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WIRES AND LIGHT

by

ASHLEY INGUANTA
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2009

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, FL

Spring Term
2011

Major Professor: Susan Hubbard

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ABSTRACT

Wires and Light is an experimental story cycle composed of fiction and hybrid pieces, which blend poetry, fiction and creative nonfiction together. The characters in these pieces are propelled by uncertainty and a strong desire to be connected to places, people. If these characters do find the connections they are searching for, most of these “joining” moments are fleeting. A girl, straight out of high school, misses her “wonder boy,” befriends a woman nearly a decade older, fists her in the desert while California’s on fire. A woman who dives horses off the Atlantic City Steel Pier is forced to leave her glamorous, dangerous career, which has been her entire life. The same woman meets a grieving mother years later on a train, wrestles with the idea of loving this woman, tries to understand the wall between them. A boy loses his virginity and has trouble understanding the power of his body. A young girl loses her blue horse, her best friend. Years later the same girl will deal with depression and self-mutilation, and will heal on her own. She will meet a child in a coffee shop and help her heal, too.

These characters yearn for love, freedom and wholeness, and although the search is painful, they must learn to find happiness by accepting the presence of pain. These pieces are intended to show how pain affects the body, how wires can bind bodies and light can burn skin, but they don’t have to. Wires can be used to collect love, keep it fastened and safe, like a guiding light.

This is for the girls
who are not the most
loved
ones in the lives of others
This is for the tiger girls
the fae girls
the valleyflower girls
the combat-boot girls
the glitter-cloud girls
the felt-moon girls
This is for the girls
who sleep with egg-white ghosts
the girls who love so hard
nothing is solid
The black-hole girls
the fade-away girls
the girls with stems and petals
the girls with muscle and sinew
This is for the girls
who reach so far they almost break
the girls who have learned to live in survival-mode
The dharma-punk girls
the wildflower girls
the poet-blossom girls
This is for the girls
who feel like they were born with the wrong name
in the wrong place
at the wrong time
This is for the tornado-dance girls
the warrior girls
This is for the girls
who are not the most
loved
ones in the lives of others

Girls,
you are not the only ones

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

These pieces, or versions of them, originally appeared in (or were awarded by) the following publications:

Pindeldyboz: Wires and Light, II

SmokeLong Quarterly: Inside

Breadcrumb Scabs: Happy

All Things Girl: Dedication

Glimmer Train: The Heart of America (Honorable Mention: Very Short Fiction Award)

*

My dad used to drive me around in his 1957 Chevy,
let me wear his flannel shirts as dresses. I'd like to thank him for that.

And my mom, she taught me about the sun, how to tell time
from the shadows it casts. I'd like to thank her for that, too.

Thank you, Susan Hubbard, for believing in me and my stories, for your endless encouragement,
for sticking with me until *The End*, for not giving up on this book when I was about to give up
on finishing it.

Francesca Lia Block, Toni Jensen,
Darlin' Neal, Judith Hemschemeyer,
Terry Thaxton, Lisa Roney,
Jocelyn Bartkevicius, Pat Rushin, Mary Gaitskill—
Thank you

for being such compassionate mentors, for helping me grow over these past two years.

Thank you, CM, for helping me understand the darkest parts of myself and explore them without
shame.

I would like to thank Earth for all the friends/brothers/sisters she's given me.

I would like to thank Prairie for telling me that secret in Santa Fe.

I would like to thank California for helping me find freedom and New York for teaching me
forgiveness. And, of course, Florida, for helping me heal through love.

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PROLOGUE: THE HEART OF AMERICA

You are on Long Island, but won't be there forever, only you don't know that yet. It is June. You are nine years old and your dad takes you to a garage sale a few blocks down from your house. There are rows of everything—rows of Christmas tins, porcelain dolls, records, wicker lawn chairs, rows of silver baskets, cat statues, cassettes, rows of books with pages the color of the moon. In a few years when you're fourteen, a Big Strong Italian boy will blow on your neck in English class and you will feel violated but you'll like it. He'll be one of those gold-chain-wearing Italians with horses and a hot tub; and even though you're Italian, too, you'll still be a stick of a girl with a unibrow who gets rubber bands thrown at her in the hallway, who gets called a slut at the Stop-N-Shop around the corner. He'll blow on your neck again, and you'll still feel violated but like it even more. Secretly, you'll wish he was a girl. That summer, you will walk past the inactive nuclear power plant near the Long Island Sound, wondering how the brown waves can move in such a fluid, celebratory way, almost like they know how lucky you are. Almost like they know how lucky you are because you are able to push past the ebb and flow. Because you are able to leave.

So you are nine and your dad takes you to a garage sale and you pick out TLC's *CrazySexyCool* cassette tape, which is greasy and red and smells like cigarettes. He says the tape can be your birthday present because you're his June baby. You tell him you like Left Eye because she raps, and you are awful at rapping. He smiles, turns around, and after looking for some time, finds a few 45s. You don't ask him if you can listen. All of his music is the same, warm harmonies and deep voices.

When you are twenty-six, old enough to have your own daughter, you will hear some doo-wop music in a Florida diner. You are living there, in Florida, and you will hear the music. Yes, you will hear it, and it will be as loud as waves crashing at the Long Island Sound, as loud as fire trucks, as loud as your father's voice was when he said, in response to your fear of going to high school, "This is life, God damn it." You will hear the music and it will be loud, and it will shake you and you will cry, leaving before your new girlfriend can say, with her feet tapping on the checkerboard floor, "Let's get the special."

And then it all hits you as you open the Florida diner's double doors, thick southern air coating your skin, making you feel greasy, cheeks flushed red. Your chest tightens and the sun, yes the sun, turns everything bright as fire. The metallic diner reflects the bright sun and everything rises, just like the ladder rose, and then everything shrinks; and with everything getting smaller you feel your body shrinking again, too, just like it did when you got out of that damn town.

When you are nine at a June garage sale a few blocks down from your house, you wait for your dad to finish browsing through the 45s, and while you're waiting, you get splinters in your fingers from running your hands back and forth, back and forth across the old wicker chairs that no one will ever buy again. Then you get one last splinter, this one makes you flinch, so you slip the *CrazySexyCool* cassette tape in your pocket, telling your father you don't want him to buy it for you anymore.

When you are nine, sweating from June, holding your heavy pocket with your young hand, you won't know that you will move to Florida at sixteen and become agoraphobic for years, that you will crave fragility and starve yourself to about 70 pounds, that you will crave strength and recover and gain back 30. You won't know that you will end up losing your

virginity in college to a woman twice your age, that your dog will die of cancer, that you will win a prize for writing a poem about America. You won't know that you will fall in love with a woman who grows orchids, adopt a child who helps you plant sweet potatoes. You won't know that this woman will be the same woman who never got the chance to say, "Let's get the special," way back at that doo-wop Florida diner. You won't know that you will travel to California and Georgia and Texas and Idaho and Massachusetts and Nebraska. You don't know that your heart will give out and you will die an old, old woman, death being louder and shakier and bulkier and more beautiful than you'd ever have thought. You won't know that you will make it off Long Island, never again have your neck blown on by an Italian boy who you secretly wish is a girl, never again have rubber bands thrown at you in the hallway, never again get called a slut at the corner Stop-N-Shop, never again go to a June garage sale with your dad, never again see that dead nuclear power plant shining like a bright, gray pearl. You don't know that you will make it out. But you will, you will.

PART I: INSIDE

PEAKS

I.

Girl slept for a thousand years, cradled in an ocean of ghost horses, their legs and necks wrapping her like mothers would children. Sometimes the ghost-horse legs wrapped girl like rope, tying up her limbs, all wet with salt from the sea. Sometimes the ghost-horse necks spooned girl tight, only to uncurl once again, flinging her still-sleeping body into the next wave of mane, of tail. Sometimes the ghost horses ached when they let girl go. Sometimes the ghost horses could not wait to get her gone.

II.

There was a time when momma cried near the apple tree, salting fallen fruit to eat later. When later came and momma ate, baby ate, too. Baby kicked and ate and understood life would not be big as a belly or small as a hand, pressing against momma's skin-globe and saying, "We love you, baby." Baby knew the way these hands held other hands, cracked in dry weather, prayed when alone. Baby knew about love, how to sing it, sing it loud. Baby knew love was as fleeting as the salt slipped into what would soon be a navel, that the salt was always stronger than the flesh of a beautiful thing, sweet and red only for a moment.

A FALCON RIPS ORION FROM THE SKY

A falcon rips Orion from the sky. Eric, my wonder boy, drives away. I watch from my front porch, an earth-covered chicory bouquet in my hands. He picked them for me, stuffed the desert-sand inside their white-petal clusters, placed them in my hands, then left. Air nymphs play windchimes in the Yucca Valley dusk. Orion hangs limp as the falcon glides West, blood on its talons, gripping the hunter's muscle. The hunter, streaking the rich indigo sky with its bright, silver body, bits of berry-blood swirling into the design. Eric's car-taillights swarm like fire-spirits in the dark. I stand in front of my childhood home. I'm almost eighteen, almost adult and free. But still, I stand among the tall Joshua trees, green fuzz clumping atop their bone trunks. Still, I stand among the cool March air—dry land stretching, stretching. Eric took all the movement, all of the energy I had collected over the years.

*

On my thirteenth birthday, I bled. Below my navel, a warm spot grew and grew. My muscles weaved together as if there were animals inside, curling and releasing. Everything hurt. The animal inside opened its wings, its burnt umber feathers flapping for the first time against my core. This bird of prey cradled itself inside my body. Everything hurt. My mother handed me a square of cloth and said, *Stick this in your underwear. You'll be fine.* And I did, and I bled even more.

My body felt as if it was losing color, all its energy pulled to the inside where the falcon had formed. In an attempt to color my body in, spread my core energy, I painted myself as a tiger warrior. Black stripes on my face, tribal swirl tattoos on my arms—all done in house paint, the house paint my father only talked about using. Paint that smelled and clumped like museum

barnacles, all chemicalized. My mother cleaned only with fruit or plant-derived organic products. Everything in our house smelled like lavender and oranges, soft petals and stingy citrus.

I smelled like this stingy-soft mixture no matter where I went. I even think the Joshua trees could smell me at the bus stop. The other kids sure could, and they said I smelled like a hooker. I said, *Fuck off*, flashed some dollar bills, and they all shut up because maybe I was a hooker after all. In reality, I was just good at watering my mother's plants and doing my chores.

At school I wore my warrior house-paint tattoos. On a day I painted the lines extra thick, the new kid Eric sat next to me in English class. I liked his T-shirt, bowtie and acid-wash jeans pinned on the seams with men's dress-shirt cufflinks. He tapped his pencil, passed me a note. It said, *You are the most fierce creature I have ever seen*. After school we stayed out late and watched the falcons swoop into the blue-black desert sky. I pointed to the winged-one I knew would kill first. And when it did, Eric said, *Teach me how to feel the world's strings*. I said I would try. But inside, I felt scared and intrigued by his voice, never having been able to converse with another like this. I said, *Wings beat the air and paws beat the sand. A whole other language. A kingdom ruled by instinct*.

*

As Eric drives away, I drop my dirt-covered chicory bouquet. The fire from his car-taillights travels into my stomach, which I imagine to be a dark, slimy place. The fire lights my insides like a damp cave, dries it all up. It's one AM and I'm in bed and I want to scream but my words are all ash. Eric's pain is now mine, his need to understand mine, too. Everything is heavy—heavy air, heavy quilt. Even the stars are heavy; they're falling all over the place, heavy

streaks of light. Orion falls to the ground, the hunter gnarled and almost unrecognizable from his talon wounds. Silver skin bloodied, berry red. The soil is too dry, too worn to hold him.

But I understand how the desert became this way. The moment day breaks, every morning, Yucca Valley reminds me. Every morning, the moment day breaks, I feel air nymphs swallow the land's moist, fine sky-nectar. I want to tell them to stop it, they're forming tiny tornadoes when they drink, inhaling all that air. But I don't say a thing. I feel the child inside screaming, but I do not say a thing.

*

At fourteen, I asked Eric why his house was always so quiet. We sat on his bed, a mattress on the floor, and everything was hushed. I could hear air nymphs drain the sky, couldn't hear birds of prey rip animals from their homes. Eric said the quiet's because his parents are yogis from Santa Monica, where the air is all wet and salty. They drive back up there on Mondays for meditation sessions, and when they're not in sessions they're nearly always meditating or reading or drawing landscapes with charcoal.

Eric said he hates meditating because his thoughts are too loud and feelings are too strong. He said his parents just keep giving things away. His mother's expensive purses, his father's fancy suits and cufflinks. *They say it is part of Buddhism*, Eric explained. *Something about cultivating detachment. So I took the cufflinks instead.* When he asked me what my parents believe I said, *They believe in spiritual apathy.* He lifted my egg-white hair and kissed the back of my neck, his lips dry against my skin.

Everything is too loud, he said. *I hear the wind but it's just too loud.*

You'll be okay, wonder boy. I rested my head on his shoulder. His skin looked so bright and smooth, smelled berry-sweet.

They come home from Santa Monica and don't even notice. It's all just too loud.

You'll be okay.

He pushed me away. *You think you know everything.*

I curled up on the edge of his bed, knees close to my chest.

You do, he said.

A rush of cold dropped inside my body, and I sat still. A black hole inside, a pull, a punch. I uncurled and, with my back straight and eyes forward, walked home. Outdoor language muted. All life, for a moment, silenced.

*

Tonight, I watch Orion's falcon swirl and swoop. Eric is gone now, no more fire-spirit taillights, no more engine hum. But the falcon is still there, beating the air with its wings. It all began when I bled, felt the falcon growing inside my body. I grew to think of this bird as my guardian. Now Orion's falcon sweeps the indigo-sky with his umber feather plumes. *How could Eric leave?* I think, but can barely say out loud. I sit on my bedroom windowsill now, my mother in the next room watching late-night sitcoms, my father asleep in their bed upstairs. Soon, my mother will go to sleep on the couch. I want to ask my parents why they don't sleep in the same room anymore, but I don't. Faceless television voices blend with the occasional pre-recorded hoopla that's supposed to make the at-home viewers think, it's okay to laugh, too.

In a dry, burnt voice, as dry and burnt as Yucca Valley, I say, to no one, *Look at you, falcon, all that feather and bone.* I reach underneath my T-shirt, feel my sharp ribcage, the fluttering, flapping, frantic animal underneath. Nothing scares me more than knowing it all lies in those wings underneath my skin: life, the beating heart. The soul rests, like a child inside a mother's womb, somewhere in between.

*

It was the last night before senior year began. I watched Xena on my black-and-white television set, waiting for Eric to come over. One month until I turned seventeen. Mindlessly, I ate Cheerios from the box because my mother had gone on a cooking strike, her reason being all the cooking made her anxious, so she needed to stop completely. My father had been living off Chinese food and my mother, tofu and red wine.

Wrapped in faux-print sheets, I felt like a leopard, the television set all gray lights—overcast. I wondered how leopards spoke, and imagined a soft, strong purr. I tried to duplicate this purr, the air spinning off my tongue like a sporadic ceiling fan. Xena went *hiyayayayaya!* on television and I jolted, just a little. A knock at the door. In my leopard sheets, I passed my mother, already sleeping in the living room. I opened the front door and Eric stood there, eating a plum. When he held my hand, I noticed the plum juice on his fingers, on his brown sweatshirt and dark Levi's. He no longer wore his bowtie or father's cufflinks. I missed those things. With my thin nightgown underneath, I felt like a hummingbird or butterfly when I kissed him rather than a dangerous, purring animal. He said I am strengthening by the day, and soon I will get out of this desert and move to a city where it rains. He said soon I won't need him. I feared maybe he was right.

*

I sit on my windowsill, pressing my fingertips against the glass. Eric must be miles away by now, tires on asphalt—spinning, humming. The Yucca Valley land holds bouquets of deep blue phacelia, dull boxthorn, bold rock daisy. They cluster, forming canopies, trying to catch the other sky-star souls before they break. But the canopies are not large enough, and everything falls, silver-white souls streaking the indigo sky, falling on the dry land. Berry-blood covers

their once-bright bodies, just like hunter Orion. Even the beings who don't shine tonight fall. Now that Orion's gone they can't help but fall. Bull Taurus and swordfish Dorado fall, scorpion Scorpius falls, dolphin Delphinus and dove Columba fall. When Taurus goes down he tries to help Dorado but the swordfish's fin slices him in half. *Teach me how to feel the world's strings, Eric had said.* Columba tries to help Scorpius but he stings her white wings. *Everything is just too loud, Eric had said.* Delphinus sees Orion, his sinew twisted into blood ribbons. *You think you know everything, Eric had said.* The dolphin tries to save him, but he crashes, hot stellar matter on sand. Such enormous life collapsing. I slide my palms down the cool glass, pull away. My insides grow heavy.

The television makes deep sounds in the living room, then cheering sounds, then deep sounds again. I peek in and my mother is sleeping. I turn off the late-night game show and kiss her on the forehead. I wish she would kiss me goodnight sometimes, or at least cook with me, or at least talk with me about the world—how it all falls apart and scatters and collapses inside of you at the same time. The air gets thick with nymphs, spitting moisture onto the fire. I want to help the fallen stars, too, but everything is too hot, full of sparks and soupy plasma. I grab the car keys and, like the universe, the animal inside of me falls, too.

*

On my seventeenth birthday, I dressed as a monsoon. Deep blue scarves, falling in waves. I said I wanted to be water, full of natural power that can sustain and destroy life. That night, I wanted to dance as water, nourish Yucca Valley. But I knew something was missing—my scarves were all dry, just netted material I cut from underneath a bridesmaid's dress. Eric came over in a black hoodie and jeans. We stepped onto my patio. He was taller now, the way he bent over to kiss me. I wondered why I hadn't noticed before. His kiss felt feminine, small,

against the giant night. I wondered why we were not labeled as boyfriend, girlfriend. I wondered why we had never taken on these roles. And then I realized water was still water before we said it was. Storms were still storms. Falcons were fierce animals. Orion was the star-soul protector, the hunter, before we could understand who he was, how someone so unreachable, so bright, could fall.

I spun and spun, stomping my feet as if the patio-cement was one large bass drum. But Eric just stood, so tall and thin, tapping his feet. He said, *Let's go*. He grabbed my hand and we ran down the driveway, into the road, crossing desert planes, climbing lava-rock formations and leaping into clusters of suncups, tiny yellow petals growing from the dirt. I said I was tired, but he said he couldn't stop moving, said he had to keep moving because his body hurt so much, he felt too much. Everything was heavy. The sky shouted, *run before I fall*, so we ran, we ran until tiny thrusts of wind blocked our path—windmill giants, hundreds of them in rows, churning air from the farm below. The wind farm caught and tossed air as if it was unbreakable. We were caught at that moment, too, our bodies halting in an awkward, unsteady way. Eric touched me all over, calloused fingers sucking out all my moisture. But I was all specks of sand, freckle clusters. I wondered if he would ever look at the sky, the ground; I wondered if he would ever look at his own, pale skin, and realize we are all part of that giant, that colossal feeling-creature he cannot understand. Nothing but reincarnated matter and ageless souls. Skin against skin in the static dusk.

*

I get in my truck and head North, where Eric's bound, where the air gets icy and the ground, wet. Before he left, he stood in my front yard, wind lifting dust and sand. He said my core is so strong he can't take it, that the desert was draining him yet nourishing me. Then he

shoved a clump of soil into a bouquet of chicory, handed it to me. But now, there's only one main road out of this place and I take it. I drive so fast, I don't notice the shadows of my Joshua tree armies and lava-rock elders. I don't notice the sky's hush, mourning Orion. Houses in the distance line a hill, their night lights glittering like giant impressionistic neon cupcakes.

I turn on the radio and some late-night host talks with a lucky listener. This lucky woman is having trouble deciphering things. The host asks, *Who is the love of your life?* He asks this like he's saying, *What is your favorite song?* or *What is your favorite ice cream?* The woman cannot decide between a number of men named Mark or Stan or Joe. I want to say *Too many good songs. Mint chocolate chip. Eric. Eric is the love of my life*, but the winged-creature inside my ribs travels up, up up up to my throat. Feathers inside, absorbing all that slimy, sticky stuff. I feel like a child again in warrior house-paint, ready to fight for no reason other than something is changing.

*

About one month ago I told Eric his feet smelled like money and chives. I told him this over a dinner of saffron rice and rosemary salmon, left over from what my mother had made the other day. That week, she cooked everything she could find. But she wouldn't let me in the kitchen as she cooked, and afterwards she wouldn't eat any of it.

Eric was still sweaty from his late-afternoon run. He said he could not stop moving. I was windburned and my skin stung, but I was with Eric so everything felt like cool, lilac-scented silk. Everything tasted like sweet, thick soil.

I said, *It all tastes like earth, no matter what I do.* I had said this many times before. After dinner I lay beside Eric, finishing the drawing I began in history class: Rushmore in ink, bubbles traveling up the stone noses and out the stone brains, a pair of silver lips floating at the

top of it all. Eric rested his head on my shoulder, slid his hand down my lace camisole, swept my freckles with his fingertips, kissing them as if they are the most precious, dangerous grains of the land.

*

I turn off the radio and park near a tall lava-rock formation. *Too many songs. Mint chocolate chip. This beautiful world.* Lava rock shapes bulge from the earth, grow with life—the land’s bright core underneath. Eric had said he felt my core growing too strong, but I know the strength never really belonged to me alone. And when I open the car door, I step onto this desert land with bare feet. A cool burn. It is now I understand that nothing is gone.

I lie on the dry ground, sharp with rocks and sand. I move my hand up my dress, across my breast, a bare hill, down past my navel, a stretch of desert plane. Everything is warm inside, bright body-star plasma muted with the cool March air. I search for rain. I fall down, a little bit more now. My muscles clench like a sky hunter going for the kill, a falcon beating its wings. And it’s there—wet, soaked with life.

PARADISE

I go to bed and dream I get so thirsty I can't stop texting myself water in the form of semicolons. One semicolon after another. It's ridiculous. Still, when I wake, my mouth is about as dry and rough and sticky as it was before I went to bed. To the right of me, there is nothing. Left, nothing. Above and below, as empty as ever. I have not been able to paint in weeks. Nothing.

Then Charlene comes in. I open my eyes and she bounces with me on our waterbed, pulls my hair and says, "If you keep dying it this red, Elise, you'll become the fire itself. It's just too much." Then she kisses me, hard, on my desert-dry lips. She says the stars are bright and the young girl who lives down the street is standing in our front yard, head up, just standing, bare-footed in pink-and-white striped PJ's. I try to swish my tongue around my mouth but it sticks to my teeth.

"California will be all smoke soon," I say, rolling out of bed. These fires are burning up the state faster than I thought they would. The air feels as dry as my mouth as I walk to the kitchen. The way our house is shaped Charlene can see me everywhere if we keep the doors open.

She wraps a thin white sheet around her shoulders. "You're always thirsty," she says.

"Why is she on our lawn?" I grab a handful of off-brand Lucky Charms and munch.

"You can tell her to get off if you want."

"No," I say.

"Fine."

Charlene bounces once, her thin frame moving up and down with the waves of our mattress. Her skin is so white, almost like an explosion.

“Come to bed, chickadee,” Charlene says.

But all I can do is stare out the kitchen window at the girl in the driveway and, lovingly, wish the stars would fly like falcons and give her the brightest show of her life.

But the stars don't fly—they fall. And the young girl watches, her teenage body shrinking to that of a child. Without even bothering to shove the cereal into the pantry, I place the off-brand box on the kitchen table, and then I turn around fast and run toward Charlene, leaping onto our bed. We dip and rise with the waves, then steady ourselves. Charlene rests her head on my abdomen.

I say, “When we have a daughter, I can teach her how to cook and you can teach her how to paint. And she can teach us how to see the world again.”

“Yes,” says Charlene.

But I can't paint anymore. I have to switch out the work in my art gallery because nothing is selling, and there is nothing new to put up. For two months it's been cactus flowers holding raindrops and women with entire galaxies in their wombs. I've painted all the water I can. Nothing new comes. We are getting older. I am 27 now, Charlene is almost 30.

My stomach growls and we fall asleep.

*

I see the girl again a few days later when I park my bike underneath a Joshua tree outside the Food-4-Less. I was riding home from work and my throat felt stuck, like it couldn't swallow, so I stopped for some water, even though Charlene hates it when I buy bottled water. We have a station wagon, but biking helps me feel calm. Pushing and pulling the pedals, feeling my leg

muscles clench, grow stronger. My throat gets dryer every day, sandy almost, so the water feels good, smooth like Charlene's voice.

I sit on a nearby rock, open the water bottle, and take my first sip. My throat opens almost too easily, water going down without effort. The girl, she is here and she is standing, head up to the black-red sky. The air is still burnt from the California fires, bitter and thick. This time the girl is wearing a long dress, the color of a green pear. The sky is hard onyx tonight, swirled with waves of red. The stars are stuck inside. They're not going anywhere. But the girl lifts up her head anyway, and I look at her.

And then her gaze loses focus. She walks toward me and says, "Your hair is as red as my boy's."

"It's box color." I take a mouthful of water, puff up my cheeks, and swallow. "My girlfriend hates it."

"It's lovely."

"Where's your 'boy'?"

"Dunno. He left."

"Oh."

"He left about a year ago. He couldn't feel the sky as I did. It's his fault he left." She taps her feet, then sits down beside me, legs crossing into lotus.

"His fault?"

"The stars were just so bright last night, shining through all that smoke" the girl says.

"And I didn't want to be at home anymore, and with the fires no one sees bright stars anymore and—"

"I understand."

The girl introduces herself as Dawn.

I say, "I'm Elise."

Dawn kisses me on the cheek and winks, turning around methodically, pivoting on her left foot like a dancer in a show-choir. She can't be more than 18, and she can't weigh over 90 pounds, but I swear she has the power to spin the bitter, burnt sky with her entire body. And yes, I want to kiss her back. And yes, my throat dries even more. I puff my cheeks, fill them with water, and swallow.

But just as the water slides down, Dawn stops mid-spin, flashes me a peace sign. I don't make any movements; I can't. I feel too heavy, like my body is made of rocks. But Dawn's body, it becomes smaller and smaller as she walks down the road. She eventually disappears, the horizon enveloping her as the sky would envelop a star.

*

When I get home Charlene is peeling a Vidalia onion, wearing her checkerboard apron and costume chef hat. Her skin and hair get whiter every day.

"Take a bite," she says.

"I want to paint with you." I kiss the freckles that dot the bridge of her nose. "We never paint together anymore."

"I'm cooking, Elise. I'm *working*." For years, Charlene has been trying to find the perfect recipes for a vegan menu. She wants to open her own restaurant but she just can't get it together. Always, she is trying. It never stops. She's been a server at the Natural Sisters Café for years. I think she is too afraid to admit she's content with her job. "Just take a bite."

I bite.

"What do you think?"

I grab her waist and say, “I want you to lie on our bed and I want to paint you.”

She kisses my neck and her lips are warm. “Later.” She slips her hands onto my abdomen, lifts my shirt halfway, and takes a deep breath.

And we eat. We eat olive-oil-and-lemon quinoa with garlic, tomatoes and onions. When Charlene and I first met, I was 22 and she was 24. It was past midnight and we each had decided to take a walk on the Santa Monica pier. There were homeless people sleeping and groups of college students drinking convenience-store wine on lifeguard stands. The air was all foggy and we were trying to escape our shitty jobs and lonely lives or something like that. She noticed me because, at the time, I had what she considered very red hair. She loved it, then.

“You’re going to become America with this red hair of yours,” Charlene had said to me. She sat on the railing overlooking the Pacific Ocean and motioned for me to get up, too.

“Some wine would be good right now,” I said, as the kids on the lifeguard stands huddled together. Some were even wrapped in blankets, leaning on each other.

Charlene tugged on a curl, holding it against her stiff-straight platinum blonde. “Your hair’s as red as the stripes and mine’s as white as the stars.”

I thought that had to be the worst pick-up line I’d ever heard, but I didn’t care. I liked the way her hand gripped my curl, the way her arm tugged at it. Strong, but careful.

We met at the pier nightly, going back to my place or hers where we’d eat whole garlic cloves for fun and then kiss afterward. A few years later we got sick of LA’s loud lights and billboards and the bright, bright explosions we saw inside of every almost movie star, so we moved to Yucca Valley; we liked the Joshua trees and the open roads and the brown landscape and the wine sunsets. Charlene didn’t want to be a movie star; she wanted to be a chef. All I wanted to do was paint.

In Yucca Valley, sometimes we could do just that. Sometimes she'd even let me paint her. The curve of her hip, like a hill, her lips as pink as secret spaces inside sea shells. I miss that now—tracing her body with my brush. It's been two years.

We used to bring bags of garlic outside, eat the cloves whole, and watch the sky fade from blue to black, the houses on mountains lighting up. I'd paint the nighttime houses in their full, distant silence, and she'd add a touch of coral there, a touch of umber there. We don't eat garlic whole anymore, or watch the sunset. Now, though, Charlene just chops the cloves up as tiny as she can, mixes them in.

Before we sit down to dinner, I pour one glass of water for Charlene and two for me because I do not want to have another absurd semi-colon dream. I don't even like texting. I always tell Charlene to call me, not text me. A certain safety lies in hearing her soft, smooth voice.

We eat the quinoa and occasionally she'll kick my leg and look out the window into our empty yard. Charlene has always said she'll plant flowers, and I said I would wait until she bought seeds. I would always wait. I am always waiting.

*

The third time I see Dawn, I'm sitting on top of a small lava rock near the Food-4-Less, my shoulders burning from the heat. I'm sketching with charcoal on a pad of newsprint, hoping for some sort of movement. I've been outlining a Joshua tree with hands and feet growing from its branches. But the hands are not enough; they need to be holding something.

I take a gulp of water and it goes down so hard, it feels like someone punched me in the throat, making it swell up so fast I can't get any air in. I need to get air in even if the air's no good, too thick with smoke. I need to, but I can't, and then I manage to inhale and now my

throat is smoke, mouth is smoke. I drop my water bottle. Notebook and pen fall. I place my head between my legs.

“You okay?” Dawn walks with such a heavy step, she kicks up dirt clouds. Before I know it, her dirt-caked hand grips my arm. I lift my head. Her fingernails are jammed with dirt, and when she goes to sweep my cheek with her hand, I feel the grains on my skin.

“Have more water,” she says.

I sip some water. It feels like my throat is peeling off when I swallow. But I can breathe now. Things feel better.

“Let’s go,” Dawn says. Her nipples harden beneath her white tank top. I don’t look away.

“Where?” I say.

“Let’s just go.”

Her hand interlaces with mine. She wants to take the lead. I let her. When I jump from the rock, my feet hit the ground and the impact stings.

We walk through cake-layer canyons, clusters of Joshua trees with branches up, stretching, longing. She says nothing. Neither do I.

When we slip into the lava-rock cave, the air thickens like it’s made of dust.

“Come here.”

And I do. And she takes off my shirt, kisses my bare breasts. Her small hands slowly travel up and down my back, grains of dirt loosening and falling from her fingernails. Then I guide her hands down, past my navel. She undoes my pants, but I do not undo hers. I don’t even touch her. I can’t. My hands sink into the cool, rough rock below us.

When this young girl goes inside of me, my muscles tighten in such a way you'd think they'd break. But they don't break, they just tighten harder with each cycle of pump and release. And with each cycle, her fingers grow into one solid fist. My body lowers, my back stretching across the rock. It is so cold.

And then there is a moment where the coolness peaks, where my insides grip this young girl's fist like it's life or death. The air is thin and everything disappears. I don't think of Charlene. I don't think of Dawn, either.

*

"I miss my boy," the girl says.

"Dawn," I say. I kiss her cheek. "It's okay."

"I don't think he will ever come back." She leans back, and I rest my head on her chest, still clothed. I go to unbutton her pants, but she flinches.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"I can't stop missing him, I just can't stop."

"Do you want me to go?" I say.

"Yes."

"Okay."

"No," she says, placing her hand on my shoulder. "Don't."

"Do you want me to take you home?" I say to this girl, this child.

"No, not home."

Dawn gives my shoulder a squeeze. I tell her we have to leave. "Charlene is waiting for me," I say. And it is then that I feel like a child, too.

She then hands me my shirt and helps me dress. We step outside the cave and the desert is crisp with night. When we part ways, it is Dawn who says, "I can't find a single constellation."

*

"I made lemon pepper tofu with almonds and rice," Charlene says as I walk inside, handing me a spoonful to try. I bite and swallow.

"It's good," I say. "You seem tired."

"I'm fine," she says, licking the now empty spoon. "I was listening to the radio. The fires are getting closer."

"Should we leave?" I ask.

"I don't know."

"Maybe soon," I say. "It would be a good idea. Just for a while."

Charlene says nothing. Instead, we sit at the kitchen table and rather than kicking my feet, Charlene simply eats her food, taking each bite with an odd caution. Her teeth slide along the fork in a delicate, beautiful way. It feels safe, watching Charlene place her elbows on the table, curl her back over her plate. Something about this moment takes me outside myself, and I can see us, here, at this table, and it feels overwhelming knowing this moment exists on its own, without what has happened or what's to come.

"Aren't you going to get some water for us?" she says.

I fill up two glasses of water from the kitchen sink. One for me, one for her.

And we drink, slowly, as if drinking slowly will fix something, soothe something.

"You're filthy," she says.

"I know."

"You look happy."

I put down my fork.

“You hardly ever look happy anymore.” Charlene just stares at me, her face sad, empty.

“What’s happening to us?” She reaches across the table.

I place my hand in hers.

“I want to have a daughter,” she says. “I just don’t know if it’s the right time.”

“I know.” I close my fingers around her palm, but she leaves her fingers open, unattached.

*

The next few nights are still. To save money, Charlene refuses to turn on any lights, and she turns off the air conditioning, too. I haven’t sold any of my work in months. We can hardly pay our rent. I might shut down the gallery, open up a shop that sells statues and flowers, but I don’t know yet. Charlene likes the idea better than I do.

Charlene has set up rows of candles along the windowsills, the kitchen counters, the bedroom dresser, heating up the room. Each night, we go to bed and she get so hot she takes off her shirt. In the candlelight, her reclined body looks like hills that have caught fire.

I want to kiss her everywhere.

But when I go to kiss her neck, she turns away. “This isn’t easy for me, Elise. I don’t know what to do.”

From the bed, I see Charlene walk to the kitchen. She goes to fill her cup with tap water, but then she stops. “That girl is in front of our house again.”

I go to the kitchen. I place my arm around Charlene, but she does not place her arm around me.

This time, Dawn is sitting on our driveway, leaning on her elbows, legs stretched in front of her. She's wearing the same pear-green dress she wore the first day we met, only now she wears a crown of suncups.

"You can tell her to get off if you want," Charlene says, covering her breasts with her arm.

"No, it's okay."

"Fine."

"She's probably just sick of being at home," I say.

"I'd like it if you would tell her to get off of our driveway."

"I'm not telling her to leave. You do it."

Charlene puts on her ivory robe, walks next to me. "We'll go out together."

And I follow my partner, her skin glowing white, her hair as white as a nuclear blast. The air is still thick, the sky coated in smoke. Yet the stars shine.

And from here, the world becomes quiet. At peace, as if nothing from this point will shake it, burn it. Dry it up.

Charlene says, "You sure do like our yard."

Dawn says, "I'm sorry, the sky's just so bright."

"Where are your parents?" says Charlene.

"Sleeping."

"Do they know you're here?"

"No."

"Well what's so great about our yard?" Charlene says. "This is our property."

"I'm sorry," Dawn says again.

“I know.”

Dawn closes her eyes. She says, “My boy left and California’s on fire.”

It is when Dawn covers her eyes with her hands that Charlene lies on the driveway next to her. “You’re right,” Charlene says.

And there I am, standing and watching the woman I have loved for years lie next to the girl who kissed my breasts, the girl who went inside of me, just a few hours ago. The show-choir-spin girl, the girl who likes my red hair. Charlene’s arm is almost touching Dawn’s. A part of me wishes they’d lie closer to one another, learn to love each other. But they don’t move an inch. Instead, I move. I walk closer, get on my knees, kiss Charlene on the forehead. Then I kiss Dawn between the eyes. There’s a fire in the distance. I tell them both I’m leaving.

I go into the house and watch the one with the white skin and the one in the pear dress light up, white and green lights beaming into the red-black sky, expanding like a mother’s belly, a cactus raindrop. Full, content. And ready. Always ready for the explosion, for the dripping of constellations. For the excess. For the nothing, and for the everything that follows.

And when it’s all gone, when California is nothing but dust and brightness, that’s when I’ll be able to collect the remains, shaping air and light into something other than what we are.

LUNG

Tonight, Eric sleeps to static on the radio. He gets the idea from Nell as she blowdries her hair in her room just a few hours before bed. That sound, that sound of air transforming into something metallic, bits of steel sucking backwards, moving so fast they're hollowed, that sound reaches Eric as he's brushing his teeth, foam-mouthed and shirtless, baring his concave, hairless chest. He understands the weight in what he hears, almost like the sound is coming from his own body. And tonight, he wants nothing more than to understand his body, be close to no body but his own.

So this is how it's made, the method of understanding: Eric takes the clock radio and slides the tiny switch labeled "radio" over to the left. The switch feels impeccably tiny underneath the pad of his index finger. The sound is softer than he thought it would be. But it still carries that shock, that empty coolness, hollowing his own body.

From there, he has to do nothing. The radio is already set on a dead station. It's probably never been used.

And with these metallic, empty bits pinpricking the air, sucking away everything inside, Eric falls asleep faster than he has since he left Yucca Valley, headed East.

Tonight, Eric sleeps to static on the radio. He is cold, so cold his arms feel like swords. In his dreams he sees Earth spinning on an axis made of steel, shaped like a sword but dulled from piercing the planet over and over. Finally, the axis pierces Earth right—there's nothing messy about the go-through, the initial pierce, thrust, and release. Eric wishes his own body could be as clean as this dream Earth.

Just as the planet finishes its first spin on this perfectly placed axis, light cycling back to dark, something warm pushes Eric's chest.

Nell is leaning over Eric's body, her elbows using his chest as a table. "I want to go orange picking," she says.

Nell is a tiny, solid weight of a girl with pleasantly yellowish skin and a straight, sharp nose. She looks younger than her age, and without clothes on, Nell is even smaller, straighter, sharper. Her body, it always moves fast, warm and fast, like an arrow.

*

Eric found Nell a little over two months ago. She was sitting outside of Pacos Tacos, drinking a huge can of Arizona Grapeade. Eric sat next to her and said nothing. "You're a creep," Nell said. She twirled the daisy in her hair. Eric said her daisy was awfully clean. "It's fake, cotton. I made it." When he asked Nell why she didn't use a real flower, she called him *inquisitive* and said, "I'll kill you if you don't take the extra room I have."

Eric told her he drove here from out West and thought of stopping for a bit, so why not. She twisted the cotton daisy in her hair one more time, and that was it, he moved in that afternoon, with nothing but a suitcase full of clothes and his Chevy Blazer. The house was a tiny thing topped with a weather vane, dropped in a field surrounded by forest. One navel orange tree grew in the yard beside the house, leaves deep green, branches spreading wide, rotting oranges and orange peels fallen at its roots. Nell said the tree was old, tall and ugly, too big for its own good. Eric thought it was beautiful—sharp and bright, like her.

Nell did not ask about Eric's California license plate, nor did she ask Eric if he had ever lived with an orange tree. Another day, over tea, she did ask him how he had so much money, so much time, to drive and do nothing but that.

“I graduated high school, left right after,” he said. “I’ll find a job soon.” He took a sip of black tea from a tiny cup shaped like a rose. The kitchen was all dark shades of wood, even the floor was wood, the kind of wood with large, intricate knots.

“I used to sell flowers, but I know nothing about flowers,” Nell said. “I hate real flowers. The idea of picking them.”

“So you wear a flower in your hair.”

“It’s cotton. I told you.”

“So you don’t have a job.”

“I’m young, I’ve got time.”

“You are.” But Erik knows she’s not young like Dawn. Dawn, the girl in California, the girl who can turn herself into a monsoon with the spin of her body, dancing in the desert, all wild. The girl who understands the way her core works, the thing that connects her body to the world. Some would call this thing a soul. But Dawn, she had taught Eric the core exists in the body, the soul exists somewhere else. He left her because he couldn’t understand why he failed to feel his own core stemming, latching its roots.

*

Tonight, Eric just wants to sleep to static, enjoy the solidarity of his body. He wants to dream of Earth pierced in just the right spot, no mess. Nell twists the stem of her clean cotton daisy and kisses Eric on the stomach. “I’m hungry. Let’s go orange-picking.”

The thought of oranges makes Eric’s lips pucker, reminds him he has a stomach, a digestive system, which will curl and twirl with each lick of acid. The sun is not up, the world is not that orangey-yellow color, the color of a canary’s wing or the scales of goldfish. The world is still as plum-black as a bruise.

While lying next to Nell on this bed, this bed he is simply sleeping on for a while before he goes back to Yucca Valley, the static on the radio thickens, like sandpaper rubbing wood, skin rubbing skin. When Nell touches Eric's chest, his skin wears, thins.

Nell re-positions herself so her breasts sink into Eric's chest, now awkwardly resting her arms on the mattress.

"You know when you chew an orange and it just bursts, like that? All night it's been on my tongue."

Eric reaches over to turn off the radio.

"Put on Frank Sinatra," Nell says, adjusting herself to sit upright. "Fall in love with me."

"It was so I could sleep," Eric says. "The static."

Nell twirls her daisy, secures the clean cotton behind her small ear. Her black hair barely hits the bottom of her ears, but she still brushes it back, as if it gets in the way.

"I'm picking oranges," she says. She motions to the window with her thin, muscular arm. "Come with." She takes Eric's hand. The sharpness, the strength, the density in her touch shows him the lightness in his own body, like he has half a heart, like he's breathing with one lung.

*

One night, a night before the steely static, the hollow pricks in the air—on this night, Eric sleeps to the sound of Nell's breath. She breathes in a hard way, like she's constricting the back of her throat. Her belly goes up, down, and up again, like a wave. Eric does not rest his head on her stomach, but he rests his hand right below her navel. The sweetness of Nell's body is still on his tongue, between his legs, but it won't last for long. This is the first time Eric has ever had sex. He always thought his first time would be with Dawn. Still, he has never tasted or felt

anything so sweet, and he never will again. It's this sensation—the shock, the pinch, of something momentary—makes him feel empty, like each pinprick is scooping out his insides.

Eric wakes up to the shift of Nell's body. She gets up, puts on a long t-shirt. Eric gets up, too, but he sits on the bed's edge, his skin coated in filthy air. Nell looks older in the half-light, an old woman wearing a daisy in her hair. But she's not really an old woman, and Eric knows this. In this light, her skin is stretched so tightly over her jawbone, her cheeks sink in. Her mouth is all teeth and tissue and bone. Her eyes are tired and worn, like fallen fruit.

She says, to Eric, "This is all pretend, isn't it?"

He wants to tell her she is beautiful. Instead, he says, "Put your head on my shoulder."

For a moment, Nell tilts her head to the side, as if she's thinking about something. Then she tugs her long shirt and sits cross-legged on the hardwood floor. "I've lived here my entire life," she says. "My mother died, my father always lived somewhere else. Sister moved out. I tried moving out, too, but it didn't work."

"It's hard, moving."

"Think you'll go back west?"

"Not for a while."

This room, the room Nell gave Eric for a while, has no decorations, not even a photograph, on its walls. There is just a wooden sleigh bed and one small, splintered oak dresser with a clock radio on top. The other day Nell told Eric these things belonged to her sister, who she hated. She also hated her sister's husband, who would come into the flower shop where she worked and ask for dozens of gerberas and snapdragons, not even understanding the flowers were cut from their roots, how sad it was they'd die faster.

"I want to leave, Eric," Nell said.

“I always want to leave,” Eric says. He lies back down, rests his head on his pillow, pulls the cool sheet over his thin body, his bare skin.

Nell slowly stands and, before Eric can say *where are you going*, Nell walks out the door. Time passes, and Eric still says nothing. Instead, he imagines this house, this shell of a house, as something full. He imagines a mother resting her head on this pillow, her two daughters, as young and thin as daisies, placing their head on the mother’s lap. The daughters say *I’m scared*, for no reason other than that it’s dark. And the mother says *Don’t worry. It’s all make believe*, and holds her daughters tight. Eric’s own mother never did this for him. She was always busy reading or drawing with his father, too busy to teach him about bodies and sex and what is real and what is not.

Eric lies back down, wraps the sheet around his entire body—from his head to his feet—and tries to imagine he is a mountain, layers of built-up earth, but cannot. So instead he thinks of Dawn when she became a monsoon, wearing layers of blue lace and dancing in the desert, and wonders why he too cannot become something larger.

*

Soon enough, Eric will be that mountain. When he’s old and ready to become something else, his body will be nothing but a body. It will take him fifty years to understand how mountains collect the shells of what we once were, building and solidifying with each life, each bit of the irreversible.

But tonight, tonight is when Eric and Nell walk down to the orange tree. Her body is heavy with another body; his body is light, all on its own. The air is thick, tangible. Wet, almost. Soaked with sweet fragrance. Eric steps, barefooted, into the soft, muddy grass. Nell is barefoot, too. As they walk closer to the tree, each speck of orange and each spread of leaf grows, covered

in a streetlamp yellow. Nell stops walking, and rather than letting go of her hand, Eric stops walking, too. This woman with the cotton daisy in her hair, she says, “Ever pick oranges before?”

“No,” Eric says.

“Why not?”

“There aren’t as many orange trees in Yucca Valley as there are here.”

Nell curls her fingers tighter, but Eric’s hand remains loose. “Do you miss it, Yucca Valley?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“Then why did you leave?”

Eric then thinks of Dawn spinning in her blue dress with heavy movements, like water. Like water, but not water. Just lace, a costume. Pretend. “No. I don’t.”

“I’m starving,” Nell says. She steps toward the tree, kneels by the place where roots join ground, and grabs an orange. “This one was picked for you.”

Nell rips the skin off this fruit, opens its center like a heart, peeling off one veined wedge like a tiny misshapen lung, extending her arm toward Eric. He thinks of the liquid inside, the sticky mess, acid curling inside his stomach. When he takes this slice, he slides the velvety membrane on his tongue, constricting his throat muscles, swallowing the piece whole. It goes down, hard, like a sun that no longer burns, like a shrunken planet. Solid, not full of juice that, if broken, will just spill, spill and do nothing more.

Nell kisses Eric’s constricting throat. With the final release of his tongue, the final swallow of orange before it all goes down, Eric wishes to rest his head on this woman’s shoulder. But it’s too late—she has already lifted her small lips from his neck.

And now, all she can do is stare at him, her sharp face showing an odd, empty look, a look Eric can't read now, but much later decides might have been the look of understanding.

Right then, Eric tells her she is beautiful. She hears him.

*

It will be just three days later when Eric leaves. He will pack his one suitcase, climb into his Chevy, close the door hard. He will not turn on the car radio. Instead, he will roll down all four windows. He wants the air to move fast, so fast it hums. Of course he thinks about asking Nell to go with him, but she says she is fine. In fact, she says she is better than fine, sitting in that big orange tree, eating all the fruit she can.

"I will never go hungry," she says.

"Take care of yourself," Eric says.

"One day I will see America, too."

Eric hears her. "Yes," he says. And at that moment, he believes it.

INSIDE

I closed my eyes fifteen years ago, when I was seven. I sat beneath my mother's piano we never played, hid under my grandmother's quilt, and started counting. "Your grandma loved the wrong kind," my mother had told me that morning when I snatched the quilt from a box marked *Goodwill*. "She was a good person but she loved the wrong kind."

When I counted to three, I decided I was sick of playing this game and wanted to find that stray cat who would stop by sometimes, looking through our window. My head was still underneath the quilt. It was so dark, I couldn't tell if my eyes were still closed or if I had opened them to a space without light.

But the quilt slipped from my body, and a light flew, swarming on my tongue, down my throat. This light was as thin and sharp as a woman, a young woman, just before she would ripen. This woman, her heart is a lantern in my mouth, only I have not met her yet. Five years have passed. I am twelve, walking downtown by the middle school I will attend in a few weeks. My mornings will be orchestra practices she encouraged and my nights will be poetry assignments she gave, only I do not know it yet.

I stare through a window I that I will soon be staring through from the inside. The young woman is there, sitting in the classroom with two other, older teachers. All I can see is brown hair sweeping her mid-back, but her frame is small. When she leans over the table, her back curls like a cat's. I want to run my fingers down her spine, press each bone, understand her vertebrae—alone, each one hard like ivory, yet together, they're as supple as a feather, as malleable as pure gold.

I still think of this touch when I am twenty-two and in a shower that was once hot, and is now stale. The air on the other side of the curtain will be even worse. I shut my eyes and turn the shower off, grab a towel, wrap it around my body. “You chose to love the wrong kind.” My mother likes saying this to me now. I halfway-dry and put on a long shirt. In the corner, there is a cased violin that has not been touched in years. On my bed, there is a journal smothered in a quilt of words. I lie on the floor. From inside of the next apartment, my neighbor plays the organ, a lullaby that digs and digs inside of my stomach, digs and digs.

Out of the rips fly birds with piano keys for wings.

PART II: A SAD, PRIVATE PLACE

HAPPY

The lover ran her hand down the girl's stem neck, swept her fingers across her back, as smooth and white as ice-age Earth, as empty as Pluto. Inside the girl's ice-age spine is a world of pink – Pepto Bismol, cotton candy, motel flamingoes, amoxicillin—a sea of pink, all the color you could ever want, so much color it will make you sick like galaxies spinning, happy sick like bodies shrinking, shrinking, then having enough. Happy sick like the fuse igniting. Happy sick like the birth of a star.

HUNDREDS OF BEAUTIFUL THINGS

Autumn grew up thinking her home was indestructible, that it would live forever. But now she watched the effects time has on its walls—they chip and wither with age. She remembered running down the wood-paneled hallway after school, racing toward the back room to watch Flipper the dolphin on television. Deep mahogany once swirled with ebony like lace, but now these wood panels were the color of mud mixed with snow.

Tom pulled at the panels, hooking the wood from the top. “Don’t,” Autumn said, gripping Tom’s arms. He promised they’d figure something out in the morning. After eighteen years of false promises, Autumn should have known better. But now she stood in her slippers and nightgown, sunrays beating through the window onto her neck, her husband beating through the core of her father’s house—the house he worked so hard to build.

“Autumn,” he said, “go back to bed.”

He didn’t even look at her when he said this, as if she were a ghost.

“These panels are at least fifteen years old. I’m sick of looking at them. Your mother and father would have been sick of them, too.”

Autumn turned her head, catching sight of someone in the living-room mirror. But it was hung too low to see this person’s face. Autumn remembered when her mother brought home this mirror from a yard sale, how the waves etched into its pewter frame had reminded her of a silver ocean. “We’ll call it the ocean-mirror, then. Just for you,” her mother had said. Then she hung it especially low on the wall, just so her daughter didn’t have to stretch tall to see herself in it.

Now Autumn looked into the mirror and it seemed as if she had outgrown it. As red hair touched a white nightgown, she moved her hand forward, and the faceless mirror-woman did the

same. She flinched. The mirror-woman flinched, too, and it was then Autumn realized they are no different.

She couldn't stand the sight of Tom's hands, his hammer prying metal out of wood. She couldn't stand how neglected this house had become. Its once royal blue carpets had faded into a dull cerulean. Chandelier crystals had fallen, shattering into tiny prisms as they scattered onto the hard dining room floor. The bathroom tiles had loosened—one has even split completely, its fractures branching like a dry river. It was almost 1980, Autumn was almost 26, Tom 28. They'd been married for five years. Both of their parents were dead. Tom was right; it was time.

Autumn noticed her body stiffen, fill with an odd, sharp energy. She took the crowbar from his toolbox and dug its sharp end into the panels, ripping the nails from their hold. With nothing to keep the panels secure, she pried them down with the crowbar, cursing their splintered edges for containing so much that was dear to her, for holding so much power.

And then she cursed herself. Her grip loosened and the sharp tool slipped from her hands. Rid of the ebony wood, the wall was now a collage of shattered eggshells, a muddle of beiges and off-whites.

“It's so bright,” Tom said.

Autumn swept her fingertips across the wall, and she swore she could feel it breathe.

“Let's redo it all,” she said. “Not just the hallway. The whole house.”

*

Autumn felt happy when she looked at the front lawn, covered with piles of her father's records, her mother's chinaware. Boxes of clothes, their bed frame and mattress. It felt good she and Tom decided to clean her parents' room out first. They formulated a plan: Parents' room first, kitchen and living room second, their room third, back room last. The back room would be

the hardest, both Tom and Autumn knew this; they kept the cradle in there, other baby things. But when the couple was talking about this plan of theirs, they both said the back room would be last simply because it would be the most expensive to renovate, and they needed to save the money. But really, they both knew that room would be no more expensive than any of the others. Autumn should have made this plan a long time ago, she thought.

When she was about to go inside, help Tom tear up the carpet, paint over the rose walls, she thought about keeping her mother's robe, putting it in the closet with her own things so Tom wouldn't notice, but the thought flew away before it could sink in, replaced by a more important one—the tension in her shoulders, all that energy that needed somewhere to go. She could not wait to tear up the carpet, rip it up quickly, painlessly.

Tom had already pulled the carpet away from the wall by the time Autumn went back in, rows of tack strips exposed, their sharp edges tempting. Autumn fantasized about running her fingers over them, her blood dripping all over the carpet. But when, in her fantasy, the blood made it to the floor, she felt stupidly childish and focused her thoughts on Tom, the way he held his knife, pulling the blade to the side. She noticed the way his hands gripped the knife, remembered the way he gripped the steering wheel when he was young, the way he held her hand. He was gentle, then. It was now, as Autumn watched her husband peel up the carpet with these same hands, she realized there was always a hidden roughness about him.

“I'll start in this corner,” said Autumn. She took a knife from the toolbox and went to cut, sliding it with a force that surprised her. “This feels good, Tom,” she said, trying to make conversation.

“I want to put in a new wood floor, so we'll have to get these tack strips up after we've taken up the carpet.”

“That sounds good. A good change.”

Autumn was the first to start rolling back the carpet. She rolled each section tightly, securing the thick rolls with twine. The method of tearing and rolling this carpet calmed her. Tom rolled back a few sections almost too quickly, nervously, and then said, “I’m taking the scraps out front.”

Autumn wanted to stop him, tell him to stay, work beside her. But she didn’t stop him. She was too transfixed with the pulling, the rolling, tying down rolls of thick, heavy carpet, to leave her spot on the floor, to touch her husband’s arm, maybe even kiss him on the cheek, say, “Thank you for starting with this room, Tom.” She was too transfixed with the feeling of her own muscles tensing up and releasing to speak. Autumn rolled up another strip of carpet. It reminded her of the sleigh-like curl of the cradle Tom had made, years ago, for a child they never could conceive.

Sometimes Autumn would see Tom sitting in the back room, staring at the cradle. She used to sit with him, but once, when she placed her head on his shoulder, he just pushed her away. He pushed her so hard it hurt. That’s when she knew she could no longer help him. Last night, she stood at the open door, watching Tom in the back room with the cradle in his hands.

Early morning on mother’s day, Tom came into their bedroom carrying a tiny bed, its wooden frame hot, newly smooth. “Maybe it will bring us luck,” he said. He sounded so hopeful then.

“You know it’s not because of luck,” Autumn said.

But when Autumn’s infertility smothered Tom’s belief in good-luck charms, his affections toward her grew more and more distant. He saw her as some hollow creature, void of the internal garden that other women were gifted with. Autumn looked to the world for

answers. She looked to Stonehenge; its frame becoming mother earth, the womb that birthed fields and flowers, humans, and animals. She looked to the Sphinx, its strength compelling her to search inside herself for her own. Somehow, she hoped, this strength would bury itself in her barren soil and sprout trees with bright leaves. Autumn looked to Lady Liberty, too, her torch lighting the fire that birthed a nation. Then she looked to herself, hoping she would find something—anything—worthy of Tom’s love, worthy of motherhood. She searched and searched for what he’d seen when they first married. But what he saw was a fading image. He saw what he wanted to see—a garden with sunflowers and tiger lilies, a garden that would reach full bloom only when a piece of himself was planted in it. Autumn knew they could still have this garden, but this garden would spread across the earth like a forest, a cluster of rooted things created by a power higher than themselves. She knew she could still be a mother; there were so many children who needed mothers.

Autumn kept thinking Tom would change, that he would see her with the passion he once had. She kept on hoping that one morning she would wake to the man who took her to the jetty, holding her hand as they walked across the rocks, letting the waves spray their skin. “This ocean will take us anywhere,” he said. During the fishermen’s off-season, he promised, they would travel. “I’ll take you to Europe and Africa, India and Brazil,” he said. “I’ll save the money.” But he never had.

Autumn kept hoping that she would wake to that man—the man who was full of drive and life, the man who would dance down crowded streets with her, who told her that music could be found anywhere, that all you have to do is listen. Every morning, she kept listening for that music. And that morning, weeks ago Tom’s beating hammer slammed wood like the mallet of a drum, cleaning the hall of its wooden panels, starting something within Autumn, something

destructive. It was when Autumn rolled up the last piece of carpet she understood this destruction was always there, inside of her, functioning like a lung or heart or any of the other hundred beautiful things inside of her body, working together.

When Tom came through the back door, his face was red from the October chill. He combed his fingers through his blond hair. “This looks great,” he said, opening his arms wide as if he were trying to embrace the emptiness of this room. “Beautiful.”

In almost no time, the couple nailed the padding staples to the floor. They worked separately, diligently, in a silence that warmed Autumn in a way she hadn’t felt warmth in a long time. Tom removed the tack strip with ease while Autumn swept the room with quick, precise strokes.

*

Soon, it was time for dinner. To celebrate, Autumn ordered Chinese and they ate on the floor, which was still a bit dirty, even though Autumn swept. But she enjoyed the dirt, the roughness of the wood subfloor. She enjoyed this feeling so much she didn’t notice Tom sat next to her, closely, and put his hand on her shoulder.

“I want to clean out the back room next,” he said.

Autumn could not believe this. He was breaking their plan. “But we haven’t painted this room yet. We should paint first.”

“I don’t care.” Tom stood up, walked out the door. “I would like your help.”

Autumn followed him down the hall to the back room. Tom slammed the door with his fist and it flung open. Before they could discuss it, he grabbed the cradle, shoved the closet curtain aside, and threw it on the top shelf.

“We can still—” Autumn began.

Tom closed the curtain. "I want all of this gone. Help me move this couch outside."

Autumn dragged her hand across the couch cushions, and their lumpy texture made her cringe. "We have to push," she says. "It's too heavy to carry."

Tom and Autumn stood together beside the couch's arm, and when they started pushing, the couch didn't resist their force. It glided across the oak floors through the eggshell hallway and into the kitchen like a whipped, obedient thing. The kitchen tiles felt cool through Autumn's thin slippers. She let go.

"What are you doing?" Tom said.

Juniper potpourri imbued the air with a soft sweetness, and she sensed her mother placing dried flowers and wood-shavings in jars. Her mother taught her how to combine flowers, wood-shavings and roots, letting them dry for days. When they finally withered, her mother would place the pieces in the oddest-shaped containers. One time, Autumn and her mother rubbed some dried marigolds and juniper all over their father's work shirt, thinking that making him smell like a girl would be a harmless April Fools' joke. That night, when he came home from doing his TV-repair rounds, he said, "Marigolds and juniper. All day I smelled like home."

"Do you smell that?" Autumn asked Tom. She stepped away from the couch. The back door was straight ahead. It would have been so easy to push the couch out the door. But the juniper, it smelled so strong. Where was it coming from? The potpourri jars spoiled years ago. When Autumn's father died of a heart-attack and she and Tom moved back in to be with her mother, Autumn tried making more potpourri, but her mother wouldn't help. She threw out all of her jars. She missed her husband too much, she told her daughter. This longing, it made her die before her time.

"We used to dance, Tom. Do you remember that?"

He propped the back door open and started pushing the couch.

“We left Montauk to spend a weekend in Manhattan, to enjoy Christmas there. You grabbed my hand and said, ‘It’s the time of year for dancing.’ I laughed and said, ‘Here? Now?’ Then you said, ‘The taxis are the trumpets and the voices are the violins, the cellos.’ And you led me through the streets, full of people, twirling me around and dipping me back.”

Tom gave the couch one long push, and he was out the door. Autumn ran out the door too.

“I’m bringing it to the junkyard tomorrow,” he said, pointing to the yard full of boxes overflowing with china and records, her parents’ collapsed bed frame. “With all this stuff.”

The streetlights lit up their yard with a sickly yellow glow. Wind curled through the chain-link fence, metal against metal. “Do you hear that?” Autumn said. “Years ago you would have said that sounded like bells.”

Tom turned away and walked inside. She was a ghost to him.

*

Autumn slept on the couch that night, and Tom slept in their bed, which was in Autumn’s childhood bedroom. Both of them hated to admit this, that they were sleeping in the room she slept in as a child. No matter how hard the couple fought, Autumn never, ever slept on the couch. When Autumn’s mother died, Tom wanted to move into her parents’ room. Autumn tried, but in the end she just couldn’t. She kept thinking about breaking all the picture frames in that room, cutting the palms of her hands with the edges. The last time Tom had asked her to move rooms, she took a kitchen knife and stabbed the wall, over and over, making pathetically small dents.

Autumn woke up early, put on a pair of moccasins, and ran. She ran out the yard and into the street, away from this house. She passed fields that stretched over earth like blankets, covered

with flowers that partnered into mosaics, portraits of her life. Two lovers held hands and kissed. A child held a yellow balloon, waving it in the wind, releasing it into the sky. Her existence, a mere hope.

In the distance, the sky and the ocean came together like a gray canvas. The air smelled salty now. In the field, oranges smudged with yellows and browns. The lovers' untangled their hands. The child leapt and spun and fell to the ground. They moved like a watercolor painting, dripping but caught in the dry, thirsty air.

As Autumn ran down the pier, its wood let out a shrill. The ocean rumbled below, her reflection a scrap of color floating along its waves. She knelt down and swept the water's surface with her hands, finding herself beside the pewter waves of her childhood, only now they seem more gray than silver.

Tom and Autumn had agreed to name their daughter Isabelle. "I know we are going to have a girl," he'd said. But all the tests were negative.

It was now that the waves swelled and shriveled below; she searched for Isabelle within this gray undulation. She searched for the home she once had, the home she wanted to make—mahogany and ebony swirls, deep blue carpets, nights of creating potpourri mixes with a daughter whom she loves. This home could be anywhere, on any inch of any place in this world. Autumn sunk her hand deeper into the sea, its biting coolness welcoming her; the hurt, reassuring, like a mother's touch.

*

When Autumn walked through the front door, Tom was standing in the living room, in front of her mother's china closet, ripping off its copper-wire doors with his tools. He must have noticed that she was gone. She wonders if he even cares.

She walked to the other side of the closet, its doors still intact. Its doors, made of wire like cages. Porcelain women wearing Victorian dresses and holding parasols rested behind the wires, their expressions blank. Once Tom tore off the door completely, he took the figures from their shelves and placed them on the dining room table.

“The doors wouldn’t open,” he said. “I needed to take the porcelain out before I started piecing apart the wood.”

“What about our plan?” said Autumn.

“This house, this house,” Tom said in such a way it felt like he was talking to himself.

“I’m starting to paint, with or without you.” But when Autumn went to the hall closet to open a paint can, Tom grabbed her arm. He cried, calmly.

Autumn looked him in the face. He looked older, all of a sudden. “You’re crazy, you know that?” she said.

He turned away, started prying off the cabinet’s other door. “Thought they might be worth something,” he said. “We need money. We can’t do this without money.”

“I’m keeping the dolls, Tom.”

Tom yanked the door off its last thread. “These will be worth a lot,” he said, placing a woman in a gray dress on the table. He breathed in a hard, unforgiving way. Autumn could no longer tell if he was crying, but after thinking about it, she didn’t care.

“I’m keeping them,” she said again. “They were my mother’s.”

“She’s dead, Autumn. Both of our parents are dead. We never talk about mine. It’s always your parents,” he paused. “Dead. Do you know what that means?”

“I do,” Autumn said.

Tom turned around, but kept his eyes fixed on the floor. “I want to keep trying, for a baby.” He looked like a child now.

Autumn stood beside this man who looked like a child, helped him take the porcelain women from their shelves. When they were all on the table, Autumn turned around, saw reds and whites—her red hair falling against her white nightgown, framed by pewter waves. She heard her mother speak.

“We’ll call it the ocean-mirror, then. Just for you.”

She did not know why this plan to renovate meant so much to her, made her feel so safe. Maybe, she thought, just maybe, navigating change in simple, easy steps could have helped her find all that had been lost—a home she could shape, a daughter who she could love.

These lost things, they could be anywhere. In England with Stonehenge, in Egypt with the Sphinx, in America with the Statue of Liberty. In this room, hidden within her voice.

And her voice, as cool and slick as an overflowing sea, unveiled the heart of a life weighed down with good luck charms. This heart, it wanted to get out of this place. And with grace, she let it loose.

DIVE

Evelyn sits on the Steel Pier's Ferris wheel, her damp swimsuit soaking through her gossamer jacket, a plum bruise ripening on her forearm, fresh from an afternoon dive. It's not unusual for her body to collide with Aria's paddling hooves as they climb out of the pool.

It's cool for a summer night. Evelyn's stomach spins as the Ferris wheel glides down, then up, then down again. Atlantic City surrounds her—almost human now, almost loving her as a human might. Like the face of a woman, the Pier is shielded by a veil of stars, flooded with moonlight, kissed with a sand-salt perfume; its voice, pushing its way through the crowds, roars like that of a lioness. This city's Steel Pier, tired and worn, holds Evelyn. Its metal is all bone tonight.

The Ferris wheel jolts, then halts. Evelyn leans against the rail. To the left, the skeleton of her diving platform reaches forward, stretching like an acrobat, trying to become an entertainer itself before its days are up. Before all of the performers' days are up. The pier was bought by Resorts International. Big casinos are coming. Tonight will be Evelyn's last dive. After weeks of knowing, it should have sunk in, Evelyn thought.

Aria's hooves have beat and bruised the diving platform countless times, rushing up just to leap off. Some spectators have come up to Evelyn after the show, saying how Aria's red hair matches hers so perfectly she nearly vanishes into her horse's coat during the dive. Some horse-and-rider pairs take a while to jump. But when Aria gets to the top, Evelyn leaps on her back, and they both plummet—Aria's neck arched and legs curled—forty feet into the cold deep pool below.

The Ferris wheel jolts again, gliding downward. Lights brighten, yellow-orange like fire. Evelyn almost wishes the pier would catch fire, die tragically tonight. She remembers the fire in 1970, destroying the Marine Ballroom. It was her second year as a diving girl; she was seventeen, still toughening up. This is her tenth year. She's had about six broken bones, which is pretty good considering Hailey's been diving for thirteen years and has had over ten. The horses don't get injured nearly as much as the riders do.

Almost to the ground now, the woman that is the Steel Pier gets larger as Evelyn comes closer. Her veil of stars slips down. The details show now: stunned faces of children, their clammy skin and salty fingers, their worn and wrinkled parents, the occasional pair of young punk lovers with bright hair, groups of girls in electric-pink ruffled sundresses. It's the kids and parents Evelyn will miss the most, seeing them holding hands. She can only imagine what it would feel like for a five-year-old to hold their parent's hand. Security, protection, maybe even love.

When Evelyn gets off the Ferris wheel, Hailey squeezes through a crowd of sundress girls and runs toward her, cotton candy all over her fingers, pink sugar in her platinum hair. She's older than Evelyn but dives like a child, eyes closed the whole way down. Sometimes it takes her five minutes just to mount her horse. Evelyn steps off the Ferris wheel and Hailey hands her a clump of pink fluff. The Bee Gees "Night Fever" plays, cheerful violins and soprano voices blend with staccato trumpets. Hailey bobs her head and swings her hips.

"Evelyn," she says, "let's dance." Hailey grabs her hand before she can say no.

Hailey recruited Evelyn at fifteen, when there was nowhere for her to go. Evelyn couldn't take it at the group home, so she just left. Worked at a fruit stand for a while. That's when Hailey saw her. She bought some peaches and said, "You would look lovely on top of a

horse.” Evelyn thought Hailey looked so bright with her platinum hair and almost-translucent skin. They slept together after Evelyn’s first dive, just the two of them. Then, months later, when Hailey got a boyfriend, Ryan, Evelyn was her third spark—Hailey and Ryan’s third spark—the one who could make things fun for them again, all three together in bed. Then Hailey said things were okay, she and Ryan didn’t need Evelyn anymore in that way. *Let’s be friends*, they said. Evelyn thought, *Now what?*

She missed touching Hailey’s warm, freckled skin, kissing her thin arms and neck. She missed Hailey’s warm hands touching her everywhere, a gentle sort of love. Years passed and the women continued to break their bones. As always, they healed, and the crowd continued to taunt them with a lion’s voice.

But now Hailey twirls Evelyn around and around, Evelyn’s boots stomping, Hailey’s pumps tapping the Pier. Hailey sings along, closing her eyes, her voice way deeper than the Bee Gees. Evelyn mouths the words, barely singing at all. There is too much to see and hear. Almost as if she were to speak, there would be too much pressure, and her body would collapse.

While the two women dance, tight-rope walkers and unicyclists perform their usual balancing acts, acrobats fly from cannons, the Crazy Mouse spins so fast ridegoers scream. Evelyn tosses her head back, holds Hailey’s hand, and lets everything be, just as it is.

*

Underneath the pier, the air is thick with salt. Evelyn is the only human here. Aria and Solo, Hailey’s horse, kick their stalls so hard the doors shake. Everything is covered in a deep yellow light. Evelyn kisses Aria on the nose. She’d like to think her horse understands this will be their last dive, but Aria looks at her as she always does, head tilted to the side, her red forelock grown so long it covers one eye.

Maybe it's good Aria can't tell. If the horse knew, she'd be too sad to dive. Aria and Evelyn are the last, the sealing finish, the closing act. The fallen planks surrounding them now, underneath the pier, were once strong. Now they have softened, splintered. The rides above them have rusted. The sea surrounding them gets darker every day. The Steel Pier is growing old, wrapped in a veil of stars.

Evelyn walks into Aria's stall and she stops kicking. Solo has stopped kicking, too. "Hailey will be here soon," she tell him. His gray coat looks like an overcast sky. When he dives, he is a shooting star on the Pier's veil. Children make wishes on him and tell Evelyn their wishes after the show. Once a child came up to her and whispered, *I wish for a twin*. Another time, a child said, *I want to be a diving girl, just like you*.

Evelyn's boss, Marty, rushes into the barn, his tophat too large for his bean-shaped head, his tailcoat flapping against his boney hips, as always. And you'd think over the years he would've grown into his suit. Hailey follows him from behind, skipping and singing some Donna Summer song. Evelyn perches onto Aria's stall door.

"Just be natural," Marty says to both of his diving girls. "Be happy. And those damn SPCA people. Just fuck 'em. They're all over the place tonight." He said the same thing to all the divers and staff just a few days ago. They were all sitting down here, in the same darkness, with the pier above them. This is the same man who welcomed Evelyn when Hailey recruited her, when there was nowhere left to go. This is the same man who told Evelyn, at fifteen, just dive, to just plunge, and to revel in every minute.

"Don't worry," Hailey says, sitting beside the woman she used to touch, nightly. "The crowd will never forget you."

"I'm done," Evelyn says. "No matter what happens, I'm done."

Hailey runs her hand down Evelyn's leg and kisses her cheek. Evelyn imagines kissing Hailey on the lips, open mouthed, lips small but full of warmth. She imagines Hailey kissing back.

*

Before the dive Evelyn walks along the pier, barefoot, in her beige swimsuit. Feathers in her hair, rhinestones fastening them together. Her lips, deep red. Eyes, lined in blue. Back straight, head up, she walks. This persona is everything she is. All she knows.

Greg from the Planter's Peanut stand walks, out of costume, straight past her. Tim, who operates the Crazy Mouse sips coffee, hand in pocket, eyes to the ground. Tiffany and Dave, a young couple with acid-red hair, eat pretzels and say, *hey Evelyn, we'll be there tonight, of course, front row*, and walk onward, hand in hand. And of course she sees Ryan, wearing a brown suit and fedora, his shiny shoes tapping the pier loudly. He nods, gives her a look as if he can see underneath her clothes, and walks right past. Her nipples harden. She crosses her arms and turns her head.

Children and parents stare at her, wrapped in light sweaters, too bundled for a July night, turn to stare at her. *She's a queen*, one of the little boys screams. He tugs at Evelyn's leg. *And you're a little prince*, she says. He smiles. His mother grabs his hand and pulls him away.

Evelyn lights a cigarette and inhales. Acrobats leap from trapeze to trapeze, holding each other up, trusting. She won't be able to trust another human for a long, long time. She does not understand how the acrobats fly, catch, fly and catch, hands in hands. It will be a long time until she will be able to trust another human. To have another's hands in her hands. Never again Hailey's hands. Evelyn make fists while she walks, pretending there is more than air in their grasp.

Fists. Her empty fists turn into those of boxers. Her knuckles, punching cement and steel. Her voice, screaming at the Steel Pier. She punches the ground and screams, bone against bone. Skin shredding, ruby blood on her diamond white skin. The feathers in her hair fall. She shreds them. Tiny drops of blood soak what was once her crown.

And then everything is dark for a moment. Pleasantly dark, dream dark. Everything is dark. Then bodies huddle, voices shout. *Are you okay, okay okay okay. Miss, are you okay.* She stares at them, rocks in her lungs. They hover around her, waving their arms and shouting. She pushes her way out of the crowd. The Steel Pier is waltzing now, spinning and dancing. Evelyn stumbles, skin blood-wet and stinging.

*

“What the fuck happened to you?” Marty says. He is leaning against Aria’s stall, arm resting on a fallen wood plank. The din from the families who walk along the pier, above, echoes all around them. Everything feels moist and salty. Marty’s face seems dirty, but it’s just caked with sweat—almost ghostly in the dim yellow light.

“I’m fine,” Evelyn says. She sweeps her toes through the cool dirt, wishing she could feel this exact piece of ground every day for the rest of her life, knowing she cannot.

“Fix yourself up. You’re on in 15 minutes.”

Her knuckles burn, blood dripping. She grabs a post-dive towel and sits, wrapping her hands in its warmth. The towel’s pressure eases the sting only slightly. Aria looks at Evelyn like a child, eyes wide. Solo eats his hay, nose in the air.

“Love,” Hailey says, sitting next to the girl she used to kiss nightly. “How do I look?”

Evelyn takes one hand out of the towel-wrap, raw skin exposed and burning. She tilts Hailey’s sequenced headband to the side. “Beautiful.”

“Take care of yourself.” Hailey puts her soft hand on Evelyn’s scraped one. “I could just kiss you.”

“Shut up.”

Hailey kisses Evelyn on the cheek, gets up from beside her and runs up to Solo, giving him a hug. They are both so bright, with his gray coat and her platinum hair. It hurts Evelyn’s eyes a little, they are so bright.

The two women, their bodies once touched in such a way Evelyn’s world would explode. Everything hurt in such a sharp way, their knotting muscles and young bones. But still, Hailey was gentle. Evelyn hated it when Ryan touched her, tied her hands up, licked and bit her pussy until she couldn’t take it. But that was part of the deal.

Pain was also part of the deal at the Steel Pier. Those days when Evelyn would sleep with Hailey after their dives, kissing each other’s bruised skin. Damp air rose below a star veil so thick the women could hardly breathe.

But nothing Hailey and Evelyn did ever came close to the feeling of the dive itself—Evelyn’s muscles tight against Aria’s, falling forty feet, falling falling falling as the Pier wrapped them in her deep, warm voice.

Now Hailey kisses Evelyn’s cheek as if they are sisters. An almost-nothing kiss. A ten-percent skin/ninety-percent air kiss. Evelyn wants to say stop it, stop fucking with me, but instead she leaves her blood-soaked towel in the barn and walks up to the dock. Skin burning, drying, she look at the platform one last time. It’s a skeleton, long and thin. The ramp their horses run up, the platform on top where they stand, wait, leap on their animal’s backs, and together, take off into the pool below. Their platform, an almost-nothing launch pad that they abuse nearly every day of their lives.

Abuse: The SPCA's favorite word to pin on the divers, label them with. Evelyn knows what's going to happen when this is over—the SPCA will take the horses to a rescue farm, away from everything their hooves once knew. Away from the divers who love them. Evelyn wonders where all of her love will go without another being to share it with.

Marty taps her on the shoulder. “Kid, you have to get offstage so Hailey can dive. And put this on your hands.” He gives her some gauze strips and injury tape.

“Can I take Aria?”

“What?”

“When we go? Can I take her?”

“You don't have the money for that.”

Evelyn sweeps her hand along the damp stall door. “Yeah.”

“Just be calm, sweetheart.”

“I'm getting offstage.”

When she walks to the horses on the side of their diving ramp, the crowd huddles into the stands. Although she knows he's out there, she cannot see Ryan and is glad. She wonders why he isn't with Hailey, why he never comforts her before a dive. The crowd crumples and folds together in those stands. Evelyn wraps her hands with the gauze and tape. The burn lessens with pressure. She tries not to think about where she'll end up tomorrow. Pack up her things, go to the airport, see what she can afford, see what city promises to maybe love her next.

Marty taps his microphone, but the crowd still hoots and hollers. Hailey stands at the top of the ramp. A barn hand walks Solo to the foot. Hailey lowers her head, first to her horse, then to the crowd. Hundreds of people, people all over. Hailey raises her arms and they applaud even

louder, the ovation growing. Evelyn stands to the side, watching it all. Trying to remember what this woman's skin felt like on hers.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, it's a sad day at the Pier,” Marty announces. “We are going through big changes. I'd like to believe this is not the end. But now, Solo the Brave Horse is going to dive into this pool of water beside the Pier. Miss Hailey Sullivan will lead Solo during their 40-foot dive.”

Voices hush and Solo canters up the ramp. Hailey waits on top, keeps her head down. She hesitates, then Solo's up, she's on, and they're off. Hailey's body, crunched and curled on Solo's back. Both of them, so small against the night sky. Together, they're a shooting star, falling from Miss. Atlantic City's star veil, hitting the water, breaking the surface with the force of an explosion. The water shoots up, white, like fire. Hailey is in the middle of it all. Evelyn wishes for her happiness.

Hailey tosses her hair back when she follows Solo out of the pool. Her headband now fallen to her shoulders, she rips it off and waves it in the air.

The crowd stands, applauds, hoots and hollers. Everyone's voice lost in everyone else's. Evelyn stands, silent and still, as a barn hand leads Aria to the ramp's foot.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” Marty announces. “That was Miss Hailey Sullivan and her Brave Horse, Solo! Now, for the last, legendary leap: Miss Evelyn Ingram and Aria!”

Evelyn raises her head to the sky, blue-black like a bruise. The cold hurts her muscles.

Everything is sharp. Her empty hands, bandaged knuckles—cold, sharp. Head to the sky and bare feet on rotting, splintered wood.

Aria's hooves beat the ramp, climbing up to where Evelyn stands, approaching her like a bass drum. Everything is different when you're on top of it all. Evelyn's heart shakes so hard

with each pounding hoof. She raises one hand and the crowd claps harder, harder, so hard their echoes beat her skin. The crowd muddles together, clusters of color, cheering from a half-dome.

Aria's red coat catches Evelyn's peripheral vision. Her horse is a ball of fire, a comet launching. Evelyn swings onto her back, grabs her mane. Her cold legs and arms wrap around her horse's warm body. Together, they leap, plummet. Their bodies fall, but something inside of Evelyn lifts—something deep inside of her stomach and throat muscles—and they are suspended. She lifts her head and Aria does the same, her hands rising with the upward motion of her horse's neck. They crawl through the air like children searching for a safe place to collapse.

And yet, the water will hit soon. Evelyn curls her neck and back into Aria's, and Aria lowers her head. Evelyn closes her eyes. Everything is sharp, slicing, burning. The water surrounds their bodies like a cage. They push and pull their way from the thick, malleable walls. Evelyn's legs are still wrapped around Aria's back, hands still on her mane. So much love. What is there to do with so much love? Red hair, red coat. Hands yearning to ease bruises. Evelyn's hands yearning to let go. Soon, everything will be let go of.

But now, for a moment, everything is bright—crowd clusters, tiny lions and tigers in the stands. Mothers and children, lovers, friends. Voices loud yet muted. The Steel Pier hushes every sound as Evelyn rises, her body clinging to such a graceful, massive animal. When the show is over for good, Hailey will marry Ryan and become a mother. Marty will go into retirement. He will say Evelyn should become an acrobat, but she will say the thrill lies in the fall.

HUSH

If Evelyn had not parked underneath the awning instead of on the street, the love letter would have been washed away by the rain. The letter was a piece of loose-leaf paper folded into a neat square, tucked tightly beneath her windshield wiper. It had been raining so hard she needed to leave for a while, get out of Brooklyn, go anywhere. She was sick of driving so she decided to take the train.

She carried the letter, which was surprisingly dry, in her pocket, and the moment she forgot it was there, the child sitting in front of her said, “Fart-art, art-fart.”

This child, who was merely a puff of blonde hair, was obnoxious. Evelyn wanted to shut the child up. But at the same time, Evelyn wondered what it would be like to hold the child in her arms, knowing she was the mother, able to watch her grow into a teenager, an adult.

How unattractive this train was with its beige, greasy seats. The world outside seemed unusually brown, green. The rain made all the colors deeper. Sometimes Evelyn got so lonely she wished the world would turn into a mouth, swallow her whole with its clean tongue, include her in all of its colors, textures, smells. Sometimes she wished the world would turn into one steel hand, shutting her out, its fingers flinging her into space.

“Fart-art, art-fart!” the child said again, this time shouting. Her pouf of blonde hair bobbed up and down.

“Can it,” a rough, androgynous voice said. The child laughed. Teenagers listened to music everyone on the train could hear, professionals talked on their cell phones and typed on their laptops loudly. And yet, it was this child whose voice stung the hardest. Evelyn felt angry she hadn’t jumped at the chance to hush the girl up.

She really, really wanted a cigarette, but she had quit after two years of smoking a pack a week, and she wanted to believe she had good will power. Besides, she wasn't that addicted, anyway. She started smoking the day she understood the world was waning and had been ever since her birth. She'd stood in line at the bank and noticed the room of safety deposit boxes, how dull they were, and remembered when she was in elementary school going to the bank with her dad. Back then, the boxes shone like scales of a mermaid's fin. But as Evelyn grew older, on that day especially, everything was dull, like these boxes at the bank. She wanted something new. She wanted to feel it in her body. So she bought the cigarettes, and two years later, she got bored of them, too.

The train stopped and its doors slid open, making a cool, clean sound, like a knife slicing through something without effort.

A woman wearing a black and gray tweed suit stepped onto the train, sat next to Evelyn. Evelyn felt underdressed by comparison, but this difference in dress didn't bother her as much as she thought it should. This woman's hair was as red, but a different kind of red than Evelyn's. This woman's hair was thick, straight, and as red as a new brick. Her jaw was artfully cut. The color of her hair looked natural, as if she'd never dyed it in her life, not even now, when it should have been graying. Evelyn's hair was graying. Grays mixed in with dull red. The woman took out a small blue book and began reading, then stopped.

"Do you mind?" the woman said.

Evelyn had no idea what the woman was talking about, so she wiped the corner of her mouth with her thumb. She felt like a child now, thinking of the love letter in her pocket. She hadn't a clue who it was from. The handwriting looked thin, long, and wobbly, masculine in a sense she couldn't quite identify. No one she was aware of had feelings for her. She almost never

left the house. After Justine killed herself, Evelyn couldn't do much of anything. It had been almost one year.

Evelyn had met Justine five years ago. At the time, Justine was in her mid-twenties and Evelyn was 48. The two women kept seeing each other walking to their cars. After a month of making brief eye contact and the occasional wave, Justine had knocked on Evelyn's door. Evelyn did not know how Justine found out which apartment was hers, and the fact that Justine knew which door to knock on did not bother Evelyn one bit. In fact, she welcomed this young woman, made her tea from the jasmine in her small patio garden. Justine told Evelyn she'd seen her around and thought she was beautiful, told her she was getting her MFA in fiction and could not stop writing about girls fisting each other, the feeling of such a compact, human thing inside of you, almost like a baby in your body. Evelyn imagined this young woman fisting her, her muscles clenching like an animal's.

"So you live alone?" Justine said as if she were fishing for words, trying to sustain the conversation.

"No," Evelyn said. She lied.

"I do," said Justine. "For seven years. I hate it, but I can't seem to get along with a roommate. They've all been idiots."

"Oh." Evelyn stirred her tea.

"I want to kiss you," said Justine.

So Evelyn got up from her seat, walked over to the young woman, bent over, kissed her open mouthed. This scared her. She said, to Justine, "I'm scared," like a child would say "I'm scared" while watching a scary movie. She felt pathetic, but a part of her didn't care.

Justine said she understood, but Evelyn could tell by her quick, choppy speech that she didn't.

"Do you mind?" the woman in tweed said again.

Evelyn looked out the window, noticed the world's colors deepen, glide past.

"Your hand is on my thigh," the woman said. "You're making me uncomfortable."

Evelyn honestly had not noticed. She felt foolish, moronic. "I'm sorry," she said, folding her hands in her lap stiffly. Her chest tightened and she tried to slow down her breathing. Instead, she thought of Justine, how in the last year of their relationship, they'd moved in together.

Justine would watch foreign black and white movies and walk around the apartment topless, sometimes play records she found at garage sales. Evelyn remembered one night in particular when they played an album of baroque music and watched *La Strada*. They both sat on the floor, Evelyn Indian style and Justine in a straddle, and marveled at how a clown could carry such sadness at the beach. They laughed at how depressing the movie was, got up and danced wildly to baroque strings. They had the best sex afterwards, making each other come, over and over, for hours.

Sometimes Evelyn hated Justine for her depression, not trying hard enough to find a job, sitting around all day while Evelyn worked. Evelyn trained horses that rich children would eventually purchase and show, which left her more physically than mentally exhausted. She'd been at this job for fifteen years, and felt lucky she had it even though she hated it. When Evelyn was in her twenties, she dove horses off the Atlantic City Steel Pier for a living, and she missed it, even though she eventually realized it was torture for the horses. She kept telling herself the longing would settle itself with time, but it never had. Sometimes Justine got so depressed, Evelyn wanted to bash Justine's skull in and watch her cry. Once, Justine told Evelyn she wanted

to kill herself in the bathtub and turn the water rose-colored, but Evelyn thought she was full of shit. She doesn't regret thinking that, especially now, her feet propped up on the seat in front of her, scuffing up the sick beige.

"You know, you can move if you want to," Evelyn said to the woman who was now folding her tweed jacket in her lap.

"There are no other empty seats," she said. "Why don't you just shut up?"

"Fuck you," said Evelyn. "What's wrong with you?"

The woman brought her jacket to her chest. "I'm going to my daughter's funeral."

The child who was shouting "fart-art" was now on to another refrain: "Frog, frog, ants on a log!" The teenagers and professionals were in their safe electronic worlds, acted like the child didn't even exist.

It was then Evelyn paid acute attention to her heart, felt repulsed by how much it ached.

*

The woman headed to her daughter's funeral, was named Autumn. Autumn's daughter had been sick for a long time, but she did not know it. Autumn felt stupid for not knowing. Isabelle had become so, so thin. Autumn got scared when she began to forget what her daughter looked like before she turned into a body of wire, so she drew pictures of Isabelle. In the drawings, her body became a part of hills and rivers. This way, in her imagination, Autumn could see her daughter all the time. In reality, Autumn saw her daughter twice a year—Thanksgiving and Christmas—and every year she looked more and more like bone. Autumn could hardly look at Isabelle without feeling ashamed.

Autumn remembered when Isabelle let her listen to some of her music in the car. This happened before she lost all that weight. The CD was called Doll Parts. Isabelle took the CD out

of her Diskman and slid it into the stereo slot, turned up the volume so it shook the car. After a few songs played, she said, "I want to gauge my insides out. Fuck." Isabelle played the CD at home, too, drawing pictures of bone-goddess girls on her walls in Sharpie, smoking cigarettes openly. Autumn didn't ask her where she got the cigarettes. She remembered thinking her daughter's angst was endearing.

When the train stopped and when its doors slid open, slid closed, Autumn realized neither she nor this woman was getting off. Then she felt her body sink, something in her stomach rise. She wished this woman would place her hand on her thigh again, she wished she could have fully enjoyed the feeling before.

I am a coward, she thought.

She was a coward for never telling Isabelle how ugly she was making herself, a coward for not loving anyone fully, ever, in her entire life.

"I am sorry," the woman next to her said. She tapped her foot on the seat in front of her in this beautifully anxious way.

"You are a liar," Autumn said. "You know nothing about me."

"You're right," the woman said, and introduced herself as Evelyn.

Autumn gave her name. "I hate talking to people on trains," she said.

"I'm going to get off at the next stop," Evelyn said. "Port Jefferson. Come with me if you want."

Isabelle's wake would begin tonight at six, in Montauk. If Autumn got off in Port Jefferson, she could take a cab and make it in time. It would cost her, though.

Autumn noticed Evelyn's hands, still folded sharply in her lap. She had made her decision.

*

Toast was a nice little restaurant in Port Jefferson that reminded Evelyn of one, large folded napkin. The tablecloths were checkerboarded and the bar was narrow, made of deep brown wood. Bottles of liquor shone like jewels, but the two women would not drink, even though both of them thought about it. Evelyn even thought about smoking a cigarette again, and was so dumbfounded that she had not thought of smoking for a whole hour, her bewilderment seemed to overpower the craving.

Autumn felt annoyed when Evelyn chose the window seat, but she sat down anyway because Evelyn pulled out a chair for her. It was still raining, but less now. The rain struggled to fall.

Evelyn ordered an avocado omelet and its green color looked oddly playful, like something a child would find amusing. She thought of Justine. The love letter in her pocket. “You are breathtaking,” it said. She thought of Justine, topless, sitting on the couch, knees pulled into her chest, saying “I don’t know what to do. I don’t want to live,” and felt repulsed at her own inability to comfort the one she loved. She thought of Justine lying in the bathtub, skin open. She thought of the love letter again, and decided it was definitely meant for someone else. She thought of how happy the thought had made her. She thought of turning the table upside down, listening to all the silverware clatter musically.

Autumn ordered nothing to eat. She put extra cream in her coffee, curled her fingers around the warm cup, thinking of a dream she had. In this dream, Isabelle was at the wheel of the car and Autumn was a passenger. Isabelle threw a rope out the window and there was something on the end of it, but Autumn couldn’t tell what. Autumn thought there was something alive at the end, tied to it. Her daughter laughed manically in the dream. Her daughter slept soundly when

Autumn woke up. There were times Autumn sat at the end of Isabelle's bed, watched her sleep. Isabelle never woke up to see this, but Autumn wondered what would have happened if her daughter did wake up. Would Isabelle let her mother stay, or shut her out?

Evelyn noticed Autumn's hands were bare and wondered if she'd ever been married. But then again, Evelyn didn't wear a ring, either. She and Justine didn't believe in that.

Evelyn did not know what to say. She struggled to make conversation, even though she had so much inside of her she wanted to let loose. She thought of how bothered she used to get by depressed people and how, now, she wanted to ask this woman about her daughter. She wanted to hold this woman while she cried.

Autumn wished Evelyn would just hush, put her hand on her leg again. She hadn't felt anything like it since she left her husband 25 years ago, after he said he did not want to adopt a child. He started tearing apart their home, preparing it for renovations without her permission. So she left him and adopted Isabelle, felt happy with this new, smaller life. She dated a few men after she left, but they were all neurotic and, after a few dates, she wound up finding them highly unattractive. She wanted to tie them up and whip them until they bled, they annoyed her so much. But she didn't do that. It wasn't in her character, she decided. After a while, she got tired and gave up dating completely.

*

Evelyn paid for her avocado omelet and Autumn's coffee, took this strange woman by the hand, led her to the port. The rain had stopped, leaving the air thick. The boat's sails peaked like mountains, their bodies resting, floating in a way Evelyn felt was disturbingly beautiful. Autumn thought the boats looked pathetic, arranged so neatly.

She said, to Evelyn, "You know, I really liked this. Thank you."

Evelyn tried to see past the desperate, vulnerable look on Autumn's face. It was hard not to feel contempt for someone who, at this moment, reminded her so much of what she hated about herself.

"Why are you here?" Autumn asked. "Why were you on the train?"

"I don't know," she said. She really didn't know. She had a car, hadn't felt like driving it. She'd come to Port Jefferson before, when she was in her twenties. She'd been alone. She went because she overheard a conversation on the Steel Pier. A woman said, to someone who appeared to be her husband, Port Jefferson was lovely. She used that exact word, lovely. Evelyn didn't think Port Jefferson was lovely, but she did enjoy it for some reason she couldn't understand.

"I'm going to have to leave," Autumn said. "For Montauk."

The two women sat with their ringless hands folded in their laps.

"Okay," said Evelyn. She understood the sadness in Autumn's face, the way her cheeks sank in. Evelyn never wanted to forget this woman's face.

"Bye." Autumn thought about touching Evelyn's leg, but didn't. Instead, she stood up and walked back to the train station to catch a cab. She would get to Montauk and learn to understand why the colors were deepening sadly all over this world.

Evelyn sat on the dock and breathed in, out. In, out, over and over. Even though the air thickened, sitting here felt easier with each breath. A big white boat took off. She felt the sea holding its weight.

A SAD, PRIVATE PLACE

I touch the nape of your neck, sweep my fingers across your shoulder, following the curve of your collarbone to the place your skin dips. Here, there is no bone to catch skin. We are in a sad, private place. It is not dark, it is not light. It was never a question of dark or light. Instead it is a question of sound, waves of noise thinner than needles, threads. Here, in this place, you cup your hands onto my shoulders, square my bare body towards yours. I lift my chin, tilt my head to the left, stretching my neck. Inside, we are screaming one great wall. Inside, there are mouths full of clean teeth, ready to tear it down.

PART III: WIRES AND LIGHT

KIRTAN

My body opens, a chasm
with a globe inside, tilting
and twirling like my dancer
daughter, who is now nothing but light
crashing into, then kissing, my skin.

My body opens. Skin, a box
of mosh pit bruises
firecracker burns, flooded
with the sound our voices make
when we sing together. Freedom
and release.

CORINA'S BLUE HORSE

Corina knew she had lost her blue horse when she went into her backyard and the cluster of pacasandra stretched, flat and bare.

Her blue horse usually stood in the middle of these flat, green leaves, waiting for her to say good morning, good afternoon, and good night.

“Good morning!” Corina said. She hoped her horse was just hiding. She looked behind the shed, behind her mother’s statue of a Greek boy holding grapes, behind the evergreens her mother hired landscapers to plant. She looked behind her backyard fence, covered in graffiti so bright it was almost brighter than the stars. She looked by the powerlines behind the fence, in the tall tall grass, near the stretch of blacktop covering decade-old train tracks. No luck.

So Corina went inside, through the chipped French doors, of course taking off her shoes first. Always, shoes off first. Her mother just cleaned the tile floor. Corina could still smell the vinegar drying, her small reflection in the half-shine. Her mother once told her vinegar kills germs without being toxic.

“Put on these socks,” her mother said. “I don’t want you getting your dirty feet on the tile.”

“I lost my blue horse,” Corina said.

“What?”

“I was going to tell him good morning! He’s gone.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Corina.”

So the young girl adjusted her orange headband, took a strand of hair and placed it in front of her eye. “He looks like this, only blue.”

“Stop it. Go ride your bike.”

“He lives out there. You must have seen him.”

And then her mother went upstairs, to do banking or more cleaning or something else that adults know how to do. Corina had never seen the point in telling her mother about her blue horse before, but now she thought maybe she should have. She wished she could have told her father, too. But he was always gone.

Her father was in Manhattan fighting fires, falling down burned staircases, saving babies, teenagers, parents, lovers, saving entire houses, sometimes saving entire blocks. Corina knew there was a world inside each person, each home, and each street her father saved, which was why he was always so tired. The lonely people must be heavier to carry, Corina figured, because when her dad would come home, he'd comment on how big she was getting. He'd be gone for days at a time. Corina didn't understand why Manhattan had to be so far away from Greenbrook, Long Island. She didn't understand why her father could go into fire and come out alive and not manage to come home at night.

But she did say goodnight to her blue horse. Every night at eight o'clock she kissed him on the nose and said, “Sleep well.” And he lay down in the pacasandra, feet tucked underneath his body. Strong, yet vulnerable in sleep.

She loved him for that.

She loved him for always being there.

She missed him already.

So she made some signs that said:

LOST

BLUE HORSE

HE LOOKS LIKE ANY OTHER HORSE, JUST BLUE

RETURN TO CORINA'S BACKYARD PLEASE

REWARD

Corina made these signs at the kitchen table with the black Sharpie her father used on sticky notes. *Go to the store, Get car fixed*, these notes read. Her parents didn't keep any blue markers in the house, so she didn't bother to draw the horse. Her sign had to be accurate. If it wasn't, there was no point.

All of the houses on her block were very accurate. Two stories, the second story slightly shorter than the first in length. Three windows on top, two windows on the bottom. An attached two-car garage. Wood shingles, some darker than others. Shutters that looked like old washboards she learned about in school—some green, some red, some yellow. One brick chimney that the fattest Santa Claus could leap down. All of these houses were very accurate. Like math grades, or school-taught sentence structure. Clocks with big hands.

So when Corina posted the signs—20 of them to be exact—she was careful to tape them places people would look. After all, it was easy to blend in there. She pinned her signs to telephone poles, mailboxes, cars.

Corina didn't want to blend in, so she wore glitter t-shirts, bright headbands. Once she took a walk to the record store around the corner (called the Corner Record Store) and bought a Bangles tape with her allowance money. Every time she got a B, which wasn't often, her mother gave her five dollars.

“My dad has some Bangles records but I’m not allowed to touch them,” Corina had said to the record lady, who was wearing a thick gold ring. Corina figured this was her wedding ring. She wanted to wear a wedding ring, too. “But I listen. The part of their Egyptian song that talks about Dominoes and waitresses. I like that part.”

“Me too,” the woman had said. Her heavy, blunt bangs fell over her eyes, reminding Corina of Chrissie Hynde from The Pretenders. Corina thought this woman looked a lot like her own mother when she was young. Sometimes, when Corina’s mother wasn’t looking, Corina would go into her mother’s closet and get out her high school yearbook from 1964. Corina loved how tough her mother looked with her long, black hair and thick bangs. She pictured her mother giving roses to boys in bands and riding on the backs of motorcycles.

Corina wondered if this woman in the record store was as tough as her mother had been. After a bit of thinking, she figured it wouldn’t hurt to ask this woman to help her find her blue horse.

So Corina rode her bike—the seafoam green one with pink tires she got for her sixth birthday—to the record store. Luckily she had saved a few signs, just in case.

*

Albums and tapes lined the Corner Record Store like dull rainbows. Stripes everywhere, stacked inside shelves. A couple of teens browsed, taking out albums, staring at them for a bit, then shoving them back into place. She wondered how many songs were in these rainbows, how many words in each song. There must’ve been enough words here to fill up the entire world.

“Hi,” Corina said to the woman behind the cash register. “I lost my blue horse.” She handed her a sign.

“I will keep a lookout,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“Corina.”

“I’m Patty.” She stuck out her hand.

Corina shook it. Her kindergarten teacher, Mr. Davis, had taught her how to shake hands when she was five, during graduation when she had to shake the principal’s hand. It was always difficult for her because she was left-handed, and she had to shake with her right.

“Check this out,” Patty said. “It’s called a Compact Disc. A CD. We just got some in.”

“That’s nice.” Corina tugged her orange headband, tapped her Keds against the floor.

“Where did you see your blue horse last?”

“In the pacasandra cluster in my backyard. Where he always is.”

“And when?”

“Last night. I said goodnight like we always do.”

“And how tall is this horse?”

“Very tall. But not taller than most horses.”

“And how blue is your horse?”

“Very blue.”

“Sounds beautiful.”

“Yeah.”

“I am sure he will come back to you, Corina.”

And with that said, Corina said thank you, and left.

Corina rode her seafoam bike down the block of brick ranch houses, down the block of two-story houses that were almost like her own, but with two windows on top instead of three. She posted the rest of her flyers on telephone poles, mailboxes, cars. When she stuck her last sign to a mustard-colored Hyundai a boy came out of his house. It was Ryan. She knew him

from school, but hadn't known where he lived. Ryan. She wasn't very fond of him. In fact, he was awfully mean to her, throwing spitballs at her in Language Arts or telling the entire school she was a freak who didn't shower.

"I'm sorry," Corina said, taking the sign off the Hyundai.

Ryan held a basketball, started dribbling. "What's that?"

"I lost my blue horse."

When he passed the basketball to her, she missed. "You're retarded," he said.

She sat on her bike, ready to take off, but Ryan walked over to her, held her handlebars so she couldn't move forward.

"Let go," she shouted. "I'm going to tell your dad!"

"There is no such thing as a blue horse. "

She spit on his new Nikes, kicked him in the knees. No use.

"You're such a baby."

"I'll prove it to you, Ryan. I'll show you."

"Baby." His grip tightened.

She kicked him in the knees once more. A little higher, a little higher.

Ryan curled up like a hermit crab inside a shell, like the pet hermit crab Corina used to have did when he got scared. When the crab died, he curled up, too. She realized she might have really hurt Ryan. Her strength, in this moment, terrified her.

"I'm sorry."

"Shut up."

So she did. Corina didn't say a word. She rode home on her bike, passing rows of accurate houses that all seemed so permanent. Almost as if each house had its own world inside.

Her world was missing some things.

Simple things, like good mornings, good afternoons, good nights. The safety felt in watching the one you love fall into a vulnerable sleep.

She passed a house with red shutters, wondering what it would be like to paint it tie-dye, to paint it polka-dot. She closed her eyes and imagined rows of tie-dye houses in Greenbrook. Each house would be bright, but the way their colors swirled would make them different from one another. She imagined how good it would feel to ride her bike, zooming past all that color. She pictured her mother wearing cowboy boots and cat-eyed glasses, sitting in the yard with her beside their bright house, making crowns of roses. She imagined the wind roaring, like a dragon. The roar got louder and louder, almost like she wasn't imagining it at all.

"Hey." It was Ryan. He was following her on his silver roller skates. "I want to see this horse of yours. Prove to me it's real."

"*He* is real," she said. "He's a boy." But inside, she wondered if her blue horse would ever be found. No one had ever seen him but her. Why hadn't she told her parents? They could have been on her side. They might have helped her find him.

So Corina on her seafoam bike and Ryan on his silver roller skates zoomed along the streets, listening for a hoofbeat, looking for any hint of blue. Tracy from next door saw Ryan and her face turned red, and when he asked her to help she didn't hesitate to lace up her tan roller skates. When Erin from across the street saw Tracy on her skates, she joined in, too, riding her brown bike. They didn't get along with Corina in school either, said her skin was too dark or

her clothes were too bright, said her answers in class were too dumb. Or maybe only Tracy said that, and Erin followed. Erin always did what Tracy said.

But a blue horse! What a marvel. It was just like any other horse, but blue. And he belonged to Corina. Well, they hated Corina. But this horse and this girl, they had exchanged good mornings and good afternoons and good nights.

“When did the blue horse start living with you?” Tracy asked.

“I don’t know,” Corina said.

“How blue is he?”

“Very blue.”

“Did you have to brush his hair?” Erin said.

“No,” Corina said.

“Why?”

“He never asked me to.”

Ryan skated in front of the group. “Boys don’t brush their hair.”

“Ew,” said Tracy.

All Corina could see was one of her signs, blowing across the road.

Erin stopped, picked it up. “This is the worst sign I’ve ever seen.”

Tracy agreed. “There isn’t even a picture of a horse on it.”

“We don’t have blue markers at my house. Or any color markers.”

“You’re such a freak,” said Ryan.

Tracy and Erin nodded.

And then, Corina realized without the picture, no one would really be able to see. So she shouted, “Blue horse! Have you seen my blue horse?”

The adults washing their cars in their driveways said, *No, no blue horse here, kids*; the adults coming home from work said, *No*, if anything at all; the adults mowing their lawns or planting flowers said, *Why would a horse like to sleep in a cluster of pacasandra? They eat grass and hay.*

And with each No encountered, Corina shouted harder, Ryan and Tracy and Erin helping with each yell, curiosity and doubt and envy in their voices. Ryan zoomed on his silver roller-skates, Tracy trailing slightly behind in her tan skates, and Erin straggling in the back on her brown bike. Corina peddled faster, faster, speeding in front of them all, pedaling so fast her legs ached and her heart pounded. For the last time in her life, she yelled and cried with no shame.

And dusk came upon the town of Greenbrook. Dusk came upon Greenbrook as accurately as the accurate houses lining the streets. Corina had to get home for dinner. Ryan and Tracy and Erin had to get home, too. Ryan said Corina was a liar. Erin said she wanted a blue horse of her own. Tracy said no, Erin never wanted a blue horse. How stupid can you be.

Corina swallowed hard, trying not to cry. She walked up her driveway, up to her house that looked just like everyone else's house, opened the chipped French doors. She didn't say goodbye to Ryan or Tracy or Erin. They didn't say goodbye to her, either.

Corina was trying so hard not to think about what just happened, she forgot to take off her shoes when she walked inside. Her mother sat on the couch, staring at the wall.

"Corina," she said. "Your father's in the hospital."

Corina couldn't move. She couldn't think.

"He will be okay," her mother said. "I just need to sit here for a while."

Later that night, Corina's overheard her mother talking on the phone. Her father was putting out an apartment fire and a set of stairs collapsed on him. He will be okay, her mother

kept saying on the phone. He hurt his knee. He was not in critical condition. He was too strong for that, her mother kept saying.

*

The very next day, Ryan started a rumor about Corina at school, saying she was a liar and brain-damaged because her mother drank alcohol while pregnant. Tina and Erin brushed their hair in the bathroom and stared at her when she walked in. They said, *Another breed is in here!* And laughed. Corina went back to the record store after school and Patty showed her some CDs, bright rainbow circles, blunt bangs falling over her eyes. The CDs, they were almost unreal, they were so bright. But they were there. She could touch them. Smooth, cold and bright.

Corina didn't ask about her blue horse.

Patty didn't mention it, either.

Perhaps she had forgotten.

Perhaps she had been too caught up in selling records, tending to her own family at home, cooking dinners and creating worlds, loving each and every one of her children's words, her husband's words. Or maybe not. But she did have a wedding ring, after all. That Corina could see. That was real.

That night Corina looked out her bedroom window, into her backyard. Her father would be out of the hospital in a few days, her mother had said, to someone else, over the phone. He had hurt his knee, but will be able to walk again. He was strong, her mother had said.

Corina thought of this strength while she held her stomach, it hurt so bad. She'd eaten some Chinese takeout her mother ordered, so it couldn't be hunger pains. But that's what it felt like.

Outside her window, the pacasandra cluster stretched, empty. She didn't know when her father would be coming home from the hospital. Her mother was in her bed, sleeping. Corina hoped the light behind the shed would guide her blue horse home, if he ever wanted to come home. Her horse would recognize her mother's little boy statue, the evergreens, the fence covered in graffiti brighter than the stars. How could he not? He woke up to them every morning, went to bed near them every night.

He used to always be there.

She loved him for that.

*

Every night for the next week Corina rode her bike to school, passing bare telephone poles, cars, mailboxes. Within a few days, the neighbors all threw the signs away. Corina knew because she looked in their bins when they put the trash out. All of her signs, crumpled. Maybe she should have drawn the horse, even if it wasn't accurate. Maybe that would have made a difference.

She closed her tie-dye curtains and turned on her TV: Samantha Stevens in black and white, setting spells with the twitch of her nose. She loved old television shows because they had been around for a long, long time. They had been recorded. Documented.

Why hadn't she taken a picture?

Oh, it didn't matter. It didn't matter at all. She stopped going to the record store. That year a new girl moved into town, Amy, and the two girls became best friends until they tried to kiss each other. That was right before high school started. Then, Corina's clothes got brighter and brighter and she got her nose pierced. In high school she had a boyfriend who drove a Chevy and dumped her within one week because she was "too nice," meaning she wouldn't give him

head. So she isolated herself. Each morning and each afternoon and each night Corina went to school, came home, went to school and came home again, began to answer questions in class better. Sometimes during those mornings, afternoons, and nights, Corina would look outside her window before going to bed, wondering what had happened to her blue horse. But then she'd go back to studying again, forgetting that she was alone.

Her father's knee never healed properly, but he continued working up until her sophomore year of high school. Both of her parents decided it was time to move to Fort Lauderdale, and Corina had no friends to leave behind, so moving was easy. Her parents said they were glad she straightened out her grades. Corina wondered if they knew how lonely she was; after all, her parents were lonely, too. Now that her father was retired, he did nothing but watch M*A*S*H on repeat. Her mother cleaned the floor with vinegar every other day, did the banking. They would die that way, Corina knew. She loved them the best she could, but there was something missing. She could feel it in her body, like there was a hole in her stomach.

She learned to love that feeling of emptiness, of starvation, even years later at twenty-two when she moved from Fort Lauderdale to Orlando, Florida. She finished college and became a journalist. A documenter. When the emptiness got too big she photographed orange groves, sometimes looking for hints of blue in-between the trees, but of course when she couldn't find any blue she'd get scared and focus on the orange: the rows of orange, bright and full of sweet juice, bright and coming from the Earth, right there. Right there.

Corina will see her blue horse years later at twenty-six, when she drives past a pregnant woman in a teal t-shirt, standing next to her boyfriend in downtown Orlando's Little Vietnam district. The woman's t-shirt is lighter than the coat of Corina's blue horse, but Corina still sees her horse within this woman. She sees her blue horse's legs curling under, his neck long, nostrils

sniffing, eyes wide, eager to see her as the sun rises. The woman will grab her boyfriend's hand and her blond hair is made of the sun itself, it is so perfect. The woman is so perfect she may just disappear. Her boyfriend, however, he is the one who will disappear. Gone. Alone now, the woman smiles at nothing, waiting to cross the street, either to get bubble tea from Lollicup or to see the man who does taxes or even to buy cheap dragonfruit at the market. Corina drives past, gentle on the gas, headed who knows where, but headed somewhere, and that's good enough for her. It's good enough for the woman, too. It has to be. She is crossing the street now. Everything coated with heavy air. The blond woman in deep blue. She holds her swelling body as if she's got the whole world inside.

JUMP

I wake to cats, their voices outside my window, screaming like babies thrown in dumpsters. A sad, sad tune. I walk to the refrigerator, hoping to find some leftover rice to heat up. Nothing but a moldy orange. I reach into the light, and I am eight years old again, on a field trip to Fire Island. I climb the lighthouse's spiral stairs. Seashell echo, light-up high-top stampede. Almost to the top. Brick walls, voices of children. I want to speak with them, but my words come out stale.

I wish the shoe stampede would turn into a chorus of wings, flapping and cradling the wind, then shoving it aside. Birds have it good up in that free, empty sky. There are no trees in the sky, no trees that will eventually grow oranges that will turn moldy and wrinkly like my father's skin is, like my skin will be one day.

High-top light-up stampede, seashell climbing, brick walls cool against my hands. Nowhere left to step. I stand, the railing in front of me. Blue ahead. Birds cradle and shove the wind. I imagine my shoulder blades are wings and lean forward, stomach on the metal bars. A chaperone grabs me by my shirt and says what are you trying to do, Corina, kill yourself? I stare at her and scream inside. There are chickens and cats within my mouth. Not made to fly, but to jump.

WIRES AND LIGHT, I

Summer burns me with his tongue, then Autumn kisses me with her cool lips, her mouth on my wings.

“Summer’s gone, Corina,” she says. “He’s gone and you’re gone from him.”

I look out my bedroom window, still shattered from his bricks. A whirlwind of leaves spins and spins below.

Autumn brushes her hands down my feathered shoulder blades. She says, “This won’t hurt, this won’t hurt at all,” and wipes them clean of the dirt that had gathered between their veins. Summer had poured buckets of earth over me long ago, planting seeds that sprouted wings on my back. He promised me escape. Now, Autumn promises me purity.

She sweeps her fingers over my veined wings, purple rivers pulsing. My skin rises and falls with her pull.

She kisses my cheek and I rest my head on her lap, covered in lace from her dress. Then she pushes me away.

“Not yet,” she says. She takes my wings with one hand and digs her nails under my skin, ripping my wings from their roots. The burn reminds me of Summer, only instead of planting seeds, this burn cuts and tears the disgust these seeds have grown.

Autumn wipes the blood from my back, holding my wounds in her hands.

I let her.

*

Summer came to me in New York, flew with me, sixteen and hopeful, to Florida, and stayed with me in Florida for the next five years. At night, I kept my eyes open for him, but he

never came. In the morning, he was there, next to me on my bed, his tongue on my neck. I felt light and pure when Summer was there. I could feel my own bones, the muscle that stayed with the bones when I starved everything else away. Summer licked my neck again, sunlight burning through the linen canopy over my bed.

Then I burnt myself. One match, two.

It felt good, like it would feel to rest my head on Autumn's lap. I was searching for her.

I was twenty, my junior year of college finished, and my body felt so empty I stayed inside for weeks. Summer stayed with me. But I really wanted Autumn there. I wanted her to wrap me inside her thin, warm body.

But Autumn wasn't there. Summer said, "You are nothing. You need nothing," and licked my neck in a delicate, careful way. No one would wrap me up, he said. I hated him for saying this. I hated his tongue on my neck. I hated his voice, telling me to get smaller, smaller. I screamed. I screamed and dug my nails into my arms.

*

After Autumn digs my wings out, she leans on my bed, covers me in cool linens, but will not hold me. It is then I meet Winter. Winter's white coat is scarred and her tendons, bowed. She knows the difference between being beaten and being loved, she tells me, resting her head on the foot of my bed.

I ask Winter if she will hold me, cradle me inside the bend of her neck, wrap me in her legs, fasten me there with her heavy hooves. My body feels so light, I say. I can't stop. I need someone to touch me, make me feel real.

"I can't, Corina," she says. "I'm not strong enough."

And, like that, Winter's gone. But I don't care. I take a key and slash my wrist,

lightly. The burn feels good, like it would feel to rest my head in Autumn's lap.

The blood grows thicker.

Autumn taps her fingertips along windowsill. "If you keep thinking about Summer, you're going to let him in," she says. "Close your thoughts and his door will close, too." Her hand sweeps the hair off my neck, her cool fingers on my warm skin. She lets my wrist bleed, keeps my skin wide open.

Outside, the sky's tie-dyed purpleblue. This land is like a mother to me, a mother who birthed deep blue skies, green grass, warm with hints of gold and orange and yellow; a mother who birthed pink and red and blue flowers, tall trees, turtles and seagulls, deer and horses. But I can't have this mother fully. Florida belongs to the world.

Autumn's touch makes me feel like she is mine alone. But she won't hold me tonight.

She wipes my wrists but does not sew them shut. Instead she holds my shoulder blades, now wet with blood, in her hands. She says the scars on my back are so ugly and big, thick with scabs. I say it's better than having wings.

My skin is now warm and bright enough to nourish flowers, covered in all that new blood. Florida is the mother inside of me, the mother I need. But I can't reach her, even though Autumn tries to help. She tries to love me.

"Summer's gone," she says. "But you can't let go of him. I tried to help you, but the dirt is still in your veins, on your skin." Then she sweeps her hands, soaked in brown-red, over my hair, my skin. My olive skin, now gold. My black hair, now shades of umber. I touch Autumn's skin and it's like touching my own—calm.

She folds her fingers into mine, our palms touching, and leads me over to my bed. We slide under my quilt of azalea and calla lilies and hummingbird sage. I rest my head on her chest.

She lets me.

And then there's a dull growing pain in my back. My wings have regrown. Stronger this time. Thick stretches of feather and bone.

"Where do you want to fly to, with these wings?" Autumn asks, brushing her fingers through the stiff ivory feathers.

"I don't know," I say.

"Where do you want to go?"

"New York. I want to go back."

"You are a stupid, stupid girl."

"I want to go back, Autumn," I say, feeling my ribcage, indentations full of blood, dried where my old wings were.

"To find Summer?" Autumn says. "Summer always comes. All of the horses know that. You should listen." She strokes my wings one more time, then sweeps her hands down my spine.

"You said he was gone." I keep my head on her chest as it rises and falls, rises and falls, quilted azaleas covering us. I wish she could be Winter, with that strong neck and those heavy hooves.

Autumn takes her hands from my back and scrapes them along my ribcage scabs—filthy blood, skin, Summer—then she throws the dried blood flakes into my feathers.

“You need to learn,” she says. She pushes me away and spits on my feathers, keeps spitting and spitting. A translucent coat wraps my new wings. A cocoon she had spun just for me.

Her lips kiss my cocooned back, the pressure of my beating veins nearly ripping through. I try thrusting my wings open. Just enough pressure to feel that burning calm. Not Summer’s burn, this one’s mine. My muscles and my skin, warm and bright enough to nourish flowers.

*

Escape was Summer’s promise. Autumn promised me purity.

But Autumn is fading, her golds turning into grays.

And with this cocoon, all I can do is walk.

I walk, barefoot, across grass and cement and acorns and pine needle blankets, headed North. Just my feet, the ground, and nothing in between. The heat of the cement, the friction of dry grass, the piercing pine needles and acorns, tear the soles of my feet. It feels good, like resting my head in Autumn’s lap.

Crab grass and casino lights and river-veined forests and over-packed high schools and midnight diners meet me as I walk. We nod, shake hands, introduce each other for the first time.

They say it’s refreshing to see such a new girl, a girl who absorbs everything with every step, a girl who says hello to the crab grass the same way she greets a roadside diner.

I tell them when Summer’s seeds sprouted wings on my back, these feathers flew me away for five years, flew me to a place where I did not have to think about anything besides shrinking, become lighter. I have missed so much of life, so much.

I am almost, almost there, they say.

I believe them.

*

When I come to the curled stone fence, I know. I am not in New York. I am somewhere else, between borders. I sweep my fingers across the stone surface, moss growing inside the cracks. Gray covers the sky, twisting its shades into waves. Treetops form a canopy frame above the stone fence, deep brown leaves scatter below. Hoof prints set deep in the muddy earth.

Winter comes up the hill, jolts. She says her legs need warmth, her tendons, weak from others forcing her to race. I wrap my hands around her thin legs, but she says there's no time, we need to go, Summer's here.

I want to fly with Winter, bring us both to a safe place. But the cocoon only stretches beneath my thin shirt, so we walk.

The clouds look like piano keys above me, playing songs that reverberate like azalea explosions. Pink and yellow petals pour from the sky. They land on the golden-green ground below.

Winter and I keep walking. We pass rows of boxcar barns, horses grazing in the fields. Above this place rises a big hill surrounded by another stone fence. Oak trees catch air like arms, hands.

"Let's run," I say.

"I can't," she says. And I remember her bowed tendons. "I need to rest."

I sit on the cool grass, lean against the oak-tree, its bark against my skin, rough in a skilled way, like hands of a woman I have yet to meet.

But then the roughness becomes different, harsh, and Summer's hands are pressing against my back. His tongue on my neck, again. My back on the dirt-covered ground. Again. Bones scraping, skin opening, shirt wet. Again, again.

Autumn's whirlwind of leaves kisses my wounds, her cool lips on my skin.

"Summer's gone, Corina," she says. I bury my head in her lap, her lace dress, and feel her gold skin fade into gray. Still air surrounds me.

And it's then Winter's muscles are on mine, warm, protecting each other as we jump over stone fences and canter through oak-tree-covered paths, over hills.

Whisper hands now sweep my back. Naked shoulder blades, sharp, featherless. Smooth.
Clean.

Hooves sewn into my feet.

WIRES AND LIGHT, II

When I drop out of college for good, you say, “It’s about time, Alex,” and peck me on the cheek, like a bird would. You say I look beautiful, that I might even glow. You say now that I’m free, I look much older than 19. We celebrate this freedom at the Santa Monica Pier, and you bring these two boys you met at a bar. The boys, Antonio and Mark, buy bottles of berry wine from the gas station, and we all drink on a lifeguard stand from plastic cups. The boys bring other boys, too.

We all sit and drink and laugh, covering ourselves in thick blankets. We are all artists. You are a musician, and the boys work on installations at local coffee shops and small museums. You are not afraid to talk about your art. I am sick of it.

When the moon hangs heavy and low in the sky, the heaviest and lowest it has been for a long time, two girls pass us, holding hands. One has bright red hair. The other, bleach-blond. They wear ripped jeans and tight T-shirts. I imagine their bodies as buildings, the formulas it will take to construct the curves of their arms, their hands, into structures with windows and doors.

The redhead kisses the blonde on the forehead.

I imagine them married one day, if they are not already. I wonder if I will ever marry you, Stephen. But you want the boys, now. I am like your sister, now.

As the girls walk, bare feet in the sand, someone pours more wine into my cup, and I drink. My mouth is a deep berry-red. Like I’ve been sucking blood, you say.

But I'm too distracted to talk. The red-haired girl, she moves like a sea-ghost. She moves in such a light way. She holds the blonde's hand and sways it. And it's not until then my ribs ache. Truly ache for someone I can build a life with.

*

It's not too much longer until you get bored with the music you're making. We are bored to death in LA so we take a drive to Anaheim. I am still like your sister at this point. We're driving to some place for happy hour, stop at a red light and see a tourist family looking sad. The son wears Minnie mouse ears, and the daughter wears a pink fanny pack and a neon Tinkerbell tee. The parents wear kakis and Mickey Mouse polo shirts.

"They all look like they want to die," you say. "Their faces are just melting or something."

"Yeah," I say. I swing my foot on top of the glove compartment. "These red lights drive me crazy."

"I saw this raccoon today," you say. "At a rest stop. You were in the bathroom."

"Yeah? What about the raccoon?"

"It was dead."

"Oh."

"It looked like a drunk person just fucking passed out at a bar. His face was down and his arms were like this." You put your head down on the steering wheel and spread your arms across the dash.

"Green light," I say.

You grip the steering wheel, exhale loudly, and floor the gas. "I know it sounds fucked up, but I want to do music that sounds like roadkill. I don't want to make pretty things anymore."

“So don’t,” I say. We drive in silence to the bar, drink a bit, and decide that camping out’s a bad idea, that we better head back to the City of Angels.

*

About one year after we celebrated my freedom with the boys, about one year after you got sick of making pretty things, you go out without me, drink too much and end up in the hospital. I try visiting but don’t have the nerve to go in. Instead I go to a jungle-rock show by myself, and the frontman passes me his bass drum, points to the bar. I lift it there. He pounds its bare chest with his hands. Heartbeat rhythm in my body, never so strong and steady, never so permanent and never so real.

A bleach-blond key-pounder musician makes shadow puppets with me at an afterparty. We make bunnies and sharks and butterflies dance across a blue curtain. We talk about Kurt Cobain, what it would feel like to shoot yourself in the head.

“It would feel,” the musician says, “like nothing.” She rests her hand on my shoulder, and I lean in. But when she goes to kiss me, I pull away.

“It’s cheating. It’s bullshit,” I say. “There are people who are suffering.”

“I’m sorry,” she says. She points to her beer and hands the bottle to me.

“I don’t want that.” I say.

“Sugar?” she says. She grabs my hand and leads me outside.

We sit on the concrete steps, couples passing us in their Doc Martens and glitter Jelly heels. She touches my shoulder. I think of you.

“It looks like you need a cigarette,” she says.

“I’m fine.”

“I want to play a song for you,” she says. “Next time.”

“This city looks sick,” I say, pointing to the hot dog stand across the street, the cliffs in the distance, swelling and stretching. Streetlights wire up this place like IVs wire veins.

The musician stares at the ground. She’s young. But then again, so am I. And you, you are too much young. Thinking nothing can hurt you. I can’t take care of you. But I will, one day. I know it.

I go to kiss this woman, this musician, but now she is the one who pulls away.

On the bus home a child eats marshmallow bunnies, licking her fingers clean. Her mother’s thin and muscular and has glitter on her eyes. The child licks her fingers one last time and I am older, now. I am twenty-seven and marshmallow ducks are bulging into giants, just like the way your hands grow shaky when the world lights up. Your palms touch the glass for warmth. I stand on the outside; my feet, cold from the kitchen tile.

There are details etched in the turntable, spinning in that white box with number buttons and a window. It’s kind of like a payphone, during those days where beepers went off more than iPhones and Blackberries. We were both one of those people who kept beepers in our pockets and dialed and hoped, but got impatient and expanded the phone cord. The heat of the dial-tone grew shaky, unsteady, rhythm cut off by an answering machine.

There was warmth in your voice, rainwater in my boots. The world was just starting to grow, becoming a dome of wires and light. We felt lucky if we could leave a message. Now voicemails are a pain, just like waiting for microwaved Peeps, even though it only takes a few seconds for the heat to stretch sweet yellow neon.

The first time I got a microwave, I was seventeen. My heart was a giant thing that bulged and stretched bedroom walls. Your heart was far away, just like my mother made me stand whenever I pressed the start button. But I thought it was so cool, that disk of light. I still do.

We spin and the box lights up, giant sweetness inside. You grow restless; your earthquake hands want to re-wire the world. You are twenty-seven and so am I. You say, “Everyone has a microwave!” You say this decreases its significance. Still, the turntable details stretch for us, reaching, reaching, reaching.

Swelling neon leaves sugar on your lips, and you whisper sugar onto mine. Yellow smears scatter light in your pocket. Payphone dial-tones grow into giant and sweet sounds, heating up wire and glass.

Globe lamp in my shoes.

SWEEPING BACK THE OCEAN¹

Corina understands why the water is still, why the wind halts, why the people of Greenbrook cease to cry. The hush in this town began one week ago when Amy died. Or at least that's how Corina imagines it—the origin of all this quiet. The dead nuclear power plant shimmers in the sun. Not even the seagulls cry. She sits on the Long Island Sound's rocky shore, Alex beside her.

Corina kisses Alex on her forehead, walks up to the brown waves and feels their tug. They pull lightly on her ankles, even though their crash is harsh. The waves are the same color brown as they were ten years ago on her sixteenth birthday, the day she left Long Island for Florida. She never thought she would come back. And definitely not with someone she'd just met.

But she is here with Alex and acts like she doesn't even know why. Really, she's here because of Amy. "My car simply wanted to go back East," she had told Alex, an artist she met in California. The two women started talking at one of Alex's art shows in Los Angeles. Alex painted horses who cantered through lakes, hooves pounding over hills, jumping over train tracks, shaking the Earth when they landed. Corina noticed the *touch* of these paintings, so she placed her hand on Alex's shoulder and said, "Your art feels like this," then held up her palm and pressed it against a bare spot on the wall.

And that's what got the two women talking. Alex and Corina talked about everything—their love of astronomy, nature, loneliness. They talked about how Alex's husband just got up and left, how Corina couldn't hold a steady romantic relationship ever, in her entire life. About Corina's travels, all Alex could tell her was, "Be careful, ladybird. Don't drift back too far." But

¹ Inspired by the photograph "Sweeping Back the Ocean" by Jacob A. Riis.

Corina wants to pull it all back, peel back the Sound, take all of the clay beneath and shape something, something big, something that would shout a big “Fuck You” at this town—at all she has lost to its walls, its smallness.

Corina imagines Amy’s family and friends as tiny gray specks, huddling together on a cliff above her and Alex. In this image, they might be throwing ashes, saying a prayer. Corina wants to know where Amy is, which bit of nuclear-power-plant-reflected shimmer holds her. She wants to know which grain of sand, which wave, which seashell holds her. They thought of themselves as sisters, always running back and forth between houses. It got to the point where Amy’s mother would leave the door open for Corina, and Corina’s mother would leave the door open for Amy. If Corina could, she’d bucket the ocean. She’d spend her entire life catching and compartmentalizing each wave.

But her fantasy, this dream of sweeping back the ocean, finding Amy curled in that perfect wave, is bringing Corina nowhere. So she looks at Alex, who sits with her arms wrapped around her knees, staring across the Sound. The horses Alex had painted felt strong, heavy, to Corina. There was so much weight in each pound of hoof, the hardness with which they ran and ran through the grass. Corina remembers her horses from childhood, too. How she’d try to draw them, each movement frozen on the page. How she and Amy would ride together.

“I wish I could say I’ve loved somebody,” she says to Alex.

Alex kisses Corina on the cheek, then lies back in the sand.

If only Corina could box it all up—put the world into tiny compartments. She tries to bucket the sea by photographing the water, the sand, the gulls, the glitter-machine beside all of them. But she can’t get it right.

So she throws her big, black box of a camera into the ocean, knowing it will be washed up eventually, maybe even in parts—its film covered in salt water and seaweed.

Corina thinks she sees Alex's eyes tearing up. But before she can ask, she grabs Alex's hand.

And they leave.

*

Before the girl decides to put the sand in buckets to make castles, she eats ice cream pops with her dad on the beach. He finally has time off from work, so he takes her on as many raft rides as he can, going up and down the Sound, stopping at the jetty. Always stopping at the jetty. Until one day when his girl, Corina, says, "Let's go past." She is a little older then. Maybe 6 or 7. So they drift, father and daughter, until the glitter-ball beams in the distance. A bright, beached star.

It is then Corina sees a group of kids from school swimming together, and she wonders why they don't ask her to swim with them. She misses her new neighbor, Amy, who had to stay home for a piano lesson. To make up for it, Amy promised to spray lemon juice in Corina's hair later, turning brown into a soft blonde, like hers.

But the girl, she's happy to be here with her father, especially with all the stories he tells her. Today, he tells her of the protest to shut down the nuclear power plant. Once, he tells his girl, it produced lots of energy, but it was dangerous.

The girl nods, unable to take her gaze off the glowing monster.

*

Corina heads straight out of Greenbrook, Alex looking out the window, sitting shotgun. Corina heads straight out, not stopping by her childhood house on Harris Street, not stopping by

Giordano's Deli, not stopping by the house that had pinwheels all over the lawn to see if the pinwheels are still there. She doesn't stop by elementary school, the high school, the middle school, the Corner Record Store, The Crescent Moon Café, or The Lime Tree gift shop, full of snow globes and potpourri and wicker loveseats. Corina is sure everything would be the same—the town looks exactly the same from the outside.

They almost make it out of Greenbrook, until Alex says, "Would you like to show me your house?"

Corina grips the wheel tighter. She wants to rip it from its place on the dash. "Why?"
"Because it's part of your life."

*

Corina is turning twelve and it is one week before school starts. Her mother is busy and her father is working, so she decides to walk. Not paying attention to where she is going, she comes to the Stop 'N Shop across from Friendly's. There are bouquets of holly and gladiola and honeysuckle around a cross. There are balloons, a teddy bear, a sign that says, "Julia, We Love You."

Corina remembers Julia's death one year ago, although she tries her hardest not to. She will do anything not to. She went to school the morning after the last performance of the student play, *Annie Get Your Gun*, which she saw with Amy. Almost everyone at school was crying. Corina even cried a little, until Amy said, "You have to stop that," and then touched her shoulder gently, gave her a tight hug. Amy whispered in her friend's ear, "You don't want the popular girls to see you cry." Corina was especially careful not to cry after that.

So Corina passes the bouquets and teddy bears and balloons and wonders what it would feel like to get hit by a car. She can't imagine it no matter how hard she tries.

And years later, at twenty-six, Corina will remember her first kiss, search for Amy Blackwell on the internet, and find her obituary. She will return to Greenbrook and she will not hear any cries from the town. Not even the gulls will cry. All noise, hushed. Hushed simply because Corina will chose not to listen.

*

Corina listens to the soft, curious way Alex says, *Your life*, and something in those words makes her feel safe, so she starts the car, drives to Number 44 Harris Street. When she drives by all the neighbors, they are exactly the same as they've always been, tending to their carbon-copied two-story wood-shingled houses. Still watering their flowers, mowing their lawns. The Robinsons' house still has that wooden sign that says, "Welcome To Our Home," held by two wooden Christmas elves. The Quinns still have that green, algae-covered pool slide hanging over their backyard fence, and the Stovalls still have that brass bed up against their front window, the plastic deer in their back yard. She remembers when they'd shoot at that deer with Airsoft guns. The Murphys of course still have their Chevy Astro, their Ford pick-up, their garden of clovers with the crystal ball statue centered inside. Then Corina comes to Amy's house. They have a new fence—brown chain link turned into a white chain link—but that's it. Not even a new mailbox—the same old black tin. Their house is still the same shade of periwinkle blue. Corina has a hard time understanding Amy is not inside of this house. She can't even think about it. When she starts to, her thoughts become muddled, frozen.

"Are you okay?" Alex says.

"We need to leave."

"I know."

"You don't know."

“Why do you think that?” Alex asks.

Corina says nothing.

“Why do you think I don’t understand?”

“Why are you here with me?” Corina asks.

“I have nowhere else to be.”

“You are an artist. You have everywhere to be.”

“Stephen’s gone.”

Corina rests one hand on Alex’s bony shoulder, keeps the other hand on the wheel. “This isn’t like me. It’s not.”

Alex looks out the window, wrapping her curly hair in a ponytail.

Corina never noticed how curly it was until now. She flinches when she pictures Alex’s husband, Stephen, wrapping his fingers around these curls. She hopes her touch can compare to his. “We need to leave,” she says.

“I know.”

*

It is summertime and Corina’s mother is gardening, her father is working as a newly appointed fire lieutenant. She is bored and it is almost her fourteenth birthday. She can tell her mother is bored, too, which is why her mother keeps uprooting and replacing the same tulip from the ground. Corina asks her mom to take her to the beach, but her mother says it’s too dangerous for two girls to go to the beach alone, so she’ll have to wait for dad to get home.

So it is summertime, and bumblebees cluster around daisies, humming like the nuclear power plant would have hummed if it were not dead.

Corina thinks about what it felt like to kiss her neighbor Amy the other day. They were listening to The Cranberries and Amy said, twirling her new strawberry-blond hair with pink streaks, “Would you smoke a cigarette if you had to? If you were an actor in a movie?” Corina said, “I would.” Amy said, “Me, too.” And then one thing led to another and the two girls were talking about touching tongues. So they tried it. Corina thought it felt odd, someone’s rough tongue on hers. But good, too. It felt good.

Amy’s mom’s Honda isn’t in the driveway, so Corina decides to just walk inside to see if anyone is home. She walks up to Amy’s room and finds her holding an open bottle of deep-red nail polish to her nose. Amy says nothing, but hands Corina the bottle. Corina takes a shallow inhale, followed by a deeper one. It is then the world becomes weightless. She wants to be weightless so badly, and it scares her. She tells Amy she has to go and runs right up to the bathroom in her own house to weigh herself. Eighty-three pounds. She closes her eyes, wishing her dad were home to take her to the beach. But he’s not. He’s never home.

*

It takes a total of five minutes or less for Corina to drive through Greenbrook. Not enough time to think about stopping. All instinct.

Until a falcon flies straight into her windshield, splitting the glass in one, neat line.

And of course, Corina hears the crash and sees red dousing the huge, brown bird, a clean cut forming, but not breaking, the windshield. But she doesn’t think about this; instead, she thinks of Alex, how she knows absolutely nothing about Alex other than she is an artist whose husband left her to pursue music. She also knows that Alex kisses softly, not unlike the light tug of the Sound’s waves.

Alex was the first person she had touched in years. She hadn't received anything more than a simple touch from another human for as long as she could remember. Nothing beyond a brief handshake. Not even a hug.

She is twenty-six now, and until three months ago, photojournalism was her life.

She needed a break, she told her editor. She needed to drive.

But now she needs to stop. So she does. She stops her car, gets out, and holds the bird in her palms. Brown feathers, red blood, a heavy, lifeless body. Corina wonders where the bird is right now. If the bird is in the patch of air she is breathing, if that bird is part of the ground where she is standing, or part of the pink camellia that is growing wild. But still, Corina does not bury the falcon. She places her on the ground and sits, for what seems like hours. It is quite some time before Alex gets out of the car and sits beside Corina, saying nothing.

*

Corina is fourteen now, and she walks to her locker in between French class and Global Studies to switch books. A boy named Giovanni passes her in the hallway, arm in arm with Amy. He blows Corina a kiss. Amy looks at the moccasins on her feet with the same hard look she gave Corina last week.

It happened like this: The two girls were in Amy's bedroom getting ready to go to the movies with Giovanni and some of his friends, and Amy kneeled down by the mirror, held her face once inch from the glass, and curled her eyelashes with the precision of a surgeon. Corina followed, sitting cross-legged next to her friend, applying lip-liner curve by curve until it was perfect. Then came the gloss. Corina swept the wand across her lips like it would turn her into another person, a more beautiful person. She wanted to be beautiful, beautiful enough to be loved. And as this thought, "I want to be beautiful and loved," was growing and shrinking in

Corina's head, Amy said, "Stop dressing up for my boyfriend. A boy finally likes me and you want to ruin it. Don't be like that." But really, Corina wore the mascara and pink gloss for Amy. They were for Amy.

And now Giovanni won't leave Corina alone. She hates him. But Corina knows that today is a lucky day. No one threw anything at her in the hall or called her a freak or slut or stupid. She is doing her best to let them know who she really is, to let herself know who she really is; she even submitted a poem about reincarnation to the literary magazine, began practicing journalism, too. But when Giovanni blows her that kiss, her insides shrink, grow, then crash.

He pushes Amy over toward Corina, and Amy whispers, sharply, "I don't think we should be friends anymore. I can't be your friend."

Corina wishes she had never kissed Amy. She wishes so hard, she cries when she gets home from school. But then she stops. In a few months she will be in Florida where she can just start over.

*

For what feels like hours, Corina sits next to the dead falcon and Alex sits beside them and the camellias that grow so wildly. Corina picks one and kisses its tiny round petals. The occasional car passes, but no one stops to see why two girls are sitting on the side of the road for hours. Corina does not look at the faces inside of the cars, behind the windows.

But of course someone has to come. In this town, Corina knows it's impossible to go unrecognized. No one ever moves away, and everyone always remembers.

But no one recognizes; no one remembers.

"We can't drive like this," Corina says.

“I know.” Alex places her hand on Corina’s knee. “I saw a café earlier. Let’s walk to it.”

Alex puts her hand on Corina’s and squeezes. Corina squeezes back, hoping that she can one day make Alex happy. Happy, like she could have made Amy, at least for a small moment.

Corina knows exactly where the café is: The Crescent Moon Café. She and Amy used to walk there after school, split a bagel. Sometimes they’d even order espresso just to see how wired they could get. “I can’t, Alex. I can’t do it.”

“Yes, you can. We can’t drive the car. We need to figure this out.”

“I want to see Amy’s mother,” Corina said.

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“Yes.”

*

Corina knows she won’t be in her bedroom for too much longer. Her house was sold, and soon enough she will be in Florida. In Fort Lauderdale for two years, then off to college somewhere else. No more small towns.

She looks out her window and sees Amy sunbathing in her backyard. Corina closes her eyes, wishing she had enough courage to say goodbye.

And then she gets a pain in her back, a slight growing pain, like there are wings growing underneath her shoulder blades. She wants there to be wings. So she draws them. She takes some metallic blue nail polish and paints bird wings on her closet wall. She knows the old woman who bought this house will probably not use this room for anyone but guests. No one may ever see the wings, but she doesn’t care.

*

As Alex and Corina walk down Harris Street, Corina imagines a hearse passing by, followed by a line of cars. She imagines wreaths of red roses covering the hearse, a love song coming from its radio speakers.

Corina searched the Internet for two days straight, hoping to find one article, memorial page, anything that would tell her how Amy had died. But she couldn't find one thing. Not one.

And of course Corina still wonders. She will always wonder. The reason for Amy's death could have been anything. A car wreck, like Julia. A brain aneurysm. It could have been other things, too, but Corina can't think about them.

Amy's obituary was a simple one: "Amy Blackwell of Greenbrook died Monday, August 2, at the age of twenty-five. She is survived by her parents, John and Rita Blackwell, also of Greenbrook. The family held a private cremation."

She wonders if the gray specks she imagined were in fact dropping Amy's ashes in the ocean, the same ocean that's tossing around her camera with its waves. This ocean, Corina thinks, will throw around her camera for a few days then spit it back out, just for some kid to find weeks later, pressing the shutter like a toy.

And as Alex holds her hand past the rows of houses on Harris Street, Corina starts talking. She talks about the Quinns, how, as a kid, she was fascinated by that big green pool of theirs, but was never invited in. She talks about the Stovalls plastic deer, how they'd shoot at it like it was nothing, especially on holidays, and how scared the gunshots made her; she talks about the Murphys crystal ball and golden clovers, how she and Amy would sneak into their yard, place their hands over the smooth, silver surface, and make wishes. Amy and Corina never told each other their wishes. She explains this to Alex. "What did you wish for?" Alex asks.

"You know, I don't remember." And that was the truth.

The two women continue walking, silently. When they make it to Amy's house, Corina says, "We're here."

"Are you sure you want me to come with you?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to say?" Alex asks.

"I don't know." Corina sits on the curb in front of Amy's driveway. She notices the unsteady rhythm of her own breath and wonders if the ocean has to adjust its rhythm to swell and sink with fresh, heavy ashes.

In her mind, she crafts this rhythm. She crafts an ocean that moves slower, more gently. An ocean that pulls its waves back with the strength of an injured falcon, surrendering. An ocean that pushes its waves forward with the curiosity of two young girls.

"Let's walk up," Corina says.

And for the first time in her life, Corina feels as if she's made something—a space for childhood love to be swept into, a place for ashes to melt in the ocean, shimmering with the intensity of the nuclear plant, glittering gray as the sun hits its newborn skin.

PART IV: THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

LULLABY

At a baseball game in Santa Fe, a man named Prairie told me a secret. It was full, like lungs filling with dirt, roots. I grabbed at it and ran.

THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

“I love who you are, Alice,” she says to me as she stands at what seems to be the edge of the world. The ocean lies before her, and in the ocean is me. I curl inside the waves like a child curls inside a womb. Earth says this woman is my mother, but I will not know it until three years have passed. I’ll be 25, opening my wrists underneath the sun, trying to get a monster out. Earth says that instead of a monster, geraniums and larkspur and snapdragon will tornado from my body, and I’ll have grown into something bravely separate from this woman who sings. But I don’t know that yet. I am still young, the salt water dripping from my eyelids when I come up for a breath, her love stinging me like air stings a newborn.

I wander south to the bottommost tip of California, and she sings for me. She sings as I swim before her, swim toward her. I play the tambourine underwater, shaking it hard, reveling in the pulling, the pushing of all that weight. But I move too slowly. She has already gone across America in one of those big, fast cars. I launch my instrument across cities and cornfields, rivers and lakes, and catch it when I finally reach the other side. I am now sitting in a dry room one day before I board a plane, headed back West, sitting across from this woman. I want to ask her how it feels to drive a big, fast car. I want to tell her I’m going to Santa Monica where I can sing at the Pier’s edge, as she did, once. She liked to garden, then. Eat at restaurants all over America. But we don’t talk about any of this, now. All I can do is tell this woman sitting across from me I love her. I say, “I love you,” and I say, “Just in case my plane crashes, know I love you.”

I hug her and wish life could latch us tight, the plum-colored life that runs through both of our veins. I hug her and wish all the water I swallowed from swimming creates rivers in the driest desert.

Instead I get on the plane, and her real daughter scribbles blue ink across Mars. The woman hangs the drawing on the refrigerator, kisses her daughter on the forehead, and I realize that this daughter is not me, and she never will be, because my umbilical cord grew from the stars, and then the stars held me in their arms and threw me here, in the ocean before the edge of the world where a woman who is not my mother stands.

But she sings again, sings of the land I have fled—orange groves, gnarled trees, flatland green. She sings of burnt air, burnt skin spread wide open, face up to the sun, roots latching and petals opening, reaching out.

HER BEST

The first time Corina fully noticed Alex's beauty was when the women were sitting in the back of Stardust Video and Coffee, Alex sipping her latte, her gaze dipping slightly to the left, her profile a sloppily-cut half moon, lips pursed in the low light.

Alex looked worn and empty. She was staring at a child who was sitting at a booth by herself. The child was squinting her eyes in such a way Corina could not tell if she were concentrating or sleepy. When the child slowly lifted her head to the bare ceiling, Corina noticed how her jawbone formed a compact, neat V. When the "V" started reminding her of an alligator's mouth, a swan's beak, that's when Alex said, "I just don't know what to do anymore."

Corina wanted to touch each freckle on Alex's sad face, cup her jaw in her hands, understand its own "V" shape, the density of its bone. But Corina just sat there, closing and opening her fingers, forming loose fists.

"I can't help you with this anymore," Alex said.

Corina placed her hand on her stomach, which felt heavy, like it was filled with stones.

"I know it hurts, knowing Amy's gone."

Alex didn't even understand what *gone* meant, Corina thought. The full meaning of it. Corina felt angry at that invisible thing giving her consciousness, how in every human being, it would eventually stop working. Just the day before at some fifties diner, Corina had realized everyone in the entire restaurant would one day die; they'd close their eyes in the most final way while that heavy, invisible thing climbed out, irreversibly. She'd cried so hard she and Alex had to leave before they could order the special.

"Corina, I'm sorry." Alex placed her hand on the bare wall, made a spider with her hand,

inched up until her fingers touched the outer rim of a glittery painting. The wall was covered in gold frames, old photos of frowning families, piano parts, but for some reason, Alex reached up for this painting, the brightest one in the entire coffeehouse.

In a way, this part of Orlando, Colonialtown, reminded Corina of the cluttered Stardust walls. Some of the houses in Colonialtown were over one hundred years old. Some were painted brightly surrounded by art gardens. One family made sculptures from mirrors and stuck them into their front lawn. Another family placed clusters of Greek statues around a fountain with the head of a dove. Other houses looked dull in comparison, but there was a strong sense of peace in their decay, like the frowning families in the old photographs at Stardust. Corina's favorite house was near the community garden, a deep green house with crescent moons carved in the shutters, a bathtub out front filled with sunflowers, a spiral staircase leading to nowhere beside it. She and Alex had plans to grow vegetables in the back yard, tangerine bulbines and hiemalis and Peruvian lilies in the front. Alex even said she wanted to sculpt Corina's blue horse from childhood and place him in the garden's center.

Now, when Corina looked at Alex, the downward curve of her mouth, her stiff, straight back, she wondered how the two would make it to Los Angeles after this fight, if Los Angeles would heal them, if they would come back, together, to Orlando, and plant their garden. Corina couldn't blame her for what she said, how she, later that day, left her as four people instead of simply one. Alex was Corina's lover, mother, and father. Now Corina had to be all of those things, including herself. Corina couldn't blame Alex—who would want to be all of those people for someone else?

The girl who had been alone jumped up from her seat, her bright clothes like a flash of light. "I'm putting on a puppet show at two o'clock," she tapped her combat boots quickly, like

she was trying to form a beat. “Spread the word,” she said.

“Will do.” Alex’s face was a heap of warping wood. Corina wanted to draw this face over and over, hoping it would keep her from missing it when Alex was finally gone.

“It’s going to be good,” said the girl.

“What’s it about?” Corina moved over, patted the extra space beside her.

The girl sat awfully close to Corina, even though she didn’t have to. The space was big enough. “Animals.” She pulled a stuffed giraffe out of her giant neon backpack. “This is Arnold. My dog, Weinermister, hates Arnold.”

“Oh?”

“He’s at home. We can’t take him anywhere. He’s really bad.” The girl squinted again, then smiled. Her nose crunched in this odd way, like she was unaware of her expression, what she was feeling. Corina was always telling Alex she needed to be more aware of *feeling*. Alex was always telling Corina to escape her own head, that she dwelled on the emotion for too long.

Corina studied this girl’s expression and tried to mimic it.

And then the girl introduced herself as Alice, asked what Corina was doing with that big book. Corina explained the book was an atlas of America, opening its pages slowly, to California. She told Alice that she and Alex are going to Los Angeles soon.

“My mom used to sing at the Santa Monica Pier,” Alice said.

It was then Corina noticed her lover, Alex, the way she picked up a napkin, folded it neatly, as if she were too tired to hold it, really hold it, tightly between her hands.

*

Alex did not stay for the puppet show. She left almost immediately after Alice got up from the table, took out the rest of her animals and set them up on Stardust’s small corner stage,

which was in a separate room from where the baristas worked. Glittery red ribbons drooped in clusters behind the stage, bright lights shone on the ribbons. Corina was the only one watching. Alex told Corina she'd walk home, but when Corina insisted Alex take the car, she did.

“Corina, sit up front, sit on the floor!” Alice said, crinkling her nose in that odd way. She thought of how this young girl was once a baby, how her bones grew, how they will keep growing. “My mom once took me to Kirtan and everyone sat on the floor, it was so cool.”

Corina left her table and sat on the floor, placed her hands on the stage. It was unusual for a child to be at Stardust, especially alone. She didn't ask Alice if her mother was here. In fact, she preferred not to know.

“This is Arnold.” Alice held Arnold by the back, sliding him across the stage. “He has a lot of friends but not all of them could make it. He's the most popular of all the animals because he is tall and has a long neck and can reach things. That's how he met Lester, who was sleeping in a tree for days. Lester is a monkey.” Alice grabbed Lester, who was perched at the side of the stage, by the fur on his head. Arnold poked Lester in his monkey head. The two animals slid across the stage, back and forth, Alice clutching their fur, like she trusted herself not to hurt them.

Corina wondered if Alice would clutch her hand like that, with such assurance. Corina wanted to hold the girl's hand, ask her other questions, like how she was doing in school, what her favorite subjects were, what her friends were like.

“I'm hungry.” Alice's hands went limp, fingers uncurling Arnold's back, Lester's hair. She crawled to Corina's place at the foot of the stage. “What happened to your girlfriend?”

“She went home.”

“Do you guys come here a lot?”

“Yes.”

“Me, too.”

Corina wondered why she and Alice have not yet met, if they both come to Stardust so often. “I will see you soon, then.”

Alice hooked Corina’s gaze, bent forward, and kissed her on the forehead for what felt like a long time.

In the middle of this kiss, Corina thought of how this girl would look as an old, old woman, but couldn’t quite picture it. Instead she imagined Alice as a teenager with a septum piercing and blue hair, singing Kirtan and playing the drums, not knowing in fifteen years this young girl would tell Corina how much she loved her. Alice would want to die, but she would not die. Instead, she would find comfort in movement. She would move from state to state with her tambourine and scooter, call Corina up sometimes when she got lonely. It would be hard for Corina to comfort someone who needed so much, especially when she had her own daughter, her own life with Alex, but she would try her best. Always, her best. Nothing but her best.

THE GOOD THINGS

There is love here in Los Angeles, strings of headlights wrapping the city like a gift. I can feel this love and see it, but it's not mine.

You hold my hand as I drive. Sometimes you'll disappear, your winter skin fading into mine, gold with autumn. When you reappear, our bodies separate so quickly the pressure in our hands tightens, your pulse a drum beat on my skin.

You say it's been a while. I say it's about time you started talking. You purse your lips, say your hands are turning so pale they look old, even though you're younger than me. I laugh and say so are mine, then you say shut the fuck up, Corina, you are twenty-six, and grab my hand tighter. Your voice is as plum as ever. Your hair is back to its soft blond, no longer strawberry bright. I kiss your cheek and sweep my hand down your long skirt. Then you fade, disappearing again.

In bed that night you come back, your hand in mine, leading me to the orchid garden beside my apartment. I tell you I went to New York, visited Greenbrook, brought a woman named Alex—a patient, calm woman who I can see myself loving one day. She planted these orchids, I say. She's at a gallery opening tonight and I've decided to stay home. You say tell me about you, so I do. I tell you how many years I've wasted by shrinking my body, too scared to love. I tell you how much it hurt when we lost each other, years ago. You can see things differently now, you say.

Even though you died? I ask.

Then you drape a scarf around my shoulders and say, Yes.

My hand touches your skirt now, its rough texture brown like oak trees. Your fingers brush my hair.

You point to your heart. You tell me how you got sick, how your heart had hurt. Your heart hurt more and more, and eventually it had enough.

You curl into a ball at the foot of the garden, your arms around your oak-colored skirt. I walk toward you, kneel in the soil, and kiss your forehead. And it's warm.

Just when the warmth turns to a burn, you flinch. I step back.

No, you say.

I'm sorry, I say.

You pat the soil once, lift your body up to a high kneel. Come here, you say. And I crawl to that space where you are. We look like misplaced children waiting for someone older to love us. You pick an orchid, tug its stem, snap it short, and tuck the flower behind my ear.

What are we supposed to do now? I ask.

We can write about all of the good things, you say. Every day we will write about the good things, pull them out of the hard earth and cobblestone streets, smell them and feel them and taste them.

Everything else, I say, what will happen to everything else if we only write about the good things?

You slip your hand inside my shirt, your palm on my skin, your lifeline on my drumbeats. I wonder, then, if my heart can take much more, or if it, too, will get sick, give out.

The city lights seep into the garden, growing brighter with each passing car.

The headlights fade, and so do you.

EPILOGUE: MIRACLES

One.

The man charged \$59 for miracles. No more, no less. He made a sign that was big enough to see from Road 50, but he was careful not to make it too big. He had to be strategic. There was another man a mile down who sold local honey and oranges, had a sign that was so big it went inside of travelers and dragged them to it. These travelers stopped because the yellows and reds that printed “Local Honey and Citrus” made them think, *This is it. This is real Florida.* But they almost always left disappointed. The miracle man did not want to leave his customers feeling like that.

Two.

Julia was a beautiful girl, the most beautiful girl in the world. And when she died at thirteen in New York, Alex was in California, turning a year older. *Some old number*, she wrote in her journal. A little over a decade later, Corina travelled from Orlando to L.A. for the first time, reading journal entries at one of Alex’s art exhibits.

In these entries, Alex wrote about fighting with her husband, fighting about her silence, her inability to simply say how she felt. Feelings, always feelings. It was all just too much. So she decided to paint, to shape horses with strong legs. Muscle and bone. They cantered over hills, through lakes. Jumped over train tracks, tires. And when they landed, the world shook, just like the jolt Earth felt when Julia had gone.

Three.

Alice thought \$59 was a bit too much to charge for a miracle, but when she looked the man in the eye, she saw straight to his skull and understood the price was just right. The man sat in a folding metal chair beside a Ford pickup. Both the chair and pickup felt strongly metallic surrounded by all that tall, tall grass, stretches of everglades. Alice did not stop because of the sign; she stopped because of this metal, this glimmer that pinched her eye while she was driving from college in Gainesville to Corina's house in Orlando. The glimmer reminded her of the way Corina had said, "Alice, take care of yourself." Alice talked to Corina on the phone every other week, but it had been so long since she saw Corina in person, almost two years. She hadn't seen her own mother in five. She told herself she did not miss her mother one bit, but that was not at all true.

Four.

Julia was a beautiful girl, the most beautiful girl in the world. Her hair could have been blonde, red, brown, black. Her skin could have been swept with freckles or brushed smooth. She could have been five feet tall, five foot four, five foot seven, six foot two. She could have been curvy, straight. She could have been light, shadow. Julia could have been any of those things.

She turned into the ocean, the sky, the sea, when the car hit her.

As Julia crossed the street, Alex's horses galloped faster, building inside of her, taking shape as she and her husband fought—their muscles and hooves not yet reaching her canvas. But Alex, she had never met this girl, this Julia. They had never seen each other, never stepped foot in the same town. Not even once.

Five.

“\$59?” Alice said to the miracle man.

“Yes.”

She handed him three \$20s, and he gave her back one crisp dollar. Alice could see this man’s face now that she was looking at his forehead instead of his eyes. He looked like a stone.

The man stood up, took off his loafers. His bare feet were surprisingly clean. He dug his toes into the grass and shook the shoes downward, as if he was trying to get something out of them. Nothing came out.

“That should do it,” he said.

Alice wanted to say “That’s it?” but didn’t. Instead she got back into her VW and headed to Orlando, to Colonialtown. Alice thought about her own mother, how she could easily drive one more hour to New Smyrna to see her. It seems so easy, she thought, to drive one hour.

Six.

In the Manhattan B-train terminal, while Stephen plays the bass, high school girls sip Red Bull, texting on their iPhones, seeing the world one shade darker through their vintage Jackie O’s. A woman wraps herself in a fur, collar high to hide her wrinkled neck. She untucks a dollar, tips the man, tapping her shoes extra hard as she passes the girls on caffeine. Alex writes about this, too—the buildup of New York City, the stacking of people, each one always going somewhere. She doesn’t know her husband is here but she writes about the city anyway. She writes about Evelyn Ingram, a woman from the 1970s who escaped the stacking of cities by diving. Evelyn dove 40-feet down into a pool of water, multiple times a week, on horseback. Alex is fascinated with the thrill of the fall, wonders what it was like.

Julia turned into the dive when the car hit her. She turned into the money and the music. She turned into the words, the instant communication, the caffeine. You can even say she turned into the planet, all wired and full. Full of light, not unlike Hollywood, the place where stars fall, tossed like fistfuls of glitter, to the ground.

Seven.

Tom and Abigail pose on the glitter ground. He picks her up on Judy Garland's star, spins her around. Then they come closer to Corina, stopping on Godzilla's star next, placing two tiny turtles they bought right next to the giant's name. Before Corina can even remember why she is here, they ask her to take a photograph. And she does. And then it's over. Even though they will never meet again, they ask her name. She says, "I'm Corina." Three weeks later, she will say "I'm Corina" to a ten-year-old girl named Alice at a café, teach the girl how to take photographs, understanding this girl will be in her life for a long time.

But for now, Corina is focused on the newlyweds' smile, the gentle way they kiss the turtles, place them in their carrier, and leave.

Corina breathes, and on the exhale, her chest lightens. The couple does not know it yet, but the most beautiful girl in the world is dead. Years from now, when their own child ODs at seventeen, they will feel what the world was missing as they stood on Godzilla's star. When Abigail rolls up her daughter's sleeve, touches the bruises on the bend of their daughter's still arm, listens for breathing but cannot hear the inhale, the exhale, cannot feel the chest rising and falling, she will yell for Tom, who will run into their child's bedroom—which has posters of magazine girls in chains and fox ears on walls that are still pink—they will know. This couple,

they will look at their daughter, notice the way her lips curve, the way her arm bends, and understand this curve of the lip and bend of the arm means nothing. Abigail and Tom, when they find their daughter in her childhood bed, seventeen and gone, they will know the way movement swells up bodies then pushes out the soul, all shrunken and blue like a newborn baby. A body that is small, a vessel for love.

But for now, the couple does not know how the world has changed. They don't know the world had to slow down the rhythm of its winds, adjust the push and pull, to make up for what was lost. The world has been without Julia for more than ten years.

Corina knows, even though she has never spoken to this girl, this Julia. They'd seen each other at school, but never spoke. Not even once.

Eight.

After the sun set, the man who sold miracles packed up his chair and sign and drove off in his pickup, down Road 50, past the everglade stretches, to his house. On the drive, he thought about Alice's bones, the Gerber baby that would soon perch on her hip, the tattoos she would have. All those inked feathers on her arms, like a bird. He smiled when he thought of this.

He also thought of Corina, how she would be turning 43 soon, how scared she was of 43, how thankful she was that Alex had stuck by her all these years.

As the miracle man drove, Alex was sprinkling cinnamon on sweet potatoes, their daughter Coco helping her, slipping the brown grains through her tiny, young fingers. Corina was getting the table ready, setting an extra place for Alice. She always felt like her love for Alice wasn't good enough. She tried her best to help Alice when she needed help, when she called Corina from the hospital saying she got alcohol poisoning, or when she called Corina from her

apartment, panicking after she cut her wrists. The cuts were small, Alice said, but Corina was still scared for the girl. Alice was in a constant state of ache, an ache neither she nor Corina could identify the root of.

Alice's mother moved to New Smyrna when Alice left for college in Gainesville. Alice grew up in Orlando's little Vietnam district. She walked to Pho 88 and the Asian market every weekend with her mother, gardening afterwards. That was before her mother got sick, stopped gardening and going to restaurants. She stayed inside all day and kept opening and closing doors, moving things around the house, sleeping. Alice met Corina one day when her mother dropped her off at Stardust Coffee and Film and slept through the café's closing hour, leaving her daughter with no one to drive her home. Alice loved Stardust and usually walked, but that day it was raining hard. She had to beg her mother to drive her there. To Alice's ten-year-old mind, the café was a wonderland covered in piano parts and artwork of skinny women with droopy faces, sepia photographs of families in stiff poses. Sad musicians crooned lovingly, their voices complementing walls and walls of movies like teeth inside a relaxed mouth.

Alice saw two women sitting at a table looking at a map, one wearing a blazer and black skirt, the other in a yellow dress, like she was going to a tea party. Alice wondered what it would be like to have them as mothers, so she introduced herself, said she was putting on a puppet show. "I'm Corina," the one in the yellow dress said. "Come sit," Corina said. "This is a map of California. This is where my girlfriend Alex is from. We're going back there tomorrow, right here." She pointed to Los Angeles. "For one week. For our anniversary." Alice wanted to ask if she could come, but then she thought she better not; who would make sure her mom woke up if she left? She remembered all those stories her mom told her about California. Santa Monica, it was. Her mother used to sing on the pier, she told Corina.

Nine.

As Corina exhales, watching the Godzilla-star couple walk on, disappearing as they hit the Hollywood horizon, Alex sits in her Los Angeles home, retouching her horses, the horses she painted years ago, preparing for her new art show. She recently read an article about a Yucca-Valley-based artist named Elise Zaric who could not produce for a long time. But when Elise's house caught fire, she re-invented old paintings that were stored in the back of her gallery, adding more warm colors to the desert landscapes, more texture to the raindrops. Alex thought she'd reinvent some of her old paintings, see what shape they could take.

So the horses Alex reshapes become a bit darker, their muscles a bit tighter. Their blackened hooves understand movement better than humans do, better than physicians who formulate equations, measuring the impact of a car on a thirteen-year-old body.

Alex's husband, he packs up his things, careful not to make too much noise while Alex is painting in the next room. He's on his way to Manhattan to play a bass solo, to see how far he can travel alone, but he doesn't tell Alex where he is going.

And yes, Alex hates him for this.

And no, humans do not understand movement at all.

The girl, Julia, she was just trying to get some gum from the Stop 'N Shop after eating ice cream at Friendly's, vanilla with rainbow sprinkles. She was only trying to cross the street.

Ten.

The miracle man made it home that night and kissed his wife on the forehead, took his dog for a walk, then came back inside and fried some eggs for the three of them, took a box of cake from the freezer, sliced three large portions. Dug his bare feet into the carpet as he ate.

Eleven.

“\$59 for a miracle? Alice,” Corina said. “I don’t now what you were thinking.”

Alice showed her wrists, “I’ve been good,” she said.

Corina hugged Alice tighter than she ever had, in her entire life.

Alex took Cocoa’s tiny hand in hers, led her to the door. “We have a room for you and everything,” she said. “We’re glad you’re here.” And she meant it.

Eleven.

The last play Julia saw was *Annie Get Your Gun*. The last time Corina saw Julia, she was smiling, laughing outside the middle-school auditorium with “Annie,” whose real name was Beth.

Julia was popular. Corina was not.

But that didn’t matter.

Twelve.

Alice cried in her sleep that night. When Corina heard her, she climbed into bed with Alice, careful not to wake her. But Alice did wake up, felt Corina’s body next to hers. She felt like a child, and that embarrassed her, but it felt so good she didn’t care. That night, in bed, she told

Corina she loved her. Said she couldn't visit her mother, it hurt too much. Corina said, "Alice, when you're ready, you'll know."

Thirteen.

After *Annie Get Your Gun* let out, Corina walked past Julia with Amy, her best friend, who, as of last week, gave her a kiss—her first kiss. Corina felt Amy slipping from her, slowly, the air thinning, the world shifting its weight.

Fourteen.

"What if she dies before I'm ready?" Alice said. "I ran out of gas money, the \$59 was for gas. I don't know what to do. What if she dies before I'm ready?"

"Shh," Corina said.

And Alice fell asleep, deeply.

Fifteen.

No one knew it then, but when the car hit her, Julia became the absence of pain, of fighting, of aging. She became horses diving, artists restoring what could have been lost. She became girls in big sunglasses on the B-train, women in faux fur, men playing the solo bass. She became first kisses. She became wrists, cut. She became too much alcohol in a young body.

And no one knew it at the time, but when the metal met her body, she was the most beautiful girl. The most beautiful girl in the world.

APPENDIX: JUST A BUNCH OF MUSE GIRLS HANGING OUT IN THE DESERT

JUST A BUNCH OF MUSE GIRLS HANGING OUT IN THE DESERT

Hay

The moon painted a picture of me and she called it “hay.” The picture is my hair, sliced off from the ears down, tied with rope and slapped onto a clean, metal table. The paint makes my hair look white as bone. Horses eat my bone-hay hair and when they’ve swallowed it all, they grow wings and become falcons.

History

A lump of clay in my mother’s hands.

Percussion

Mallets pounding her spine, the moon.

Pack-Ratting

This week, I’ve been flirting with one boy and two girls. The boy is cherry pie. The girls, they are ponies, death metal. I tell the boy my dreams. Steel Pier in flames, swallowing Jupiter. The girls and I go swimming naked in the sea, waves metallic in the cathair dusk. I want this to last forever. I want to dance in the street, traffic lights in the oiled, wet road, glowing like angels.

Teeth

There have never been more orange peels in the living room.

You've made boats out of Clementine boxes and now you have nothing

to do. You contemplate ordering pizza, extra mushrooms and no cheese,
and then you understand everything you've ever wanted is in the seed
of the apple that wished it could have been a petite orange. Petite oranges
in their dresses, so small! You'll have none of it. So you climb

a landfill of dresser drawers and suitcases, catch a plane to Memphis, croon your life
away. Now you're a doo-wop tune, a hand grenade. You're pudding, a bull's eye.
A bud inside a bud. Twin daisies, glassy-eyed. Just yesterday, after making

music, you figured out how to cook the perfect batch of rice. A little bit
of math, some cotton candy, a glass slipper or two. And then you decided

it was time to skip a beat. One, thirteen. Some teenager's
making a fuss. It's always the same sad song. *Nobody*

loves me. But it's not me, it's you who needs love. It's you
who needs the bow, the arrow; and time, time's all wild horses now,
alligator hearts, that loosey-goosey way you sit in a chair. Legs spread

wide, empty hands placed in the center, delicately. Apple
between teeth. Umbilical cord jump rope lampshade night
glowing your mouth.

Now

You ask me, curiously, What is there to do with a dead angel?

I say, Love her from a distance. Let the space shift, grow

heavy enough to lift her wings.

And space grew. The weight, it was the breath of something

just born.

Before

[]

Treasure

You tell me you believe in trains, pennies, boxed and blessed by the falcon down the street. On weekends, falcons sing, unraveling their wings to reveal cheap versions of real-deal watches to teenagers with cowboy-soft hearts. Your heart's the lasso, and your tongue's Time, bulldozing strip-mall loaves of baby, menus of milk, pumped and bottled, heaping with diamonds—cut, cleaned and fastened to bands of solid gold.

Earth, Water

A clean peach between my legs.

Fire, Air

We are on the porch, eggshell paint chipping, your dress glowing red with sundown as I sing to you. I sing, *don't let sadness slow you down*. I sing, *don't let it slow you down*. And then, you vanished, evaporated. Or maybe you folded into a crane, a gull. Or maybe my song caused you to bolt, get the fuck out of here. After all, you were burning and it was sundown. And I, I was just trying to make music.

Orbit

It's just another night catching stars with nets that once held Clementine's. The nets are orange and thick and smell sticky sweet. It's just another night scooping up these stars, collecting them all until my net gets too full, the brightness spilling, spilling like when you take down your hair. All that blonde, rushing.

You're the one that pulls me up, up up up, toward the pinkblue sky in Texas.

You're the one who curls up inside that space where sky meets land.

Sometimes I crawl close enough to whisper, *rescue me*, in your ear.

But then the moon says, Young girl, that's impossible. You're catching stars with a Clementine net the size of your fist.

We are wilting, warping wood.

We ache, a plum bruise.

We hurt like earth hurt when she caught orbit.

We love like the moon loved when she held on.

Shells

I remember I got a hard feeling in my chest when I looked at the woman, as if my whole body would collapse. I wanted to kiss the woman, but those rocks in my chest. I couldn't move.

When I started losing weight, it felt exciting.

Mother

History.

Healer

A psychic once told me I was a healer, could heal with my hands. We sat by the ocean in Key West. It was about to rain. She said I could have babies if I chose, even get married. I wanted to believe her. Back then, at eighteen, I hadn't menstruated in two years. I wasn't planning on bleeding, either. Bones were more important. But this healer thing, she said I could heal with my hands. The thought of touching another made me flinch. I wanted to love this woman who told me I could heal. Years would pass and I'd want to love other women, but it wouldn't work. The psychic wouldn't tell me this. Instead, she stood to leave. I handed her some cash, and night settled.

Years later, at twenty-three, I went to some trendy bar while on my period. There was a by-donation psychic. I donated, put my beer in a corner, sat down. She took my hands, placed them face up. You have lost everything, she said, and will only fall in love if you allow it. I wanted to tell her I haven't loved a lover in my whole life, and wasn't planning on it.

I wanted to tell her how bitter I was, the choice I made to live on the outskirts of another woman's life.

But I didn't tell her. There were others waiting, and my friends were asking me to dance.

Home

When the moon said, *it's life or death*,
Earth helped me love
in the form of freedom. Northern horses
diving, starved bodies
strengthening, Western constellations
falling, California
on fire.

Now I have collected the stories of my separate selves,
each story, a wild heart that will love you
in the same way love loved me when I traveled across America,
living as if I had one hundred lives ahead of me,
each one reaching out, welcoming me
home.

WRITING LIFE

WRITING LIFE

I: What Came Before

A portrait of the life of a girl who sleeps with an older woman and then, after losing understanding of what her body is, becomes too reckless for her own good. This was the premise for my hypothetical novel I envisioned writing two years ago when I joined the MFA program at UCF. I planned on spending two years working on this commercial, autobiographical novel. But when I wrote one chapter of this “novel,” it felt extremely forced, not only because it was too close to my own life (why not just write nonfiction then?), but because I found myself naturally writing shorter pieces.

I started writing about women diving horses off the Steel Pier in the late 1970s, the 2006 California fires. The first draft of each piece was about ten pages each, pretty traditional for a short story, and the page count didn’t change much during revision. Writing those stories felt fun, like I was creating characters and just going along for the ride of whatever their lives happened to become on the page.

I remember when Dawn fisted Elise in “Paradise,” and I had no idea it was going to happen until it happened. With “Corina’s Blue Horse,” the flash forward almost wrote itself when I was driving in Little Vietnam. There was traffic, and this beautiful woman in a blue shirt was crossing the street. When I saw her belly bulging, I felt an odd mixture of happiness and envy for her child. Right then, I knew how to end “Corina’s Blue Horse.”

At the time I was writing these short stories, I was reading Miranda July, Francesca Lia Block, and Monica Drake, all of whom shape beautifully magic worlds out of everyday life. Structurally, however, *Clown Girl* (Drake) and *Echo* (Block) are novels, and *No One Belongs*

Here More Than You (July) is a short story collection; I didn't see myself writing either one of those. I had hybrid pieces I wanted to include, crossing the poetry/fiction boarder, as well as one or two poems that used the line.

After writing a handful of short stories, I naturally began editing older hybrid pieces and writing new ones. I've only started reading Kim Chinquee this year, and her work, especially "Hip," has influenced my love for writing short, genre-bending pieces. The first time I read "Hip," a piece detailing two women who dance with each other while the speaker's bouncer-boyfriend watches, I couldn't believe how much *feeling* could be presented in only 202 words. I've read other short-short, genre-bending pieces before, but this one captivated me in a more intense, personal way. Part of this captivation had to do with me favoring the subject matter—two women dancing, bonding sexually, physically. But Chinquee pays such careful attention to language—she shapes longing with her language, and it's not an overbearing, dramatic longing. The last line of "Hip," "We were there, on the floor, doing it. The music was boom-boom-booming into the heart of me," stayed with me weeks after I read the story (SmokeLong Quarterly).

Mary Gaitskill's "Folk Song" influenced my short-short pieces in a similar way to "Hip"; however, Gaitskill's story allowed me to feel a tremendous amount of strength. Chinquee's story helped me feel understood, loved even, but Gaitskill's story made me feel strong, like my anger had a place in her words.

Last semester in Fiction Workshop, when Pat Rushin asked us to bring in a short story that "wowed" us, I brought in "Folk Song," read the last three pages aloud to the class. The story begins like this: "On the same page of the city paper one day:" and continues to describe the murder of a woman and her young daughter, how the murderer was awaiting trial; a woman in

San Francisco who was trying to have sex with one thousand men and break a record; two endangered turtles getting stolen from the Bronx Zoo (Gaitskill 25). Gaitskill weaves these three situations together seamlessly. But that's not where the power of the story comes from—it comes from her language choices, her ability to delve into the mechanics of human pain. I read about what happens when “male turtles fuck,” the way their necks stretched; I read about ovaries with eggs “bejeweled with moisture” (33). I said these words like I meant them—“Fuck,” “ovaries,” “bejeweled.” And then I finished the story. I read: “A machine can never be hurt or raped or killed. But no matter how she tries, she will not succeed in becoming a machine. Because she is something else.”

When I read those words, I felt understood. I also felt like I was understanding someone else, the speaker. I felt stronger. If the speaker could be strong, make declarative statements about machines, discuss how male turtles fuck, what's stopping me? Shortly after I read “Folk Song,” I revised “Inside,” a boundary-bending short-short I wrote almost three years ago. Shortly after, Molly Gaudry picked up “Inside” for publication *SmokeLong Quarterly*, a journal that focuses on flash/microfiction pieces that often cross the border into prose poetry territory.

Stephen Graham Jones' *Bleed Into Me* also helped me craft publishable, boundary-bending short-shorts. While I read *Bleed Into Me* for the first time in 2008, I re-read the collection in 2010. Back in 2008, I simply admired Jones' experimental time leaps. When I re-read *Bleed Into Me*, however, I tried to pay careful attention, explore *how* and *why* the time leaps work. In the end, it's simple—the time leaps are working in order to form dramatic tension between “now” and “then,” or “now” and “future.”

I wrote “The Heart of America” when I was re-reading *Bleed Into Me*. I was in the car and TLC's song “Waterfalls” came on, and I thought of the time I got the tape, at a garage sale

with my dad. I was nine years old. My life was completely different then. I never thought I would get off of Long Island. If only I could talk to my nine-year-old self, I thought. So I parked my car and wrote to her.

The time leaps present in “The Heart of America” strongly mirror Jones’ use of time in *Bleed Into Me*, especially in “To Run Without Falling, when Jones makes a leap in time, transitioning his characters from boys to men:

No kites, no sirens, just our bones creaking as we grew into the men we never thought we’d be, chasing our children across the slick grass of April, the fences melting out of the way, the neighborhood playground yawning before us too soon, the bright new equipment hulking in its bed of gravel.
(Jones 27)

While the time shifts in my work and Jones’ work are similar, it’s important to note that, when I am writing, I am not thinking, “I must make my work like Jones’ work. He is influencing me right now.” The process of freewriting and journal writing has turned first-drafting into an almost subconscious process. Normally my first drafts are hand written, and I don’t remember writing them.

Let’s backtrack: After I sent out my hybrid piece “Inside” to SmokeLong Quarterly and Molly Gaudry chose it for publication, I read Gaudry’s verse novel, *We Take Me Apart*. When I sat down to read Gaudry’s book, the language and structure shaped this complex, beautiful sense of loss and acceptance that is still present in my mind. Whenever I feel sad, I open to page 84 and read it aloud:

In a different version it was not three
beautiful maidens but Mother & you &

me in this version

as in all versions

happiness was her hoped for ever after

then i came along & in this version happiness
was her hoped for ever after for me

but then you came along & in this version
happiness was my hoped for ever after for us

but then you left & in this version happiness
was my hoped for ever after for you

then Mother died & there was only me. (Gaudry 84)

The first time I read these lines, a switch flipped in my brain. I felt a genuine wish for happiness when thinking of one specific person I have lost. Books like Gaudry's remind me of why I read, why I write. To tell my story, to read others' stories, to connect, to feel less alone.

In terms of "craft," Gaudry's verse novel inspired me to write the Appendix of my collection, a verse short-story called "Just a Bunch of Muse Girls Hanging Out in the Desert." "Muse Girls" uses subheadings, is language-driven, and is dominated by a sense of

loss/acceptance. However, “Muse Girls” does not always use the poetic line, crossing the boarder, becoming prose-poetry at times.

In a way, I think the experimental jumps I’ve been taking in the MFA program have a lot to do with the way I’ve been living. Becoming stronger and healthier through yoga, meditation. Driving across America with my camera and a friend. I’ve discovered the beauty in living nomadically, how this style of life helps me practice non-attachment, helps me desire less, helps longing hurt less. Right now I know I *do* have the whole world open to me, and the feeling is scary and wonderful. If anything, writing this collection taught me how to take risks with a certain degree of recklessness, and words cannot describe how thankful I am for that.

II: What’s Next

I think I'll take a train to California
with nothing but the clothes on my back, the eggshell
of a baby bird, the leftover compassion
in her voice. I'll return to New Mexico, too,
do some organic farming, grow
my own food in the desert. And while I'm out there,
I'll live knowing
there will always be a fierce love
present in my heart, a love for the Florida
who has taken care of me
over the past 10 years.

She tells me *don't cry, don't cry because it's over*, but I do cry,
and she spins me around and around. The universe is bulging,
stretching painfully with love.

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