, the milk you never drink. Pour and stir. That veil you wore, that dress. And the satin shoes. Throw in the earrings, for luck. Chop spinach and pretend it fixes the whole of your life. More green. Crumpled dollars from your coat pocket. Leaves swept off the porch. White and green will do. They are enough. You don't need any other colors.

This is all too much for one pot. Scatter it across the floor and stomp. Repeat. No one wants to eat with you. Draw shapes in the sugar with your hand. Remember the turkey TV dinners you ate after school while your mother worked two jobs. Those mashed potatoes. Imagine how it feels to be fed.

Washing Day

It's washing day, my mother used to tell us, when the clouds bowed low to the horizon and shielded the mountains from our wondering gaze, tossing a silvery haze over the morning like the chiffon scarf she would drape over our lamp at night. And the sea seemed eternal; or perhaps it was the grey sky that rinsed the salt from the barnacled beach. Or perhaps that one fine line of a horizon divides one great expanse from itself. I sometimes, often, asked if she was *sure* the mountains would come back. She promised me *yes, sweetheart*, and she was always right. At night I would dream of an endless ocean, and sometimes the mornings still taste of salt.

Sometimes Picnickers Gaze Into the Heavens and See Large Ferocious Animals

I prefer more earthly hallucinations. When my mother was still a young girl, she collected various insects—ladybugs, stink beetles, mosquito hawks—in a small jewelry box. She buried them in the rhubarb patch and she never saw them again. She had been careful; she had marked the spot with a large flat stone, a small Italian flag her father had smuggled back from the war. No matter how deep she dug there was only more dirt.

Years later, I came home one night at 2 a.m. to find my sister and mother shivering. They were out on the front lawn huddled together under a thin blanket. My mother was muttering something fierce about how the moon had such evil faces. My sister was silent, with her finger she traced the outline of my mother's cheekbone. I brought them another blanket and sat with them until they were warm again. It was all I could do.

Once when lying in the garden, I noticed how at the ground level the garden wall and my line of vision conspired to cut the row of daisies in half. Instead of four petals, now there were only the top two. I stared at them this way for a good fifteen minutes until I felt my eyes were about to water, until those petals became something other than petals, until they looked like two lovers leaning in together for kiss, like my grandmother and grandfather must have looked when the war ended, on that night eight years later when they made my mother. Only then did I look up.

Lazarus

for Jake

Today, among young green branches thin from winter, I look up from the fire to find us still a family. It made me think of you. Was it the whiskey? The pastel shirt on a new body? My father, our warm laughter and new ease felt familiar. My grandmother, a tall tree calm and firm, smiling in the wind. Was it the light skipping off the lake, playing on the heart I got from you? I did not know. I could not have known that I would miss you more today than I did yesterday.

A Beleaguered Wife Pleads With Her Husband About Icarus

Look, I know you're tired of having this conversation, and I am too, but you need to listen to reason. You're going to get yourself killed. Yes, I know I've repeated the same damn story a hundred times and that you know all about the flying, the burning, the crashing, the misery and folly of the whole thing, but I'm going to repeat it anyway because it seems like none of it is sinking in. Look, I know this is a boring life—our little house, our ordinary family, our simple existence—and I see you staring off into the sky, closing your eyes and imagining what it's like to be a bird, to be a cloud, to be something heavenly and not just a speck of dust chained to the earth. I get it, I really do. You think there aren't days where I want to be more than this, where I think about leaving it all behind for some adventure? I want nothing more than to go off like a pioneer, to find a hidden valley just for us, to let the kids discover their own lakes and claim them with homemade flags, to climb a mountain and name it after us, to make love under more stars than I could possibly imagine. But that's not how life works. We have this farm and all its chores, we have these legs to walk the land, and we have these hands to work the soil, and the best we can do is find blessing in this drudgery. So please stop killing the fowl for feathers. Please stop letting the crops wilt while you make wings in the shed. Please stop chopping down our trees so you can have wood for the frame. Please stop jumping off the house, the barn, the water tower to test out your inventions. Please stop falling asleep outside looking off into the sky. Please stop holding a flame against your skin to build a tolerance. And please, for the love of God, please stop spending every second of every day imagining how you will leave us destitute so you can experience a few minutes of ecstasy before you get consumed by the fire and dropped back to earth like a fallen star. Please just stay home with me. We can make love under the stars tonight, and even though the clouds are starting to come in and the porch lights will soften their glow, it can be enough, can't it?

What Death Is

When my father says, *you must get used to the fact that I'm going to die*, I'm surprised that he doesn't know that Mom's breath became what I learned was "absence"—when the tears fell from his eyes like pinpricks of stars that collapsed against her blue-ing arms—I've known what death is. I've known death since my sister cupped her hands over my eyes and pressed me away from the gurney into our living room when my father tried to kill himself. His body was hauled out after we found the empty bottle of pills that I didn't have a name for. My father locked his door and left a note while I studied the haftarah at Temple Kol Ami. I know that you would let yourself die, from pneumonia, from the coronavirus, from the pain of living without your wife. I heard it yesterday, in your voice, when your breath sounded like the shaken cup of stones that we pick the best of and lay on Mom's grave. The wheel of amber reminds me of when we buried a family of ducklings on the beach. The lifeless bodies had yellow tips of moonlight attached to their wings. I wish that I didn't know what it's like to know that you will someday die. That you will be pressed into the earth, covered with a fistful of soil while I stand over you and say, *May there be abundant peace from heaven, and life, for us.*

Sepsis

My kidneys were swollen rocks, pieces of bismuth abrasive against each flank. In the hospital, they put me on oxygen, morphine, Tylenol, Benadryl, intravenous antibiotics, and Valium. I was convinced I would sink. My kidneys would drag me through my blue hospital gown, the white flannel sheets, the thin mattress, the steel frame of the bed, the gray linoleum, the cement, the next three floors. I was convinced I would wake up in the dirt. I'd add to the collection of decay—a few more bones and rocks. Instead, a nurse tapped each of my wrists, and asked which vein more easily took a needle.

Elegy for the Worst

The worst that could happen did. People ruled by fever & chills said the word love meaning don't touch me, meaning this is my tongue a terrorist fuse, & your body a place I do not hate, and yes, my breath can destroy. Meaning escaped the lips pink ruins after language broke its promise to stay. Some used blood in the valley of bones to paint flowers on stones of unmarked graves. Worshipping memory, the art of despair, was how color, taste, and hands in blue gloves did what the living used to do, make death a plate after church on Sunday, hanging themselves on the covenant clouds where any moment the lamb would descend. The worst that could happen is happening again. Belief became hope that a wardrobe of wool stained with the dark of deliverance would clothe the world's naked body, meaning maybe you can hold me closer than that, closer than the meaning of maybe.

fiction

Crash Corner

Tanya lived near a busy, poorly controlled intersection, and so kept a pot of coffee on during the winter, and a large pitcher of lemonade in the fridge during the summer. She sat on a stool looking out the kitchen window, leaning her elbow on the counter, waiting. There was an accident almost every day. Sometimes, if it had just snowed, or if it had rained and then froze, there were many accidents. There were more accidents in the winter than in the summer, which was why Tanya looked forward to the drop in temperature and the first snowfall every year.

As soon as she heard the thud and shattering glass, she shuffled to the coffee pot and filled up lidded Styrofoam cups with coffee, fit them into cardboard drink carriers she collected from fast food restaurants, and headed down the sidewalk toward the street in her alpaca fur slippers, pushing a squeaky wheeled grocery cart laden with the Styrofoam cups. She leaned heavily on the grocery cart, pushing its slick wheels through the snow and ice, and leaning on the handle for support.

She knew everyone from the firehouse and police station and looked forward to seeing them. She knew most of the paramedics, too, but there was a fast turnover for paramedics. The new ones ignored her until they got to know her. The cops mostly told her to back up, but took her coffee anyway. Tanya liked the firefighters best. They always treated her nice, and no matter what, once the work was done, accepted her coffee with a smile and thank you.

She gave coffee to the victims of the accidents too. Usually, they were dumbfounded, and accepted the cup without realizing it was in their hands. She often had to nudge their elbows up to get them to drink. Some were angry and shouted at her because they shouted at everyone. She didn't take it personal. She waited until they were done shouting and extended a cup, which they dumbly accepted. After a few sips, their face muscles would relax, and Tanya would smile with the thought that she'd made a new friend.

If it was a really big accident, she might have to shuffle back down the sidewalk with her grocery cart and fill more cups. She bought several packages every time she went to the dollar store. They filled two whole cupboards in her kitchen. She had another cupboard for her own ceramic mug and a single plate. A drawer contained one fork, one spoon, and one knife. There was a can opener for cat food. On the counter she kept a box of cereal and a box of instant rice. Next to the coffee maker was a can of coffee with a black-stained measuring spoon resting on the lid. She kept the stubs of her social security checks in another drawer that also held a thick note pad and a few cap-less pens.

The walls of her small but tidy house were empty, except for a crucifix that hung on a nail near the front door. There were no pictures of children or grandchildren smiling and waving. The surface of her fridge was clean—no magnets holding up invitations to weddings or birthday parties. She never received any Christmas cards.

Most days, Tanya left the TV on and listened to soap operas from her kitchen stool while she looked out the window. On particularly slow days, she would sigh and move from her stool to the tattered couch in the living room to see what was going on in the show.

Some days, however, Tanya's body would ache from head to toe so bad, she'd lie on her bed and watch the ceiling fan spin around. There, she'd talk to her cat, who rarely came out from under her bed except when he heard the click of the can opener.

"Tomkiss," Tanya would say into the ceiling fan. "Why don't you come out from under there and lay with me, you lazy old cat?" But the cat wouldn't budge. When it got past time for his food, she'd turn her head and find him sitting on the floor staring at her, his tail flicking. This made Tanya anxious. She'd heard of people who'd died and were devoured by their hungry cats, and she couldn't help but think that would happen to her some day.

Whenever Tanya lay in bed like this, she tried not to think of her mother, but no matter what kinds of distractions she employed, her mother would creep into her consciousness. First, just at the edges, Tanya pushing her away. But gradually, she'd get further and further in until Tanya could recall the way she wore her weave in a beehive, how tightly she puckered her lips, the wrinkles around her eyes and between her brows that never

went away. Tanya would close her eyes and see her mother scowling at her, telling her to get her lazy bones out of bed. Then she'd open her eyes, but still her mother's face was before her.

Tanya, herself, was older now than the image she carried of her mother, and yet seeing her mother's scowling face always caused her to shrink, to feel like a naughty child again who forgot to make her bed, or who spilled her glass of milk at supper.

"Come on out of there, Tomkiss," she'd say, dropping one hand over the edge of the bed in an attempt to lure out the cat and shake loose the shame that clung to her. He might sniff her fingers, or bat at them in a lazy sort of playfulness, but he never came out. He never climbed up on her bed to nuzzle her chin. He wouldn't lie down in the little space left between her two swollen legs. And this is when Tanya would cry, letting tears creep down her cheeks and land in her neck without bothering to wipe them away.

Yesterday had been one of those lie-in-bed sorts of days, so when Tanya looked out the window the next morning and saw a fresh coat of snow on the ground, her heart beat fast, and she put an extra scoop of coffee grounds into the coffee pot. She wrapped a quilt around her shoulders and sat on her stool, listening to the gurgling sound the machine made as it brewed. The sun rose and the smell of coffee filled her house and seeped out the cracks where the cold air came in. She hummed a pleasant tune and wondered what sort of friend she'd make today.

When the coffee finished brewing, she took her mug down from the cupboard and poured herself a cup. She brought it to her nose and smelled deeply, letting the scent warm her. Then she nestled down on her stool, the blanket pulled tight around her shoulders, and waited. Tanya smiled while she watched the traffic lights perform their dance: One light green, the other red; the first yellow, then red, and then the other green. Her eyes bounced back and forth when the lights changed colors.

She didn't have to wait long. When the light turned, Tanya watched, as if in slow motion, a speedy black car slip, tires screeching, until it hit the bumper of the car in front of it. The noise of the impact made Tanya blink. She heard the quick shatter of glass and eased off her stool. She was

across the kitchen in a step and filling Styrofoam cups, topping them with plastic lids.

She paused, considering the number of people who would be at the scene. It was a small accident. There would be at least two firefighters right away, and eventually the police would show up. But, she reasoned, it was unlikely anyone would call an ambulance. The victims were probably commuters at this hour, and she doubted either carried any passengers. Being able to anticipate exactly how many cups she'd need was a skill she was proud of, one she'd honed over the years.

When she finished filling the cups and putting on the lids, she placed them into the cardboard holders, and those into the grocery cart, which she kept just outside the front door. The quilt was still wrapped around her shoulders as she shuffled down the sidewalk, leaning on the cart and not daring to pick her feet up, sure there was a patch of ice hidden under the fresh snow.

By the time she reached the end of the sidewalk, the accident victims—an elderly man in a parka and a young woman in a wool coat—were exchanging information. The man stood before the woman, who sat in the driver's seat of the black car with her hand covering her forehead. The man seemed calm despite the damage to his car. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"Saw what happened," Tanya said when she was close enough. She was winded, but felt giddy. The cold air stung her nostrils, which she flared.

The man turned at the sound of her voice. "Careful, Miss," he said, indicating the shattered glass.

"Thought you might need some coffee to warm you." She untucked one cup from the cardboard holder and handed it to the man. He hesitated, but took it and said, "Thank you." She held another out to the woman, who looked at her with disgust. The woman reached behind her and lifted a paper cup with a lid.

"I already have coffee." But she didn't drink any. Just sat it back down in the cup holder.

"This is hot," Tanya offered, still holding out the cup. "And fresh."

"No thank you." The woman slid her legs around and gripped the steering wheel. Tanya huffed. She'd dealt with people like this before. But

her joints held the remnants of her achy day in bed yesterday, and her heart burned at the rejection of her cat, the invading presence of her mother.

Tanya watched the woman, young and thin, with her whole life ahead of her. Her weave was silky, unlike Tanya's hair which she'd let go frizzy and gray. The woman's skin was still soft and supple, where Tanya's was wrinkled and spotted. The woman's set face, determined, brought to mind Tanya's mother when she would lead the two of them down the center aisle of the church for Sunday mass. All heads were turned toward them, the only black family in a Polish community, a community where Tanya never felt she belonged. She and her mother would make their way to the very front row where her mother would sit, turn her head in the direction of her neighbors, smiling and nodding in greeting. Then she'd turn to young Tanya and attempt to smooth down her daughter's curls. "Sit up straight," she'd mutter. Or "Don't rest your back on the pew while you're kneeling," "Fold your hands while you pray, and close your eyes," "Pull up your stockings," "How do you always manage to wrinkle your dress?" The memory made Tanya grit her teeth and crease her brow.

She could feel the shame and anger pooling inside her chest. She pressed it down and smiled at the woman. She could still win her over.

But the woman in the black car had pulled out her cell phone now, and Tanya listened to her conversation. When she heard the woman say, "Hi honey," Tanya imagined a handsome man who called the woman "sweetheart," or "baby," or maybe even "sugar." That's what her man had called her way back when, because he said she was as sweet as sugar, running his hands up and down her youthful, sixteen-year-old skin until she got goose bumps. And she melted into him, so much older and more knowing than she was. How could she in her innocence turn him away?

Tanya's brow furrowed deeper, and she stuck out her bottom lip. She tried again to push the shame down, but it was stuck there in her chest, making it difficult to breathe.

The fire truck had reached them now, and two firefighters got out.

"Tanya," they said in greeting, nodding to her as they rushed about, but she hardly heard them. She was trying to remember what it was that had drawn her to such a man. Perhaps it was his eyes the color of golden sap, eyes that devoured her when he looked at her. Or the mustache he grew, which made her feel older and more sophisticated,

even though it prickled her mouth when he kissed her. Perhaps it was the way he traced his fingers up and down her spine until she shuddered. Tanya watched absentmindedly as the firefighters talked to the accident victims. The woman put her phone down and shook her head while she talked to the firefighters. When the police came, they asked Tanya to step back. They took each of the victims' statements. The firefighters swept the bits of bumper and broken glass into the shoulder. Tanya shook her head to clear away the memories and stared hard at the woman in the wool coat. The young, foolish woman, who didn't have a clue what life was about, but exuded confidence she hadn't earned. Tanya stepped forward, extending the cup.

"You could at least take some coffee," she said to the woman, her eyes narrowed. She tried smiling, but her face muscles felt tight, stuck. Everyone turned and stared at her. "I went to all the trouble." She turned and indicated the wheel tracks in the snow from pushing the grocery cart.

"Tanya," one of the police officers said, stepping forward. His name was Frank, Tanya knew, and he had kind, tired eyes with wrinkles at the corners. He held up his hands as if in defeat. "Please," he said, his eyebrows raised. Tanya huffed and pulled the quilt more tightly over her shoulders.

"I'll take one," said one of the firefighters, taking the extended cup. "Thanks, Tanya," she said.

Another firefighter, setting down a broom, smiled and asked for a cup, too.

Tanya felt her face soften and smiled as she took another cup from the grocery cart, watching them drink the coffee she had made for them. But the police officers turned back to the victims, their uniformed backs barring her. She set her face again, furred brow, lip out. Why was everyone pushing her away?

"She was driving too fast," Tanya said. Once again everyone turned and looked at her. "I watched the whole thing from my window, and I could tell from there she was driving too fast." She nodded her head along as she spoke.

The woman looked at her, incredulous. "Are you kidding me?" she said.

"How fast?" asked Frank.

"Oh, I don't know. Fast."

Frank wrote something in his notebook. Then he took a cup from Tanya and said thanks. He indicated to the other police officers to take a cup, which they did. Tanya smiled again, looking around at her friends, even the man with the parka, appreciating what she'd done for them. But when her eyes met the woman's, she saw that her eyes had turned red, and she fixed a gaze on Tanya so very much like the look her mother used to give her, it caused her to jump back. The last cup of coffee, reserved for the woman, toppled in the cart, dripping a little from the spout in the lid. Tanya picked up the cup and poured the rest of the coffee out into the snow, staining it brown.

The woman turned her head and the sun glinted off a tear streaking down her cheek. Shame rose up again, and Tanya's throat tightened. She swallowed hard and shuffled back down the sidewalk pushing her grocery cart ahead of her.

Once home, she dumped the coffee from the pot down the sink. She yanked the corner of the quilt when it began to slip off her shoulders and put more coffee grounds in the coffee maker. She pressed the button to start the brewing. It was the woman's fault, she reasoned, not hers, for driving so fast on a snowy day. Tanya had an obligation to tell the truth if she saw it. But still, the woman's eyes haunted her. Accusatory. Hurt. As if Tanya had betrayed her. After all, weren't they kindred souls? Two black women in a sea of white? Didn't they have an obligation toward each other?

"All I did was offer her some coffee," she said to the crucifix on the wall.

The tiny Jesus stared at her with melancholy eyes.

"It wasn't my fault," she shouted to the little Jesus. She pushed out her bottom lip and gave the crucifix a nod as if ending an argument.

Later that same day, Tanya was in the living room watching a soap opera when she heard the squealing tires and shattering glass. Her heart skipped as she hurried to the kitchen window. Here was her chance to redeem herself from that terrible morning. God was giving her another chance. But when she peered out the window, her mouth fell open and her stomach dropped. This was a big one.

A school bus lie on its side, smoke slipping out of the hood. She jammed her feet into her slippers and hurried down the sidewalk, her

hands cold and empty at her sides. Her breath came out in little clouds, and she groaned at the sight ahead of her.

She crossed the intersection and saw people in their cars gaping. Some had their cell phones out as if taking pictures. She approached the toppled-over bus from the back where she bent down and stuck her face in the back hatch window. The window was full of mud and road salt, and she couldn't see anything, so she pulled down the sleeve of her sweater and wiped a strip of grime away. When she cupped her hands around her eyes, she could see inside.

Small children, elementary age, had been thrown from their seats, and were piled up on top of one another. Backpacks and lunch boxes were strewn everywhere. There were tennis-shoed feet sticking straight up in the air. There was little movement, and she thought she could hear faint cries from within. And there was blood, too, trickling down the faces of the children who were lying nearest her. She couldn't possibly have smelled it, but her nostrils filled with the iron smell of blood.

Her mind flashed images before her. She was sixteen again, blood trickling into the toilet, running down her leg, her uterus clamping down on her in protest. She gripped the bathroom counter and tried not to vomit from the pain in her abdomen and chest. After she had cleaned up the blood on her legs, and the bit that dripped onto the ceramic tile, she sat down on the couch, her mother tossing a quilt over her shoulders and thrusting a mug of coffee into her hands.

"There," her mother said, standing before her and looking down. "Now no one will know what a slut you are."

Young Tanya, no longer innocent, let the tears slide down her face and the coffee spill over the edge as her body shook from the rapid change in hormones. She turned away from her mother's scorn as she would later turn away from potential lovers. Because who could love her now that she'd done what she'd done? She would never walk down the center aisle at church in a wedding dress, white or otherwise. Her uterus, betrayed, would never bear her another child. The man, the one who called her "sugar," fled back to his wife and children, and she never heard from him again. Though for years she would lie in bed at night and imagine what her child would have looked like. Would it have had his golden eyes? Her smooth skin? Would she have bundled the baby in her arms and sung it lullabies to

fall asleep? She whispered the lullabies to herself instead, bundled herself in her bed.

Nausea overcame her now at the memories and she gagged. She stood back and took a deep breath. She held her hands out in front of her and took another step backward. Slowly, she inched away from the bus, shaking her head. *The children don't deserve this*, she thought. Sirens blared, coming nearer and nearer, echoing through her skull.

She'd tried to tell herself it wasn't her fault. She'd been young, and him so much older. Her mother so forceful and terrifying without ever having to raise a hand to her. And yet, whenever she found herself on the brink of letting someone into her life, she saw her mother's narrowed eyes and heard the words again, *Now no one will know what a slut you are*. She could hear her lover's voice on the other end of the phone when she told him about the pregnancy, *How do you even know it's mine?*

This accident, too, couldn't have been her fault, despite what she'd been hoping for after the incident with the woman earlier. She couldn't possibly bear so much guilt. She crossed the intersection and shuffled her way more quickly down the sidewalk away from the bus and the children. When she reached her house, she burst through the door, panting. The crucifix rattled on the wall.

She picked her quilt off the back of a kitchen chair and wrapped it around herself, then went for the can opener. She clicked it into a can, but didn't open it all the way. When the cat came dashing into the kitchen, she cornered him and scooped him into her arms. He barred his claws, but she let them dig into her skin. She stood and held him to her face, letting his body quake with hers as she cried into his fur. Soon, flashing red and blue lights filled her kitchen through the window, but still she clung to the cat, his claws digging into her arms, even after they drew blood, which trickled slowly down her arms and dripped onto the linoleum floor.

A Dukedom Large Enough

The tip of Ray's drafting pencil snapped the moment it touched the sketchpad. He swore as he watched the graphite tip careen off the sharply angled desk. There was a muffled shout from a room upstairs, followed by what sounded like a frying pan clattering against a wall. He'd learned to tune the noises out. Without taking his eyes off the sketchpad, he fished another pencil out of the limp backpack dangling off the back of his chair. He flexed the cramps out of his fingers before settling the pencil into the shallow grooves worn into his digits. Taking a deep breath, he began to sketch a series of short, precise lines.

He didn't look up until the rain started spattering the window over the sink. Decades of grime had rendered the window nearly opaque, but he could hear the droplets pelting the glass. He'd lost track of time. The microwave clock blinked 12:00 AM just as it had for the entirety of his childhood. The sun hadn't quite set yet, and the rich smell of pipe tobacco drifted up through the floorboards as it almost always did in the late afternoon. Ray pulled a mug from one of the cupboards but abandoned it upon finding a cobweb coating the inside. Reaching under the sink, his hands closed around a bottle of scotch. His father had routinely secreted one or two bottles down there among the pipes. Ray took the bottle back to the desk.

He admired the broad porch he'd drawn. It would have to have thick mesh screens for New England's notorious summer mosquitos. Using the edge of his pencil, he shaded-in the neat square shutters he'd envisioned for the second-floor windows. With a ruler, he added a few more cubic shingles to the roof. Smiling now, he ran a finger along the rigid lines he'd just drawn. Four months and the design was barely halfway complete. Crumpled drafts filled the trashcan in the corner along with empty wine bottles and stained coffee filters. The entire right wing of the house hovered like a shadow next to the portion he'd already drafted, visible only by the light pencil marks he'd made for reference. Still smiling, he took a long pull

from the bottle and grimaced at its burn. It would be perfect, he thought. A perfect house.

A crack of thunder shook the house. Loose shingles fluttered down past the window. A sweet, musty smell like old books filled the kitchen as the house's rotting beams swelled with rain. Another peal of thunder started the baby crying upstairs. At least the storm had drowned out the couple's unending argument. He picked up his pencil. The baby's wails intensified. The scotch didn't burn so much the second time. He sketched a portion of the widow's walk but furiously erased it. The dimensions had been imprecise.

At some point the baby's cries dulled to a soft whimper. The bottle of scotch sat nearly empty on the desk and the kitchen had become dim. He could barely make out the faint lines he'd sketched. He went into the living room to fetch one of the house's few working lamps. There he saw the puzzle again. It sprawled across the coffee table next to the sagging loveseat where his mother had smoked cigarettes and read magazines while he'd sat on the floor, watching cartoons inches from the television screen.

But the puzzle they'd worked on together. She would yip with delight each time she'd fit two pieces. Even his father would pause on the way out the door to one of his midnight poker games to push together a few pieces. He'd offer some advice between sips of the old fashioned that he'd splash onto the carpet with each emphatic jab of his finger, which he'd wield like a scimitar when he spoke.

"You always want to start with the outside edges, then work your way inside. That's how you do it."

It was an image of the solar system, though they'd never finished it. And whether out of laziness or stubborn pride, they'd never bothered to sweep the pieces off the table and back into the flimsy cardboard box. For years it had been the room's sole decoration save for a taxidermy sparrow on the mantle over the fireplace. Saturn, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Uranus, and Mercury rested intact, but Earth and Neptune remained incomplete. The elusive pieces were scattered throughout the piles that textured the table's otherwise smooth surface. Some pieces lay submerged in the plush carpeting that covered the floor. He made a mental note to take up the carpet to check for wooden floorboards. Once he finished the exterior design he'd begin blueprinting the interior, but not before.

Ray had been putting off the interior, unsure where to begin. Before they'd died, his parents had done all kinds of extensive remodeling to divide the house up into rentable units. They'd built additions, crafted maze-like hallways, installed impossibly small stovetops and washer-dryers in closets, and rerouted the pipes so many times that the plumber swore he'd never set foot in the house again. At one point they'd had over a dozen renters squirreled away in every nook of the house.

As his parents gambled and drank away their trust funds, renting out the oceanside manor (which Ray's great-grandfather had built with railroad money) had been their only way to stave off the bankers and accountants who would come by with their sleek leather briefcases. His parents could've worked, of course, but they never had and saw no reason to start so late in life. As they filled the house with a rotating coterie of strangers, their own space became increasingly cramped. By the time he was twelve, Ray, his sister, and his parents had occupied just three rooms: the living room; a bedroom with two canopied, four-poster beds; a single bathroom; and the kitchen. Though his parents rarely cooked anything more complicated than toast, they'd all spent most of their time in the kitchen, lounging around the sturdy oak table laughing and talking for hours. They'd managed to keep the house in the family, anyway. A handful of renters still lingered, though Ray wasn't sure how many were still in residence. Supposedly his sister came around once a month to collect rent, but he hadn't seen her once in the four months since he'd returned to plan the renovation. He'd never seen the other tenants either, for that matter.

Setting the lamp on the carpet, Ray collapsed onto the loveseat. A plume of dust erupted out of the cushions. He bent over the puzzle. Within a few minutes, he managed to connect a few of the dust-coated pieces. None of the Earth pieces seemed to want to fit together. Another rumble of thunder shook the house. A moment later he heard a loud crack followed by a thud that vibrated up through the sagging floorboards and into his chest.

He leapt to his feet and bounded the short distance across the living room to the front door. With both hands he yanked it open by its heavy brass knob. Wind whipped into the house. Ray watched his sketchpad flutter like a broken-winged bird as the wind hurled it to the kitchen floor. Rhode Island was usually spared storms like this until later in the summer. Straining his eyes against the fierce wind, he discovered the source of the

cracking sound he'd heard. The enormous beech tree that had stood sentinel over the house for generations now lay collapsed in jagged, splintered chunks, blocking the road. It had taken down several power lines in its descent. Blue sparks shot up out of the ends of the frayed black cords. His wife had left in the station wagon they'd driven up from New York. Now the only car in the driveway was the dilapidated 1969 Corvette Stingray his father had won in a game of Texas Hold'em. Despite the occasional effort his father would muster with a wrench and a bottle of Jack Daniels, he'd never managed to tinker the car back to life. The car sat low on its rusted struts, red paint chips gathered like dandruff all around it and crabgrass creeping up over its aquiline frame. Ray briefly wondered where the other residents kept their cars. Swearing, he slammed the door closed behind him as he stepped back inside.

Before calling the fire department to clear the tree from the road, he picked his sketchpad up off the ground. He set it back on the desk and gently smoothed out the pages with his palm. The thick paper felt sturdy and pleasant under his fingers. The pencil, too, had been thrown off the table, and picking it up he saw that the tip had once again snapped. Ray admired the pencil before setting it down on the desk. It had been a gift from his wife, part of a set she'd given him upon being made partner at Ramsey-Cliff Designs, the architecture firm where he'd worked for nearly ten years. He wondered if she'd come back but pushed the thought away. He concentrated on the house. It was the house she couldn't stand. If he could just fix the house, he thought, she'd come back.

The phone droned in his ear when he picked it up and dialed the three numbers. Of course; the tree had taken out the electricity. He slammed the phone into the receiver and started rifling through the kitchen drawers. The yelling upstairs had gotten louder.

"I don't want to hear it! Shut up! I don't want to hear it anymore!"

"Oh, that's just like you, isn't it? Never wanting to hear it!"

He shook their voices out of his head. Finally, he found a few candles. He'd almost given up searching for matches when he thought to check the living room. Nestled between the cushions of the loveseat he found one of his mother's old lighters. They'd slip loose from the pockets of the silk robes she always wore, and she'd always drive to the closest gas station to buy a cheap new one rather than hunt down the missing lighter.

“Life’s too short for that nonsense,” she’d always say.

He lit the candles and sat back down at the drafting desk he’d placed atop the kitchen table. With a sharpened pencil, he added a few touches to the porch. It would have enough room for Adirondack chairs and a table where they could sip cocktails on summer evenings, watching the waves lap at the rocky shoreline while the cicadas symphony droned from the trees. Jen would love that. In New York she had always loved drinking lemon drops on the roof of their apartment building, staring out at Brooklyn across the East River. Even in the winter she’d beg him to throw on a scarf and follow her up the stairs.

A door slammed somewhere upstairs, and he heard running footsteps. His pencil froze on the page. The steps hurried down one set of stairs, and then another. He couldn’t tell where they were coming from. Since returning, he hadn’t once ventured beyond the three cramped rooms his family had called home. He didn’t even want to see the mess of the house’s interior until he’d fully plotted the exterior. The footsteps continued, traversing the intricate staircases and hallways that connected the many rooms housed in the expansive three-story estate. The steps moved deftly, hurried but certain. They were getting closer, each step louder than the last. He stared at the door that connected the kitchen to the main foyer. He’d double-locked it but as the footsteps got closer, he eyed the locks nervously. The footsteps came to a stop and he heard light breathing just outside the door. Then there came a pounding knock.

“Mister! Mister your car!”

It was a boy’s voice, and he sounded young. Still glued to the chair, Ray realized he’d been holding his breath. Swallowing hard, he called out to the voice beyond the door:

“Yes—what? What is it?”

“Your car! Look—”

The sound of crunching glass drowned out the boy’s frantic voice. Ray turned in the direction of the sound and leapt to his feet, knocking over the candles. Rushing to the kitchen window, he heaved it open against its rusted hinges. He couldn’t remember the window ever being open. Not even when his mother would boil the lobsters his dad would bring home as a peace offering after some bad streak at the blackjack table or the racetrack.

The whole kitchen would fill with the steam from the pot and the sweet, pungent smell of cooking shellfish.

Rain plastered Ray's hair to his forehead and streamed down his cheeks as soon as he stuck his head out the window. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the thick sheets of rain. The clouds were as bulbous and steely gray as zeppelin shells. Then he heard another grisly metallic crunch and turning, he watched as the wind again lifted the Corvette off the ground and rolled it like a log down the street. Mirrors, glass, and sharp pieces of faded red metal flew off in its wake. With each turn on the pavement another crater would impact the car's sleek body, pounding it to a contorted wreck. As it crossed the railroad tracks it caught sharply, sending a showering burst of orange sparks up into the sky. It came to a crumpled halt at the shoreline. Its dented metal steamed in the pouring rain before a towering wave snatched it off the shore and it disappeared into the obscure depths of the bay.

Even straining against the ancient hinges with all his strength, he couldn't get the window to close. Rain and sweat stained his shirt, and finally he left it open. Water pooled in the sink and splattered the floor. Rubbing the moisture from his eyes, he sensed that the room looked brighter than it had before. The sound of feet pattering back up the stairs grew quieter, and then silent. He wondered how long the boy had been standing at the door. Turning from the window, he let out a horrified yell. The candles he'd knocked over had lit his sketchpad on fire and now a small blaze engulfed his desk. Grasping about for kitchen rags, he managed to smother the fire. The remains of his designs smoldered in his hands. He did not attempt to stop the orange embers from consuming the scraps of paper. The front door (a stained cherrywood piece as he'd envisioned it) was the last image to fizzle into a hazy smudge of blurred lines. He crumpled the ashes into his palm, too empty to scream or cry. Unclenching his fist, he allowed the relentless wind to whip the blackened flakes out of his hand and scatter them about the kitchen.

For a while all he could do was stand by the sink, letting the rain and wind course over his body. He picked up the scotch bottle and briefly considered hurling it against the wall, smashing it to pieces as the storm had done to the Corvette. Ray settled on tossing it into the trash can, where it rested on the dune of scrapped drafts. When he groped through the dark

and opened up the cupboard under the sink to look for more booze, he froze at the sound of the violin. It was a soft, mellow sound, slightly off pitch. Slowly, he closed the cupboard door and the music was silenced. Opening it back up, the reedy sound of vibrating, tensile strings poured back into the kitchen. It was as though the sound was echoing through the pipes or seeping through the walls. It was a haunting melody, almost an aggrieved wail. But it was also somehow comforting, and he strained his ears towards its source. He wanted to taste the sound, ingest it, become it, envelop himself within its gentle, unhurried strum. In a frenzy he scurried about the kitchen, flinging open all the cupboards and drawers. The sound filled the room, drowning out the storm.

Through the open window Ray could see water sluicing down the street, past the abrupt ending of the asphalt and into the ocean. It moved like a great fluid snake in the darkness. By now the water level had climbed halfway up the rusted sign warning drivers of the trains that no longer traversed the abandoned railroad tracks. He watched as the rushing water carried the collapsed beech tree in great rolling chunks down into the sea where they floated like ice cubes.

Hesitating, he placed his hand on the knob of the kitchen door. Only moments ago, the boy had called out from the other side. The violin's baleful, inviting melody intensified. Ray felt a compulsion to follow it, find its source. Before he could stop himself, he unclasped the locks and yanked open the door. As his eyes adjusted to the dimness of the foyer, he could discern a winding staircase leading upward from directly behind the door. The boy must have been standing on this first step, as there was barely a foot of floor space between the bottom step and the door. A sharp burst of lightning lit the foyer then and he saw several more staircases, doors, and hallways, all shooting off in different directions. Following the sound and groping with his hands along the bannister, he started up the winding staircase. He heard feet pattering above and behind him, but he could see nothing. The baby was crying again. The smell of pipe tobacco lingered in the musty air.

"I've had it with you!"

"You've gone too far this time!"

The couple raged at one another and he heard a crash of glass and doors being slammed. All the while the music grew louder, the violin's

melancholy solo building to a crescendo before dissipating back into subdued, mournful notes. The staircase wound upward in circles. Another flash of lightning briefly illuminated a window up ahead and he moved towards the burst of light. But just as he did so there was a deafening crash of thunder followed by a wrenching groan. The staircase shuddered and he tumbled backwards down a few steps before catching himself on the bannister.

Ray kept trudging up the stairs. Finally, he reached some sort of landing and he paused to catch his breath, leaning against the small square window. Sweat poured into his eyes. It wasn't until he stopped moving that he felt a sudden consciousness of his own inertia. He looked down at his feet to be sure they weren't moving. They were firmly planted, and yet he was aware of movement. Another lamenting groan echoed up from the earth, followed by a violent lurch that threw him to the floor. His head glanced off the bannister and he rolled to his knees.

Holding a hand against the throbbing pain in his skull, he pulled himself up to the window and peered out into the darkness. The lightning was nearly constant, an unbroken charge casting the swollen clouds in an unnatural iridescence. In the spectral half-light he could see that the porch was completely submerged, water surging around the house on all sides. Clutching the windowsill, he braced against another violent lurch and watched as the rushing water tore the house from its foundation. Another burst of thunder boomed out from the starless night sky and the flood shoved the house unceremoniously into the street. He felt the floor swaying unsteadily beneath his feet. The violin had never stopped.

Ray pressed on through a semi-circular hallway and ducked into a low-ceilinged passage that had been carved through a fireplace into an adjoining room. He followed the sound up two more flights of stairs and through several more curving hallways. He emerged into a small bedroom packed tight with bunk beds. A tall ladder in the corner of the room led up to a trapdoor in the ceiling. The violin was deafening now, as though it were being played directly into his ear. Without pausing he climbed the ladder and pushed against the trapdoor.

He hauled himself up onto the roof, using one hand to shield his face from the furious wind and rain. There was nowhere else to go. He dragged himself to the edge and peered down. The house had picked up

speed, propelled down the street by the racing current. It had too much momentum to stop. Plowing through the railroad sign as though it were a toothpick, the house was thrust into the ocean. Ray's stomach churned with each wave that lifted the house to the precipice before plummeting back downward. The waves, dark as ink, crashed against the windows three stories down and rain drenched his clothes.

At some point he'd passed out, succumbing to the unyielding headache. When he awoke his clothes felt damp against his skin. Touching a hand tenderly to his scalp, he felt a lump the size of a lemon at the back of his head. He tried to stand up but settled for an ungraceful squat when his vision went red. After a moment he realized it wasn't raining anymore. The soft, pink light of dawn warmed his face. He crawled back to the edge of the roof and looked down. Sure enough, the waves still lapped at the house's shingled walls, but it had somehow stayed afloat. Turning his head in a slow circle, he saw only the ocean on all sides, no land in sight. The tranquil waves caught the pink light at their brief peaks and rippled briefly before returning to a deep indigo. Ray stared at the waves for a long time.

The sound of the violin broke his trance. He snapped his head in the direction of the sound. Peering down to the other end of the roof, he saw people. Squinting, he could make out a couple with their arms around each other, swaying slowly. He inched closer, crawling along the roof. A woman rocked with a sleeping infant in her arms, her eyes closed, and her lips formed into a tired smile. An older man with a thick white mustache lay off to the side on his back with his hands clasped behind his head, one foot tapping to the rhythm. A knobbed pipe jutted out from under his mustache and every few seconds a small plume of smoke would drift up out of his mouth. They were listening, clustered around the crumbling brick chimney. On top of the chimney, a young boy played the violin. His nimble fingers worked the taut strings and the sound resonated off the bow he held tenderly in the other hand. There was something regal in the boy's countenance, a patrician grace in the way he captured the attention of the audience with his eyes closed and his mouth set in a focused frown. The sound followed no traceable pattern or melody, but simply poured off the instrument and into the air.

Standing, Ray took a moment to accustom himself to the gentle roll of the house as it bobbed with the rise and fall of the waves. He walked across

the roof and sat down between the mother and the old man. The swaying couple nodded at him and smiled but said nothing. Closing his eyes, he listened to the violin and yielded himself to the gentle, undulating rhythm of the house as it floated along.

Three Months

Month Two

The place in California turned out to be just okay. It was cheap. I could walk to work. But there were fleas no matter what we tried, and I was glad you never said anything about the bites that covered my legs. It was small too—just the one room. The big door in the center of the wall wasn't a closet, but a bed. I had never seen such a thing. You said it was a Murphy bed. Every night we would turn the knob and open the door into a web of springs and spokes. Every morning we'd snap it shut again, our pillows and blankets disappearing into the flat wall.

We crossed the country in three days, racing the imminent death of our car, as if the odometer ticked minutes, not miles. While one of us drove, the other read stories out loud because the radio didn't work. Fifty miles into Colorado it suddenly sputtered into country music. The deep twang of broken hearts. We listened in silence and stared out at the plains.

You'd spent an afternoon poking battery cables and kicking tires. I leaned against a chain link fence, looking out at the line of used cars like a horizon. You finally sparked a deal, matching a car with the roll of bills I handed you the night before. The white of the driver's door didn't match the other whites—it looked like an old tooth—and made a sound like a shotgun when you opened it. To open the hood we had to use a screwdriver and a kick, each placed just so. The fourth time we refilled the oil, somewhere in Ohio, I watched from the passenger seat, my feet on the dash, as you coiled your leg into an aim. When you got back into the car, wiping your hands on your jeans, I said you looked like a hood ornament. You grinned and gunned the engine.

Month Three

I got a job right away but wouldn't be paid for two weeks. We counted out the rest of my bills. "We can do it," I said, "Black beans. Peanut butter."

But the next day when I came home, I smelled beer on your breath. There was a pizza box in the garbage.

You told me you were leaving a few days later. You had just gotten out of the shower. I was sitting on the Murphy bed, putting on my shoes. You stood in the bathroom doorway, the steam behind you, a towel wrapped loosely at your hips. You were smoking a cigarette and your eye was squinched against the smoke. It looked like you were winking. Your smile was shy and blushed. You said you'd be back; it was just summer work, back East, for your father. But as you stood there, I knew it was over. You weren't ready. Your chest, skinny and narrow, gave you away.

Month One

The first time I met your parents I stood alone in the large living room, waiting for them to return from somewhere. You were on the porch. I walked over to the mantle to look at the family photographs. A long line of important ancestors. Stern faces with hard eyes, some framed in cases of delicately tooled leather, bedded into velvet linings. I lifted one to look closely. I was looking for you—your smile perhaps or your eyes, the parts of you that pulled me in—but then I heard wheels on gravel. I reached to put the photo back, but it wobbled, then fell and broke with a crash onto the stone hearth. Before I could pick it up, everyone was arriving. There were slamming doors, barking dogs, several small children. I turned. Warm hellos and handshakes. But all the while those dead eyes were staring at the ceiling through broken glass.

Corvallis

In the dream, Sarah drives her rust-red Buick up the coast of Oregon, just past the city of Corvallis where she lives. I am sitting passenger side, trying to take a photograph of the waves, black-grey and glossy as obsidian, the shore dotted with rocks hard as jawbreakers. The crank windows are rolled down, Sarah's light blonde hair trailing and whipping in the early spring wind. I want to ask her a question, can feel the consonants of a *Wh-* word pulling at my lips from the inside, but just as my voice begins to rise from my throat, I wake up, pulled back into the muted navy blues and greys of my apartment bedroom. The back of my pajama shirt is damp with sweat, the scent of my own body salty, though I am shivering. I watch the caves my ribs make as they rise and fall beneath my shirt, beneath my now slick skin.

I have to remind myself, waking up, that I am not in Corvallis, have never been. Oftentimes, I picture myself getting fish tacos from a light blue truck near the ocean, Sarah munching one beside me, even though I don't know if there are any taco trucks like this in Corvallis. I imagine us sitting at a driftwood picnic bench overlooking the ocean, the planks rotting but sturdy. She would call the table beautiful, trace the dark spots and slanted marks with her finger.

When Sarah left, I promised that I would visit, in the spring when I could take a few days off work, or maybe for Easter. The two of us would share a meal at a square wooden table like the one from our Austin apartment, all scratches and sleek edges. I'd bake sweet potatoes dusted with cinnamon and drizzled with honey, Sarah's favorite, in her tiny kitchen, the ocean a grey blanket outside the window. We'd curl up on her corduroy couch, our mouths still dusted with the sweet substances.

I wondered, before she left, if I could go with her. I didn't have a job or graduate school waiting for me there like she did. Every attempt to picture myself navigating the city was merely a foggy daydream, slowly saturated by all the times I'd conjured the image. Deep down, I knew that Sarah needed to go alone. I had my own life to figure out, interviews to attend

for teacher's assistant positions, studio apartments going up for sale across Austin. I buttoned up my plain blouses, pressed my stomach in as I looked in the mirror. I thought of Ohio Man, how the first time he'd slipped his hand beneath my white shirt, I'd watched it move, like a bony ghost, across the ridges of my body.

After Sarah's departure, the days accumulated, as did instances of the dream, each one as grey as the last, Sarah's car the brightest object in the picture, the whipping of her hair the most delicate movement in sight. I stared at the pixelated digits of my bank account day after day, all that I had gathered from each month of work. My teaching job paid the bills, helped with upkeep of my studio apartment and battered Toyota, both of which still smelled of Ohio Man's scent: wintergreen mouthwash, cologne strong as bourbon, wood shavings from his job in set design. Kissing him, I wasn't sure whether to feel drunk or refreshed. After our first date, I called Sarah, but she didn't answer.

Ohio Man once took me on a tour of his workspace, briefly pointing to his coworkers—Rudy, Sam, Irwin, or names something like those—without telling them my name. I knew, lying in his musty sheets months ago, waking up to the diluted sunlight and smell of burnt toast, that this would be my last time with him. I just didn't know how to say it then.

It's been eight months since I last spoke to Sarah and I haven't looked at plane tickets in half a year. The job I had texted her about laid me off, my budget constricting in a single, icy curl, more snap than curve. I stopped texting her after she forgot my birthday, forgot the time she'd promised we would FaceTime after Ohio Man broke up with me, told me that Texas never had his heart, never would.

"It's just too different," he said one night, the two of us pressed together on his twin-size mattress, air conditioner sputtering just outside his apartment window. His body made me think of all the places I wanted to travel. He had one treasure map tattoo printed on his right rib, a triangular, mountain-like pattern moving across one bicep and down his shoulder blade.

"As a state?" I asked, reaching to run my fingers across the map, along the gaps between each arched bone.

“As different parts put together. You go from El Paso, borderland, to Austin with its hipsters and keeping it weird, and it’s like going to a different planet.”

I wanted to ask him what kind of planet he wanted to live on, if he wanted one more ocean than rock, more water than body. But as I looked at the treasure map tattoo, the dark spurts of hair around his navel, whatever wave of question that had risen within me was quelled.

Sarah was the middle child growing up, between an older brother and a younger sister. I met them when Sarah’s whole family came to visit for graduation. They all gathered around our scratched table, sharing confetti cake with pink frosting and talking about their upcoming hiking trip. They were athletes, small-bodied but built, with hair the color of aged honey and fresh bark. Sarah said little, gaze darting between one family member and the next, but from time to time she would catch my eye and smile. Sarah’s sister, petite with brown doe eyes, cut the cake into perfect squares. I ate half my slice, then, under Sarah’s watchful eye, the rest of it. I licked the frosting from my lips.

I was in the middle, too, I suppose, but in a different way. My mom and aunt shared a house, so growing up, I lived with my three cousins, two older, one younger. I still remember us standing in the bathroom mirror one night, the three of them dark-haired, Milagros putting on burgundy lipstick, Ángeles mauve, while Caridad pulled a straightener through her curly strands. And me in the middle of it all, pale arms pressed to my sides, staring at the turquoise dress covering my limbs, hoping it made my breasts look bigger. I didn’t always mind being smaller than my cousins; I just thought I was the wrong kind of small.

Everything about my body was either too soft or too bony. My cousins pointed to my ribs, curved and hewn as Atlantic seashells, noted the slight protrusion of my lower belly below breasts that had not grown since late girlhood. While they whispered in our shared bedroom, summer dresses and suede heels strewn across our faded beige carpet, I prodded at my skin. The only comfort in watching those parts of myself was when Ohio Man kissed my stomach, rested his head in the hollow between my breasts. When Sarah, lying next to me, looked me up and down, said, “You’re soft-edged. I could lean into you for hours.” And though I wanted to trace my

finger down her arm like so many lines of a treasure map, I kept my hand where it was, didn't move until she rose for a glass of water.

I was still throwing up when Sarah and I started rooming together. I pressed two fingers down my throat until everything rose—my food, my tears—and fell into the bowl in front of me. She found me one day, knees scratched from a tumble off my bike that afternoon, tiles cool against dried blood and warm skin. The swelling of my throat subsided to thin, jagged lines of ache. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be, but I knew it wasn't this.

Sarah pulled me off the floor and pressed her thumbs into my wrists, burgundy polish still wet on her nails. I remember how a thin line of it rubbed off on my own wrist, like smashed cherries. Like blood.

"Let's get you into bed," she said, pulling me upright. In the mirror, my face was gaunt, dark circles a near-permanent fixture on my dry, pale skin. I once dreamt I was an old woman, leaning over a porcelain sink, spitting out teeth hard as pearls, my skin the hue of an oyster's insides. That day, looking at the face of my twenty-one-year-old self, I knew I could not let myself become that woman when I was still so young.

Sarah had me brush my teeth, then brought me a foggy glass of water while I pulled my pajamas on. Our dishwasher back then rarely worked, often leaving white, scalloped streaks on the glassware, giving them an oceanic feeling. Like I was drinking from the Pacific itself. I hoped the water would take whatever made me keep digging and carving and wash it away.

Just before she left my room, Sarah slid under the covers with me, wrapping one arm around my waist, resting her head on the corner of my pillow, along the skin marking the space between jaw and neck. Her arm rested along that soft spot of my belly. When she went back to her own bed, sometime in the middle of the night, I felt the sheets beneath my open palm, barely wrinkled and now cold, as if no one had touched them.

The next day, I rode my bike for an hour, putting off an essay I needed to work on. The Texas sun seared my scabs. That night, sitting at the kitchen table in front of my laptop, I rubbed my palm over the skin, tracing upward until I reached smoothness.

Now Sarah is graduating, finishing her master's degree in Ocean, Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, with a concentration in Oceanography, just as I am about to start mine. I'm not actually in anywhere, just on the waitlist at two schools nowhere near her. One in Ohio, the other in Florida. I applied to do a Master's in ESL, imagined myself teaching in a small school by the sea, or between fields of grain. Anyplace where the space around me expanded, rolled and curved and bent without pain.

Ohio Man told me that his state was king of corn. He said this as he rolled over atop my just-cleaned white sheets, to face belly-down.

"More than Nebraska?" I asked.

"More than Nebraska." He nodded, looking me straight in the eye. His were brown with a ring of gold at the center that seemed to shrink whenever I looked too closely.

Besides school, I have no real attachment to either state, no particular fondness for corn or oranges. Neither could ever be sustenance. I wrap the rotting vegetables from my fridge in paper towels, toss them in my trash bin with a prayer or an apology.

And I wait. I stare at my inbox, scrolling through unopened emails that look important enough to glance at but maybe not enough to keep. Even to decide which ones to throw away seems too difficult a task.

One night, I dream I am in Corvallis, but I am alone. Here, at the border between land and sea, facing an ocean I have never touched. It's just me, standing at the shoreline, arms thrown up to the wind. Though I cannot see what I'm wearing, I know it's my grey and red sports jacket, the one with the zipper that goes all the way up my neck and flares out below my chin. My body is as hard and flat as a board. Dark etches run across my torso; I know this without looking at them, can feel their depth without touching them. I run my fingers through my hair and, when I feel it coming off, light and airy as dandelion puffs, I slowly start to panic, feel the age creeping up from the inside of my body, liver and stomach suddenly acidic. I press one palm to my forehead, the other to my heart, and awake in the same position. As if my real body knew my dream body, knew the place where it wanted to go but could not. And here, my real body, sweat-damp, remembering the jagged lines, the smooth rocks. Remembering the way I carved myself from the inside like a wolf, without knowing what hunger I would eventually find.

Epitaph

The foal was born crooked, legs folding in on themselves like an origami crane. It took too long to stand up, Papa said, it wasn't going to make it. He went back to the house to get his gun and by the time he got back the little thing was on its feet, legs wobbling as it fought gravity. We'll give it a couple hours, Papa said, spitting into the dirt and walking out of the barn into the cold night.

I watched through the wooden slats as you wrapped a blanket around the still-wet body. You nodded to me and I slid in the stall door, knelt beside you. Careful, you said, mama horses are like mama people. When a body slips out of ya, there's no telling how you'll react. The towel I rubbed down the shivering body grew damp while the mare breathed hard, forcing herself up on the shavings. Come away, child, you breathed, they need to bond. And as the mare ran her tongue down the body that had so recently been inside her, first with trepidation and then with resolution, long strokes that almost knocked the foal off its trembling legs, you stroked my hair the same way, held me close, as if remembering the moment that I came into the world and became yours but also not yours at the same time.

The foal made it, but you died that spring. Papa didn't shoot you but sometimes I wonder if he wished that he had as your screams, long gone, echoed around the empty rooms. Towards the end the doctor came almost daily, giving you pills that dulled your eyes and your song and left you staring at the ceiling, not remembering my name. Papa used to sit with you every day, holding your hand and praying to your god for you to get better, to come back to him. But as you got worse he came less and less, until finally you died and he wasn't there at all.

Papa doesn't say much now. But after you died he went out and shot that colt, six months old now and still at its mama's side. Shot him right in the

head so he didn't feel any pain. His mama did, though. That mare cried and cried for her baby, the same way you had, rolling around in your bed. I remembered how you used to save that colt garden scraps, the little horse that Papa didn't think would live, and how you named him Providence and how Papa put a bullet in his head after you were gone.

Monday

12:06 AM

Last Monday, you took a week of leave.

In accordance with company policy, Anne from HR calls to offer her condolences and a few more days, should you need it.

She says, I can't imagine.

How *unlucky*.

6:45 AM

You don't have to wake up because you never slept.

7:12 AM

You brush your teeth.

Unlucky.

You turn the word over and over in your head, feel it ringing in your ears, as you spit out a mouthful of Winter Blast Mint. *Unlucky* slithers between your teeth to wilt under your tongue, then climbs down your esophagus to curl around your ribs.

8:59 AM

Work is a big glass tower on the corner of 43rd, jutting forth to pierce the cloudy morning sky. To arrive at your cubicle, you must traverse through a series of pristine hallways, each one emptier than the next.

Every footstep you take hollows off the ceramic tile to linger in the frigid office air.

In many ways, it reminds you of a hospital.

9:42 AM

You forgot how much you hate spreadsheets.

10:21 AM

You're rechecking Stacy's invoices and the endless lines and numbers make you think *hospital bills* and, all of a sudden, your heart lurches and you're standing, once again, in the washroom down the hall from the NICU.

You think, I don't want to be here, but you've never really had that choice. Instead, you dry your hands and look in the mirror, at a starchy-sad-hopeful woman with deep ruts lining her blurry eyes and exhaustion twitching along her cheeks.

In this memory, you look up, and there is an awful, hideous mural unfurling itself across the fluorescent ceiling and—

The numbers on your screen blur into hazy Rorschach splotches of ink as you click *Enter*.

1:08 PM

You saw that mural over a hundred times; 118 times, to be exact.

And you can recall each detail with astonishing clarity. Tiger and Piglet and Cinderella, animated with happiness, dancing with lilies and fawns and fluttering baby birds. And right there, scrawled across Cinderella's left arm in tacky, gaudy red: *There Is No Footprint Too Small That It Cannot Leave an Imprint on This World*.

You think, I saw that mural over a hundred times; 118 to be exact, and I hated it more each time.

2:51 PM

Your Disney stapler, a souvenir from your honeymoon trip to Japan, breaks when you jam it too hard on Stacy's stack of invoices.

Unlucky.

3:21 PM

You have always been a fast worker, so it makes sense that you would finish early today.

But now this means that you have nothing to do with your brain and your hands and your everything.

Maybe you should ask to go home.

You think, I should go see my daughter.

4:03 PM

You finally muster the strength to get up and go ask Anne from HR if you could please leave early, because well, there's that tragic circumstance in the family, and you would like to see your husband and your daughter.

You know how husbands are, can't even make dinner without us.

Ha-ha.

It's very urgent.

Of course.

4:47 PM

You are waiting for the five o'clock bus. You are going to see your daughter.

5:07 PM

There's a father sitting in the seat across from you.

He has his boy next to him.

The father whispers something in his boy's ear, and the boy whispers back, then points at the blinking street lights outside and laughs. He laughs and laughs and laughs, until you can almost see peals of his exhilaration frothing in the air.

Would it be weird, if you just...went up to them? If you just grabbed him and screamed, take your boy to the park and across the world and hold him tight and—

The bus pulls to a stop. They're still laughing when they leave.

5:41 PM

It takes you forty minutes to arrive at the mausoleum on the outskirts of your city and because they close at six you have to really, really rush.

The ground is still wet from yesterday's rain. You leave zigzags spiraling in the dirt behind you.

You're thinking of that mural, stretching across the washroom ceiling down the hall from the NICU and all the hours you spent inside, praying and waiting and praying. You think of the boy and his father, laughing at the streetlights flashing by and your broken Disney stapler from your honeymoon in Japan and finally,

5:45 PM

you're here,

you're here,

you're here.

5:49 PM

You smell lavender shampoo, and baby oil, and milk.

Her heart beats against yours.

5:51 PM

Your daughter has the prettiest face.

And you could look at her forever, at her half-moon eyes and dimples and waving tufts of silky hair, and you love everything about her, from the way she bobbed to Franklin's old CDs and her twitching thumbs and rounded hiccups, and

5:53 PM

you look,
and you look,
and

7:09 PM

Franklin wants to know how your day was.
It got better, you tell him.
(You saw your daughter for nine minutes today.)

11:59 PM

You're thinking of the washroom again.
Lucky turns over and over in your head, ringing in your ears. You feel it curling around your ribs, and you think I am so [], because I am your mother and I always will be, and one day we'll spend all of eternity together and—
You're thinking of the unused diaper boxes stacked in the corner, of the baby oil and lavender shampoo bottles still sitting in the shower, of the tiny footprints trailing over every corner of your heart.
Of the mural, glossing over the ceiling, and you think,
I finally understand.

The Danger of Landing

It wasn't the accident that split us apart. I blame the virus for that. For your landing. Make good decisions, you'd say. Be careful.

Even as Sam and I were hanging on either side of the wire—she the only one left in the wicker basket, me tangled in the ropes and the balloon drifting down between us in flaming tatters—she and I knew we were in it together, peanut butter and jelly. I think we were laughing. She laughed at everything, like it was a solution. I desperately wanted a solution.

Let's start with the hot air balloon. You'd want to know about the hot air balloon first. Everything about a hot air balloon is gentle. Even the danger is gentle. You still wouldn't have done it. Or you would have, but you'd be asking questions the whole time about safety. You would've been annoying. Sisters always are.

I wasn't nervous about it until we got there. It was our summer of saying yes, of feeling alive, of whitewater rafting and buying a new (used) car and going up in a hot air balloon. Sam and I had been cooped up for too long. We were doing it all, before the virus surged again. Before life ended. If the virus surged again. Either way, we'd decided to live.

When we got there, to the open field with a couple pickup trucks, a big, flattened fabric, and a wicker basket, we sighed in relief. We'd driven too fast to get there; it was getting too late in the day and we might have missed our window for flight. The hot air balloon man introduced himself as the pilot; Sam and I shared a look. He was too messy, with his stubbled chin and tousled hair, to be a pilot. And seemed more likely to take us to the Land of Oz than efficiently pilot us anywhere. That's the other thing about hot air balloons; they're not efficient.

He explained what he was doing and what to expect from the flight, as he set the wicker basket upright. The carabiners held it all together. That's when I felt a little nervous. I was putting my life in the safety of a few carabiners and a wicker basket brought thousands of feet in the air by pure flame. Sam squeezed my hand, and before I could finish my thought

we had climbed in and we were drifting. The flame, as it turned out, was beautiful.

You know when we were kids, and I'd let go of a balloon to watch it drift into the sky? You'd yell at me; tell me I was killing the turtles and the whales. But do you remember what it looked like? It might bob a bit, waver in the wind as it steadily drifted away from us? That is exactly what it feels like to be in a hot air balloon. But instead of something drifting away, you are the thing that is drifting. Flying. It felt light, powerful. I felt like maybe I could catch up to you.

When we paused to breathe, after the laughter, which was after the screaming, I looked around. Sam was clutching the side of the wicker basket, the sole remaining passenger, soot on her face, reaching for me. I'm not sure her eyebrows were there anymore. I looked down and just past the smoking fabric of the balloon, I saw the on the ground the limbs of the balloon-man askew. I didn't like to see that. I looked up instead.

Where the ropes were caught on the electric lines, sparks were flying. It explained the bits of fire raining down on us. And as the ropes held onto me for dear life, I glanced up and to my right. Several yards away, past the danger and the fire and the ashen remains of a gentle flight, a bluebird sat on the wire. I knew he was a bluebird because I was below the wire by a few feet, and I could see his underside; it was orange. Mom always taught us to look at the underbelly of the birds. He stretched his wings and settled onto the wire. He flitted up and settled, flitted up and settled, every time a shower of sparks went off. I think he chirped, but I couldn't hear because Sam was talking. Or screaming. Or laughing. I wanted to hear him. I wanted to hear Mom, making up lives for the bees and the birds, bringing to voice the nature around us.

The rope slipped, caught. My fingers twitched. They weren't tangled, just my arm. I grabbed a bunch of fabric and rope above me with the other hand. I was trembling.

I looked down, at my legs dangling, the legs of the balloon-man down below my own.

I looked up, at the wire and the sparks, and for the bluebird. The bluebird looked up, too.

“We’re out of rooms, but you can have an orange Barcalounger.” The nurse said the words as if telling a child she could have the last piece of spinach, what a treat. I nodded, sitting down gingerly. The ER is full of germs. I don’t know how you ever worked here. Even before the virus.

The nurse paused before walking away. “What exactly happened out there?” she asked.

“The wind. Blew us into the electrical wires. We were supposed to be landing. And then I fell.”

I settled into the orange Barcalounger, my new world. Waiting here seemed better than waiting on the wire. Here, I was waiting for them to take pictures of my insides. They’d already stitched up my arm, where the rope had dug welts into my flesh and tore it apart. I tucked the blanket under my chin for comfort. Somebody had probably died on this blanket two hours ago. You would kill me if you knew I was down here, Lyss. I wished I could take my orange Barcalounger and go wait on your floor.

“Excuse me,” I attempted to pause the nearest nurse passing down the hall. “How is my friend? Sam?”

“Sam...” she turned on her heel to step back towards me, waving the doctor to go on by. Cocked her head sideways to read my wristband. “Emily Barnes. You mean the other girl from the hot air balloon?”

I nodded.

“She’s going to be fine. They want to keep her for observation, because she hit her head in the fall. It’s quite a miracle you two are okay.”

Okay, I thought. My thoughts looped over themselves as the pain medicine eased up the stabbing in my belly. *And where did the bluebird go? Did he watch me fall?*

They put me in a wheelchair and wheeled me down for an X-ray, a CT scan, covered me with a warm blanket after.

“No internal bleeding,” the doctor said. “You have some rib fractures, so you’ll have to take it easy.”

I nodded tentatively from my orange Barcalounger in the hall. As she walked away, I considered that you were right upstairs, unconscious. If you’d been there, you’d be asking her all the right questions. I didn’t know the questions—or the answers—so I just drifted back to the moment of flight, before the crash.

The grass waved good-bye as we drifted, though I didn't notice until we were high enough that I couldn't just jump out. I wanted to, for a moment, when I realized that opportunity had passed. Then the little songbirds waved at us with their fickle and buoyant wings, as we floated above them, too. And then the tops of the trees, looking like waving broccoli, greeted us with their foreign outermost leaves, sending off the last of the sunlight for the day.

"Wow," we said to one another. It was really all we could muster, overwhelmed by the beauty and by the balloon-man as he told us more than we wanted to know about the fuel, the flames, how he could dip us down to the tops of the trees. My stomach flopped when he did, but I obligingly grabbed a handful of the tree's leaves, as instructed. I didn't care about the trees. I just wanted to fly. To be away from the ground. Sam knew we didn't need to talk. She just wanted to be high.

And we flew. Standing so close it was impossible not to touch, we separated from the earth and its pull and joined the sky, the flame propelling us to the middle space between ground and cloud. I closed my eyes, briefly, only to dizzy myself when I opened them.

I wanted to stay there. But it's nothing more than the moment-before, when I think about it now. The landing ruined the flight.

I wanted to stay up there then, too, but the sun was going down. No flight at night, balloon man said. Planes wouldn't be able to see us. Not safe. He wasn't a man of many words while he was in landing mode.

So he picked out a clear field, looking for the chase truck that would meet us there. We started to descend. And then the wind blew, and we were flying again.

"We'll touch down one field over," he called out to the chase truck as we ascended again. To us he said, "It may be a bumpy landing. Wind's picked up."

We flew again. I wanted to keep going, higher, into the night where we could disappear and never touch the ground. I knew you were on the ground. I'm sorry.

We were just high enough to see the next field, the tallest trees at eye level, the electrical lines just below. We began the descent, again. Another gust blew us sideways, catching the edge of the balloon fabric. It crumpled, denting our balloon and the flame shot up, no longer underneath the bulk

of the balloon. The fabric rustled as it slid over the electrical wires, pulling them down and pulling our basket sideways.

Another gust. Balloon-man slipped out, like a seal sliding into the water. I reached out for balance and grabbed the ropes as the fabric slipped further on the other side, pulling my arm and tangling it in the process. My legs slipped from the basket as gravity sought to remedy the wind's push. The flame shot up, capricious pulses of light, connecting with the electricity worn through the wires.

I wasn't flying any longer. I was swinging. Hanging. I wondered if that was how your body had felt, too, the moment before you lost consciousness.

We always wanted to fly. We'd ride our bikes down the biggest hill in the neighborhood, you and I. Arms outstretched, eyes closed, balancing just with our knees. I would make up a story about how we were fairy princesses, imaginary chiffon dresses of violet and blue billowing behind us as our bikes lifted us from the pavement. You were too old for fairy princesses but not too old for bike rides. You'd smile, close your eyes too, and shout at me over your shoulder not to forget to brake. I always forgot to brake until it was too late. There was a permanent dent in the neighbor's bush at the bottom of the hill from where I forgot to brake.

You'd look back as you flew past.

"You good, Em?"

"All good!"

You didn't brake, either, but not because you forgot. You didn't need to; you had the balance to maneuver around the curve at the bottom of the hill and use the momentum to get up the next one. I'd end up walking my bike, bested by the uphill. You'd be waiting for me at the top.

I didn't lose Sam like I lost you.

She was just fine. Even her eyebrows were just singed. And when we were discharged, the reporters were waiting. I thought about turning the other way, going upstairs to be next to you, but I couldn't have you see me this way. I'd feel the judgment of my irresponsible decisions even through your coma.

Sam looped her arm through mine; I winced where she pressed against my new stitches. There wasn't any comfort in the act, anymore. She said, "Peanut butter."

They shoved a microphone in our faces.

“I’m gonna jelly from over there,” I motioned to the side of the building. She nodded, distracted by the camera as she began retelling the flight and the fall. I walked away.

I blinked and the balloon-man’s legs were there. I shook my head, turned it up towards the morning sun, not yet warm with the fall dew still cooling the air. I blinked again; there was the bluebird, looking up. Much better.

We met while waitressing, Sam and I. Three years ago. Not quite the trenches of the ICU, like you and your blood sisters (your nickname for your fellow nurses, I haven’t forgotten), but it got stressful at times and we needed someone to have our backs. Or at least to watch them, for the customers who got grabby, or mean, or entitled. I take that back; they were all entitled. That we expected, working at a fancy steakhouse. The grabbies, as well called them; *that* I didn’t expect.

I admired Sam. I didn’t like her at first, until she decided I should. She was showy, and clearly loved working there. I didn’t dislike the work, but I knew it was a stop on the way somewhere. I just didn’t know where, yet. You weren’t too sure about her either.

Sam was frosty to the newbies. I was frosty to everyone.

One night, we were short-staffed and had run out of the most popular entrée, a honeycrisp roasted duck (honey-roasted to a crisp and served with honeycrisp apples; the chef couldn’t resist the play on words). You were there that night, celebrating your promotion. I turned to my left after pouring the first glass of wine at my table. Sam was walking away from the next table laughing, a throaty laugh that made you want to join. She was laughing, but she wasn’t looking.

She bumped into my elbow, knocking the bottom of the bottle from my hand as red wine soaked down the front of my crisp white shirt.

I looked up and saw you from across the room. You had seen it all. You kept eye contact for a brief moment. Your lips were pursed, charge nurse style, as if to say, *not again, clumsy*. I finished the thought by adding to myself, “Can’t you do anything right?”

Sam responded to the statement I’d apparently uttered out loud with her placating but flirty voice, soothing the diners around us. “Oh, I can

do plenty right, darlin’.” She gripped the elbow she’d bumped, her acrylic talons digging into my skin. She leaned just past me to my table. “She’ll be right back with a fresh bottle and a fresh shirt. I know you want to drink your wine, not look at it.”

As soon as we got back to the kitchen she started laughing, the same laugh that had caused the trouble in the first place.

“Girl, you need a new shirt. There’s one in my bag—in the back—it’s yours, just get it back to me at the end of the night. And watch where you’re going.”

I wanted to yell at her; it had been her fault. But she’d just solved the problem she’d caused, so what could I yell about?

I furrowed my eyebrows. She continued.

“It happens to the best of us. Take a breath, change your shirt, get back out there. When the night’s up we’ll have a sandwich, finish off the roast duck for the evening.”

“There’s no roast duck left. But there’s always almond butter, and that plum jam... We can do a PB&J of sorts.”

“You got it. PB&J, we’ll make a great team,” She picked up her tray of orders. “Elbows in.” She winked.

Sam was great in a pinch. When she wanted to be. When she gave a damn.

I couldn’t tell her about you during our summer of yes. I couldn’t let her make that decision for me. But I could say yes to every adventure out there with her in the meantime.

“Every now and then the pandemic will fill me up and I need to pour it out,” you said to me one day. Like you were a teacup. Always the big sister, always the nurse, protecting me from the truth despite the tears streaming out of your eyes.

You made it, right up to the day they released the vaccine. In your note you said simply, “They didn’t need to die.” You knew it wasn’t your fault. And you were right, the hundreds of thousands who died didn’t need to. But it doesn’t mean your work was in vain.

I tried to tell you that, when I first visited the hospital. I know you couldn’t hear me (or maybe you could, the nurses said it’s possible), but your work wasn’t in vain and my words aren’t, either.

After the hot air balloon accident, people kept telling me how lucky I was to be alive. Not caring much for decorum anymore, I answered frankly. “Dying isn’t always the worst outcome.” They’d look at me funny, pretend they didn’t hear. The handful of people who knew about you looked stricken, like I’d slapped them in the face. I could almost see the finger marks as they touched their cheeks, sucking them in as if to bring back the words. Sam would just look at me like I had two heads when I said that. “Being alive is the best outcome,” she’d say, quashing any subtleties I’d implied.

I wasn’t just talking about you when I talked about dying. I was talking about the future, too. I lost my ability to say yes, to drift, to fly. You lost out on everything. Hypoxic brain injury, your chart says. Due to self-asphyxiation.

They blame you. I blame the virus.

If I let go, I won’t be killing a turtle or a whale like those childhood balloons. I’ll be killing you.

The nurses tell me not to look at it that way. They tell me in kind voices that really, you’ve already died. They tell me it’s my decision, I’m the one you named.

You and I had a conversation about this, once. I wish my memory were sharper. You paused the movie we were watching (one of the characters was in a coma) and you said, “If that’s me, don’t let me just rot slowly in a hospital bed. I’d rather be dead all the way than kind of mostly.”

“Nothing less than one hundred percent, for you.”

“What about you?”

“Ew, why are we even talking about this. I need more popcorn.”

“Seriously!” you called towards the kitchen. Some conversations are too hard to have face-to-face.

“There are miracles!” I shouted back. “Keep me around ‘til you have proof that miracles are dead, too.”

You pressed play before I even made it back. I grumbled about how you were the one who paused in the first place, so we could talk about the most morbid topic ever. You reached over and ate half of my popcorn. Why we ever made friends outside our sisterhood, I don’t know.

A week after the accident, Sam and I walked along the lake. It had been such a good summer of saying yes, before the hot air balloon. On the way out, we relived our favorite moments, as if the falling had never happened. Sam was already planning the next adventure, to hike in the Adirondacks. I was done with Sam's adventures.

It was sunny, but the white caps on the water sent wind whipping around our words. When we turned around the wind forced the sound back behind us, before it could reach our ears.

Some conversations are easier shouted. We took advantage of the opportunity not to hear one another.

"I CAN'T KEEP SAYING YES. SUMMER'S OVER."

"YOU CHANGED. BUT YOU DON'T NEED TO. THINGS WERE PERFECT."

"I THINK I NEED TO SAY NO."

"I MISS YOU." I was making up half her words. I couldn't hear them. I knew she'd said something heartfelt, though, because she looked at me then.

"I NEED TO LET MY SISTER DIE." I shouted, staring straight ahead, unleashing the thing I'd never told her. Crows don't share their grief with other birds. The wind pulled tears from my eyes, and I was grateful for the excuse. She kept plummeting, her words hunting for mine.

"I'M MOVING. MOVE WITH ME. I love you," she said as we entered a tree grove and the wind died down.

"Did you say you were moving?"

"I said I love you."

"Did you hear what I said?"

"The wind was loud. Em, I love you."

"Did you hear any of what I said?"

The grace of the noise-cancelling wind caught up with my cowardice. I was unable to repeat what I'd said, only sharing my grief with the soundless roar off the lake.

She took my hand. It was limp, clammy.

"I said I love you."

I straightened my shoulders before I responded. Ballet posture. She hated it when I did that, because it was the only time I was taller than her.

“You don’t love me. You love yourself when you are with me. Sam, I’m not gay.”

“But, after all we’ve been through together—”

“Still not gay.”

“You can be bisexual, you know.”

I knew. “You can be, but I’m not.” I stepped past the grove, back into the wind, the roar that allowed the quiet. I was done with her conversation, her decisions.

She stomped away from me to the car, muttering how she was done with me. You were right, you had warned me, she didn’t really listen further than the sound of her own voice leaving her lips. I walked back to the car feeling lighter than I’d felt in months.

I thought it was the summer of saying yes to life, but really it was the summer of saying yes to Sam. It was easier than saying yes to you. And when we drove home, it was silent. And I really wanted to tell you about it. To let you know I was ready.

I heard a honk. I honked back. More honking. It was coming from above. I looked up, to a haphazard V formation of straggly looking geese heading south. They looked disheveled, lazy, no clear lead to their formation.

“C’mon, guys. You can do better than that,” I muttered as I swerved into a parking space.

It was a short line inside. Since the virus, most people ordered ahead for their coffee. But I wanted to order in person today.

“Two pumpkin-spice lattes, please. One for me and one for my sister. I’m bringing a coffee to my sister.”

“Size?”

“Grande.”

“Name for the order?”

“Em. And Lyss.”

“Just one name’s fine. Em, you said?”

“No. It needs to be both names.”

“I can only put one name for the order, sorry. Which one do you want?”

I closed my eyes, hard. First the geese and then this moron. You would’ve told him off. I compromised.

“Just put ‘my sister’ for the order. As the name. MY SISTER.”

“Okay.”

I waited, remembering the times you brought me a pumpkin-spice latte on the first day of fall (even if they released it in, like, August).

“Coffee for My Sister, at the counter!”

It wasn't all selfish, you know. I wasn't just ordering an extra vanity coffee, or pretending you were fine. I wanted the room to smell nice when they released you from the tubes. And I think you would've wanted me to have something warm to hold while I waited for you to die.

I used to make notes to you, in my brain, throughout the day. Little post-its stuck to the recent memory of the day's events. *Tell Lyss about the disastrous Calculus prof*, I'd flag after class in college. *I can't wait to tell Lyss about this apartment—French doors into the bedroom!* I'd stick to my mind when you couldn't come apartment-hunting with me. *This girl is so self-absorbed*, I told you when I first met Sam. You had just decided to transfer to the Intensive Care Unit. They needed more nurses. You thought you could do the most good there, until the bodies that used to be people started showing up, already starved for air. You knew my problems were nothing, but you humored me anyway.

You always had some words for me, even when you were spent from a long day on your feet. Or you did, before the virus. Your words got fewer and fewer. You got sick. You got better. You went back to work. People kept dying. You needed out. I get it.

I still make post-it notes for you. I kept some of the ones I wrote out and stuck around your room, in case you woke up. I wanted to be prepared; it's what you would've done for me. I brought them home, after. Now I stick them around the window. They frame the occasional bird that flits through. Sometimes the post-its ask you a question.

The only answer I ever hear from you is in my head, the last word you said to me. I was walking out the door after dinner—I'd brought pizza over to your place, remember. And we said our usual “See ya, love ya, later!” but your eyes were dull as you said it.

You added one more word, the thing you'd always told me when we were kids, wanting me to watch out for the log that could trip me up on the trail or the picnic table behind the car as I was going in reverse or the

boyfriend who might break my heart or the brakes on the bicycle as we flew downhill.

“Careful.”

I think it would be nice to be a bluebird. Or a red bird, or a yellow bird. Not a hawk, though. They have all those mouse bones poking around in their bellies. And they seem kind of violent.

The songbirds, their only crime is against the worms. And the worms are stupid enough to dry up under our feet anyway when the rain stops. So I say the birds should get to have at ‘em, anyway.

I think I’m more like a crow. They make that awful “caw, caw.” They’re smart—apparently they can even recognize faces—and they know well enough to follow their murder. That’s what a pack of crows is called, a murder. I’m a part of a murder. And nobody wants to welcome a member of a murder to their pretty birdfeeder in the backyard.

Sam, she’s like a swan. Seeking a partner and the admiration of onlookers. Her reputation and her beauty take up more space than she does. She looks enticing from far away, but she can get aggressive if you get too close.

You were like one of those birds at the beach that flies up high, higher, higher and then dives straight down into the water for its lunch. Only focused on the thing at hand. I think those are pelicans, though I’d prefer a nicer-sounding name for your bird. Everyone liked to watch you, sitting on the beach soaking up the sun as you flew with your purpose.

I bought a birdfeeder, hung it up outside my apartment window. I watch them in the mornings while I drink my coffee. I don’t need to fly above them, now. I just let them come to me. And every time they land I catch my breath, just a little.

Contributors

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Fletcher Bonin is pursuing a Master's Degree in English Literature in Washington, DC. Before attending graduate school, he grew up in Rhode Island and taught English abroad in Taiwan from 2016 to 2017. His writing interests reflect the things that have formed and fascinated his life; that includes travel, stories derived from his Cuban ancestry, addiction, disparities of wealth, humor, and coming of age. Most recently, his work has been featured in *Literary Imagination* and *Mobius* (online). The complete fruits of his writing efforts can be found here: byfletch.wordpress.com.

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Stephanie Lamb began writing at a young age but primarily kept her work in private journals. In her mid 20's she went through a severe writer's block while seeking medical intervention for insomnia and anxiety. She rediscovered her voice and now writes to empower others and give a voice to the voiceless. To see a more comprehensive collection of her work, you can find her on Instagram and Facebook @stephanielambpoetry.

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Rachel B. Moore earned her MFA in Creative Writing from Lesley University in 2012. Her short story, *MISSING*, appears in the collection *Debs: Four Women Writers on the Verge*. Rachel's literary obsessions include disappearances of all kinds, missing people, architecture, travel and displacement/disconnection.

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