

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THIS IS NOT YOUR HOME

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“This is Not Your Home” is a collection of three stories accompanied by the first fifty pages of a memoir to be titled “Holy Father”. These works collectively explore the lives of black women and their struggles to live well within their worlds. The stories are primarily domestic tales that explore the complex relationships that form between characters, their spaces, and their desires within a family unit, with the exception of the first “Ginger”. That story grew out of an impulse to engage with what writers do when they write, both in terms of the writing process but also with regards to what happens when we create and then go onto harm (for the sake of the story) our characters. In the memoir portion of “This is Not Your Home”, I take the questions I develop in my fiction and apply them to the peculiarities of my own life, chiefly asking “How can I examine the dynamics that formed within my own family as a way to gain insight on the world I live in and the lives we’ve lived?” Beyond the content, “Holy Father” formally tackles questions of narrative structure in memoir. Written in brief sections, the work shifts from first person direct address, to close third person

narration, and back, from narrative to poetry as well, and attempts to experiment with the formal aspects of storytelling and their applications to memoir.

THIS IS NOT YOUR HOME

by

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## Holy Father

Jerry, you are sitting in Mom's salon chair at the kitchen table. It is a leather seat with arms and one of those levers at the bottom that let you adjust the height, and your slippered feet are resting on the bar. You're paying bills, shifting through the pile of envelopes and letters you carried with you sometimes in a plastic post office box or in a cardboard box. Your hand shakes as you hold the pen. Your fingernails have grown longer, thicker and are chipped and cracked like the bark of a tree. Your knuckles have gnarled. You smile when I come into the kitchen, and I can see that you've lost more teeth. There are stains on your shirt, today's breakfast or lunch. As I get closer, I can smell you: something old and dry, stale cigars and sour sweat. You open your arms to me and your belly swells up just a little, the way it always does when you're happy. We haven't seen each other in months. Jerry. My father. I am home.

In my dreams and nightmares, our house fills up the whole sky, pulsing slightly, as if breathing. Usually I stand before it, in front of the garages, staring up through the windows of the kitchen and living room. My mother always hated those windows. She hated the access they gave to the innards of the house. One whole wall of the living room was floor to ceiling windows, and even though the house was

surrounded on all sides but one by a barricade of trees, even though it was impossible to see through the windows from the road as she claimed (bored, one night I had tested her complaints), she still howled to fill the rafters about neighbors spying on us, curious about “dem niggers”, as my mother would put it, and glad for the view.

In my nightmares, the view I have of the kitchen and living room is of darkness pooling in the living room’s vaulted ceiling, darkness draping itself over the furniture. The house is empty then, beckoning as a bear trap disguised by leaves. I shrink to the size of a pea watching it breath in the moon’s glow. By the end of the dream, always, I’ve lost track of my own breath. I wake up grasping for my chest.

In another dream, I lay awake in bed. The door to my walk-in closet opens, and I rise to inspect it. In the closet, on the side wall, is a door that shouldn’t exist. It comes up to my waist, and if it opened, it would lead into the open air outside my third floor bedroom. Sometimes, in some dreams, it hangs open and reveals the vastest and most complete nothingness. Other times it is shut and rather than relief, there is dread. Dread of what will emerge when the door opens, as it must, as it always eventually does.

There is a painting by Zdzisław Beksiński, the only painting in the world that reminds me of home, the exact timbre of it, the impossibility of it. It is as if he reached into my dreams and pulled out an essence. Beksinski, an artist whose surreal and dystopian landscapes have long resonated with the more ravaged section of my heart, once said, “I have quite simply been trying, from the very beginning, to paint beautiful paintings,” yet a casual review of his oeuvre, especially his paintings, will leave you questioning the nature of beauty. All of his works remain untitled, due to a

desire to eschew the need to make meaning of his art, which makes them difficult to talk about. In some of them, skeletal bodies merge and meld to form terrific, awful scenes. In others, the play of color and shadow, light and dark, remind us that in beauty, in its seed heart, there is always terror. The painting that recalls home for me is of a stone structure in a field: sepulchral, spacious, sky-filled, and star-dusted. There is beauty here, in the way the canvas seems to deepen and shift, unfolding before the eye; in the flush of red that climbs the side of the mausoleum, and in the forest that fills it, the sulphur-shaded sky, yet the beauty is deathly.

The first time I saw the painting, I was back at home with you, Jerry, in Connecticut. I'd graduated in May from undergrad and the next day started working at the town deli, hauling nearly full-time hours training newbies for the night shift. The pay was indecent, the hours inconvenient, and the work itself isolating. Being home left me feeling like wet cardboard, weak and soon to rot, and before long I began having panic attacks at work.

They'd come on all a sudden. I'd be standing behind the counter, slicing cheese or weighing ham or wiping the windows or stirring the tuna salad to keep it fresh looking or sweeping or restocking the plastic soup containers then I'd look up and the world would have flattened itself down to one dimension. Objects would've become unrecognizable. I couldn't have called a spoon a spoon. Sound too, flattened into one unintelligible track. To stop myself from sobbing, I'd look at my hands, which were miles below my eyes and hideous. The sight of them, always, broke the dam and suddenly I'd be walking, near running for the freezer. Even if in the middle



of an order. I'd curl up on the floor next to droplets of chicken blood, and pant until I could name myself again and count all my fingers without a tear falling. This could happen once, twice, three times in a night. My first time seeing Beksinski's painting, I thought to myself first, *Ah, that's what a panic attack looks like*, then, *this reminds me of home*. I loved the painting immediately.

When I was younger, I believed the house was haunted. This did not help my nightmares. On more than one occasion, I found myself half-asleep and hallucinating the dead wife of the house's previous owner had risen to torture me. I never told you about the nightmares, but you knew which nights they came on. The mornings after usually found me curled up into a ball in front of Shay's door with my pillow and blanket. Apparently, so the story that I remember goes, she hung herself in the attic, the room that became my walk-in closet. Mr. B, the previous owner, continued to live there for years after her suicide, and I don't know how he could do it. It was hard enough for me to see your bedroom; to smell your familiar, curdling scent; see the mail laid out in stacks on your dresser; your laundry, unfolded and waiting in the armchair by your closet; and realize that I could, if I wanted to, stand exactly where you drew your last breath. And keep breathing.

Here's something I'd never tell you: I kissed a woman in DC during a protest against a man you elected, a country you love, and a police force you support. I was not in love with this woman, but her lips were soft. When I kissed her, and even after, I felt relieved that I wouldn't have to lie to you about where I was and who I was with

and what I was doing with my body. Then I remembered why. You cannot lie to the dead.

A few days later, I let that same woman slap both of my cheeks, one after the other. She'd been crying in my driveway. Not over me, but I wanted to give her something. Like how after Mom would leave your bedroom after lighting up the whole house with her shouts, I'd creep up to your room door and knock. *Jerry*, I'd call. *Can I get you anything?* You'd shift in your bed, huffing from the effort. You'd ask for soda or ice cream with berries. You had the appetite of a sad child and so did the woman I kissed. She didn't hold back when slapping me.

I've taken to calling you my father now that you've died. Do you remember the first time I tried? It was the first and last time, while you were alive. We —my mother, sisters, and I— still lived in the blue house on Edgewood Street. I was eight, going on nine years old. Your white pickup was parked in the drive behind the brand new Ford Expedition you'd bought my mother.

She'd spent the week prepping my sisters and I for the visit. She pulled me aside and told me to call you Daddy. It wasn't anything I wasn't used to at the time. I was the youngest, therefore the most likely to charm the men she introduced us to with my baby fat and dimples, the lisp I was working out in speech therapy. She'd brought boyfriends home before and said the same words for each one: *He's your new Daddy*. Never mind that the three of us were mostly fine with the Daddies who sired us or that the men she brought home rarely lasted long enough to ever be more than passing shadows. What mattered was that we played the part.

You were in my mom's bedroom, stretched out on the bed, too big for the space. I remember feeling that way when we first met in the kitchen months before. You were too much for our lives: too tall, too wide, too old, too rich, too white, too pink in the cheeks, too round in the belly, too close to bald. I didn't like you when we first met, but by the time my mom shuffled me through her bedroom door and pushed me up to the side of the bed I'd grown curious.

*Maiasia has something she wants to say to you*, she murmured, her hands tight on my shoulders. I shook them off and climbed up onto the mattress next to you. At this point, your face still had its soft doughy quality. You were wearing a blue polo tucked into your khakis over the swell of your gut. You smelled of cigar smoke. There were wild tufts of hair sprouting from your ears. What was it I said?

*Are you gonna be my new Daddy? OR Can I call you Daddy?*

You stiffened, shot a glance over at my mother. I didn't turn my head to look at her, but I could imagine her tight smile. I'd seen it before. The lighting in the room seemed to dim as you cleared your throat, shifted your weight away from me and lowered your head. For a second, you seemed almost shy, so different from the man who'd swept into my life by then, bringing gifts for my mother and loose quick hugs for my sisters and I. Occasionally you'd give me the comics section from a newspaper to read over while you talked to my mother in the backyard or in her room. She'd already told us to start preparing for the move. She'd already told us that in you she'd found her prince. She'd said you were going to buy us a castle to live in. She'd even *shown* us the castle on a long drive north in the Expedition. It was made of old gray stone and drafty, a world and a half from the floor we rented in our little

house in Hartford. She'd raked a comb through my hair that morning trying to tidy it as my sisters watched on, telling us you were going to change our lives, you were going to save us. You chuckled darkly. You said, *Ha, well you know, I prefer Jerry.*

You know, that might have been the first time I was rejected by a man in my whole life. I was only eight years old. Up until then, every man or boy in my life had given me yesses when I wanted them. My mom's suitors had all said some version of *Sure kid*, when she put me up for the Daddy Talk©. I'd had something of a boyfriend by then and he held my hand whenever I asked and shared his lunch at school too. My biological father was a bit of a pushover. He gave me anything I asked for when I visited him. And, later on, you got to be that way too, but on that day, you told me to go play with my sisters, and I felt like crying as I climbed down from my mother's mattress. I hadn't expected to care. I said, *Fine*, and ran off before my mom could grab my arm and make me try again. I don't remember where I went.

What were you thinking then? What were you planning? What did you want for us? From us?

The blue house we lived in in Hartford was small. I can remember that clearly now, even as the dimensions in my mind contort to match a child's frame of reference. We never used the front door, which connected to a short hallway that opened into the living room. The only time I remember my mother answering the front door was when there was a police officer on the other side, an officer that I had called that day, curious about the magic number *911* that I was never to dial under any

circumstances. I had snuck the wireless phone into my bedroom, punched in 9-1-1, giddy with all the possibilities, and waited until a voice on the other end of the line said *911, What's your emergency?* Then I hung up and gave a little breathless jig. I had just done the unthinkable. I was six years old.

Eventually, maybe an hour later, a cop car pulled up in front of the house and an officer emerged. I was in the living room and ran for my mother once I saw his white skin bright in the sun. When she opened the front door for him and explained the situation, she was all smiles. I cowered behind her legs, glaring up at the man in his reflective sunglasses who sneered openly and spoke in short, clipped bursts about paying better attention to your kids. Later, after she was sure he'd left, my mother dragged me into the living room by my hair. She told me to sit and wait and not move a muscle, then stalked off for her bedroom. When she came back, I was sobbing, but she stood me up anyway, smacked me across the face, then laid into me with the belt she had retrieved.

I don't think I'll ever forget that belt. It was black leather, about as wide as my palm is now, with a line of rivets, studs, and spikes marching down the center. The spikes stood half an inch off the leather, but they were dull enough not to do too much noticeable damage. Even so, one time after beating me for taking too long to clean my room, I found a mark somewhere between a bruise and cut in the shape of a D on my left forearm. I had used that arm to block my face from the worst of her strikes.

My sister Shay and I shared a bedroom that directly connected to our mother's by way of a thin wooden door. It had one of those classic keyholes that you could peek through to spy on someone, and spy we did. It was never an organized thing. It

was more like sometimes Shay'd walk in on me with my eye pressed to our mother's keyhole or vice versa. The door was rarely ever locked because our mom had propped boxes in front of it to keep it from opening, but even so if we were feeling adventurous and our mom wasn't home, we could push the door open carefully and slip through the tiny gap.

One day, we snuck through the door into our mother's room and began to rummage through her things. The room was dim, packed tight with her belongings. Under her bed, we found a pound bag of jolly-ranchers, pairs upon pairs of shoes, and an urn overflowing with coins. Our mother had a sweet tooth as potent as any child's and we often begged her to share her candies with us to no avail. We found her jewelry box, a wooden affair painted a glossy black with small pink flowers dusted across the surface. I pulled out her necklaces and fingered their glinting chains, their heavy baubles. She loved costume jewelry, always had, so the necklaces, rings, and earrings I touched were all weighed down by large faux jewels or beads. They seemed desperately glamorous, just right for the sort of person my mother wanted to be. We opened her drawers, pushed through her folded clothing, flung open her closet and ran our hands over the dress shirts and silks, the purses that hung from the top corner of the closet door. I climbed up onto her bed and made a quick snow angel on her sheets, then pulled them taut again over her mattress. Finally, pockets stuffed with candy and clinking from the quarters we'd dug out of the urn, we slipped back through the crack in the door.

You must understand, Jerry, our mother was a mystery to us. She worked throughout the day, temping at one place or another. When she picked us up from our

afterschool program, she'd take us home and lock herself in her room to watch TV or talk on the phone for hours. Sometimes I could go days barely seeing more than a flash of her. And she rarely, if ever, let us into her bedroom. She called it "going to Mexico", those times when she would lock herself in her room and lose the rest of the world. She'd tell us not to pick up the phone and, if we did, to tell anyone looking for her that she'd left for Mexico and would be back in a few days. Standing on the threshold of her bedroom, listening to her as she lay stretched out instructing you on the lie, you could feel, almost against your skin, the barrier she kept up between her space and the rest of the world. So she was unknown, untouchable, then and even now.

Would it be cliché to say it's funny how little things change over the years? My mother, despite all the years that separate us from that small blue house in Hartford, still locks herself in her room, and I, when given the chance, searched through it, looking for something I'll never find in her closets or dressers or between her mattress and box spring. In 2017, when she spent those months in the summer in California away from us, I found myself sneaking into her room again and again just like when I was a girl. I told myself I was looking for the spare keys to your bedroom, in case I needed to get to you and the door was locked. I told myself I had to do something about the smell seeping out from under her door. Of course, things had changed by then. I was much taller, wider. Her main door was locked and properly barricaded this time so that the only way into the room was through the door that connected her bedroom to the bathroom, and that one was locked too. What I ended up having to do was break part of the frame.

Before she left, she propped a kitchen chair underneath the knob so that I couldn't push the door open and then piled boxes and bags of clothing around the chair to keep it steady. It took me three sharp kicks to crack the door and the frame, one more to make a gap small enough to wedge my hand through and nudge the chair loose. No one was home except for the parrot and I, and he screamed out a panicked *Hello?* with each kick. When the chair was out of the way, I braced a shoulder against the door and pushed as hard as I could. It moved an inch, then another. A crack was made. I slipped through.

I keep floundering over my project here. I think this is about family, my home, my country, myself, but I get shy. I haven't given myself permission to be honest with you yet. I don't know if I want to. You're still my father, so I still want to lie to you. I still want to give you the version of my life, our lives, that you'd like to hear. For instance, you wouldn't ever want me to write that you were my mother's Sugar Daddy. Instead you'd want me to say that you were and my mother were friends. Even though you two were engaged for 15 out of the 16 years I knew you, it would've been laughable to call her fiancée by the end. No, you were just "good friends".

But then, if you and my mother were only friends, what claim do I have to you? It was easy to take you for granted when you rolled down our driveway every weekend, to assume I understood our roles the same way I understood the sky or the flow of water in the stream behind our house. You were Jerry, my something, and I was Maiasia, your something, and together we cared for each other. There was my



mother, your fiance-friend, and my sister, your something-else, and we all lived together in that sprawling white house in Somers. It all made sense until you died and I had to eulogize you. I called you my father to a room full of strangers who knew a Jerry that was never mine, and they patted my back while my sisters' children squirmed, my mother daubed her tears, and I felt so far away from you.

You told me, a few years before you died, in a spate of honesty after my mother had left for California, that you had met her through an escort service— she'd always said you'd met on a plane. Someone had given you a card with a phone number on it. They told you to call the number if you needed a friend. You called.

When you told me this, we were sitting side by side on your bed. I'd just finished helping you unlace and slide off your new pair of work boots. Your toes curled closed like the legs of a dead spider. You patted the space next to you on the bed, and we sat in silence for a few more moments. I liked that you didn't try to justify yourself. We had known each other for far too long for that to have done anything but make you seem smaller and sadder than what I already saw.

Some people love their fathers unconditionally. I loved you, but I don't think I ever trusted you. That was just part of you being my something. Some fathers, at their hearts, ask nothing of their children but that they live good lives. But you weren't that kind of man, and it was clear that you wanted something from my family. It makes me feel like a fool that I still don't know what that was.

I was seventeen years old when I set off for college in New Jersey. We'd been living in Somers for maybe nine years by then, and had established ourselves as a part

of the town. When we rode around in your pickup truck together, we no longer got strange looks. People were used to seeing the old balding white man (a style my mom called bozo-bald behind your back) and one of his young black wards tossing out trash at the town dump or picking up groceries at Geisslers or pumping gas at the Mobil station or sitting together drinking coffee at Dunkin or eating breakfast at the Plaza Diner (although we hadn't done that in years). I worked at the town Dunkin Donuts my final year in high school, and occasionally you'd ride through the drive thru on your way to and from the house, and my coworkers recognized your truck and knew you were my "stepfather".

I've always had such trouble figuring out what to call you. You'd asked, all those years ago, to be Jerry, so you were Jerry to me, but what could I tell the rest of the world? You and my mother were not married. You two never married, so you weren't *really* my stepfather. You weren't in love either, so it's not like I could explain you away with a wave of my hand and an eye roll as my mother's eccentric boyfriend. You drove my sister and I to school every morning you could and gave us an allowance, weekly, like other fathers, but you only lived with us part time. You spent half your week in Danbury, Connecticut, in your own house, and the other half of the week with us in Somers. Most days, you'd wake early and wait for my mother to make you a bowl of oatmeal with berries. Or you'd drive down the street to the Mobil station for a \$.99 coffee. The majority of your day you'd spend in the cab of your pickup, reading newspaper after newspaper (you were subscribed to most of the major papers in the state) and smoking vanilla White Owl cigarillos while your radio blared polka. When the afternoon hit, my mother, sister, or I would deliver your lunch

on a plastic tray (either one of the hawaiian trays or the purple one whose corner I'd accidentally melted off). If you had parked your pickup on the front lawn, this was easy enough. I'd load the tray up in the kitchen, then waddle through the foyer, careful not to tip the tray too much and spill your coke. Someone would get the front door, and I'd march slowly down the walk to the driver's side of the cab and pass you the food through your window.

Sometimes, if the weather was nice and the sky bright and the breeze clear, you'd ask me to sit with you in the truck as you ate and smoked your cigarillos. Other times, I'd sit in one of the white chairs by the front door and wait for you to finish so I could take your dishes back to the kitchen. If you'd parked your truck way out in the backyard by the blueberries or the pond, we'd have to decide who would be the one to make the trek out across the acres to bring you your meal. In the summer, with the high sun beaming down heat, no one would want to do it, so we'd stand on the back deck and call your name up to the sky. We wouldn't stop until we saw your truck rolling over the grass towards the house.

By dinner time, you'd park on the front lawn, shuffle up the walk, and quickly fall into your bed. You'd turn on the news or BET, which you watched almost as much as you watched Fox News. Someone would bring you a plastic tray with your dinner on it, then pick it up once you'd finished. Sometimes, if something spilled or didn't taste right, if someone spoke too loudly or took too long, if the house was too hot or too cold, if you couldn't figure out how to use your tv remote, you'd holler at us. You'd roll over in your bed, you wouldn't touch the food, and it would be

all Shay and I could do to scurry up the stairs away from you. You weren't my father in moments like that.

Years later, trying to explain our relationship to a psychologist, I reached a similar point in my descriptions of you, stumbled, and the man said, *He treated you like the help*. The man was black. He looked at me with the saddest eyes.

But leaving it there would be unfair. There was so much more to you, to you and I, than the meals I made you or the way you'd shout at me when I lingered, *No Dilly Dallying!*

There was the way you ate your tomatoes off the vine like apples. We had maybe ten tomato plants growing in little wooden barrels behind the house. In the summer, you sat out by the tomato plants and watch them ripen. Or you'd call for Shay or me, tell us to pick what fruits we could, and then after, we'd rinse them with the outdoor hose, sit in our red lawn chairs, and search out the sweetest cherry tomatoes we could find.

I could never decide which you treasured more: your little tomato grove or the rows of blueberry bushes you had planted during our first year in Somers. Tending the fruit, brushing your crooked fingers over the leaves, you seemed content. When your legs began to weaken and we bought the golf carts so you could ride out to check on the berries and the pond, I would find you out in the backyard in the early mornings inspecting the tobacco netting that covered the bushes, reaching through holes that the birds or squirrels ripped through the fabric and plucking the firm, ripe berries off their branches. You loved them the most when they were picked fresh like that. I can see

you now: smiling as you pop the warm berries into your mouth one at a time as the morning sun crests over the willow trees.

A poem I wrote for the berries:

Blueberries (Trichotillomania)

Years later, I am a woman  
in a white bathroom wondering  
What I can wish for with these  
lashes littering my sink—

Spider legs, black wisps, grey  
tipped, follicles still clinging,  
and the rim of my eye  
swollen-stinging-red, and  
there are bald patches again,  
even blood, and the hand that  
holds the tweezers won't stop

shaking, so I have to take it  
slow or risk leaving a lash  
lying like a cataract against  
my cornea.

When I was a girl

my mother touched her fingertip  
to the quick curl of an eyelash  
settled on my cheek:

She said *Make a wish*.

And when I was a girl in the mirror  
trying to wish myself, will myself,  
white with those lashes (and not just  
any white — well-tended-teeth-white) always  
my skin, toasted-tobacco-brown, would itch

and I'd think of the men  
in the fields by my house:  
the summer men who from  
dawn to near dusk plucked  
tobacco from the dust,

who hung the leaves by their necks  
from racks — green, but soon to be  
withered brown.

In our car, my mother would  
duck her head as we drove past.  
She would not want to see

all our black bodies in that  
moneyed-white town  
indistinct from each other—

slave heirloom amaranthus,  
field tools, bent over our work.

My step father, Catholic-white,  
choir-boy-pink in the cheeks, had me pick  
his blueberries clean, my sister too...

All forty two tall bushes,  
each summer under tobacco nets.  
Had us be bitten and stung for the berries,  
separated from the sun by  
white gauze. I hated the berries,  
hate them still.

And I wished my body spoke  
a language with no word for labor.

Of course, I hated the blueberries. Maybe as much as you loved them. The  
summer our neighbors shot fireworks into the netting, setting the berries on fire, was  
one of my happiest. After the fire, I didn't have to wake up early on Sundays and pick

the bushes clean, branch by branch. When I was younger, during our first summer with the berries laid out in neat rows by the pond behind the house, I didn't mind the work. It seemed romantic. As I worked I imagined:

*Summer in a field under the hot sun. My hand drags across my sweaty brow.*

*The grass lets off an earthy perfume and the breeze kicks up my skirts.*

*Surrounding me, eden. Trees and shrubs heavy with fruit. I pick a berry and it bursts open in my mouth, sweet as day break.*

As I daydreamed I could lose the image of you, cool in the house or the cab of your pickup truck. I could ignore the way you shouted at my sister and I to hurry up as we worked over one bush after the other, filling the little white plastic buckets you'd given us. It was always a dilemma between my sister and I: did we prefer you there in your pickup truck shouting at us like an overseer through the tobacco netting or did we prefer lugging the buckets laden with berries back and forth across the acres from the plot you'd laid to the house? Did we prefer the smile on your face when we emerged from under the netting carrying the blueberries like country girls in the scoop of our t-shirts or did we prefer the silence of early summer morning spent alone in a field? But of course it wasn't silent, even with you gone. There was the croak of the morning frogs, the call of birdsong. Rushing cars heading out of town, buzzing wasps close to my ears, snapping twigs. Shay was always rough with the bushes.

Jerry, I think the first poem I wrote, I wrote for my high school lit mag. I was a freshman in high school, mid-puberty with the tiny tits and terrible self-esteem to match. Most of my friends were on the math team and in the science/engineering club, JETS, and I joined them, less because of my own love of math and science and



more for the time I got to spend with my friends. Somers High was a decent sized high school, in my opinion, the sort of school where you could ride the currents filling the halls and never really meet someone's eye. You could drift, buoyant on anonymity, through all four years or you could try to anchor yourself in place. You could claim a place. The place I truly claimed for myself was in the school lit club, Scriptura. I was already a heavy reader, and while I wasn't well-versed in poetry, I had an adolescent's emotional stability and our home situation fueling me, so the writing came from me like syrup from a tapped tree. The first poem was an abstract meditation on thinking powered by an image of a train. Literally one's "train of thought". At the time, I didn't so much think it was brilliant as I believed it was acceptable enough to be printed alongside the other student works that populated the pages of Scriptura. You could find copies of each issue in the school library, and I read them voraciously. It seemed amazing to me that people from my bodunk town could write poems, especially poems so close to my own heart, when I was sure that, alongside my sister and my friends, I was the only thinking, feeling creature in Somers with a pen.

The poem was accepted into the magazine with the caveat that it be printed both forwards and backwards. Someone in a Scriptura meeting I didn't attend had read the poem and imagined it would move better as a sort of see-saw, and I was too afraid to complain about the changes when I got the acceptance email from the faculty member running the club, Ms. Jan Martin. My poem was printed in the next issue on its own page with my name underneath the title line. The day the copies arrived at Somers High, I grabbed enough for my immediate family and all my

friends, then spent the afternoon distributing them. Shay, who periodically pretended not to know me even though our lockers were side-by-side, congratulated me as we climbed onto the bus to go home. Jerry, you were happy too. You were lying in your bed when we hunkered down the steep hill that served as our driveway and into the house.

I rushed your bedroom, knocked on the door, then waited for you to let me know to push it open. You liked to lay in bed, on top of the blankets, nude or close to it. It had happened before that, in my excitement or impatience, I'd opened your door without knocking or waiting long enough after knocking, and your nakedness would flash before my eyes for an instant before I turned away. This time, when I knocked you were stretched out on top of your comforter, wiggling your toes and wearing nothing more than a pair of stained briefs. The smell in the room was pungent and wet. You always smelled sick in your room, like clothing left to mildew, but I'd grown used to the smell. For me, it was enough to take a deep breath before stepping over the threshold, to leave when I felt that breath going thin in my chest. You sat up slowly, first swinging your legs over the edge of the bed, then pushing your torso up over your hips. It was hard to watch. Harder still not to help, but you held your hand up to me when I approached. Sometimes you were proud like that. Other times, you called out for me to come to you, slide your foot into your boot, lace it up, and tie it tight.

When you were finally up, I crossed the stained carpet and handed you the magazine. *I got published in the school magazine.* I nearly shouted it at you, and you laughed and said *Oh boy*, in the same sweet tone you'd use when I brought you a

special dessert or a bowl of blueberries in heavy cream. I guided you to the page and used my finger to point to the title of the poem, my name (spelled correctly) in Times New Roman font underneath. Your lips moved as you read the poem, line by line, then beamed up at me. *Good work! Whatcha got coming next?*

I said *Oh a little bit of everything*, as coy as I could, but inside I felt like doing a little dance. You were proud of me. You read the poem through one more time, then opened the top drawer of your nightstand and deposited the little pamphlet beside a box of graham crackers. *Have you shown your mom?* I shook my head. You nodded. *Well, make sure to, alright?* I nodded. You laid back down, and I watched your heavy body settle into the mattress that you would begin to die on.

Of course, at the time, I didn't know you would die in that room, trying to climb out of that bed. I couldn't have imagined the new stains on the carpet, how they would sit next to the older ones and mark an ending God wasn't interested in undoing. They say you died on your ass. That's how they found you, Tashyra and my mother. My mother went looking for you in your room on the morning of January 16th. You were slumped on the floor in front of your bed, facing the door. There was the smell of bile and your cold skin. There were the new stains on the floor, the new stains on your briefs. You must've vomited before you died. Shit too. This is what they tell me.

I didn't see any of it, of course. I was in Maryland, retwisting my hair when Tashyra began calling and texting me. I was blissfully avoiding her phone calls. I had just smoked some weed. I was in a good mood. Whatever she had to say could wait. So I sat at the kitchen table and detangled my hair, drank my coffee, and, bored,

looked through the notifications that were pouring in. One missed call from Tashyra, two, then, finally, I texted her back.

*I'm at a professional development day for my school. What's up?*

*WE NEED TO TALK*

*ITS IMPORTANT*

*I can't talk. What's going on?*

*PICK UP*

*PLEASE PICK UP*

*I am at a professional development day for instructors. I can't pick up.*

*What's going on?*

*Girl ITS IMPORTANT*

*YOU NEED TO ANSWER*

*Give me a minute*

(At this point I am on the phone with my best friend laughing about Tashyra's reliance on all-caps texting. I take a few more moments to hang up.)

*This is SERIOUS AND UR GOING TO WANT TO HEAR ME.*

The call was short. Blunt. She said you'd died. I said *No* over and over again, but it changed nothing, so I told her I'd buy a bus ticket to come home, then I hung up and went to the gym. It was all I could think to do with myself. Later that day, I sat on an ottoman in my roommate's room and said "I'm going to be much more lonely now." I stared at the wall behind his head. I wasn't holding back tears because there weren't any, then, Jerry. There was just a deep seated confusion and more than a little nausea. There was a sense that something had happened, would keep happening every

day for the rest of my life. You had died, and every day you would continue to be dead. There will never come a day when you aren't dead, and I can throw myself into your arms.

I haven't figured out how to grieve you. I don't think writing this has been grieving. Or, if it has been, I've been grieving a part of my life now over. I haven't been grieving the loss of you: the loss of a future with you in it watching over me, reminding me to eat; drink water; sleep enough but not too much; rise early; and give thanks.

Jerry and Maiasia are sitting in his pickup truck outside of the Enfield, Connecticut Firestone. They've dropped off her mother's Jetta for repairs. Jerry is in his mid-seventies, balding, at least six feet tall when he stands up straight, but it has been a rare thing to see him straighten his back in the past few years. He's too big for his bones now. He needs help standing up out of chairs, and can't tie his shoes on his own either. He is smoking a cigar out his window. Maiasia smokes a cigarette out of hers. It is 2017, and she is 21 years old. She's recently gotten her license, her bachelor's degree, and moved back home. She is unhappy. Jerry shouldn't be smoking cigars any more. What with the stroke and the pacemaker, his loose teeth and the blackened rows of his gums, Jerry should've quit smoking years ago. Maiasia wants to tell him this, but where to start and how? The first move, she decides, should be to throw her own cigarette out. To lead by example. She hangs her arm out the window and flicks what's left of her smoke as far away from the truck as possible. As she leans back into her chair, Jerry speaks.

*When do you think she'll be coming back?*

He is, of course, asking about Maiasia's mother, Denise. Denise (or Phyllis or Alana, even Needa, depending on who you ask) has recently gone to live in California with a cousin/aunt of hers as a part of her religious studies. While Maiasia was completing her senior year of undergrad, her mother *found God*. After joining and leaving a series of local Connecticut and Massachusetts churches, Denise eventually settled on a Cali-based church dedicated to a strange, if not imaginative, sect of Christianity and threw herself into her religion. Maiasia, upon learning of her mother's new calling, was openly skeptical; however, when Denise announced her journey, the girl was ecstatic. Their relationship was the stuff of myth (the cruel mother, the fiery daughter returned from her self-imposed exile in New Jersey), and the notion that she'd be free of her mother and her influence was almost too much for Maiasia. Especially once her mother announced, a week into her stay in California, that she wouldn't be returning to Connecticut. Apparently, as the woman explained in a series of texts punctuated with photographs of palm trees, the household environment in Somers was too toxic for her. She needed a place where she could flourish.

Jerry taps the end of his cigarillo against the window sill. Maiasia doesn't answer him. Instead she says, a little too loud, *You really should quit smoking, Jerry. Dr. Tucker has been on you about it for years*. He chuckles, a sound low in his chest and phlegmy. He says *Alright, well, I'll quit when you quit, huh*. He grins at Maiasia, the woman she's become. He'd watched her grow from a quiet, curious child into something wholly new and strange to him. Now, as she returns his smile and reaches across the cab to shake on the deal, he feels a warmth start to spread in his chest.

The drive home is quiet and easy. They stop for beer at a package store. Jerry is in the mood for a drink, and Maiasia is amazed. She's only seen him drink once in all the thirteen years she's known him. When he hands her the money and asks for a six pack of Harpoon IPAs, she grins broad enough to show the gap in her teeth and asks *What's gotten into you?*

*Oh nothing, nothing, Jerry says. It's just that my father used to drink them. And I saw you had some in the fridge last week. I thought we could share 'em over dinner.*

That night, as she preps his meal in the kitchen, she wonders to herself *When is she coming back?* It's been a month or two since her mother's departure and deep in her chest, she is weary. Cooking for Jerry every night, cleaning up after him, enduring his temper— its quick shifts, his angry whimpers, it's all gotten to be a little too much. Everyday Maiasia wakes up and prays Jerry's incontinence won't flare up, that she won't have to clean his shit off the floor when she gets home from a long shift at work. So far, she's the only person in her immediate family who hasn't, a fact that no one, not her sisters nor her mother, will let her forget. For a moment, an image forms of her mother with a bundle of dirtied bedding in her arms, a dazed look on her face. *This has been her life, Maiasia thinks. For 13 years, this has been her life.*

Maiasia is the youngest of her mother's children. Sometimes she thinks it is especially significant that her mother had three daughters, that it makes them sacred in some way. She's watched too much *Charmed*. She believes in superstitions, in the

power of numbers and fate and myth-making. In her head she's crafted story after story about her sisters and herself awakening hidden powers, soaring through the skies, discovering a freedom they could never know in real life. At times, when she was younger and they all lived together in Hartford, daydreams like those could get her through even the most difficult of days.

Her sister's names are Shay and Tashyra. Tashyra is the oldest of her mother's brood, and only Maiasia and Shay's half-sister. Shay is the middle child, born seven years after Tashyra. Maiasia was born a year later. Shay likes to call them Irish-twins, and while Maiasia is convinced there is some racialized stigma buried in the term, secretly she brims with pride whenever Shay makes the claim. It pulls them closer to each other, makes them seem like more than sisters. Like they are bound.

Back then, sisterhood was an easy thing to grasp. In Hartford, being a girl with two older sisters meant never getting to pick the movies they rented from Blockbusters, never getting her turn with the telephone, always getting blamed for tiny accidents around the apartment. Sometimes it meant being babysat by Tashyra and forming an alliance with Shay to break her rules while their mother was at work. When their mother returned home, it meant working together to stay out of her way and off her bad side, because if one of them got punished in a night, odds were that all of them would be punished. On school nights, it meant listening to B2K while doing homework and calling dibs on their favorite singer or jostling for a turn at the computer. Sisterhood, for Maiasia, was battling each night with Shay over who would sleep on the top bunk, was sleeping outside of Tashyra's bedroom when a nightmare struck.



But then Tashyra left. She was 16. She didn't come back for eight years. And sisterhood changed.

Secrets. My whole life feels like it was devoted to secrets. Keeping secrets from you, secrets from my friends, from the teachers who cared enough to ask, from the world. But also, there were secrets kept from me.

There was a man: Tony. You might have heard of him. He was a friend of my mother's, an ex lover. Apparently they met when we (my mother, sisters, and I) lived in a small house on Blue Hills Ave. This was well before we met you, back when my mother and biological father were still trying to make things work. I don't know where Tony fit into that. He either lived above us or down the street with his own son, a son I don't remember ever having met. Tony was tall, bald, and jolly as a Christmas elf. If his skin hadn't been such a deep shade of brown, I imagine his cheeks would've kept up a rosy glow. His voice boomed and burst. By the time we moved to the house on Edgewood Street, his name, at least for Shay and I, would be enough to get us jumping for joy around the apartment. We'd clean our room, tidy the living room and kitchen, and put on good clothes when he came around. Without fail, he'd lift each of us up in his strong arms and twirl us in a circle or give us a piggyback ride. If he laughed at something I told him, I'd tell the joke over and over again for days. He seemed to love my mother and love Shay and I without question, and it all made sense back then. But there are things you don't notice at six or seven years old.

I talked on the phone with Tashyra yesterday. I'm turning 25 this year, which means she must be turning 33. We're years and years away from that blue house in Hartford, decades out from Tony's laugh; the past cannot harm us. I called her to ask

about her memories. I wanted to know if her mind was as ravaged as mine, if the past was inaccessible, if it was ever something I could make whole. Instead, I learned a secret that had been kept from me.

*What do you remember of Tony?* I asked her. I'd been thinking back to an earlier phone call with Shay of a similar nature. She'd recalled Tony, the fights he and our mother used to have. She'd said, *Maybe that's where I get it from, watching how mom used to act with him. I swear, he wouldn't even want to fight but she'd follow him around the apartment just cursing him out. It wasn't right.* So I asked Tashyra about him hoping she could give me something solid, a scene, a line.

*Oh I remember. He and mom used to be real good together until the thing happened.* Tashyra's voice was gruff over the phone. She was distracted, braiding her hair. I could picture the phone wedged between her neck and ear, her head craned over to the side as her fingers slid through the strands. Her bedroom would be dim, the windows held open by fans so that the air could circulate. Scratching at her door, a cat.

*What happened?* I asked. *I didn't know something happened.*

*Yeah something happened. He raped me.*

Her fingers curling over a lock of hair, pulling it into place. A soft meow. Sheer shifting curtains.

*What?*

*Are you saying what because you didn't hear me or...?* Her fingers combing through another section, sorting and detangling.

*No. I heard you. I heard.*

*Yep.*

*Did mom know?*

*Know? Of course she knew. And she blamed me. Told me I was fast in the ass, that it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't walked around wearing what I wore, looking easy. I couldn't have been older than 12. Y'all never knew because she didn't want you to.*

In the face of secrets, of lies, the work of remembering feels so much more urgent. I would've never known, Jerry. I would've never been able to explain why I never remembered them together in a room, Tony and Tashyra. But asking her to remember that, writing about it now, what right do I have? This is not my tragedy. It is not even a tragedy. Tashyra said to me on the phone, *I am not a victim anymore.* What is there to say back?

[I was also raped, Jerry, twice. What's funny is that every time I talk to a new psychologist about it, they always assume you did it.]

Yesterday was my mother's birthday. Before our phone call ended, Tashyra reminded me to say happy birthday to her.

*At least send her a text,* she said. Later on, Shay asked if I'd called our mother, then ended our phone call abruptly.

*Tashyra's calling. It's time to sing happy birthday to mom as they cut the cake,* she said.

*Leave me outta that,* I said back, then she laughed and we parted. Sometimes it shocks me what my sisters are capable of. Sometimes it makes me ask myself if the

most important work of my life is remembering or living? And other times “How can you truly live without remembering?”

The secrets, the lies, the misremembrances, everything between us, Jerry, I’d like to leave behind.

And Then I Remembered That

Once I let a white man choke me  
the same day I met him.

He wanted to spit on me.

He wanted to call me his slave.

He wanted to take me to New York City  
for a New Years masquerade.

He said: *I’ll undress you,  
show everyone your tits,  
your fat clit.*

He said this and stroked  
from my cheek down  
to my throat.

His coarse hot palm

vaguely familiar —

My own mother, once,  
across from a window,  
choked me against a wall  
the shade of bruised  
blood orange skin.

She said: *You're not grown, heifer.*

*You're just a little bitch.*

And, outside, the sun cracked  
like a fat red egg  
on the horizon.

Maiasia couldn't have been more than 13 years old the last time her mother tried to beat her. She likes to use the word "beat" specifically because it implies a contest, a conflict, an overcoming. She also uses the word "beat" for honesty's sake. She was 16 years old the last time her mother hit her, but 13 the last time her mother really made an occasion out of it. When Maiasia thinks about that day, she thinks about the color of the walls in the laundry room because that's where it happened. In the laundry room. Up against the wall furthest from the door at sunset. Her mother had her pressed there, half cowering, and rather than look at her, Maiasia took in the details of the room. There were clean clothes that needed to be folded piled in a bin to her right. Shoulder to shoulder with the bin was the ironing board, and on top of the

board was the iron, recently unplugged, but likely still warm. Across from the ironing board was the washer and to the right of the washer was the dryer. To the left of the washer was a sink and counter with cabinet space above and below it. The countertop was covered with junk, clothing, books, empty cleaning solution bottles, and dryer sheets. Across from the sink was the doorway. Behind the door: mops, brooms, buckets, and dust pans. At the door: Shay's eyes, peeking around the corner of the frame.

What brought them to this moment? No one remembers. An argument, obviously, but it must've been something special with the way Denise slaps the girl around. They are near the same height, but with her hand cocked back, ready to launch, she seems to loom like a giant over her daughter. One slap, two, three. There is a cracking sound as Maiasia's head bounces off the laundry room wall behind her. Shay's eyes disappear from the frame. She's seen enough.

Then, it's as if there is a shift in the air. Denise is human-sized again. Maiasia can see this and can see that Denise isn't aware of her diminishment. The girl stands up straighter, and, yes, she can. She can see over her mother's head. A smile comes to her face, unbidden, and the sight of it enrages her mother. She clamps one hand over Maiasia's throat. The other follows. Both squeeze until the girl sees flickers of darkness and begins to panic. Her mother cocks an arm back to strike and, half-conscious, Maiasia grabs it in the air, shocking both of them, then bends it back as far as she can. Her mother's grip on her neck loosens for a moment, and Maiasia uses it to shove her away so she falls backward onto the floor with a huff. Both pause for a

spell and lock eyes. Unsure of how to continue. This had never happened before, but now that it had it seems inevitable. They feel foolish for imagining it couldn't.

Denise moves. Maiasia grabs at the iron and brandishes it before her. It is still warm, but not nearly hot enough to burn. She is disappointed. At this moment, she wants to do the unthinkable. She wants to beat her mother back. She wants to destroy her. Then drag her by the hair out of the house once she's finished and have that be that. Instead she says, shaking, gripping the iron with both hands, she says

*Don't you ever touch me or my sister again. I'll fucking kill you if you do.*

How much do I have to share here for it all to make sense? Who am I trying to excuse? You? Me?

Do you remember the day I told you what I thought was my mother's secret? It was during the year I lived at home after undergrad. Mom had left for California, and I'd spent the week trying to convince you not to let her come back. I'd done research on evictions. "You only have to give her thirty days notice," I'd said to you while we sat in your truck a few days earlier. I was dressed for work at Geisslers Supermarket's deli counter and was overheating in my smock. Sweat rolled down my forehead, collected at the nape of my neck. You were leaned away from me, frowning out the window at the strawberry bushes you'd planted on the hill. I pushed my phone screen closer to your face. "See," I said. "Only thirty days, and then she has to leave." I didn't try to hide my smile. To me the idea was a dream.

You said "Bah, take that thing away."

When I was younger, after Tashyra got emancipated, I'd daydream of what life would be like without my mother. In the years leading up to me turning sixteen, I kept a composition notebook with my escape plans in it. My goal was to follow in Tashyra's footsteps and emancipate myself at 16. While I barely remembered the process we went through when Tashyra left, I was sure I could do it. The pages of the composition book were filled with calculations of the money I'd need for my first year as an emancipated minor. I had a list of homeless shelters in Connecticut, addresses of family members who I thought would take me and friends for if the family members turned me away. I had detailed schematics on the rope ladder I'd build to climb down from my third story window in the night. I knew the distance I'd need to walk to the nearest bus stop in Enfield, the price of fare, everything I thought I would need to take my leave one day. That was a dream I nursed. By the time I turned sixteen, though, Tashyra had returned and I'd decided to go to college rather than risk my future on the streets. I could see how much they had changed her. She was barely the girl I remembered her being, nor was she the woman I had imagined her growing into over the seven or eight years that she'd been gone. So I no longer wanted to escape my mother. Instead, I wanted my mother to leave and never come back.

It almost happened once. I wish I could remember more of it. Jerry, if you were alive, I'm sure you'd recall. When I asked Shay about it, she couldn't tell me anything. She said, *What're you talking about 'Mom left'?*



When I asked my mom about it, she said *No Maiasia, I never left. Where would I have stayed? Also, me and you, we didn't fight. Maiasia, we never fought unless it had something to do with your sister.*

But it's true. She did leave. For a few weeks at least. We were in high school. I remember it because I remember the weeks that Shay didn't talk to me, in school or at home. She was mad at me, blamed me for driving our mother out of the house. At home, she'd brush by me like I was a pattern on the wallpaper or, more accurately, a stain.

Jerry, you stayed with us for those weeks. You didn't go back to your house in Danbury. Instead, you drove us to school every morning and stopped by the local Dunkin so we could get coffee and donuts before homeroom began. My mother, on the phone, asked, *Well what did Jerry eat if I wasn't there cooking for him? We both know Jerry never cooked.* We ordered pizza or chinese take-out or I made spaghetti and canned spinach for his dinner.

She came home once, during the weeks, to go grocery shopping for us and to talk to you in your room. I think you were giving her money. I think, now, that she was staying in a hotel long term. Maybe even the hotel that Tashyra stayed in when she finally moved home. At the time, not understanding how landlords work, I assumed she'd gotten an apartment. That she was leaving for good. The idea made me happy: at night, in bed, I curled up under my covers and listened to the quiet of the house, trusting it for once not to crack open. Out my window, I could see stars : first Orion, the hunter, striding across the sky, then later Casseopia, the vain queen, hanging from her throne.

On the phone, my mother repeated herself. *We never fought, Maiasia, never. I don't know what you're remembering.* I don't know what I expected. This is why I need you, still. You'd remember. You and no one else can show me my life was/is real.

We did fight, she and I. We fought even more than she and my sister sometimes. Especially by the time I hit high school. I'd stand at the summit of the staircase in our foyer and shout down at my mother. I'd dare her to try me. She'd storm up at me with her bulging eyes shouting *Heifer this* and *heifer that*.

One time, we stood eye to eye in the foyer as she shouted about my best friend. *I'm not like these other white parents out here who just let their kids walk all over them. She thinks just cuz she's deaf she can order her parents around. Well, you know what, Maiasia? You ain't deaf so you better start listening fast.* Mitchie cried out in the background and my mother's voice filled the house til it was turgid.

Sometimes my mother threatened Shay and I. She'd warn us that if we kept acting up, she'd take us to live with our father in Springfield and his family. We'd lose everything we had, everything you'd made possible for us, Jerry. The threat worked, although, sometimes it also raised up in me a startling rage. I was twelve years old the night that she dragged me by the hair across the front room floor and kicked me in the gut while I called out for her to stop, please, stop. When it was over, she warned me that she could always do worse. She could always take me to "Them Grimeses". My grandmother, who lived with us at the time in the room that would go

on to be my mother's once you and her stopped sharing a bed, laughed later on when I told her what my mother had done. Maybe it wasn't the kicks. Maybe it was my grandmother's chuckle that made the anger bubble up in my gut, burn at the back of my throat. I marched down the hall into my room and slammed the door. I took out my composition notebook and a pen. I began to write. What flowed out of me were the last words I would say to my mother if she ever did send me to live with my father's family.

*I'm glad that I never have to spend another moment around you, you terrible, heartless bitch. You don't know how to love. You've hurt me more than you'll ever know, but you did it because you're weak and I'm not. You hear me? I'm not weak and I'm better than you. This is a gift.*

My mother's secret? There are more than one, and I'm only privy to a few. The secret I wanted to tell you, Jerry, the secret I was tired of carrying, is actually mundane once I get around to it. She had boyfriends. She brought them to the house in Somers. She fucked them in your bed. Shay and I heard her. The house could hold an echo.

The day I told you was gray or rather I remember it being gray. I sat on the far edge of your bed, on the clean side, the side you'd never shit on. I hung my head down to my chest and tried to imagine how small an atom is. As you got yourself comfortable on the bed, stretched out in your underwear and barefoot, I told myself *that's how small I am, this is, in the scheme of things*. But of course I was lying to myself. No one had asked me to tell you about the men. I wanted to. I felt I had to. At the very least I had to tell you so that you could understand why she couldn't be

allowed back from California. She was a liar, a manipulator, an abuser, a threat. She had used you for years, strung you along, thrown around the word *family* as if we all agreed on its meaning, all while entertaining 1-2 boyfriends during the week while you were in Danbury. And of course, she had us call them *Daddy*.

You laid in the bed while I spoke.

*There were other men... here. She brought them to the house... They were her... playthings...*

You had been craning your neck to face me as I spoke, but when I finished you let your head fall onto your pile of pillows with a soft plop. You scraped one hand up and down the skin of your torso, and it was a while before you spoke.

*Yeah, you sighed. I know.*

In that moment, for the first time in my life, I hated you. And I didn't know what to do with it. So I pushed.

*For years, I said. My fists were balled up in my lap. I'd turned to face the dim light washing in through the blinds. Everything around us reeked of you, and suddenly I was choking on the scent. I stood up, turned to stare at you. You had curled yourself over onto your side. Underneath you, I could see your shit stains on the sheets, the track marks on your underwear. I could see clearly your pale withered body, the swells of flesh and all the hollows, the sprouts of wiry grey hair fighting to cover your chest. I could also see clearly the exact dimensions of the room. I could feel the space all around me, pressing, as if trying to press me flat out of existence.*

*You said, I know.*

When I was a girl, you would fight her for us, for me. If there was a problem that sent her careening into your bedroom, shouting about *Maiasia this* or *Shalaya that*, you'd sometimes shout back. You'd lift yourself up on your bony arms and holler to wake the world. If you were on our side, she wouldn't touch us, would barely punish us, but sometimes you weren't. Sometimes, she'd leave your room smirking.

I'd be waiting at the top of the stairs or in the sitting room on my piano stool. Her smug smile would catch the light, then from the depths of your bedroom, a call. *Maiasia~*.

From your bed, you'd tell me to respect my mother or to apologize (depending on what she'd said I'd done that night). Your voice in those moments was the same one you used on Rudy and Angel when they took a while with a task you'd given them. Terse, more than a little mean, dismissive. You used that voice on baggers at the grocery store, mail clerks at the post office, servers, telephone operators, the nice woman who worked at China City down Route 190, really anyone unlucky enough to catch you in a bad mood.

In your bedroom, after my confession, I wanted to hear that voice again. I didn't want to see you laid out on the bed prone and weak and incapable of protecting me or yourself, so I left. I said a gruff goodbye and you didn't try to stop me. Mitchie screamed as I passed him, rushed up the stairs to my room, crossed the floor, opened the window, and lit, with shaking hands, a cigarette. Normally, I would've gone outside to smoke, but I wanted you to smell the smoke in the house later. I wanted you to know that we had changed. We weren't what we used to be. You were weak

now, had been for who knows how long. I'd have to take care of us both and keep her away or, and this came to me as I took a drag from the cigarette that lit the filter and sent me coughing, I could leave. For good. For ever.

Do you remember the day, one of my last days in Somers before heading off to New Jersey, that you told me your secret? (Can you remember anything now that you've passed or are you gone from even your own history?) I was 17 years old. I was packed and more than ready to leave our home behind and forge some new future as far from Colton Road as I could imagine. We were in your pickup truck, driving away from the house. Colton Road is a hill. Our Hidden Driveway sign marked the summit of the hill, so as we drove, the road sloped gently downwards and we could see a little further into the distance. That's where your eyes were focused as we drifted forward. You always drove your truck so slow, so carefully; you barely ever crested 40 mph. On the road that day, I felt that I could've outpaced the truck on foot, and stared out the passenger side window, antsy for a smoke. I had just picked up smoking cigarettes. That was my secret. I had been keeping it from you and mom for months, but that day in the truck I was willing to risk it. You had kept secrets for me before. And I was pretty sure you didn't remember exactly if I was 17 or 18. I figured I could lie to you, say I'd bought them on my own with my own money. You'd be more likely to let me smoke if you thought the money that bought the cigs wasn't yours. So we drifted down the road. You stared into the horizon and I pulled out my pack of Marlboro Silvers.

*Do you mind if I smoke one of these?*

You blinked a few times, as if coming back to the present. Then you looked over at me. The truck slowed to barely a crawl. Your eyes flicked from the pack of cigarettes I was holding up to my face then back out to the horizon. You'd been quiet all day. You'd laid in your bed with the TV off for most of the morning and didn't touch your breakfast. Mom had found me in my room that afternoon and asked me to ask you to take me grocery shopping. As I thumped slowly down the stairs from my bedroom to yours, she stage whispered after me, *If he wants to eat, then he needs to get up and go shopping. I don't know what he expects. He knows I don't have any money.* Her hair was in half-finished cornrows. I rolled my eyes. You had cut her a hefty check to cover the costs of moving me down to Jersey for undergrad, and I knew, personally, that you had included an extra couple hundred just because she'd taken to saying recently that she had no money. When I pushed open your door, you'd already sat up and was motioning at your slip on shoes. You needed my help pulling them up over the heels of your feet. Your hands were too stiff to do the work yourself. You smiled as I pushed each foot into their shoe. You said *Thanks a bunch.*

Later, rolling down Colton in your white truck, you exhaled slowly and said *You know, I've been doing all this for you, Maiasia. All of it. I don't know what I'm going to do without you.*

You didn't look at me. You just sighed again. I pulled out a cigarette and lit it with shaking hands. I said, *I love you, Jerry. I'll miss you a lot.*

What was there to say to you? You'd been put through hell. That was my general opinion of the years you had spent with us 'til then: Hell. By that point, you'd already had your stroke and the resulting pacemaker was hard at work regulating your

heartbeat. I'd already taken to believing it was my family that caused the stroke, me, my mother and I, and not the cigars you smoked or your terrible health. So I walked around with that guilt on my back. I carried it in my hands. I could imagine how peaceful your life had been before us, how simple and stress-free. Then you met us and took us in like the group of strays we were. You bought us a house and cars and put up with our ingratitude, the way one of us was always at your door asking for more. And to say you did it all for me. As I lit the cigarette, I got the urge to put it out on my palm. Or yours. To shout at you. To say *You have a choice, Jerry. You've always had a choice! It was us who didn't.* Even now, all these years later, I stand by that urge. You always had a choice, and so often I wanted you to make up your mind. I wanted to see you walk away.

But that's only half true. I would dream of you walking away from my family, my mother, the house you bought us, the cars, the land, but I was always right there beside you. I imagined us running away together, father and daughter, to your home in Danbury. I'd never seen it, but I pictured it as a large Victorian complete with cobwebs and dust. Knowing you, the kitchen would have vaguely modern appliances and a dirty tile floor. The counters would be covered with crud, and the whole place would smell like your nasty vanilla cigarillos, but I would love it because I'd get to be with you.

I had nightmares of you dying. They started sometime in high school, fueled by a fear my mother kept alive and nursed into a passionate frenzy whenever you were late driving up from Danbury. In those years, she'd taken to calling local hospitals across Connecticut every time you took too long to arrive. Her eyes would



bulge out in her skull and she'd shout *Don't you realize he could be dead somewhere and we'd never know!*

It took me years to understand her fear. I was sure it wasn't like mine, a fear based out of love, but something different. It was only after you died that I realized my mother's whole existence was predicated on you being there. When you died, she searched and searched for a will. She had long changed from the terrifying figure that haunted and hexed my childhood. She'd both swollen and shriveled; her power was gone, her youth, her ability to terrify. Instead she was just sad, and I think she realized this. She dug through all your boxes and drawers. She poured over your paperwork. Her biggest fear had come true, so she needed the will, the safety it offered her from the rest of the world. She said to me over dinner, the week I returned home for the funeral, *You know, Maiasia, I wouldn't be surprised if he left it all to you. That man had millions.* Her eyes were glowing. Her smile was expectant. The will was all she'd been able to talk about since I got home. She gave a quick little nod of her head.

*Yes, I wouldn't be surprised at all.* She grinned, showing off her dentures, and I got the feeling that her smile was the type you gave a sow before slaughter.

*Can we stop talking about this?* I asked.

She nodded again. *Oh yeah. I'm sorry. I just thought I should say it. You know that man loved you. Me and your sisters, sometimes he could care less. But he loved you. So I wouldn't be surprised is all I wanted to say.* We were in a restaurant. She pushed the food on her plate around, smiling to herself like she'd told a good joke.

My mother likes to say you bought the house in cash. It's one of the stories she tells about you. When she tells it, she always pauses at the end and eyes me before sighing and continuing, *Yes, Jerry was a good man*. She says, after it was official that the house on Colton Road was the one we wanted, after Shay and I had toured it, calling dibs on bedrooms (and trying to ignore the hole that Tashyra's absence left gaping), my mother says you and her rode to the real estate agency, talked with your agent in her office for an hour, then finalized the deal. She says, while waiting for the agent to bring back some paperwork, you turned to her and confessed, *I'm buying this in cash, in full, because I don't want you all to worry when I'm gone. I want you and the kids to be safe*. Well, now, look at us Jerry. Look.

After your death, after no will surfaced, your estate went to a nephew of yours I'd met once as a child and once again at your funeral. He told my mother— who'd attempted to challenge his claim to the estate in court on the grounds that she and Jerry had been engaged for the last 16 years, cohabited, and raised children together and failed— that he'd be selling the house.

When I was a girl, it never occurred to me just how precarious our positioning was. I wanted you to leave us, felt that for your own health you *should* leave us, and most days I wanted to leave with you, but I always imagined you leaving my mother with the house, her car. I didn't have a reason, back then, to worry about what would happen if my wish came true, how easily we could lose everything we had.

An ex of mine had our house programmed in his GPS as "Mooshi's Hell House". I guess it was a joke. This is the same man who once, while I was at work, saw you come outside and yell at my mother and neighbor over a lost dog they were

helping to corral, all while in your briefs. When he told me, we were in the basement sitting on the couch. He had driven up from New Jersey to visit me for a few days while I spent a break from undergrad working in the town deli. He said, *Yeah, it was pretty weird. But that's okay.* He tried to laugh and mostly failed.

I took a look around the room and tried to find something not to be embarrassed over. The walls were leopard print. There was a six foot wooden giraffe in the corner my mother had bought from the Pier 1 Imports in Enfield when we were kids and just moving in. We'd named it "Drew-Freddy Boo" and loved it for maybe a year. Then I knocked it over while playing with my sister, and my mother popped me on the face, and suddenly it was tacky.

There were African masks hanging on the walls, also from the Enfield Pier 1 next to prints of African children with the words FAMILY HEIRLOOM underneath that my mother had bought from Home Goods. There were scenes of a sexy Black Jesus on the cross— shoulder muscles glistening in sweat— framing an equally sexy portrait of Black Jesus, shirtless and ripped, staring humbly out by the sliding doors that led to the backyard. There was the huge cow-hide we were sitting on that was over the center of the couch and itchy to the touch. There was the mess. There was the mess.

One full side of the downstairs living room, to the right of the couch, was filled with junk. An old treadmill with a belt that jumped when you turned up the speed. My sister's shoes and dirty clothes, an old faux bear skin rug that looked like a Michaels arts and crafts project, and bags of my old yarn that I needed to relocate to my room. On the other side of the room there was a bar (also leopard print) that

stretched from the left corner to the door that led to the garage. Behind the bar on the floor: buckets of tools, bags of paper trash, leaves, old potatoes Rudy had picked from the backyard last season, and a soggy zucchini from the garden behind the cabana I was scared to touch and scared to leave. On the counter of the bar: shoes, boxes of my mother's school supplies from when she'd earned a certificate in cosmetology, an old mannequin head with a peacock feather bird's nest woven into the wig on its head, containers of my beads that had sat there for years, three metal-work statues of dreadlocked black men in vibrant colors playing instruments, more African masks, more tools, more trash, and a thick layer of dust.

The claw-foot pool table sitting in the middle of the living room was piled high with my and my ex's things, and I decided to focus my eyes on that while I apologized to him for what happened, over and over again, rather than cry.

Or maybe I did cry. Honestly, Jerry, these days everything is so hard to remember. When I think about the house, all I can remember are the rooms, emptied of people, gray and packed with cold air. I could tell you how we kept the counters in the kitchen, what was in which drawer, how to pack the vacuum in next to the toilet paper and paper towels in the closet down the hall so that the door stays closed, what we hid in the room that used to be the laundry room, the number of porcelain masquerade masks mom kept on the walls in the bathroom down the hall, but ask me for a scene...

Of course I know what happened to me. There are flashes that remain. Most of it violent or the low moans of your voice in the night as you struggled to roll yourself over. But there is so little left. And this ex of mine, when I think about him, when I try

to remember him, all I can see is the white tile of the basement floor; the green grass beyond the sliding glass doors.

I loved this ex of mine. We met while I was a junior in college enrolled in an advanced fiction course at Fairleigh Dickinson University. I'd noticed him on the first day of the class, not because I was attracted to him, but because he showed up in a baggy pair of sweats, a torn up black hoodie with a white tank top peeking out from underneath, and a baseball cap with a laughing clown on it. He wore glasses, had a scraggly beard, and when he removed his cap he revealed a shaved head. He sat hunched over his notebook scrawling while Rene Steinke, the professor, introduced herself, and I was transfixed, the way you are transfixed by a used condom in the street. There was something grossly sexual about him, the way his mouth stretched into a wicked grin as he said his name, "Matt College".

A few weeks later, I was running on a treadmill at the gym. It was fall and I was barely eating again. I'd also quit smoking cigarettes at the beginning of the school year and was using running as both a means to cope with not smoking and a means to further my weight loss. I weighed 135 lbs, 30 pounds lower than what I weighed when I got home for the summer in May, and I was determined to keep the weight off. I went to the gym at least once a day, but preferred to run every time I wanted a cigarette. I lived in the campus village— which was just a name for a grouping of suite style dorm buildings for upperclassmen near the freshmen dorms— and liked to go to the mini-gym in the freshmen dorms, so on a good day I could run four to five times a day. Thirty minutes at a time. Later in the year, I would add in weight training. Though I only dropped five more pounds, my body at that point

would look— I can say this now— slim, strong, disciplined. I would be able to say it then, as well, but only occasionally and not without pinching the little fat that remained on my hips, my stomach, and between my thighs.

I was forty five minutes deep into a run when two friends from the creative writing program at FDU, Andrew O’Hare (who is still fondly in my cell phone as Andrew O’Harder Than a Mother Fucker) and Sarah Van Cleff, approached me and said they were going to play squash on the courts deeper into the rec center. They asked if I wanted to join and I said yes, but that I wanted to finish my run. After another forty five minutes passed, I wiped sweat from my brow, adjusted my crop top and leggings, retied my shoelaces, then stalked back through the rec center to the squash courts, high from my run. I turned the corner to the hallway that housed the courts, and saw immediately, leaning against a wall in Andrew and Sarah’s court, Matt College. His glasses hung down his nose, which was long, straight, and very softly knobbed on the tip. His mouth was curled into that same smile he’d flashed countless times in class by now, the one that didn’t quite take my breath away but gave me something to be grateful to look at when bored during workshop. I opened the door to the courts.

Later that night, as we all stood outside the rec center in the tight cold, Andrew and I decided to race down the path leading towards the main campus. I took one look at him, his stocky frame, unkempt hair, and pale skin that was still blotched red from the rounds of squash we’d played, and felt stronger than him. I said yes. Matt was the referee. He called go and Andrew took off, leaving me lagging behind. By the time I caught up to him by the horse steps that connected the academic

buildings (the Zen and Dreyfuss) to the main campus (the Student Center, Mansion, Library, and dorms), Matt and Sarah were close behind. Matt called out, *Well that was a one sided beat down, my dude*. He clapped me on the back. He grinned.

He walked us mostly back to the village before turning around and making the walk back to the College of Saint Elizabeth's campus, which was next door and where he was dorming for the semester due to a convoluted set-up where our school, FDU, had conscripted a dorm building or two from Saint Elizabeth's for the year due to construction on campus. During the walk, he and I talked about the workshop mostly. He had respect for Steinke but not much for some of our classmates, which was a feeling I shared but had kept hidden mostly because of the mental gymnastics it took me to convince myself I had a right to judge anyone's work, let alone the work of my mostly white peers who grew up with furnished souls most likely, and also because I was nearly friends with the people whose work I disdained and that made me feel even guiltier.

Matt, though, spoke freely. When I brought up a peer's story we had recently workshopped, he threw his pale hands into the air, stopped in his tracks, and shouted, *He made Castro a bus driver! I mean what is that?* I laughed and said, *Suspend your disbelief*. We began walking again and maybe he stepped a little closer when he said, *I liked your story though. It was pretty good*. I nodded and said softly, *I liked yours too*.

The next day he sat next to me in class, displacing Dan Pungello who gave him a pissy look— Dan, a sorta friend of mine, a reluctant one at best, did not like Matt— and sat next to Bill, the older man who had written the story where Fidel

Castro was a bus driver for a basketball team that resembled the Harlem Globetrotters. Rene Steinke came in wearing her trademark wine red Doc Marten boots and began pairing us up for a semester-long book report we'd have to present to the class by late November. Because he'd sat next to me that day, Matt and I ended up paired together, and the rest, Jerry, they say is history. We became friends, we became fuck buddies, we became lovers. We dated for almost three years.

Why am I telling you this? Because it's something I haven't said to you before and I hate recycling old words. But also because I wanted to give you something a little sweet in the sour. Of course, there is more sour to come. My relationship with Matt wasn't easy. I was traumatized and try as he might, he was ill-equipped to handle it. I had my first flashback with Matt. It lasted hours. We'd only been dating for a few months; he was spending the night in my dorm room while my roommate stayed with her boyfriend who lived on the other side of campus. We were perched on my bed when all a sudden I looked down at my hands and didn't recognize them. They were hands, but they weren't my hands, and I knew this because I couldn't move them. For the life of me I couldn't curl one finger. I turned my head to Matt, who had begun to notice something was wrong. Later he would say it looked like my face had collapsed. In the moment he said, *Woah, hey, are you alright?*

I tried to shake my head and failed. I tried to say, *My hands. There is something wrong with my hands.* But my mouth wouldn't work and then he was in front of me, hands on my shoulders, gently pulling and pushing me back and forth. *Maiasia?* He asked. *What's going on, man?*



I moaned low in my chest. My heart pounded in my ears. I could hear screaming, my mother screaming my name. I could hear Mitchie's cries. Then underneath it all I could hear my own cries, my own shuddering breath. Matt took me in his arms. He held me. Eventually, when that didn't work, he let me go. He tried to soothe me as I screamed out *No*, and *Why?* and sobbed and shook like something was trying to break out of me. Eventually, when that didn't work, when I still hadn't managed to respond, he crossed the room and leaned against my dresser. He put his hands over his eyes. His head hung. My roommate opened the door.

Imagine what she saw, Jerry. She wasn't supposed to be in the room that night, was coming back to grab some supplies for her homework, and found me as I was. She caught sight of me, turned to glare at Matt, and said icily, *What's going on?*

I don't remember what Matt said, only that eventually she nodded and left— after coming over to me where I laid shaking on the bed and telling me I could tell her what happened whenever I was ready and reminding me that her boyfriend was an RA— and after that time blurred and eventually I came back to myself. The total passed time was maybe two hours.

When I finally quieted, Matt crossed the room to me and put his hands on my back. He pressed my head to his chest. He said, *Thank God. Thank God.*

I couldn't look at him, so I buried my face in the bed and mewled, *I'm sorry.* He said *It's alright*, and maybe he knew what I meant at that moment. Maybe he knew I meant I was sorry for being alive. I was a junior in college, two suicide attempts deep, and apparently more deeply cracked than I could've ever imagined. I

said it over and over again, *I'm sorry*, until I started crying again. This time he held me and didn't stop.

After Matt and I broke up, I kept a journal as a way to handle the grief. It helped. I wrote it sometimes as a letter, other times as a diary, but it was always and only about/for Matt. I wrote this to him once:

*I spent so much of our relationship worried about how I would lose you. When you first asked me to be your girlfriend, when we were on acid, and I said yes, I felt something in me sink, like I knew we could never last. I used to put a lot of stock in that feeling. I'd lay awake at night and try to convince myself it wasn't true. I don't think it was true. It accrued truth, though. The more I thought about it, the more I held myself away from you in fear, in anger, in certainty, the more it became true. I knew I'd dump you, but not because it was pre-destined. Not because it was fate. Not because I'm psychic but because I knew I was too broken to love you forever. I didn't want to give myself to you. I didn't want to think about what it could mean to trust my life in the hands of someone I barely knew. No, not even that. I just had a feeling that love is death. All love is death. Loving you would be dying.*

*How much of us breaking up was from the circumstances? I'm tempted to say we wouldn't have been anything if not for the circumstances. I'm also tempted to say we could've been everything if the circumstances had been different.*

There were words unsaid there. For instance, Jerry, why do you think I thought, maybe still think, that love is death? I don't want to get mad at you. I don't want to say, *Look what you did to me, look what you let her do to me*, but eventually I am going to have to start pointing fingers. My therapist says that's part of the grief process too. So let's point fingers, if only for just a moment, if only to find a way back to love, eventually. Let's play the blame game.

You knew for years what our mother was doing to us in that house. Yet you stayed with her and let it continue. You said it was for the love of me, the love of my future. You put your dying body on my back. You did not show me what good love looks like. And worst, when I brought my lovers to you, you couldn't even muster up shame. You'd smile to show the gaps in your teeth; sitting in your truck or on your bed or in the kitchen in front of the television, you'd let them see you in your filth. I never brought a man into your bedroom besides Matt. The smell alone would weaken whatever hold I had on him.

You didn't make it easy for me. I introduced you to Matt as my stepfather, Jerry. By then, he knew about my family. I had, in a number of hushed conversations, confessed just how broken and sad I felt I was: the childhood abuse, the depression, the suicide attempts, you, my sisters, all of it. Matt listened and, unlike the men I'd dated before him, didn't try to be a savior. He didn't know how to heal me and also didn't make it his responsibility. Not at first, and I appreciated it. But then one break we drove up to the house on Colton Road from Jersey, from school, to see the house and you for the first time. And I spent the whole trip with bile rising in the throat. I'd

already had the flashback by then, had had more. Matt knew, or thought he knew, what he was getting himself into.

Your pickup truck wasn't parked on the front lawn when we rolled down the hill. Matt had commented on the drive up that the town looked deserted, and the house looked no better. There was clutter everywhere, boxes packed with my mother's things, black contractor bags filled with her laundry, opened and unopened mail on every surface, but no warmth of life. We could hear Mitchie howling as we entered the garage then the main body of the house. I showed Matt where we'd be sleeping: the guest bedroom in the basement that doubled as an office no one used. I'd already decided we wouldn't risk staying in my room on the third floor of the house and running into my mother in the morning. In fact the goal of the trip (and every trip that followed) was to get him in and out with as little interaction with my mother as possible.

I called Matt on the phone today to ask him what he remembered of the first time you two met. He said what stood out to him the most was how frail you looked. *He was just skin and bones in an oversized sweater.* I remember you differently. I always have. In my mind you've always been portly and red faced, the way you looked back when I was a girl and my whole world was Hartford, but when I look at pictures of you from years ago I can see what Matt saw: your scalp a shiny dome of liver spots and sparse, thin hairs; your skin sagging on your face and arms and wrists (which were always sunburnt); and your legs like bent stalks of reed. You looked far from healthy.

Matt said, *You know, he really loved you, Maiasia. That first time you left us alone for a bit, all we ended up talking about was how cool you were.*

Did I ever talk about you like that?

I do now. I tell stories about you. I keep you real in my life, but I felt I had to pick and choose back then. Either you're the father who didn't know how to use a wireless house phone, who thought it was a cell phone and could never understand why it didn't have service in the backyard, or you're the father who stood nearly naked in the sunlight to badger a man about a dog. Either you're the father who sent me to college or you're the father who would shit in the living room and leave it for however long it took my mother to find it and clean it up. For you to be all those men at once, it felt impossible when you were alive, feels impossible now, but there must be a way to love and wholeness. I will find it for us.

Jerry, I'm sorry for what I said earlier about pointing fingers. It feels wrong, now, to blame you for what happened. Wrong because you did your best and wrong because you're dead now. Shouldn't that exempt you from things like anger and regret? Shouldn't you walk in only light now?

I was never like you. I knew from a young age that Christianity was not for me. Don't get me wrong; I loved the faith I saw in others. My grandmother and her church, their music, their joys, it held me for a while. I believed in prayer as a child, the scripture (though unlike every other book I encountered, I hated reading the Bible), and blessings. While I sometimes fell asleep during the pastor's sermons, while sometimes I snuck a book in to read while my grandmother worked the aisles

as an usher passing out napkins and collecting offerings, while I sometimes had to be woken from sleep with a pinch, I believed in God. I just couldn't find myself in what I heard. I couldn't imagine Hell, real Hell, outside of whoopings or scoldings or cold weather. I couldn't believe that God who made sunshine and my grandmother's pound cakes would curse someone for eternity.

Not to mention, I watched *a lot* of *Charmed*. I believed in magic, witches, fairies, devils, ghosts, elves, everything under the sun. I read Norse mythology, and once we got a computer (when I was maybe seven or eight) I was researching rune magick and divination. So God wasn't all there was, all there could be. My thoughts of the afterlife, once I decided to let go of Hell, became amorphous. Maybe there was reincarnation. Maybe I'd come back as a bird (I prayed for a bird with bright red wings and a clear, haunting call). Maybe I wouldn't come back at all. The reincarnation I saw on *Charmed* was inconsistent and always involved coming back as some different version of yourself. The reincarnation I learned about online was based on your deeds while you were alive. If you were good, you'd come back as something good, and if you were bad, you'd come back lower on the totem pole.

I remember asking myself, before you, before Somers and the white people I met there, before I knew anything about this country's history, what had I done in a past life to come back as a sad, poor, black girl in Hartford, Connecticut.

I've stopped asking that question. I stopped a while ago. It seemed unproductive. Now the questions I'm interested in are simpler, I think. Where are you? Are you near me?

I dreamt of you last night. It was the first anniversary of your death. I'm tempted to think it was a sign, an opportunity. We were in the house. My mother, Shay, and I were packing up our things. We knew we had to leave. We knew it was because you had died, yet, when I went into your bedroom, you were there talking to my mother and I wasn't surprised to see you there. You were sitting on the floor with your legs stretched out in front of you. Your back was against your dresser. Mom was perched on your bed. She'd been saying something about this being the end. She sobbed, *Now she'll never come back.*

I knew she was talking about me. I nodded. I crossed the room to you and touched your shoulder with my hand. Your eyes were drowsy. I said, *I only ever came back here for you. I love you. Good bye.*

Jerry, another secret, one you must have guessed: I love my mother.

## Ginger

Ginger was having trouble eating. Ginger had had so much trouble eating at one point (before the start of the story) that she'd nearly starved, her frail white limbs thin like straws or (as I remember from another draft) thin like tulip stems. Ginger's body was begging her, then, to relent, to let just a morsel pass through the thin, chapped barrier of her lips, however she persevered. It wasn't until she caught the flu and ended up in the hospital that her nurse noticed what remained of her underneath the layers and layers of clothing she'd packed herself into — less to hide the weight loss and more to cushion her now protruding skeleton — barely added up to 100 pounds. Ginger, at that point, was five foot seven, nineteen years old, and lucky to be alive.

The story I'd wanted to tell, a story I'd named "Ginger" after its protagonist, starts after her hospitalization, after the delicate refeeding process which took months to work through and nearly killed her anyway, after her return home in the summer and her immediate rehospitalization for attempted suicide and after her subsequent placement in an intensive outpatient program. The story I'd wanted to tell was about a woman who, despite her best efforts to empty herself, was full of that shifty material which keeps people up at night: meaning, purpose, the capacity to dream, and as you might've guessed by now, I've failed to tell that story.

Now, there are many reasons I can point to to explain why I failed, but before we get into that, I should explain what I mean by the word "failure". There's a question that all writers have to ask themselves, the question of completion (not



perfection, contrary to popular belief), and by “completion”, I mean that there is a point you reach in writing a story when you know you can go no farther, as if you’ve come to the edge of the world. That point is ever shifting. Sometimes when you think you’ve reached it, you put the story away or send it off into the world with a kiss and a soft prayer, only to come back to it years later and in reading it see the horizon stretch off before you, all the work you have left. Other times you work your way through the forest of your words and then, suddenly, you break through the ending with a small gasp and you’re there: at the cliff of your story with nowhere else to go but to your knees, in awe that your journey has finally ended. I know I’ve failed because, like an ouroboros, my journey can only end by devouring itself.

So. Reasons. My mentor (who I’ve fallen out of contact with) would say that I failed to tell it because I gave up on it, which would be true if I *had* allowed myself to throw in the towel, but in all honesty it's been four years and I’m no closer to giving up the story than when I started it back in undergrad. My mentor (who I stopped talking to after a disagreement over agency, free will, mercy, and a writer’s responsibility to their characters) would also suggest I failed with the story because I failed to self-separate which I’m more inclined to agree with because, and I cannot lie here, Ginger was only a name I gave myself on the page. Or rather, she was like my Eve, if I the writer and I the woman am, in this simile, simultaneously God and Adam. I pulled her out of one of my ribs, and in examining her afterwards, maybe, you know, I did fail to self-separate, to see her as a story and not a storied extension of myself. When I roosted in her *I*, I felt less like a bird who, after alighting on the eaves of a building, witnesses a miraculous occurrence before taking flight —and

here Ginger, the woman and the story, is both the building I have alighted on and the occurrence I've witnessed— and more like a tiny wooden matryoshka sliding home...

The biggest reason, or what I'd name as the biggest reason for my failure, is that I, in the writing, suffered from a distracted *I*. If you're familiar with the first person then you know what I'm gesturing toward. An *I* can only see and know so much, can only attend to so much, regardless of whose *I* it is. My *I* was closely tethered to Ginger's when I tried to write the story. Even in the drafts where I switched to third person, the implied *I* of narration still clung to Ginger everywhere she went, saw everything she saw, and spoke chiefly as her echo. Which is to say, I missed so very much. Which is to say I, unfortunately, had been writing the story about the wrong person.

And can you blame me? When I got to writing the story, all I could see (all I thought to see) was Ginger: Ginger stretching herself on her back across the surface of her bed next to her bedroom windows, catching light that slipped through them in the basin at the base of her throat, Ginger sitting quietly through the group therapy sessions required of her in the intensive outpatient program, tapping the knobbed first knuckle of her thumb against the peak of her sternum in boredom, Ginger at home in the shower feeling for the raised knots of her spine through her skin and mourning how quickly the body can become undone. I could've gone on forever tracking her through her summer days, but what kind of story would that have been? Not the one I had set out to tell.

But stories *can* do that sometimes. There was a story I tried writing once about a girl and her mother and sister and their cat and their father. The father dies, the cat disappears, the sisters both feel but never admit they are happy their father passed and the mother, by the end of the story, lays herself down in bed alone and wonders what became of the cat and who would keep it company. It was a bad story, but I wrote it and wrote it and wrote it, even wrote *to* it a few times, as if the page had become a sort of correspondence and I was trying to coerce the story out into the sun. After many many writings, eventually the story changed. This new version had no cat, no father, just the mother, her two adult daughters, and the simple distaste familiarity can brew. This too was a bad story, maybe worse than the first, but I was satisfied with it because I saw in each draft the progression of something, a movement from the A of draft one to the B of the final draft that invoked the whole alphabet. Which is a very roundabout way of saying *something happened there*, not in the story, but in the writing of the story, in the story of the story. The story of the story I failed, am failing, to write, this story I am trying to tell now, is harder to pin down, which seems to be, to me, only fitting. You, reader, must let me know how I do.

You see, I don't know where to settle. Do I push forward, laying out each little reason until I run out of space or energy, until I feel you running out of patience, until I wear you down? Do I drag you into the story and make you sit with me as I try to work it out, make you witness it in all its brittle little pieces? Do I show you my drafts? Would you even want to see them? Would that help? I'm absolutely stumped.

Maybe I am coming at this the wrong way. Maybe I've told you enough about Ginger and the story. Maybe you should know a little more about me, about how I

make my way home in the evening, my depressive thoughts on the metro. Do you need an inciting incident? Can't you guess my internal conflict? Why I, in toiling over this story, feel such a need to account for it?

The truth is, I'm a little ashamed of myself. A little ashamed, a little horrified. Not for failing to finish a story (which is a common occurrence in my life), but rather for failing to, as my mentor (who stopped talking to me when I asked him how he sleeps at night, knowing what he's done to his characters) suggested, self-separate. The inspiration for Ginger was pulled from my own life (girl meets world → girl gets sad → girl tries to starve out the sadness but the sadness wins), and while there is nothing *wrong* with writing about oneself (I'm doing it right now!), there has to be a point where the writing transcends the self and all is revealed to have been in service of that transcendence. There has to be a moment where the story, which you've been dragging along like a paper kite behind you, catches a good gust of clean air and bobs up into the sky and the plot—which in this metaphor is the thin string by which you've been tugging the tale forward over clods of soil and sharp rocks— slips out of your grasp and they together, kite and string, wheel freely overhead and are beautiful. There was none of this in Ginger. The story skidded along behind me as I dragged it for what felt like miles and miles worth of drafts before finally accepting that there would be no good clean gust of wind, no current strong enough to rip the story from my grasp and guide it up to glow at the very edges of the troposphere.

But to frame it this way is to only tell a half truth. There was a little breeze that rustled the story, that from time to time puffed it up off the ground to coast for a split second in the open air. And I noticed the little breeze purring and batting at my

story like a kitten but I was busy dragging us along, chasing after Ginger. This is what I'd meant earlier by my distracted *I*. That breeze, which was not a breeze but a character, might've maybe been enough to sunder me from the story and catapult it into the bright sky, (if I were a better writer, if I knew what it meant to self-evacuate). And what a relief that would've been, what a goddamned blessing, if it had come to pass.

The character's name was Sandra. Sandra first appeared around the fifth draft as just a name on a page added to populate one of Ginger's group therapy sessions. Everything I knew about her I learned through Ginger, and Ginger, unfortunately, was quite uninterested in the people in her life. That part of her, so similar to her creator, is what made me love her, once. I believed there was something inside her that justified the self-centeredness, something as rich and dank and fertile as the loamy fields of my childhood. But Sandra, all I knew for sure about her was that she had been assaulted and was seeking treatment for PTSD and liked to bum Marlboro Smooths off of Ginger's only friend in the program, Mason. That was all that seemed to matter.

The first time we, Ginger and I, saw her in motion on the page, somewhere in the eighth or ninth draft, she was sitting at the round table in the group lounge working on a coloring book page with markers and crayons. As people passed behind her they looked over her shoulder at the coloring and gave the hmms and ahhs of approval. Ginger was unimpressed with the sight of that grown woman hunched over her pile of Crayola crayons, and so, because my *I* was still roosting in Ginger's,

Sandra slipped away while Ginger turned to examine the donuts and coffee offered on the far side of the room possibly similar to how Jesus examined the blade that would go on to pierce his chest. How holy those stale donuts seemed to her, then. How lowly and simple Sandra seemed in comparison. I was still, in this draft and some of the ones that followed it, convinced that I could let Ginger's voice carry me to some startling truth, that Ginger *had* a voice capacious enough for such a task, so I let Sandra go on coloring. It didn't seem as if she wanted to be disturbed.

I don't know where she came from. I like to imagine she was wandering freely through the ether of creation until one day about a year ago, like passing through a veil, she found herself in Ginger's group therapy session with a name and a sudden, echoing, memory of pain. I imagine she must've winced at the shock of being, of becoming. And the truth is, despite her obvious discomfort, I welcomed Sandra's arrival. I had had enough. Ginger was driving me up and down the walls. She was somehow too small and too willing to take up space, to be the center. And too white for me to bear any longer. The whole story was too white. My mentor, on a phone call the day Sandra appeared, chastised me. He'd read a recent draft and asked over and over again "Where are *You* in this writing?" until I said "Behind it" and he said "That's not enough. You must be in every word." So I sat down at my laptop, typed out a few stilted sentences, and then all of a sudden there she was.

She was more like me than Ginger: Black, hurting, recalcitrant, wedded to her coloring book pages the way I am wedded to this story. Soon after she appeared, Ginger and I began to butt heads. Or, rather, we became cock-eyed. I wrote much earlier in this that I'd been writing the story about the wrong person, and I continued

to even after Sandra appeared. I still trailed after Ginger, still tried to settle comfortably into her *I* and quiet my own, but when Sandra would flash across the page, my *I* would rise up unbidden and attempt to bend back the narrative so that it wrapped around her and held her fast in place. I wanted to linger with that woman curled up over her crayons and markers like the edges of dry leaf. I wanted to sit beside her or peek over her shoulder as she colored carefully within each line. I felt myself pushing back against the scenes I wrote, quietly shouting, *Screw Ginger's preoccupation with stale glazed donuts! Screw their dramatic possibilities!*

I tried to make her watch Sandra, engage with her. There were so many deleted conversations. Choppy, restless, one-sided conversations. In one of them, Ginger leans beside Sandra, out back, as she smokes through one or two of Mason's cigarettes. She opens her wide mouth, and from the hollows of her chest we ask, *Why don't you buy your own pack?* Sandra just looks at her, sadly, as if Ginger doesn't understand a single thing in the world.

Of course, I could've just made Ginger say anything I wanted, Sandra too, but that would've entailed recognizing for myself how, all along, Ginger had been a puppet animated by no *I* of her own, that the flashes of life I'd once seen in her and spent draft after draft trying to uncover were flashes of my own hand working at the back of her throat, flapping her mouth open and closed, open and closed. At this point, I was on my thirteenth draft or so and I could feel myself coming undone over the story. It only got worse when I tried to write those moments of noticing.

Sandra. There, she was, in that eighth draft, coloring. By the twelfth draft, she was being led down a hallway for her solo session with a counselor, the long sleeves

of her cardigan fluttering as if instead of sheathing fingers and palm, the sleeves were full of breeze (and there it was again, that breeze), her head turned slightly as if she was a breath away from turning back to glare at me. There, again, a flash of her by the coffee and donuts, dipping her stale glazed into the stale coffee, smiling at how the glaze cut the bitterness of the coffee, as Ginger left for the day. There, again in draft nineteen, outside smoking with Mason, holding his wrist in hand and running her long, ridiculously, impossibly, long fingers over each long, raised scar, mouth set in a grim line of recognition.

(How could she do that? Touch him that way? As if angry, as if asking *Who did this to you?*)

I wanted to sit down with Sandra and ask, but I was beginning to feel like I was trapped in a thought experiment, like the first person I was not something to be trusted, was a little like Schrodinger's cat. Had Ginger always been my hand tapping away at a keyboard? Hadn't she been real, once, somewhere out in the ether before I found her? Hadn't she whispered to me, whispered herself into existence? Was it the act of finding her that made her a prop or had she done it to herself, once she realized what I was looking for? Characters can be kind that way.

Of course, feeling this way, sitting at my laptop and staring into the folder labeled "GINGER", at all the drafts it held of that story laid out over a grid five columns across and three rows deep, over four years of wasted effort, I considered giving up. And not just giving up the story and Sandra (who was becoming a sort of hope that held off the horror I felt at my deep confusion), but giving up writing altogether. It used to be that writing was like untying a knot or fighting through a forest in search



of a bright edenic clearing or edge of the world or any of the other tired metaphors I've already employed, but now... Now I'm caught between two women, both borne of my flesh, one light as air and hollow (hoping to be filled) and the other heavy as rain and praying for dissolution. One willing but incapable, the other capable but unwilling to pull me through.

So, how did I know the story was Sandra's? That seems like an important question to answer here. The best I can offer you is that sometimes she made the pages flutter. She unsettled them, unsettled me. It was as if she wanted to get out. She was always on the edge of a scene, always leaving or being left, as if at any moment she might walk off stage and be gone forever, back to that place where hurt women are sent once they've served their purpose. It was as if she *wanted* to go back, wanted nothing to do with me, and because I couldn't get close to her, because she didn't want me to, because I couldn't trust myself to get close to her without subsuming her *I* into my own (a process I had always trusted to work the other way around), all I could do was listen.

However, even as I say I wanted to listen to Sandra, I must admit, in all the drafts I've written she's only said a single line of dialogue. It took seven, from the eighth to the fifteenth, for me to find a way to let her talk, and then hearing her speak (or rather writing her dialogue) felt immediately like such a transgression that I cut her line altogether.

And it wasn't only that. It wasn't only that in letting her speak I was intensely aware of how I was speaking for her and how unreal she was and how real, how

*really* real, I wanted her to be. It was *what* she said, too, as if all along she knew I was there and listening and desperate.

She, during a group therapy session ( although, I know she wasn't speaking to the group, she was wagging one of her long, long fingers at me curled over my laptop like a dried out leaf), said, "You don't understand what it is like to be used, to carry it with you every day, the feeling that you are nothing but what someone else makes of you.

## Root

You live in an apartment with your mother and brother on Edgewood Street on the north end of Hartford across the street from the south end of Keney Park.

Sometimes you can hear pigeons coo from your bedroom window or voices of people on the street or at the edges of the park, coming and going. Sometimes you hear sirens coming and you can't breathe until they pass. Sometimes you hear shouts and shots from the park at night, and the next morning, on the way to school you walk quickly with your head down. You walk like you are in a bubble. You do this at home too. You have a room to yourself where you can sleep and crochet and read and be alone, but you've been finding it increasingly hard to be comfortable taking up space in a room that has become, over the years, a sort of family storage unit.

Your room is next to the bathroom which is on the right side of the hall if you're walking from the kitchen. Your mother's room is on the left side, next to your brother's. If you were to imagine the shape of the apartment in your head you would think immediately of a dumbbell because of the kitchen and the living/dining room and how the narrow hallway connects them like cold metal between two very heavy things. Or you would think of the playscape in the nearby McDonalds, the one your brother loves almost as much as the park, and you would see each room in your apartment as tiny child-sized bubbles connected by a flimsy plastic tunnel you have to hunch and crawl your way through.

When your mom first claimed a corner of your room, you were twelve. You came home to find boxes piled almost to the ceiling, and even though there weren't many you were excited. You believed you three, you, your baby brother, and her, were finally moving back to the old house, or somewhere like it. You started to pull clothes off their hangers in your closet. You made a pile of coats and shoes and jeans and your Sunday dresses. You were moving onto your dresser when you noticed her, your mom, with her arms crossed watching you from the doorway. She'd been watching you for who knows how long and looked like she couldn't believe what she was seeing. *Girl, what do you think you're doing?* You grinned at her. *I'm packing. We're moving, right?* And you pointed to boxes in the corner with their big bold black labels KITCHEN, LIVING ROOM, LANDAN. You pointed to the boxes, and she followed with her eyes, paused, and then let them land back over on you. Then she was laughing and laughing. *Oh no, oh baby no. We ain't moving. I just needed ta borrow some space for a lilbit. I can't keep paying for the storage unit so I just...* She laughed, bent forward, hands on her knees. *I just needed ta borrow a lil space.* She was laughing when she left too, the sound lilting like the pigeons' coos, and as you started in on the pile you'd made in the middle of your floor, you heard her through the walls on the phone with your grandma saying, *The poor girl ripped out her whole closet.*

You lived in a house off Blue Hills Ave when you were real small and you could, at twelve, still remember enough of it to hate the little apartment you shared with her and Landan. In fact, you'd been asking her to move since well before you were twelve and she came home saying you'd have a brother soon. You'd been

begging to go back almost since you moved into the apartment, declaring first in the plain words of a small child *I don't like it here, Mama. Mama, I don't*, and then with the confidence of a slightly larger child *Mama, when are we going back to the yellow house?*

In your mind you were always going back. You went back there everyday, for all the things about the yellow house that made it better than the new apartment; things like how often you got to eat biscuits because the yellow house was right down the street from a KFC, or how the yellow house had a pantry that you hid in some times, right behind the big bags of rice, because it made you feel like a mouse which was good because mice could disappear at will into the walls when they heard or saw things that scared them or they didn't understand whereas you were a person and kept getting older and bigger and people kept expecting you to -if not face your fears head on- realize that escape was no longer an option. You remembered that the yellow house had a toilet that you couldn't recall ever clogging, and of course you remembered the space. The wide open space. Your room which you remember being huge, the backyard of the house which you remember spreading out almost to the horizon. The size of the house itself, its highest point rising so far into the sky you could've stacked ten of yourselves up and been just a pinch short of reaching it.

When she told you about the brother you'd soon have, you didn't ask her about how he had come to be or anything like that; his happening was not a problem so much as it was a possible solution. You had a mission. You had a will, and now you had a way. You reminded her of the old house, how it was the perfect place to raise a child with its wide ranges of carpeted flooring and its grassy backyard. As she

rearranged the side room, which had been a kind of living room for the two of you with a good recliner and couch (both of which followed you from the yellow house), into a kind of bed room with a cradle and a small bin of toys for boy children, you pestered her and prodded her with old memories made monolithic by time and all the things you thought she couldn't see about the now. You told her the apartment was too small for a baby, the kitchen too small, the bathroom too small and the bathroom tile too cracked, the air too close and stanky, the pigeons from the park too loud, the shots, everything from the park too loud. You kept at it even when she came home carrying something small and ugly in her arms, something she called *your little brother Landan*. You reminded her, desperate now, that you were growing too, and the baby would take what was already yours and make it his and that didn't have to happen in a bigger house, and finally, carefully, as if saying *please*, she popped you in the mouth and told you to shut the hell up cuz you weren't too fancy to make space for your own blood. After some time, you agreed that you weren't, but kept on thinking you could be. You and your mom moved the recliner and couch out of Landan's room and down the narrow hall into what had been a kind of dining room, making it a different kind of living room than the first.

You wake up one morning to cooing that you realize is your mother's laughter and notice for what feels like, but isn't, the first time how much her borrowed corner has spilled into the rest of your room. Your closet has milk crates and big blue plastic bins crammed up under your clothes and the door won't shut. The original cardboard boxes have been replaced with big blue bins stacked high enough to reach your ribs, and they line the wall by the closet and jut out so that every morning you have to

squeeze around them to get into the space between your dresser and the foot of your bed just to get ready. You've covered the bins with a crocheted throw you made back when they were a new addition and hung a little mirror above them too. You laid out your hair lotions and body lotions there on top of the throw with a little dollar store vase holding your foxtail combs to try to make it pretty and homey and yours, but the throw doesn't reach the floor all the way so you can still see the blue base of the bins peeking out. It drives you insane.

Another morning you wake up, and you are mad at your mother. You dreamt that she had gray dirty wings and all black eyes, long skinny legs and no hair. Her wings were short and bare and pinched up at her sides, like chicken wings, and in the dream you felt this sick pleasure knowing that she couldn't fly. She couldn't even hover. Even though you now understand enough about things like rent money, insurance payments, loan debt, divorce settlements, and something your mother calls the "black tax", the way they can crowd people out of their storage units and their yellow houses, you dreamt last night just before waking of leaving her there in your small dark room and emerging into a world of warm light and a vaulting open sky. You roll out of dream and bed both, shimmy past the bins to your dresser and decide the time has come to push all the junk into the living room or Landan's or hers once and for all and be done with it.

At school, that same morning, you think to tell Za-miyah about the dream and what you'd planned to do, but reconsider because you were more sure of yourself in the dim morning. Now, in the narrow fluorescent hallway, the idea you had seems so petty, your satisfaction at the dream, monstrous. You and your mother have had fights

before about the bins. You know where she stands on them. You know they are just something you have to work with. You know it's not her fault. But still, you are *mad*. You don't know who, if not her, to be mad at. And that makes the anger worse. You open your locker and in the small mirror on the inside of the door you spot Za-miyah coming down the hall toward you. You turn and wave and she responds by howling, *Biiitch, you won't believe this shit that Kiya pulled last night*, and a teacher, the science teacher who is new and white and balding, leans out of his classroom and tells her to go to the office for cursing in the hallway. She rolls her eyes in his direction, and keeps coming at you, weaving effortlessly through the groups of students, the new science teacher still mouthing the words *Office. Main office*, trailing behind her and turning red, and you feel a little bad for him because you know no one's gonna move out his way because he is new and is white and teaches science. You know he won't catch up to Za-miyah before she reaches you and you both cut through the library and out of sight.

Once you're settled in home room, Za-miyah tells you her sister, Kiya, has finally run out to go stay with her boyfriend who's at least thirty, manages the Dollar Tree on Flatbush, and lives on the south end of Hartford in a shittier apartment than your own. She says finally like she's been waiting for this her whole life, and when she describes the fight that Kiya and her ma had you wonder how the girl left the house alive. Za-miyah's mom is a big woman, tall and heavy set and strong. She has a way of filling doorways and hallways and letting no light shine through around her. Kiya is only three years older than you and skinny. You've heard her ma say she was so skinny and so black she'd be a plain ol' straight line if she turned to the side.



When you ask Za-miyah why Kiya left, she waves a hand in the air as if the question is a gnat flitting by her ear. When you ask how she feels about it all, she looks down at her desk and says quietly, *Kiya's coming back*. And you hear her voice quiver.

You go through the rest of the day thinking about Kiya. You think she's not much older than you, not much different from you either. You don't have a boyfriend and don't want one, but you do have a mother who, like hers, might be everything and everywhere in your life, and you do want a way, any way, to make yourself solid and not so small in comparison.

You walk home after school with Za-miyah through Keney Park, and when there is space in the conversation you tell her about the bins in your room and how it is finally time for them to be pushed onto someone else, and you tell yourself at the same time that it isn't petty to feel this way. She says *It's about time. I swear, you don't have room for anything in there. Nothing. Like how do you even live in that?* You say, *We don't even need that stuff. No one'll miss it*, but as you say that you know that you're lying because most of the stuff is your mother's and grandmother's and even though she has no use for a lot of it, she wants to keep it close.

You tell Za-miyah you want to push the bins into your mom's room, just to show you can, but she tells you *Nah, that ain't right*. She says, *That's some shit Kiya would do... Like there is no need for all the fighting. All she had to do was work around her. All she had to do was finesse*. And Za-miyah moves her hand, palm flat facing the ground, out in front of her. She moves it smooth, as if to show what was meant by finesse. A pigeon coos loudly from somewhere above you, and you want to

defend Kiya. So what if she picked fights over This or That or the Third? So what if she pushed just to push? She was who she was. Small: yes. Mean sometimes: yes. Punchy sometimes: yes, and even though it got her ass beat over and over that's just the way she was. You think that if she were you four years ago, she would've said no over and over again even through getting popped in the mouth.

You met Kiya's boyfriend on the night of her 19th birthday at the end of the summer. You and Za-miyah were on the front porch passing a one-hitter back and forth, trying to cough over the shouting happening inside between Kiya and her mom, and he pulled up in a dented grey sedan, rolled down the passenger side window and called out *You Kiya's sisters?* You couldn't see him in the car, but he sounded younger than you'd expected and nicer too. Za-miyah answered *Why? What you want?* and he shut off the car, right there in the middle of the street, got out, and came around to where you could see him. *Tell her Cello's here.*

He didn't look like much. He was just as skinny as Kiya, just as dark as her too, and drowning in his black tee and jacket. He had what looked like a gift in his hand, and Za-miyah stood slowly, stretched, bounced down the stairs, and grabbed it from him. Then she went inside.

You were a lil high so you didn't try to talk to him, and he just stood there busy drowning in his clothes. You were thinking that he didn't seem too bad, just skinny and maybe a lil ugly, but he had a car, which Kiya didn't, and he could get her out of her house for even just a little bit which you guessed was why she was with him instead of someone her age or someone better looking. You looked him up and down and couldn't think of another reason and figured that maybe it was just because

you didn't know him at all, and maybe he was the sort of man a girl would be lucky to have but you don't know what kind of man that could be. You two were out there for almost twenty minutes without saying anything to each other, just listening to the pigeons coo and mother and daughter fight, the hint of a siren way off in the distance, before Kiya came stomping out, Za-miyah following her. Kiya looked down at you and said over the sounds of the night, *Thanks for coming tonight. Sorry about all this*, then flipped her dark hair over her dark shoulder and seemed to float down the stairs and into the passenger seat of the sedan. He trailed after her and then they were gone.

When you reach your apartment building, you and Za-miyah linger on the steps talking and not talking, watching cars pass and trees lose their leaves to the fall breeze and pigeons peck all down the sidewalk, until Landan's kindergarten bus drops him off. Then she leaves, waving to your little brother as she goes, and turns the corner onto Capen Street where she lives in her house with her mother. The night of Kiya's 19th, after she left with Cello, their mother, Ms. Robinson came out on the steps with you and Za-miyah. You passed her the one hitter and wrinkling her nose at the dirty glass pipe she said *Y'all don't know how to roll a blunt?* A light was on in the living room of the house, and it cast a weird sort of green glow on the three of you through the green curtains. It glistened on her dark skin like oil sheen, and you realized that you've never once thought of this woman as beautiful and even then she wasn't beautiful to you. Just very alive and very sad. She said out loud to no one in particular, *I don't know why she do the things she do.* Za-miyah patted her mother's back, and you tried not to notice the small green tears tracking down the woman's round cheeks. *That's a grown man she's running off with. She don't know him. She*

*don't know what he wants from her. She just wants to leave here like I'm so horrible to her.* You lock eyes with Za-miyah, and she nods her head toward the street. She's telling you to go. So you stand to go and look down at her mother who has tears flowing freely down her cheeks, stacking on each other as if they were little green beads strung against her skin, as if they would hang there forever.

You mom comes home late from her new job. She's moved up from temping to working directly for the temp agency, hiring more women to take jobs she used to hate. She told you, the day she was hired, the woman who invited her to take the job said she wanted her, your mother, because she'd be easier for potential temps to approach and work with than the other women at the office. Your mother told you she'd been relieved to be offered the job (it was more secure, offered benefits after a few months full-time, and paid enough for them to relax a little) but the reasoning behind it rubbed her all wrong. She told you all those other office women were young and skinny and blond and varying shades of white. She said that all of them, every one, wore the same style of black pumps to work that day and each said *We are just so excited to bring you on-board* when they introduced themselves to her, and she said she hated not being able to tell for certain, never being able to tell for certain, if they were full of shit.

She makes some noises in the kitchen, the room the apartment door opens into, and you think you hear her stacking groceries onto the washer and dryer to put away later. Then you hear the thud of her work shoes cross through the kitchen and down the narrow hall into her room. You and your brother are in the living/dining room at the end of the hall. He is playing with a chipped set of alpha-blox, and you

are crocheting in the arm-chair which is older now and creaky, and no longer reclines. You aren't sure what you're making but you've got this idea in your head to make something big and bright and colorful to hang under the mirror once the bins are gone. You have this idea that by making it, you are bringing a new world into existence, a world where even the bins have their own space, their own yellow house, so you choose your brightest colors and start with red. You are humming as you work and she comes up beside you and hugs you and looks at your work, which is not much more than a long red strip of stitches in your lap, and says, *Another blanket?* And before you can answer she says, *I dunno where you got so much patience, girl. I can't make more than a scarf, barely even that.* She walks over and scoops your brother up from off the floor and spins him around. You like seeing her come home like this after work. You like that she comes home a little more alive. For a while, during her last assignment working overnight cleaning and stocking the Bravo on Woodland, she'd come home in the mornings and barely look at you getting your brother ready for the bus, getting his breakfast ready or his teeth brushed. She'd slump through the kitchen and down the hall to her room. It was only once you had gone to school and come home that you'd find her in the living/dining room folding laundry and smiling at the sight of you there taking up space in front of her.

You remember Za-miyah's advice from the afternoon. *Finesse*. You didn't want to tell her then you're not the smooth type. You're not even the rough type like Kiya. You don't know what type you are, and you don't know how to get what you want. If you did the bins would never have become a problem. You'd be back in the yellow house, with an attic you're not sure you remember being there, an attic

perfectly capable of housing all the blue bins in the world. So you keep stitching row after row and after your mom sits your brother back down, you turn to her and say, *I'm making something to hang on my wall. Under my mirror.* You say it like it doesn't matter, so she barely notices you speak. She's trying to relax into the couch cushions. Soon she'll be up and on the way to the kitchen to unpack whatever's waiting there and then cook dinner because you burn water and are a little proud each time you do. She won't have time for you to try to *finesse* her. After you've all had dinner together, she'll go collapse on her bed and that'll be it, most likely, so you add, *It'll look nice once those junk bins are outta the way.* You say that like it doesn't matter either, and she, with her head back and eyes closed says *Yeah, I'm sure it would. You thinking of stacking them different?* In just the same cool way, so you say, *Well, I was thinking we could, I could, move them out here or maybe into Landan's room. He's got a lot of room in there to spare.* And you keep stitching, and she stays quiet, and you realize it's because she's going to say no so you start backpedaling. *I know you, we, can't afford another storage unit right now, and I won't have to move all of them, just one or two from my room and maybe a few of the crates from my closet.* She's still not speaking, and you've stopped stitching. You say, *I just want a lil space back, right. It's getting hard to breathe in there.*

She looks at you and you look at her, and she says *No*, then lets out a long breath as if she'd been holding it all day and stands up and says, *No. We've been through this before. No. Landan is at that age where he likes to climb things and he's big too, and I don't- I know you don't want him to climb up onto those bins and jump off or fall off, so no, baby, no... You've lived with it this whole time, and you'll live*

*with it tomorrow.* It occurs to you that now would be a good time to lay off her. She made up her mind, and as if to prove it to you, the pointlessness of stacking one plea onto another, Landan stacks his blocks up into a tall unsteady tower that wavers and falls as he's working on it. He stamps his little foot, and you consider adding a fringe to the bottom of the old throw and letting that be that. But then, then you think of Kiya flipping her hair on the stairs outside her little house that summer, Kiya floating into the night, not Mrs. Robinson's string of beads, and you push one more time. You say, *I'm not fine with it.* You reach out your arm and point down the hall to your door. *All that shit in my room, I don't like it. I don't, and-*

You stop. Your mom is looking at you in a way she hasn't in a long time. *You don't like it, huh? You don't like 'all that shit'?* She takes a deep breath and moves close to you. *You know what? Maybe I don't like it either. You ever stop to ask me what shit I don't like?* She leans down just in front of your face, and you lean back into the cushions and close your eyes shut, scared she's gonna pop you in the mouth like when you were twelve, and mad that you won't be free to be mad at her for it. It would be quick and sharp and final and feel like *please* again before it felt like pain.

She tells you to open your eyes. You do. She says, *You don't ask and you won't. So I don't wanna hear anymore on this.* Then she leaves. She goes to the kitchen, and wordlessly, you begin to unravel the stitches in your lap, yarn forming a soft red pool at your feet.

The next day, in homeroom, you tell Za-miyah a version of what happened that still has you pushing too hard but omits the way your mom didn't push back as much as she just let herself fall on you. She is quick to tell you where and how you

went wrong. *Girl, what did I say? I said you gotta be easy. You gotta work around her. You can't tell her how you want anything.* You don't tell her that your mom was right. Not right that you'd be fine in the morning because you woke up hating the bins more than you thought possible, hating the little blue strip that peeks out no matter how you drape the throw, and hating yourself for not thinking to measure when you crocheted the cover. You don't tell her that your mom was right that you've never ever thought about what she don't like, and you don't tell Za-miyah that you spent the night lying in bed thinking about what it is your mom don't like, thinking first about what she told you of her job and then other things and eventually what you came up with was the hollow kind of terrifying, and made the apartment seem smaller and your skin feel tighter than it should. What you came up with made you look in the mirror and realize for the first time that your skin, your body, is not a yellow house that'll keep everything safe. Your skin, your body, is more like the bins in your room and closet. Unwanted.

You don't tell Za-miyah anything, and she tells you that the science teacher, the one who is new and white and balding, got her name from another teacher who doesn't like her and did something stupid so when she got home her ma was waiting, asking her why she was showing out at school. You ask if she got her ass beat, and she says *Nah, not too bad*, but now she has ISS for a day and detention and can't walk home with you after school. After the pledge of allegiance, she gets up and leaves, but you want her to stay because now you want to tell her what you were thinking about last night in front of the mirror and ask her if she's ever felt the same.



Almost a week passes. One day, when Landan gets home from kindergarten, you take him with you across the street to Keney Park. You started going there alone a few days ago. After your mom gets home from work, you throw skeins of yarn into your backpack and head across the street past the dank pond and the old pond house with its chipping paint, following the path you walk along to school each day until you reach the fork that leads either to Ridgefield Street and Weaver High or to an area with benches, a playscape, and a basketball court, and a small sort of water park of sprinklers and fountains, and, of course, pigeons. Ever since the night she didn't hit you, you don't want to be around your mom or alone in the apartment with this new thing crowding in on the both of you. So you go to the park, and this time you bring your younger brother. It is the least you can do, not to leave him there as if you're saying to her *Here, do it all alone.*

Landan is happy to go to the playground, and you talk to him on the walk over, holding his small hand in yours, surprised at how quickly he has grown right there beside you while you barely noticed, surprised at how easy it is to talk to him, how it seems that even yesterday it was not this easy, surprised at how much sense he makes. It's nice until it isn't. It's nice until he says he likes going to kindergarten because it is at Ms. Mary's house, and Ms. Mary has a big house with a lot of rooms, and he gets to play in some of them at play-time, and he says all of this while reaching his tiny little arms out to show off just how big the house is and just how much he loves it. You tell him that it sounds great because it does and push him off to go play with other kids on the kiddie-scape.

You're sitting at a bench, crocheting. You've started a new project, something forest green and burnt orange and many colors in between. Something that makes you think of the world outside your apartment as inviting, as a world where you are welcome. It helps you dispel the sense that has lingered with you since the night she didn't hit you, a new sense of your mother that you still can't put to words, a sense of the world of your mother which is really your world that you can't name or won't name because it'll leave you out, open to all the things that could crowd a person out of their own life. You chose the colors because they reflect a world alive and at work, a world like the flashing of the maple leaves that fall around you when the wind blows right. You work on it at home and at school and it is fine because you are quiet and don't bother anyone with it. Only the new teacher, the science teacher, asks you about it, and even then it is only to ask what you were making and then to tell you not to let it distract you from the lesson. It turns out his face is always red.

You look up when you hear your name being called. You think it's Landan, that he is hurt or scared, thoughts filled with night sirens, and you scan the playground only to find him at the base of a slide with other toddlers laughing and flapping their arms as they chase after the park pigeons. You hear your name again and look around again and then you see her, Kiya, hanging out by the basketball courts with Cello. She waves you over so you pack up your yarn and cross over.

Up close and in the light of day, Kiya is different. She's cut her hair. All of it. Before she had hair her mother would relax for her: on a cushion on the floor with her head between her mother's knees, arguing with her even as the woman gently parted her naps and smeared out the relaxer from root to tip. She'd had long-ish hair, coarse

to the touch, but shiny and swishy after every relaxer and now all that was left of it was a short fuzz just off the scalp. You like the look on her, but you think you like the shock of it more than anything else. You've known this girl for most of your life and now the absence of her hair is so new, it is like seeing her again for the first time. You feel like you can see all of her or more of her than you ever thought there was. Suddenly you want to call her *woman* but even that is wrong. You want, need, something bigger than *woman* for her now.

She smiles and runs a hand over her scalp. *I see you've noticed my new do.* You smile back, *It looks good on you,* you say. *Why'd you cut it?* She shrugs and glances over to the far end of the courts where Cello has struck up a conversation with another man, shirtless and dreadlocked. She says, *I don't know. I felt like I was still carrying a lot with me after I left. Za-miyah told you I left, I bet.* You nod, and she continues, still watching Cello. *Yeah, I don't know. I just wanted it all gone. All of it. Cello tried to get me to go back for my clothes and stuff, but I didn't - don't, I don't want them.* She looks back at you and grins. *And anyway, my hair was shit. My mom always left her relaxers in a lil too long. It was all fried.* You nod again, unsure of what to say to this new Kiya. You haven't seen her since the night of her 19th birthday, almost three months ago. You wonder if she's seen her sister, her mother. You want to ask if she misses them, but you don't. Instead, softly you say again, *It looks good,* and she says again, *Yeah... yeah.*

You wait for her to say something but she doesn't, so together you watch Cello get roped into a game of basketball. You want to ask her questions like *What do you do when someone takes something from you, something that you need to live?* But

you don't know how you would explain who does the taking and why and how or what it means if she asked you what you meant. You want to believe that this new Kiya wouldn't need the clarification, as if a haircut and a week of freedom are roots from which a kind of wisdom can grow.

Cello and a few other men walk out onto the court and disturb the pigeons that are shuffling around pecking at the pavement. In the silence between you and Kiya, between you not asking what you want to ask and her not giving anything up, you notice pigeons everywhere, crowding the whole scene and cooing and shuffling, flapping their wings, and pecking everything. You turn to Kiya and blurt, *Are you going to go back?* The best way you know how to meet the moment, the clutter of it, is returning to simple questions like Will you or Won't you, Can I, Can't I? All of these are easier than *Why*, which is the real question you want to ask this person, this Kiya. *Why do they take the things you need to live, things like space and certainty?* She pulls out a pack of cigarettes and starts to smack it against her thigh, setting a steady rhythm. *I don't know*, She says, as if answering both questions. You say, *Za-miyah thinks you will*. She laughs and lights a cigarette. You've never seen her smoke before. You feel like this could also be a root.

On the court Cello is posted up just under the net holding off another man from taking his shot. The man keeps backing into Cello, trying to steal territory bit by bit. You look over at the kiddie-scape, and Landan is riding a long thin slide. A pigeon flies and lands on top of the backboard. Kiya says, *Za-miyah thinks she knows everything*. She looks at you, really looks, long and hard at you, from head to toe, and you let her, this person who you thought you used to know. She says, *I might. But, I*

*don't know. I honestly feel the same. Here or there. Anywhere. I could go back home tonight and get my ass beat but sleep in my own bed and... I don't know. I still wouldn't feel myself. I could stay with Cello tonight and sleep in his bed, and I still wouldn't feel myself... This-* She motions to her scalp, suddenly angry, *This didn't do anything. Nothing. So at least it looks good.* She exhales heavy and you do too.

You know what she's talking about. You know her's was an answer that had something to do with trying not to need, something to do with saying no, and because you won't ask, you can't tell her what you think of that answer. And you can't share your own.

So you stand with her and watch Cello play until you hear Landan calling for you. You look over at him, and he is in the fountain area, soaking wet, and waving his short arms above his head. You pick up your crochet bag and say, *My brother... I should go*, and Kiya nods and gives a smile and turns fully to watch the basketball game.

Later, after you've collected your brother and brought him back to the apartment to drip water and track mud all across the wood floors, you think of how you could've told her about the yellow house you used to live in and how you still like to remember it as it was when you were real small. It big then, big as the whole world, so much bigger than you and very full, but it was fine because you could find yourself in it just by looking down at the brown of your hands. How when you were there, the space you took up never felt like stealing. You could've told her that you still believed in that house long after you and your mother left it, after your apartment filled to the brim with Landan's cries and your room started taking on things you

needed to cover to feel secure, that sometimes you still dream about it, and when you wake up you don't always immediately remember the day, last year, when you and your mom and your brother were on the way to a beauty supply store on the other side of town, driving up Blue Hills Ave and your mother pointed out to your brother, *That's where me and your sister used to live, Landan. That house right there*, and you, heart in your throat, heart just inside the small cave of your mouth, turned thinking *Home*, just to see it passing by through the passenger window: a small and ugly, pus yellow shotgun house, its tiny yard ringed in by a wire fence left hanging open, pigeons perched and pecking at the rails. Yes, you could've told her how the dream was gone, and you were gone, already far down the road.

## Ginger

I still have the photos of us from that summer's Independence Day. Do you remember that summer? I'd just gotten out of the hospital. I was gaining weight back, ounce by ounce. You swore you believed in fresh starts, like after Dad left. There are photos of you at the grill: wine cooler in hand, your hair slicked back in a cloudy ponytail, the brown skin of your forehead catching the flash of the camera.

I found the album tucked away in a box last night after we got off the phone. I hadn't known what I was looking for when I found it, but something you'd said on the phone sent me back to the past. Or rather, it was something I felt about what you said to me during our chat. You wanted to talk about AA. We've been talking about it together, now, for maybe a month, talking about what it'd be like for a woman your age to join a local group, to make her confessions. Each talk, each night, you brought it up between us and then tried to brush it away the way you used to brush crumbs off our countertops when I was a girl.

That cookout was a mess. Do you remember? It was our first and last Independence day cookout. You grilled burgers that I did not eat because I'd gone vegetarian. There is a photo of you pushing a loaded plate towards me and there I am with my arms bent and hands raised to fend it off. Actually, it is a photo of Mason's parents, already sloshed, standing next to the deck door, but we got caught in it off to the right.

If I can recall, you weren't drunk quite yet. In fact, you did well that night. You stuck to wine coolers, only had two or maybe three at most before everyone packed up and left. It was during the cleanup that I noticed you finish one beer then another then another then slouch off to bed with one in each hand. But that aside you did well.

It was everyone else who drank that night at the cookout. Mason, me, his parents, the few friends of yours that you invited, the few friends of mine that I wanted to see. In one picture, I'm grinning between two of my old pals from high school, holding a hard seltzer in my left hand and making bunny ears behind someone's head with my right. When I pull that photo out of its sleeve in the album and hold its glossy surface close to my face, I can almost make you out in the background, you and the wetness of my eyes.

The photo I like the best is of you stretched out by the pool the night of the cookout. You'd let someone else take over grilling and had changed into a modest bikini and a long green bathing suit cover. Your limbs are long and thin like the arms of a birch tree. Your mouth is open wide in laughter and your head tilted slightly upwards towards the night sky. There is a clear, cool drink in your hands. You don't look like you could be anyone's teacher, anyone's ex-wife, certainly not anyone's mother. You look like you had all the time in the world to finish that drink, like it wasn't an issue at all.

I remember the day we got those photos developed but not who put them into an album or how I ended up with the album all these years later. The cookout photos aren't the only ones in it, but they are the only ones dated, and they start the album



off. The other pictures are ones you snapped of me during the rest of the summer. Flipping through the small laminated pages, I can almost feel myself shrinking back into the bones of that year. I was so small, Mom, so very very small. You could've seen the peaks of my shoulder blades through my skin, the ridges of my ribs, all the little knobs and tendons of my wrist. In fact, when I think back on those days, the images I recall are ones of light laying itself across my bare skin, pooling in the places where my body hollowed.

What would I remember of that summer without these pictures? The barest of facts... In so many of the photos, I am turning away from the camera, away from you holding the camera. In one of them, I've got a hand out moving to block the lens. All you can see of my face is a bit of brown and an ear. In another I am escaping around a corner. There is a leg, thin as straw, there are shorts that are too loose. There are the last curls of my fro. What were you trying to record here, Mom? Your efforts? Mine?

Let's start again.

Last night you said, *Ginger, I'm going to do it. I am. I'm going tomorrow.*

And I said, *I think that's a good idea, Mom. I really do.*

Then you said, *I need you to go with me.* And I got mad. Just a little. And I wanted to tell you something, but I didn't know what to say, so eventually I said *Yes*, and we hung up. I couldn't stop thinking about it. I went kicking through my closets rehearsing lines that could get me out of going, feeling smaller than I liked to remember. I found the album in a box of old books and binders. I think, Mom, that I

wanted to tell you a story about *need*. If I start at the beginning, take it slow, I can make it out, word by word....

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Your door is closed. You keep the door closed when you're in the room, closed when you're not, and locked at all hours, and last night, after the cookout, I saw you slouching towards your bedroom, a beer in each hand, so I shouldn't be surprised or annoyed, but I am. Last night was our 4th of July celebration, and you spent most of it at the grill sipping wine coolers, flipping burgers, and chatting up Mason's parents. Your hair was slicked back into a low ponytail and in the evening sunlight, you glowed a soft oaky brown. Normally, we don't celebrate Independence Day except to reread "What to the Slave is the 4th of July?" and rewatch our favorite *Roots* episodes, but this year you insisted on throwing a cookout. When I'd asked you why, you wouldn't exactly say it was because of me, but danced around it so precisely that if I had traced the stuttering path of your avoidance it would've formed a perfect circle with the word *Recovery* smack in the center. You offered me hot dogs and burgers that I refused on the basis of my week-old vegetarianism. When I pushed the plates away, you frowned the same frown my counselor had when I'd mentioned my conversion in therapy last Monday, so to appease you, I piled my plate high with potato salad, grilled corn, roasted peppers and onions, and a scoop of the fruit salad you served out of a hollowed out melon. I can't say it was delicious, but it happened.

Through the wood, you groan in your sleep, and I hear your bed shift. I knock hard. *Mom. It's 8:30. I need you to get up and take me to CHR.* My voice is calm, as

if I'm asking you how you want your coffee. Behind me, my reflection in the wall mirror knocks at her mother's door as well. We could turn and look at each other, scrutinize and share knowing glances, frustrated by the unresponsive doors at our backs, but we don't. Neither of us would've liked what we saw. You snore like a bear in a cave. I knock some more and then text Mason for a ride.

In his car he says *She didn't seem that bad last night. Shit, I drank more than she did.* Mason is only a year or so older than me and white like most of the people who go to CHR. We met three weeks ago on my first day in the program. He was smoking cigarettes outside when you dropped me off. It had been an awkward ride from Somers to the Community Health Resources building in Enfield, the only place within a 50 mile radius of my hometown that has a decent partial hospitalization program, and you pulled up to the wrong door at first, you were in such a rush to get me out of the car. I went in, realized your mistake, came out, and there was Mason, tall, skinny, arms covered in what, from a distance, seemed like a horrible rash. *Do you need help?* He asked, and stubbed out his cigarette to the butt. I said, *More than you know.*

You'd liked the idea of Mason, liked that I had a friend in the program despite how much you distrusted the program itself, up until you caught sight of his arms. He'd dropped me off one day and smoked a cigarette in our driveway before heading home. The scars were unavoidable in the bright sunlight, shiny and smooth. Some bloomed across his skin, red as if full of ripe currants; others snaked along rosy pink and thick, while between, beside, and bisecting all: thin white strokes, only gently raised, hatching and cross-hatching along his biceps and forearms. It had been

impossible for me not to appreciate the effort he put into them, but you met me at the front door after he left, only half able to speak. *Was that him? How well did I know him? Did I think he was safe?*

Last week, I got my discharge date. It was during my solo session with Sally, the women's therapist and one of the eating disorder specialists, that I was told to pull out my phone and mark the date on my calendar. In the little grey room that served as the one-on-one therapy chamber, Sally thumbed through some papers in my file, flapped it shut, and said over the white-noise machine *Now remember, this date is only tentative. Between you and me, I think you could, with a show of good behavior, convince them to let you go even sooner. You've taken to the refeeding process. You've taken to therapy. You're doing well for yourself.* She smiled at me, and I did my best not to notice the way her mascara had smudged itself in the folds of her eyelids. For some reason I couldn't name, I wanted to cry. Instead, I said, on a whim, *I've decided to go vegetarian*, and felt better. A beat passed, then Sally held my gaze, frowned deep, then said slowly, *Ginger, I can work with that as long as you stay on track with your goals. Talk to your dietician about meeting your nutritional needs on a vegetarian diet, make some meal plans, and keep me updated. Our session this afternoon will focus on how not to relapse with an alternative diet. Your discharge date is August 12th. Mark it down so you don't forget.*

Today the women's group lasts for an hour before lunch. We let Pat talk for half of it because it's her last day, and she stutters her way through dreams of the deli, the meat counter, her flimsy paycheck. She talks about her kids – two boys, twins.

Their dad tried to convince them that PTSD from rape can't happen, that suicide attempts are a sign of selfishness, a sign of a woman who never learned how to love. One believes him. The other returns her calls, tries to get his brother on the line. She's scared that he'll never come around. She's scared she'll be alone in the world, only half loved. I focus on a place behind Pat's head, outside the window. The green, green grass. The summer sky puffy like gray mold. It's hot out there and muggy. Tonight there'll be fog.

After Pat finishes, Sally wants us to open up about how we got to be where we are now, not how we got better, but how we got bad in the first place. She is saying it's good to acknowledge how it all began if we want to work towards healthier, happier lives. I am tempted to raise my hand and start the story of my life, "It all began when I was born on April 17th, 1995..." but that sort of misdirection stopped feeling worthwhile while I was in the hospital. Nonetheless, I still dread the idea of having to pitch in to this conversation. Why should I have to tell them about the first few meals I skipped or how my eyes began to land on my body different. I'm sure they can tell what happened just by looking at me. They've probably tried to imagine what I looked like before. I am directly to Sally's left. She turns to her right and asks Heather to go first, and the woman looks uncomfortable muttering an account of how she started on coke. Three more people go before Bridget knocks on the room door to let us know our time has run out.

Two hours later, we're all standing around the table in the group therapy room singing the Golden Girls theme song to Pat as a goodbye. Bridget leads: *Thank you for being a friend. Traveled down the road and back again.* We sing it to everyone on

their last day, but today, for Pat, I try my best to stay in key. Not because I like her, in fact we've barely spoken to each other besides one conversation, but because she looks so lost, like she'll crumple when the song ends. I want to remind her how ridiculous this whole thing is. The real world will be better.

But then again, I have to ask myself if it will. Since Sally gave me my date I've been thinking about those two weeks between the program ending and the fall semester at UConn starting up again. What will I do with myself, alone with you in our little house on a hill? Last week, after my meeting with Sally, in the car on the way home, I let the words August 12th hang between us, just under the pop music coming out of the stereo. You said something about bonding, girl time, and something else about needing to stop by the bank before heading home. You reached out and rubbed your thumb around my elbow until we went over a pothole and I used the moment to pull away. I'd always been better at talking to Dad, at least before the divorce, about what scared me in the world. On the rare instances I sought you out, you never failed to remind me that loving someone doesn't easily translate into knowing how to care for them.

Mason drives me home. When we reach my house, he turns the radio down to say, *You're looking better. Just so you know.* I nod at him, and catch sight of myself in the car's side mirror. He's right. My face has filled out a little. The angles aren't so sharp. My clothing's tightened. A moment passes and, embarrassed, I nod at Mason again then climb out of the Camry and cross the lawn to my front door. He leans on his horn as he drives away.

Inside, you're cooking. The smell of it makes my stomach churn, and I remember the nurses in the hospital, their loosely folded hands, their warnings that to gain the weight back, I'd be sick for a while, my body needed to relearn how to process food, build fat cells and muscle without overworking itself. Eventually, they said, the food I eat will stop running through me, will be solid when I shit, but for now, in the refeeding process, diarrhea is something I have to live with.

You call to me from the kitchen, *Did my alarm go off this morning?*

It had. You have one of those old fashioned alarm clocks with real bells and a little hammer that rockets back and forth between them, the sort of alarm that could start a riot if ever detonated in a college dormitory. It woke me up at around 7:00 in the morning, and at about 8:15, after showering, I realized you hadn't gotten up, just silenced the alarm in your sleep. Instead of answering, I climb the stairs to my room and drop off my jacket and program folder. On my dresser, my beta fish swims circles in a bowl a size too small for it. He's built a bubble nest along the surface of the water.

Sun light slats across my bedspread. Laying down, I pull my shirt up over my hips, belly button, and ribs, let the sun warm streaks of my skin. A few months ago, I used to lay in my bed on campus and let light pool in the hollow of my abdomen and imagine it seeping through, illuminating each bone. I had felt translucent, half grotesque. Even then, though, my lower belly had a slight pudge to it. Now the pudge has grown, but sometimes I still want to be like stained glass or fragile as tulip stems. Nobody has told me when that will change, if ever it will. I run my fingers over my

ribs, counting them, then replace my shirt and take the steps two at a time to the kitchen.

You're leaning against the counter, cell phone tucked between your shoulder and ear, the slow cooker gurgling beside you. The room smells of chili powder and beans. As I approach, you say a few words into the receiver then hang up. You are a big woman, tall with long, hard to miss limbs, yet thin as a palm frond, wide-eyed and mouthed. On the nights when you slouch your way to bed, I picture you in the ocean, long limbs propelling you deep under reared back waves. I used to look almost nothing like you. I take after my father, tall too, yes, but naturally heavy set with darker skin and loose curls compared to your tight coils. Nowadays though, we're nearly the spitting image of each other.

*How was it today?* You ask. I start to answer, but you cut me off. *I meant to get up and take you but I swear the alarm just didn't go off...*

*It's fine,* I say, shrugging. *Mason picked me up. What're you making?*

You straighten up and cross over to the section of the counter reserved for cookbooks. After my discharge, you started watching Food Network and picking up new books almost every other day for weeks. It didn't seem to matter how hard it was to finish what was placed before me. Now that we're knee-deep into the summer, you've got a good collection amassed. You pick up one with a smiling white chef raising a glass of dark liquid to his lips on the cover.

*Chili, but with a twist.* You point out an empty beer can on the counter. Sam Adams. I had missed it somehow. *The stout helps enhance the flavor. Usually it tastes best if you make the chili with beef, but I'm sure this'll work too.* Suddenly nervous,



you tap your foot against the ground, looking everywhere but at me or the can. I can feel the apology coming.

*I really am sorry about this morning. I couldn't sleep well. I only managed to fall asleep at, maybe, six o'clock...*

I nod and tell you it's fine, even though I know you'll corner me later, more confident, urgent, in your need to make amends. It's happened before. The first time you missed driving me to CHR you hounded me for days about it, peppering our talks with apologies until finally I had to snap at you, *Okay, you're sorry, Okay*, but of course you were drinking then and your voice changed and you said, *I don't like your tone*.

*What time will dinner be ready?* I ask. Beside you, light is falling through the kitchen window. Little flakes of dust shift in the beam, floating, unsettled. I want to go back to my room and take in more sun, more easy quiet. Before you answer, I am already creeping out of the room.

You didn't drink much before I went to college, or even after you and my dad divorced my sophomore year. You didn't drink when he remarried either, although I heard you crying the night he told us. It was only when I came back from the hospital that things started getting out of hand. Nights spent on the couch, dead eyed as the TV blared; mornings spent in your cave of a room because the hangover won't let you move; even, early on, a few evenings spent clutching the toilet and belching, but that was only once or twice. Since then you've learned to pace yourself.

And what is there to say about it? Most nights I see you and it's like looking at the reflection of myself in a spoon. Who wants to deal with the present when it can be

so much to bear? And you have to look at me, look at my body (when I first came home I was thin as cinnamon) and pretend to know how to love it.

The next day, my phone buzzes me awake. It's a call from my father. Rather than answer, I let it ring and ring then send itself to voicemail. Your alarm clock ratchets off from the depths of your bedroom and for a moment silence seems to have only been an idea in my head, seems to have passed in and out of existence in the span of a breath. It reminds me of the early weeks of last semester, when I was first teaching myself how to starve. A girl in the hospital described her hunger as a physical sensation. For me, it was different. Hunger had a voice. It groaned like a drunk on a curb.

My father's message:

*Ginger. I hope you get this. Sheila and I are coming down this weekend to visit some of her family in Amherst. I'd love to see you. We could grab lunch somewhere in Mass or in Somers or wherever. Let me know what you think. Love you much.*

He lives in New Hampshire now with his new wife, Sheila. They own a permaculture farm and have dedicated their lives to God and green vegan living. All this from a man who scoffed whenever you felt the urge to go to church, who could eat bacon with every meal and usually carried the scent of beef on his breath. Last summer, I drove up to see him, and he gave me a tour of his set up, the crops they raised, the water filtration system that collected rainfall for their plumbing. Off on the edge of their property was a small pond with water that mirrored the sky. My father and I stood at its edge and watched red eared sliders poke their pointed heads up from

the blue. The breeze billowed out my blouse, and I felt like I could be a rock skipping on the surface of the water, felt very close to sinking. He'd changed beyond any chance of recognition. I think I realized then that I wanted to change too, to unbecome.

After CHR, Mason and I stop for ice cream at the dairy farm near the Scantic River then head over to the Field Road Park. The day is cooler than yesterday, the sky clearer. Mason's ice cream melts in his hand as he drives, and he climbs out of the car sticky with salted caramel. Still, he devours what's left of his cone and tries to lick his hand clean, grinning broadly at me. Then he sprints for the playground, arms winged out beside him. My own scoop of coffee ice cream has formed a pool in the bottom of its cup, and as he runs I swirl it around. When I pass a garbage can, I throw it out and feel only a little guilty. I had skipped breakfast, and you didn't notice, and Mason only hesitated for a moment when I told him my stomach wasn't feeling well at lunch. At the dairy farm, he watched as I ate a scoop of ice cream and then suggested we finish it on the swings.

I don't know why the anxiety's come back, but it's here, and I can feel every bit of my body shift whenever I move. This morning after listening to Dad's message, I saw myself in the mirror and realized that all the work I had put in had been undone. I paced the perimeter of my room thinking *You're going to eat breakfast, a big one, and at lunch you're gonna have Mason take you out somewhere, and then you're gonna help your mom cook dinner, and you'll eat with her too because you are in control of this. You are fucking in control.*

Mason scales the jungle gym, and hangs upside down from the top, asking, as I approach,

*Ginger, do you ever pray?*

Kids from the town's recreation camp flow around us, and on the basketball courts a group of counselors and older campers are playing dodgeball. God is a notion as distant as the bottom of my father's pond.

*Not often, When I do pray, it's, like, mainly to myself, if that makes sense. My mother prays, though. She isn't, like, holier-than-thou, but she's got her faith.*

He nods, then rights himself and drops from the top of the jungle gym. A camper dives to catch the dodgeball. The girl's team cheers, and Mason pulls out his pack of cigarettes and thumps it against his thigh. *I was thinking about it cuz in the men's group today, Hank said his girlfriend's family is pushing him to join their church, but he isn't sure about it. I don't know. Maybe it's what I need.... Does your mom go to church?*

Weeks ago, you'd mentioned wanting to take me to a service at Grandma's church, and I'd surprised the both of us by saying yes. This was right after my discharge from the hospital, back when we were beginning to feel each other out. You always looked startled to see me.

That Sunday, we got up early and brushed our teeth side by side. You put on mascara and later, unsatisfied with the way my clothing hung from me, lent me a pair of slacks and a blouse that fit me like your clothes never used to. We rode down the highway in silence and sat through the sermon and afterwards, in the parking lot, you came around to my side of the car, hugged me tightly, and cried onto my shoulder.

Rather than tell him about your tears, I say, *She used to drag my dad and I to my grandmother's church in Hartford on Christmas, Easter, and the Sunday closest to her birthday.*

Mason stands and spreads his arms open again, making a show of turning one hand to face the ground, the other to the sky. *I've always been interested in religions. Islam had these cool mystics, dervishes, I think, who would, like, spin around to commune with God and creation and the spirit.* He starts spinning in place, closes his eyes, and tilts his head back so that all I can see of his head is his sharp chin and patched goatee pointing skyward. *Right hand towards the Heavens, left towards the earth, you spin on one foot.* He lifts his arms a little higher, and the fabric of his hoodie billows out around him as he swirls. *I like it. I could do this, but not, like, church and stuff.*

As he spins, I notice a group of young campers off at the edge of the playscape spinning in circles with their hands lifted. They lose their balance easily and topple into each other. I can just remember how, when I was a little girl and we'd go to church with Grandma, you'd dance during the hymns up and down the aisles of her church, and I'd spin at your side. I always begged to wear the checkered skirt that billowed out around my ankles when I spun. I didn't understand the sermons and I didn't care to, but every now and then I'd catch your hands in mine and we'd sing together: *Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.*

A few days later, I'm sitting down to lunch with my father at the Italian Villa on South Road.

(You don't know this, Mom, but he and I met a few times that summer and the semester that followed. He was worried about me, worried about you, but unwilling to approach you directly. I can't blame him, either. Something changed in you after he married Sheila. You forgot how to be in a room with him, how to wear anything but the most poised of masks around him. I didn't tell you I was going to meet him that day in July because I knew you'd insist he come over for lunch at our house. You'd want him to bring Sheila, and you'd cook far too much food, pull out a bottle of wine, and smile like your life depended on it. And me? I'd play along because anything else would be a betrayal, and we were too lonely as it was.)

My father orders their chicken caesar salad, hold the chicken and the caesar, and I order their soup of the day, minestrone. Once the waiter is gone, he asks, *How's your mother? She vice principal yet?* I shake my head. *She was passed over again for the position. They ended up bringing in a new vice from a few towns over to fill the spot. Penny O'Brien, I think.*

You'd been vying for the spot as Somers High Vice Principal after teaching there for about ten years. You'd give me little updates when you visited me in the hospital; they were the only thing I looked forward to during visiting hours. You got the email about their decision on the new VP while sitting across from me in Johnson Memorial Hospital's psych ward. You said, *Well Ginge, at least I tried. Holding myself back would've been the real tragedy.* You shot me a sharp look. Everything had to be a lesson while I was in the hospital. It was like you imagined I'd forgotten how to live, and maybe I had back then. I barely weighed 95 lbs. In the group therapy

sessions I was recalcitrant and rude. I didn't want to be there or anywhere for that matter.

He asks, after a pause, *How's she doing?*

For a moment I consider telling him, if not everything, then just enough. Instead I tell him about the cookout we had and show him the photos I have on my phone from that night. We reach a photo of you stretched out by the pool, a clear cool drink in your hand and he smiles soft. *She looks like she's doing great.*

I say *She's trying.*

He smiles and says *Isn't that all anyone can do, Ginge?*

Later that night, I shed my clothes down to my panties in front of the mirror and cross my hands over my chest to flatten down my breast. I take one big inhale, like they taught me to do in my first week of therapy, then hold it for as long as I can bear, which is wrong. I'm supposed to hold the breath for four seconds, exhale for four, then repeat. But that's not what I want. I want lightheadedness and the heaviness that comes with it. My ribs flutter under my chest, straining, til they finally collapse.

## Artist Statement

Writing for me has always felt like an attempt to make sense of the real. Elissa Washuta says “Story is a system of cause and consequence that builds sense from the incomprehensible.” When I first came to the University of Maryland, I explored the lives of women who were, to steal a line from my thesis, “storied versions of myself”. The writing of their lives became an attempt to reconcile the facts of my own with the near incomprehensible emotions I experienced as a result. This impulse has ultimately culminated in my writing splitting down two separate paths. On one hand, there is the fiction writing: stories about women both like me and unlike me in many ways: women struggling to make sense of their lives, their bodies, their identities, and their families. On the other hand there is the non-fiction: writing that I view as the beginnings of a memoir. In this creative non-fiction, I address the same questions: what does my life mean and how can I best relate it to the person that matters most now that person has lost their life? What does it mean to exist as a black queer individual in a world that seems anti-black and anti-queer? How can I accept and heal the traumas of my childhood so as to live better? That may just be the defining question of much of my work: how can we live better?

Formally, my writing varies from standard contemporary realist fiction to more fluid hybrid work in the memoir. The reason behind the expansion/exploration in the memoir is because, at my heart, I have a distrust of the genre. We all know that memoirs are as dishonest as they are honest, and to reconcile my own misgivings, I



decided I would play. Washuta also writes “Settler colonial stories take shapes like mountains and send us scaling the side, focused on the summit... I’ve gone to the mountain. There was plenty of work to do, berries to pick. I didn’t think about the summit.” I too wanted to free myself of this idea that a memoir has to be a direct story of a life, a linear passage of time from youth to maturity, innocence to wisdom, trauma to health, with a climax somewhere along the way that marks the turn. Instead I wanted to pick blueberries from the bushes in my childhood memories and worry about nothing. My goal has been, ultimately, to build a narrative shaped like a home: something you wander through, room by room, taking note of the hallways, the windows, the molding on the walls, the vaulted ceilings, and the firm foundation underfoot.