

5-1-2016

The Edge of Mercury

Aurora Brackett

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, bracket3@unlv.nevada.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/thesesdissertations>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Brackett, Aurora, "The Edge of Mercury" (2016). *UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones*. 2645.

<https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/thesesdissertations/2645>

This Dissertation is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Dissertation in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Dissertation has been accepted for inclusion in UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.

THE EDGE OF MERCURY

By

Aurora Brackett

Bachelor of Arts – Media Studies
The Evergreen State College
1998

Master of Arts – Creative Writing
San Francisco State University
2006

Master of Fine Arts – Creative Writing
San Francisco State University
2008

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Doctor of Philosophy – English

Department of English
College of Liberal Arts
The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas
May 2016

Copyright 2016 Aurora Brackett

All Rights Reserved

Dissertation Approval

The Graduate College
The University of Nevada, Las Vegas

April 5, 2016

This dissertation prepared by

Aurora Brackett

entitled

The Edge of Mercury

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy – English
Department of English

Maiale Chapman, Ph.D.
Examination Committee Chair

Kathryn Hausbeck Korgan, Ph.D.
Graduate College Interim Dean

Donald Revell, Ph.D.
Examination Committee Member

Douglas Unger, M.F.A.
Examination Committee Member

Michelle Tusan, Ph.D.
Graduate College Faculty Representative

Abstract

The Edge of Mercury is a collection of stories inspired by myth, ritual and fairy tales. Many of the stories in this collection investigate the making of meaning and the construction of identity. Others directly reference Biblical stories or Greek and Roman myths, seeking to fuse contemporary realism with the numinous, and to create in the pairing, a narrative that is focused on the liminal, the silence beneath plot. In “Brother Death” two sisters create a ritual to revive their living-dead brother, only to lose him in the current of a river. In “Ambrosia,” the ghost of Pavarotti’s mother is searching for her dead son to deliver a sandwich which is made of everything – the mythical ambrosia. “Beginnings” is a conversation between a mother and daughter about karma and destiny. Over the course of the conversation the daughter tells and retells her mother’s story, in order to ask – what is the shape of a life without narrative? These stories are influenced by my study of the short story in America, its evolution from folk tale to meta-fiction. The story form has become in some ways so recognizable and standardized that it seems a particular challenge to introduce flexibility and playfulness. In this I’m inspired by many writers, including Franz Kafka, Italo Calvino, Angela Carter, George Saunders, Grace Paley, Lydia Davis and Kelly Link.

The more traditionally realist works in the collection are interested in what is not said in a dramatic moment. In “Cold War” a young girl reacts to the imminent breakdown of her family by becoming obsessed with the Soviet Union. In “The Edge of Mercury” – which is also a ghost story - a husband and wife come to terms with the husband’s senility, but avoid talking about it directly. In writing drama, I’m interested in slowing down dramatic moments and in paying attention to silences and am as influenced as much by film as by fiction. The slow,

uncomfortable scenes in a film by Mike Leigh or Ingmar Bergman have always seemed to me a more interesting way of approaching conflict: leaving the camera on, letting the scene extend. I try to do that in my writing and in these stories, albeit with a dose of humor.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Beginnings	1
Brother Death	15
Ambrosia	23
The Cantor	26
Corpse	47
Dorothy and the Scarecrow	53
Larry's Diner	59
Lithuania	66
Cold War	69
The Birds of Minnesota	83
Brothers	95
Circus	98
The Edge of Mercury	102
Curriculum Vitae	114

Beginnings

The story my mother tells about how I came to be has nothing to do with sex. It takes place years before my birth. My mother believes in the butterfly effect – the idea that the movement of a butterfly’s wings can create gale force winds thousands of miles away, that some small thing, a broken shoelace, a falling leaf, can change a person’s life. Beginnings are never where we expect to find them.

My mother knew my father was her soul mate when they were sitting side by side near a river and a butterfly landed on their knees, half of its body on her knee and half on his. She knew that I was a yogi, a wise child, an old soul, when at two years old I broke the ice of a frozen pond with a stick and lay down in the cold water. My parents were hippies. They met in a commune, fell in love and got married.

“Listen,” she says. “Here’s a story.” I’m sitting at her kitchen table. She hands me a slice of apple pie. The apples aren’t cooked.

There’s this man, an electrician, she says. One day he’s at work on a house, climbing a ladder, and he stops to watch a leaf fall. It brushes past him, twirling, lands in a birdbath below and he goes on climbing. But somehow when he stopped, his shoelace caught in the ladder and his right foot is stuck. He yanks his foot and the shoelace breaks, the ladder shakes. His heart starts beating like crazy and he climbs down and asks the man of the house if he can borrow a shoelace. The man invites him in for a beer and tells him he’s got this sick dog. Won’t eat anything. The electrician takes one look at the dog and he’s in love. He can’t explain it – it’s a glum-looking boxer with old man eyebrows. He convinces the man to let him take the dog home with him, fix him up. Within a week, the dog is better. One day the electrician takes it on a walk

around his neighborhood and the dog bolts. He chases it into the backyard of a nice house and there's a woman there screaming, batting at the animal with one of those nets used to clean a pool. She's cursing in Portuguese (the electrician is from Brazil). He calms her down, catches the dog and six months later he and the woman are married.

"None of it would have happened without that little leaf," my mother says.

"Then why don't you tell the story of how the leaf fell from the tree?" I ask. "How the tree grew? The history of maple trees in that part of Pennsylvania?"

"I didn't say it was Pennsylvania," my mother says.

"It's arbitrary," I say. "There's no definite cause."

"Don't be so serious," my mother says. "It's karma."

The story of how I came to be starts like this: My mother is in the backseat of my grandfather's car, my grandparents in the front. She's nineteen years old and they are driving her home from a mental hospital. She'd been taken to the mental hospital because she'd had a bad trip, marijuana laced with mescaline. She'd had a bad trip at the movies with my dad. It seems important, this background detail, but my mother always starts the story in the car, her father driving, her mother in the passenger seat fiddling with the radio. "The mental hospital?" she says. "Oh, it was nice."

I should explain that a mental hospital isn't really a big deal in my family. My mother basically grew up in one, a private facility for the wealthy and mad and a few old ladies who didn't want to leave. My grandfather was a psychiatrist there and so enthusiastic about his place of employment, he sent his children, nieces, nephews, even his parents, to cure them of their woes. It made for great PR. "My own son is patient here!" he'd announce to the skeptical newly

admitted, to potential funders on a tour, and my uncle would wave and smile in his hospital-issued pajamas.

My mother went to Hopefield for the first time when she was in the third grade. She was being picked on by a boy in her class and every day she cried, begging her parents to let her stay home from school. Instead, she went to the children's ward for a week where she learned to bake cookies and play chess and talk about her feelings. On the third day she was bored. There was a boy there, five years old, who would not wear clothes. The staff had put a high-collared shirt on him and buttoned it up the back and he couldn't figure out how to get it off. He spent hours, naked from the waist down, sitting in a corner, wriggling and scratching and kicking anyone who tried to get near him. My mother decided to rescue him. She snuck into his room while he was sleeping, pulled off the shirt and the two of them ran away together. My grandfather found them in the playhouse in the backyard, the little boy naked, asleep in a blanket my mother had stolen, my mother watching over him, a finger to her lips when her father started to shout.

The late night nurses were surprised to see one of their doctors in his pajamas and overcoat carrying two crying children into their ward. "Escapees," he said, laughing. He tucked my mother into bed and tickled her back. "Be patient, Deena," he said. "You might learn something."

My mother was in the car and my grandfather was driving, my grandma in the passenger seat fiddling with the radio, putting on fresh lipstick. My mom had been in the hospital a long time. She says her parents were trying to hide her away until the sixties were over, until Carter was in office. My grandparents were big on Jimmy Carter. "Now there's a good man," my

grandpa used to say, pointing at the picture taped to their fridge. “A reasonable man.” My mother was in the hospital for two months. My dad had called my grandparents after chasing her out of the movie theater and across the university campus and dragging her back to the house where they lived. They’d been watching a documentary about traveling bible salesmen and my dad had fallen asleep. He woke to my mother screaming, waving her hands in front of her face. He was in a daze, he was high, he watched her run out of the theater. He swears the pot wasn’t laced with anything.

My grandfather came and drove my mother to the hospital, but he couldn’t take her to his hospital, not while she was on drugs. It wouldn’t look good. He brought her to a county ER and she spent a week in a locked psych ward seeing tropical birds flying from the ceiling vents, and a tall man who looked like Jesus wandering the halls, standing in every doorway looking in on the patients, glowing in his white robes, arms held out at his sides in a gesture of love, his wrists covered in spidery black stitches.

She was transferred to Hopefield when the hallucinations stopped, spent six weeks there, and her parents drove her home.

Her mother settled on a rock and roll station and her father drummed his fingers against the steering wheel to The Doors “Hello, I Love You.” When they parked in front of the house, her mother turned around and smiled, lipstick staining her front teeth. “What?” my mom said. My grandmother’s cheeks were flushed. “Ma, what?” It was spring break and all the eligible Jewish boys in the neighborhood were home from college. My mother opened the door to the sound of the piano playing and her third grade bully, the one who sent her to the mental hospital

in the first place, the first, first place, fat Walter Kaplan, grown tall and muscular, laughing and playing “Love Me Do,” her friend Sherry sitting on the plastic-covered couch singing along.

“Surprise!” her mother sang.

“Welcome home from the loony bin,” Sherry said, patting the couch next to her. “I brought you a treat.” She nodded at Walter who kept singing at top volume. “He’s minoring in music,” Sherry said. “Harvard,” she whispered.

“Don’t you know anything new?” my mother asked him.

Walter stopped playing and turned to her, grinning. “You’re a singer,” he said. “I saw you in *Fiddler*.” He grabbed the dust cloth from the piano top and threw it over his head like a shawl. “Matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match . . .”

My mother laughed. She thought, what a square. She thought my dad would probably call him something worse. A plebe, a cog, an automaton. My dad was reading Marx that year. He was a philosopher, but that wasn’t why she liked him. She liked him because he was cute. He was blonde and blue-eyed, tall and skinny in ripped corduroy pants and these lumberjack shirts he got at a thrift store in Maine. He played guitar and sang her to sleep with a voice like James Taylor. He’d had a hard life. A life she couldn’t imagine. She’d heard he was dating someone else now. Walter stopped singing.

“Do you remember me?” he asked.

“You moved away when we were kids,” my mother said.

“Boston,” he said. “But I came to see you sing. You’ve got talent,” he said.

“You came to see me?”

He turned back to the piano. “I don’t know anything new,” he said and then he played a few notes from *West Side Story*. It was my mother’s favorite. “When you’re a Jet.” Next to her

Sherry started singing in her off-key nasal voice and my mom joined in. She could feel her mother gloating in the kitchen, about to pick up the phone and call her sister to tell her about “the Kaplan boy.”

They went through the whole show, laughing and talking in between about college and the shows they’d seen on Broadway and when they got to “Somewhere,” her parents came in with their hats and coats on.

“We’re going grocery shopping,” her mother said.

“Both of you?”

“We want to get out of your hair,” her father said. My mom’s hair was cut short that year and she ran her hand through it to tease him. Everyone laughed a little too loud at the joke. They were all trying to act normal, but the truth was she had gone a little crazy this time. She’d heard her father in the hospital calling it a schizophrenic break. She thought of synonyms: crazy vacation, hallucinatory time out. She’d heard another doctor say to her father, “Marijuana isn’t that kind of drug, Alan.” She’d hallucinated for a week, even after they gave her something to shut her brain up. But maybe it was the second drug that made her crazy, or maybe it was college. Or maybe it was that movie, those sad men endlessly knocking on the doors of sad houses. Or maybe it was my dad, Daniel, maybe he’d given her something else. He liked to do acid. She’d only known him a couple of months. Who knew what people were like? She looked at Walter talking to Sherry. He had a sculpted, theatrical sort of face, a nice jaw and thick lips. He licked them as she thought this and my mother laughed.

“What was it like?” he asked her.

“Going crazy?” my mother said.

“Yeah,” he said. “Drugs. The whole thing.”

“You don’t smoke grass?” my mother said.

Sherry smacked her arm. “Don’t show off.”

“I smoke a little,” Walter said.

“I heard god,” my mother said.

“God?” Sherry moved away from her on the couch. “How’d you know it was god?”

My mother opened her mouth. She was improvising now. They were religious, both of them. “The voice of god,” she said. Why was she lying to these nice people? She wondered. Sherry still had the same hairdo she’d had in high school, shoulder-length with bangs and a headband. What could she tell them? That their lives were a dream, a capitalist-contrived bubble that will burst, that everything they had was made by war and suffering? That it would go on and on, people having babies and trying to feed them, bible salesmen coming to their doors, all of it empty, birth and death and bills and babies, all of it the same. She never should have seen that movie. She shouldn’t have read Marx. Walter turned back to the piano. The doorbell rang. Sherry was still staring at her, waiting to hear about god. My mother wasn’t sure about god. Jesus tried to commit suicide. She didn’t want to tell them that. “You want me to get that?” Walter said. He got up to answer it. “It’s for you,” he said.

He stood there, gawking, the door wide open. And my mother saw her friends from the commune, two girls she didn’t know very well. She’d only moved in at the beginning of the semester. Their names were Ursula and something else – she could never remember the other girl’s name. She liked her though. “Come in,” she said. Ursula was wearing overalls – my mother recognized them as my father’s overalls – and a sweater. The other girl was dressed in cutoffs and a tee shirt, knee-high socks and tennis shoes. It was March in Connecticut.

“My god you must be freezing,” Sherry said, going to the coat closet.

“Not the furs,” my mother said.

The girls sat on the couch. “Wow,” Ursula said, running her hand over the plastic.

Sherry handed the shivering girl a raincoat, also plastic, and introduced herself. The girl’s name was Honor. My mother thought about this. Why couldn’t she remember such an important word? Honor was beautiful, like Mia Farrow, a pixie cut and big green eyes. Walter was already ogling her.

They made small talk. The weather. They’d hitchhiked from the university and Walter grilled them on every ride they’d taken. “Dangerous,” he said. “You ever meet perverts?”

“All men are perverts,” Ursula said.

“Are you stoned?” Sherry asked.

The girls laughed, an identical sound, and my mother remembered the three of them stargazing in the middle of the night, her first month in the house. There’d been a party and Ursula had dragged them outside, piling them in blankets and sweaters until my mother felt cocooned. The power was out and there were no streetlights. There were no stars either. They sat in the snow in the front lawn, looking into the house, their other roommates sprawled across the living room floor, half asleep. My mother heard the faint sounds of their voices. The room looked warm, lit by candlelight, and watching from outside, she felt protective of them all, this strange new family, and part of something big, bigger than the people gathered there, bigger than anything she could name.

“How’d you find me?” she asked.

Ursula pointed at her head. “Magic,” she said.

Walter scooted the piano bench closer to the couch. “Where are you both from?” he asked.

“Oz,” Ursula said.

“Michigan,” Honor said. She looked at my mother. “Are you coming back?” she asked.

She was shy and spoke quietly.

“I don’t know,” my mother said.

“You have to,” Honor said.

Walter touched Honor’s leg with the toe of his shoe. “Ann Arbor? Detroit?”

“Daniel needs you,” Ursula said.

“He’s so sad,” Honor said. My mother pictured my father in the backyard tree swing, smoking and thinking about napalm, the Vietcong, his ex-girlfriend in a mental hospital.

“It wasn’t his fault,” she said.

“We had a dream, Deena,” Ursula said. “Honor and I had the same dream. You and Daniel were getting married – some place far out.”

“Like a jungle,” Honor said.

“By the ocean.”

“There were all these birds,” Honor said. My mother looked down at the raincoat still folded over the girl’s lap, bright red, and she saw birds, red with blue and yellow painted wings flying over the hospital ceiling.

“Jesus,” she said.

“We came to bring you back,” Ursula said.

Macaws, my mother thought the birds were called macaws. She was out of real time now. Ursula was collecting her things, her small suitcase and pea coat, her cigarettes. My father needed her.

“Deena,” Sherry said.

“Tell me about the dream,” my mother said.

Honor described a beach, the air heavy with the scent of jasmine. “You were both wearing robes,” she said, “like white saris, and you had a garland of flowers in your hair.”

“How can two people have the same dream?” Sherry asked.

“This place is like a museum,” Ursula said. She was standing by the door now, looking at the framed Chinese tapestries on the wall, the polished piano, the plastic-covered furniture.

“Give us a lift to the turnpike?” she asked Walter. My mother and Honor got up to leave.

“Where are you even going?” Sherry asked.

Walter went to the kitchen to get his keys and coat. My mother marveled at the way everything seemed to come together. She’d written my father a book full of letters in the hospital: song lyrics, poems, the details of her days. She never sent any of it. He’d only called once. He said hello and she listened to him breathe. “You’re still there,” he said. “I’m still here,” she said. “Are you better now?” he asked. She said she was. He said he didn’t know what to say. He was in a phone booth outside a gas station and he hated talking on the phone. It felt like snow, he said. She told him to keep talking and he started reading to her from the phone book. He read, “Morris, Anne and Arthur.” He read, “Morton’s Sewing Machine Repair.” My mother looked at the television in the day room. “Keep going,” she said. This was love, she told herself. My father read through all of the M’s and then his money ran out and the line went dead.

“I should really drive you all the way back,” Walter said, pushing through the kitchen’s swinging doors. “But I have an appointment.” And the way he said the word, pronouncing every syllable, walking ramrod straight, Walter became instantly unattractive.

“Let’s go,” Ursula said, opening the front door.

“Deena,” Sherry said. My mother waved goodbye.

In the front seat, Ursula quizzed Walter about his life, about Boston, about girls in Boston. My mother sat next to Honor and thought about my father, about that butterfly and the day they spent by the river, a rare day when he was talkative and told her about his childhood in Maine, about running along the shore racing seagulls, skipping school to catch herring to sell to lobstermen for bait. She’d made him dance with her on the riverbank and he’d laughed, really laughed for the first time since she’d met him. She looked out the window at the proud West Hartford houses, tall and wide, their shutters and trimmed lawns and hedges. My father was a wilderness – thickets, brambles, the smell of the sea. My mother saw her father’s car pass on the other side of the road, a quick glimpse: her father’s hands in the twelve and two position, grinning at something her mother was saying, bags of groceries in the back seat. She imagined them coming home, her father carrying the bags, her mother announcing, “We’re here!” and taking off the kerchief she always wore to keep her ears from the wind. “Deena?” she’d say. “Hello?”

“I can’t go,” my mother said. She met Walter’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “My parents.” Walter nodded.

Ursula turned and grabbed my mother’s hand. “This is true love,” she said. She didn’t say anything else, just held my mother’s hand while Walter drove.

“I’ll drop them off and take you back,” Walter said. “You’ll be back at school in a week or so, I imagine.” My mother nodded and Walter smiled. “True love can wait,” he said. He turned the radio on and then off again. They drove past their old elementary school, kids playing in the yard. Walter started whistling *West Side Story* and my mother thought of Tony and Maria in that blacktop schoolyard. The gunshot. My father could forget about her. He could fall in

love with someone else tomorrow, some smart girl with a husky voice and a high tolerance for hallucinogens. He could crash his car and die. In the mental hospital they were always talking about reason. Be patient. Be rational. Think things through. These were her father's favorite phrases. Walter was taking the long way, along the creek where they used to ride their bikes in summer. My mother remembered careening downhill, standing on the pedals, screaming, laughing almost falling. The car stopped and Honor was opening the door. She was holding my mother's suitcase.

"It's Cinderella going to the ball," I tell my mother. "Snow White in the woods."

"What are you talking about?"

"Leaving your parents for your lover," I say. "It's a good story."

"More like Romeo," my mother says. She sprinkles cinnamon on my uneaten pie and the powder dusts my lap. "It's the way it happened," she says.

But what if the story begins outside the movie theater, in an alley between buildings. My mother fighting off grey ghosts in salesmen suits. She said they were coming out of the screen like a kind of army, their faces blank. My father found her cowering against the wall and she swung at his chest, his jaw. He held her and told her to breathe. She told him what she was seeing and he pretended to see it too. He wasn't afraid; he was interested, and this calmed her. My father knew how to deal with bad trips. He held her hand and walked her home and they lay in his bed and watched my mother's hallucinations fill the room. And in the morning he called her father. Was there ever any question she would come back again?

Or what if the story begins when they met. Another long-haired boy in her English class who sits in the back of the room and scribbles. He reads poetry in a quiet monotone when called on. He looks at her and she notices nothing remarkable. His face is nice. He seems remote.

Or what if it begins when she enrolled in college, on a day when nothing happened: a line at the registration desk, the sound of someone clicking and unclicking a pen. My father is in that line too, a hand in his pocket, twisting a scrap of rolling paper and worrying about money.

What if there isn't a shape to your life? What if you are just here in suburban Pennsylvania with a permanently broken toe and ugly orthopedic shoes, a yard overgrown with daisies. You are looking out the window at your husband in the driveway. He's pulling out the old fence. His knees are muddy and his hair gray. There's a stack of library books on the table in the living room where he sits at night to read. You want him to look up but he goes on working, rocking the wooden post back and forth, a look on his face of determination and purpose. Behind him, the sky is a silvery white. The house is quiet. Your daughter is in the kitchen heating a piece of pie in the microwave. She pauses in the doorway and watches you looking out at the yard at her father. You look delicate and small, framed by the windowpane. Does it matter where the story begins?

They walked the last quarter mile from the campus where they were dropped off to the old, gray, two-story house, their commune, taking turns with my mother's bag. It had taken a long time to find rides. They'd had to wait for nearly an hour at a bus stop outside of Vernon and they were tired. The girls had stopped talking about true love. They'd stopped talking altogether. As they neared the house, they saw my father in the yard staring up into the maple tree. He was wearing pink pajama bottoms, much too small for him, and no shirt. He was

holding a beer in one hand. He didn't look like a man pining for lost love. When he turned and saw my mother he smiled, totally unfazed. "You're here," he said.

"Did you know I was coming?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Are you glad to see me?"

He smiled and looked into the tree. "Yeah," he said. He was very stoned. He pointed and my mother saw a raccoon cross from an upper branch onto the roof. "He has my keys," my father said.

This raccoon had a habit of coming into the house and stealing things, usually food. But that afternoon my father was in the kitchen heating a can of soup and turned to see the animal standing on its hind legs on the table, the key ring in its mouth. My father lunged and the raccoon darted. "I have class later," he said.

"Did you try the cat food?" my mother asked. He didn't kiss her or anything, she thought. Ursula and Honor had gone into in the house. My mother looked up at the windows on the second floor. She felt lonely.

"They like shiny things," my father said. The raccoon was perched on the roof, staring down at them. My father shook his empty beer can, offering a trade. My mother thought of Walter Kaplan, how happy he'd been to see her. She thought of her parents - they'd be there soon, anxious and screaming.

"I didn't have to come back," my mother said.

My father looked at her. His eyes were a brilliant blue. "You did though," he said.

Brother Death

Death is in the living room watching TV, his legs hidden beneath a blanket. It's the legs that give him away. He's our brother, Death. Though our parents ignore him, call him by his given name, go on pressuring him about grades and girlfriends. He worries, always, that they will find him out. He's nearing puberty age. The stench is embarrassing. More and more he stays under that blanket. "You'll stick to it," our mother laughs. Death just turns up the television.

My sister and I have a plan to save him. We'll sneak him from the house and carry him on our backs to the river. My sister believes in rebirth. The algae, the river water: a green balm. This has nothing to do with Jesus, we tell him.

"Imagine how good it will feel!" my sister says.

Our brother rolls one eye. The other is now permanently fixed.

"You're drying up," my sister says.

Our brother reads books on robotics. He wants chrome for his arms and legs, a computer chip in each hip joint. The sound of water frightens him.

"What if I die?" he asks.

The three of us are silent then. We can hear mice in the walls and the slow ticking of the kitchen clock.

"It's getting terrible, isn't it?" he asks.

"You used to be a little happier," I say.

"It could work," my sister says. She's been studying: at certain times of the year a river will course like blood, flowing at exactly the same rate. Bones left to soak are stirred to

memory, jostled from slumber and decay by the river's pulse they begin to rebuild cells, bring the body back to life.

A new moon is needed. Also handfuls of witchgrass and some clothespins.

"Clothespins?" I ask.

My sister shrugs.

Our brother touches a finger to his nose. No cartilage there. He leaves a dent. "Okay," he whispers.

A Nascar race takes the rest of his attention.

Our father comes into the room that evening. Our parents rarely enter the living room anymore. They have given it up to their strange children who sit in half-light, sprinkling crumbs across the floor and whispering. *Kids*, our parents think. They wait for us to bloom, mature, become stockbrokers.

But here is our father, suddenly in the Lazy Boy staring up at the ceiling. "Where's your brother?" he asks me.

Our brother clears his throat.

"I haven't seen him since yesterday," our father says.

"Dad," our brother says. Only his head sticks out from under the blanket. He is lying on the couch, legs so long his feet nearly touch the television.

"Is he in some kind of trouble?" our father wants to know.

"Dad," our brother says. He looks like he might cry. "Shit," he says. My sister holds his hand. "I had a dream last night," our brother tells me, whispering though our father won't hear. "My body was made of spring-loaded steel. I lifted the whole fucking house over my head."

“Your brother,” our father says. “Where is he?”

Our parents complain that he sleeps too much, that he doesn’t speak when spoken to. They can’t wait until it’s over. A stage, they call it. And I imagine our brother in spotlights, in front of a crowd, red-faced and shaking, falling down.

The television is flickering and static and our father closes his eyes. I kneel at his feet and touch his cheek. He brushes my hand away. “You kids,” he says, chuckling a little and then he stands because the chuckling has made him nervous. He walks to the television and hits it with the side of his hand. “Damn!” he says. The screen flickers. “We oughta get that thing fixed,” he says. Our father turns to face us and absentmindedly places his hand on our brother’s wrapped foot, staring into the middle distance, saying nothing. Then he walks out of the room.

That night we take our brother to the river. My sister has pockets full of weeds pulled from the neighbors’ gardens. I have the clothespins clipped to the hem of my skirt. We carry him between us, wrapped in his blanket, swinging it like a hammock. “A papoose,” my sister says. We sing, “Hush little baby don’t say a word.” We sing, “if that mockingbird don’t break, mamma’s gonna buy you a diamond lake.” Our brother rocks and grumbles. I am in back. I hold his ankles. When I reach beneath the blanket and touch his leg, he screams, “Bitch!”

“Sorry,” I say. “I just wanted to.”

“God damn son of a bitch.”

I imagine bones, shadowed in purple.

“Hush little,” my sister says.

We walk through a gravel alleyway behind rows of houses in the pitch dark. My sister has a flashlight tied to her belt loop. There are houselights on in the distance. From somewhere we hear a woman singing.

“They won’t even miss me,” our brother says.

“They already miss you,” I say.

“You’re going to be alive!” my sister says.

“Dead,” our brother says.

“Don’t be so negative!” my sister says.

“But you are dead,” I say.

Then we’re all quiet again and I’m too sorry to even say I’m sorry.

It didn’t happen all at once. First there was the pain in his legs. And then the dreams. He whispered them to us in the mornings: a darkness that filled his mouth, his nose. He could taste it. It pressed in on him from all directions and the pressure was constant. When he tried to fight, he found that he had no body. No voice. When he woke the pain was still there, but it was distant, located somewhere else. In the mattress or the bed frame or the floor.

It sounds like death, my sister said. *I think you’re dying.*

Our brother became more secretive, hid his body from us. *It’s terrible,* he told us. Rot and decay, a thinning of the tissues. *Death goes on and on,* he said, looking at us dully, as if he were blind.

At the river, we set our brother down in a boat my sister has stolen. She tells us we have to cross here. There’s an estuary of reeds and sleeping birds on the other side. She remembers it

from a field trip she took in the third grade.

“Mrs. Knowles?” our brother asks. “I liked her,” he says.

“Shut up,” my sister says. “You never had her.”

We push off, using our hands to paddle. My sister shines her flashlight on the water.

“See any fish?” our brother asks, cocooned in his blanket.

“Only muck,” I say.

A family of ducks floats by, grunting as we spotlight them. “Shouldn’t they be sleeping?” our brother asks.

“Night ducks,” I say.

Our brother stares at the sky. “Look!” he says. He would point if he could and if he had more weight, would rock the boat in his excitement and empty us into the water. “Anna, look!” he says.

I look across the river. Silhouettes of train cars, empty and still, and behind them the highway. My brother’s face seems softer in the dark, his cheeks almost round. “Stars,” he says. The river lifts us. “I think you’re getting younger,” I tell him. I hear him laugh.

“We could stay right here,” I say.

“No,” my brother says.

The boat hits land and my sister turns to us, shining her light. “Take up your end,” she tells me.

We lift him again and splash until the ground is solid, sticky mud beneath our feet.

“Here!” my sister yells. “We have to cover you in mud,” she tells our brother, shining the light in his face. Our brother shrugs.

The two of us carve a shallow rut in the ground with our hands, tossing mud into piles, pulling up reeds and throwing stones.

“I’m staying in the blanket,” our brother says.

I blush. My sister says, “No.”

“You do not want to see this,” our brother says. “Trust me.”

“We won’t look,” my sister says. She turns off the flashlight.

“Shit,” our brother says.

And we roll him slowly in the dark out of the blanket and into the rut. As he falls, my hand brushes his side. His skin feels like water, so soft I think I could fall through it. Is death soft?

My sister snaps her fingers in front of my face, “Work,” she says.

We dig up handfuls of mud and drop them onto his body. Our brother laughs.

“Remember how we used to make mud pies?” I ask him.

“And we’d put rocks and snails in the center,” he says.

“Were you dead then too?” I ask.

“Shhh,” my sister says. She hands me a fistful of weeds. “They have to cover him,” she tells me. We knead the weeds into the mud, our brother laughing and laughing.

“And the clothespins?” I ask her.

“Later,” she says.

We leave him in the mud for hours. The three of us sleep, my sister and I in the boat, the water lapping closer, dew sticking to our cheeks. Maybe we dream of him running, an athlete hung with ribbons. Maybe he dreams he’s a horse, his stride leaving deep prints in the mud.

When we wake our brother is sitting up. My sister shines her light. Our brother blinks. His face looks different, the jaw more pronounced, the circles under his eyes deeper.

“You look good,” my sister says. His skin is gray with mud but I can see his ribs, every one articulated, his stomach concave.

“Don’t stare,” he says.

“How do you feel?” my sister asks.

“Okay,” our brother says.

“Can you get up?” my sister asks. Our brother crouches on all fours in his gym shorts. His shoulders jut out at odd angles. “All the way,” my sister says. Our brother squats, then stands. He bounces a little on one foot and lurches toward my sister, arms spread wide. “Hey!” he says. He falls.

“I think it’s working,” my sister says. I stare at my brother, covered in mud. His arms and legs are thin as sticks. “You should go in the water now,” my sister tells him.

“No!” I say.

“I feel pretty good,” our brother says.

“So stay like this,” I say.

“He has to go in the water,” my sister says.

My brother stands and puts a wet hand on my arm. I remember that hand lifting and holding me up over a pool, swinging me back and forth, threatening to let me go. He bends over, his face close to mine. “Really,” he says, “I’m alright.” I want to go home. My brother smells like tar. He looks at my sister over my head and I hate them both for bringing me here, away from the warmth and stillness of our house. I move to kick him but I miss. My brother turns and walks to the water.

“Wait,” my sister says, “the clothespins.”

Our brother waves her away.

“You need them,” she says. She kneels at my feet, plucking clothespins from my skirt. Our brother is waist deep now. My sister runs after him but I can’t move. My brother is up to his chest. The sun is coming up and his skin in the dawn light looks like metal. My sister swims around him. She clips a pin to his hand, one to his hair. “Thanks,” our brother says, his voice a muddy croak, a cough, a splutter.

“Stay,” I scream.

My brother sinks under.

**

I am sitting in the shallows watching my skirt sway in the current. My sister floats further out, treading water. Clothespins bump against her arms as she moves. “He’ll come back,” she says.

“Dumb,” I say. I throw my shoe at her. It hits her shoulder. The sun has turned the sky white. Dirt gathers over the cloth of my skirt but doesn’t stick, just hangs there like dust in air. “Dumb, dumb, dumb,” I say.

My sister pushes a clothespin, entranced for a moment by the way it lifts in the current and floats off. A duck calls overhead. I look up.

“He’ll come back,” my sister says.

Ambrosia

Luciano Pavarotti died this morning, and as I was walking up the hill on the very steep street that leads to my office, I saw his mother at a distance walking down the hill. I stopped to catch my breath and to better take her in. I wish I could show you the way that she was walking. She had on a black and white print skirt that ended below her knees, and a white sweater blouse, black high heel shoes, stockings. She was carrying her purse (black) in one hand, but not swinging it. She was small, but proportionate and her hair was dark, of course, and perfectly coiffed. She took small, quick, perfectly even steps, but moved no other part of her body intentionally, so that as she walked towards me she looked like a wind-up doll just after it has been released, when it seems it will go on and on forever. The motion of her legs shook her upper torso; her breasts, loose in her bra, bounced; her upper arms bounced; her cheeks bounced. Only her hair remained still.

When she came to me she stopped and I said, in the Italian accent I'd been practicing all morning, "Luciano Pavarotti!"

And her face -- perfectly made-up, her lips drawn to look plump and red -- her face met mine and she frowned and said, "Where he is?"

"He's dead," I said.

"No matter," she said, looking stern, business-like. "You see him?"

"It was in all the papers," I said.

"He forgot the lunch again," she said.

"Gone," I said.

"I have it," she said and tapped her purse. "He will cry without the lunch."

“Luciano Pavarotti!” I said, pinching my fingers in my best Italian gesture.

“Always cry,” she said.

“But his music,” I said.

“His sandwich!” she said.

“He’s dead,” I said. “Why does he need a sandwich?”

I sat down and Mrs. Pavarotti sat down next to me and opened her purse. She brought out the sandwich, wrapped carefully in tin foil. She opened the foil. There was nothing there. “There’s nothing there,” I said.

“Shht,” she said. And she waved the open foil in front of my nose. I smelled a faint broth, briny and dark, the ghost of a flavor I could almost name. I reached for the foil and she pulled it away. “No touch,” she said.

I sniffed. My mouth watered. I had the urge to wipe my finger across the empty, clean wrapper. “What is that?” I asked. Beef? A bouillon of some kind? Mushrooms, maybe. But so faint, it was like an aftertaste, a belch.

“For Luciano, for backstage, for the afterwards,” she said, pointing sort of upwards, and then she folded it back up, careful not to spill anything, her manicured hands moving quickly. “He’ll cry,” she said.

“What is it?” I asked. I had the urge to grab it from her hands and run.

“How do you say?” she said, and looked up at the leaves of the tree we were sitting under. “Ach,” she said. She opened a corner of the wrapper and inhaled.

“*Tutto*. It is all.” She waved her hand over the package, like she was stirring the air. I waited.

“All of everything,” she said.

“Some kind of casserole?” I asked. The smell was drifting away.

Mrs. Pavarotti slapped my leg and said, “HA!” and put the package into her purse and closed it shut, noticing my jilted look. “*Come ambro-sia?*” she said. I imagined a jello mold.

“No,” I said, “not possible.” The purse was in her lap, her arms folded over it. I bent over, pressed my nose to the black leather and inhaled. Mrs. Pavarotti hit the side of my face lightly.

“Tell me the ingredients!” I said, sitting up.

“*Tutto, tutto, tutto,*” she said, shaking her head. I held my cupped hands over my nose, trying to keep the scent there. And then I had it. It was in my hands. Beef, yes. But underneath there was the metallic, apricot scent of blood, and also dried maple leaves, and also an oatstraw smell, like wheat, like summer, and also smoke and perfumed breath, and newspaper and dirt, and car exhaust and warm cement, and I knew what she meant; tree sap caught in the fingers; there was the smell of clouds, and the smell of a woman’s cheek – and “Goodbye,” she said – a bittersweet coffee, and old basement libraries, tomatoes and sex, sun warmed skin, chalk, and river water, and the pits of cherries, and “Luciano Pavarotti!” I said. Because then I could almost hear music under the basil and the dry pages of books, the sunflowers, the honey. And I watched this woman walk down the hill, clutching her purse, moving quickly in a perfectly straight line, saying to herself *tutto, tutto, tutto*, as if it were a prayer.

The Cantor

On Fridays and Saturdays in the village of _____, mules buried their heads in the hay and goats ran to the forest in fear because the men, when they prayed, sounded like flocks of mad geese. The rabbi saved for years to send for a cantor from the cities, though he knew for a few coins, such a man would probably never come. He didn't know what else to do. He couldn't hear his own prayers under the din. His wife stuffed cotton in her ears. Daring boys passed under the windows of the synagogue, braying and bellowing. It was only getting worse. There was too little food; there were too many taxes. The men prayed with a desperation and might that frightened the old man. During the week he begged for God's forgiveness on behalf of his village, insisting it was the praying that mattered, not the manner in which the prayers were delivered. But after twelve long years of such apologies, after being laughed at in every village he travelled to, followed in the road by Cossacks honking and whining, the old man began to feel that his argument was useless.

It happened that one evening the rabbi was walking in the forest with one of his students, a young man full of questions.

"Rabbi, why if God created us does he tire of us?" The young man's pace quickened as he spoke and the old man had to run on his short legs to keep up.

"Because we're weak. We're ignorant. We don't believe his promises," the rabbi answered.

"But you always say that," the young man said. "What do you mean?" He stopped walking and looked out at the road.

“Shmuel, do you need to see a burning bush to know that God is here?” the rabbi asked. Lately his students would not stop asking him why God didn’t speak to them. God should tell them where to plant their crops? Which day to go to town? On what side of the river they should piss? The rabbi tired of these questions.

“God is not here,” the young man said.

They began to walk again. “God is here. God is not here. Why do we bother to pray?” the rabbi mumbled. “Look at the buds on these trees, Shmuel.” As he spoke the old man glanced at the hem of his trousers, covered in mud. He stomped one foot and then the other, trying to shake his pant legs clean, but this only dirtied them more. He wished he were at his desk. He didn’t usually consult with students outside his study and couldn’t think of a single thing to calm the boy’s mood. He could only hear his own words, “God is here. God is not here,” repeating in his mind like a child’s song. The more he tried to think anything else, the louder the song grew, the words ringing out with each step he took until he felt he couldn’t breathe and stopped walking altogether.

“Rabbi,” the young man shouted. He was two yards ahead now at the bend in the road.

“What now, Shmuel?”

The young man walked back to meet him. He put a finger to his lips. “Listen, Rabbi.”

There was a song coming from the woods, wordless but in tune.

“That voice,” the old man said. It was a beautiful voice, rich and warm, carried through the forest as if by the limbs of trees. “Who is that man?” he asked his student.

“Perhaps it’s someone coming along the road,” the young man said. “I know of no man who lives in these woods.”

They stood still, their boots sinking deeper in the mud. “Imagine this sound in our shul,” the rabbi whispered.

They listened. The song was carved from wood. It was held by the air. They could taste it in their breath. Goosebumps formed on the back of the young man’s hands.

“Rabbi,” he said. “There is no one coming along the road. No man lives in these woods.”

Whose voice is this? The old man asked himself. He said nothing. He stepped off the road and into the forest, stumbling and kicking up stones in his excitement, the young man following behind.

After some time they came to a thin path in the woods. “Rabbi,” the young man said, “this is only a deer trail. It will lead nowhere.” The rabbi looked at the branches and grasses along the trail’s edge. There was no sign of an animal. “Rabbi —” the young man said.

“You’re afraid?”

“We shouldn’t intrude on a stranger.”

“Go back then.” He gestured to the road. The young man looked up at the sky.

“There are stories about these woods,” he said.

“Murderers, thieves and witches,” the rabbi said.

“A hag,” the young man said, “ugly enough to kill a man.”

“I don’t believe in children’s tales,” the rabbi said. He turned to follow the path, the song growing louder around him. “Go back if you’re afraid.”

The young man glanced back at the road, said a prayer and continued walking.

The path led to a cottage. It stood in a clearing and was made of roughly cut logs and bark. There were holes in the walls where the wood had fallen away and looking through the wood, one could see through the house to the trees on the other side. An old woman was standing on the porch, sweeping. She was bent at the back and shrunken with age, but the rabbi could tell by the strength of her limbs that she had once been plump and healthy.

“Pardon us for intruding, Babushka,” the rabbi said. The old woman turned from her sweeping to face the visitors and the young man gasped. She wasn’t unusually ugly as he had expected. She simply had no ears. The old woman smiled at them and opened her arms as if in embrace.

“But aren’t you the rabbi?” she said. “What brings you so far from the road to visit a lonely woman?”

“We heard a singer,” the old man said. He stopped himself from continuing, glancing at her missing ears.

The old woman leaned on her broom. “At our age, to hear just a few things in a day is a gift, isn’t it, Rabbi?”

The rabbi took a step closer. He raised his voice and introduced himself and the boy. “Would you happen to know who it was we heard singing?” he asked.

“I don’t hear much,” the old woman muttered. “In the morning, the birds drive me awake and then the pricks and pins in my legs. Can’t stay in bed for more than a few hours. What do I need with sleep?” She smiled at the men.

The rabbi removed his hat and rubbed his head. He looked at the old woman and she looked back at him. For a moment no one spoke.

“It’s getting dark,” the old woman said.

“It is indeed, Babushka. The young man needs to be back at his mother’s house for dinner.”

“You’ll come another time, then.” She shrugged, turned and walked slowly back to her cottage, shutting the door behind her before the old man remembered to say goodbye.

The following night, the rabbi hummed the tune of the wordless song under his breath through the Sabbath prayers. He hadn’t expected angels or visitations. He had asked for a singer and had heard one. When he stepped off the road, he’d heard nothing but that voice. He didn’t hear the boy, his own footsteps, the birds. He had never before in his life made a single decision without thought. The rabbi looked at the faces of the men, their thin lips opening and closing, brows furrowed. They carried a persistent fear he didn’t know how to counter. But their noise was not faith. He had heard a voice. The synagogue walls were graying. There was a pallor to the room, brought on by the din. In front of him an old man bent his head slowly, eyes closed as if falling asleep, and a stream of spittle fell from his lips to the floor. *Sing!* the rabbi wanted to yell. Moishe who drank wine with his dogs, Jacob who mixed chalk with water and called it milk – their noise closed in on him; it carried the scent of their beards, their breath. A squeak, a belch, a screech, a loud, confused mumbling, and then a shout, a shout.

“Sing!” the rabbi called out. Several men looked at him, then returned to their prayers, louder than before. The old man shut his eyes. He imagined that voice, here now, the men silenced finally in awe.

On Sunday he walked alone up the road and again heard the wordless singing. It had rained all morning and the air smelled of mushrooms and rotting pine. The rabbi walked slowly,

following the song off the road and into the trees. Soon, he found himself at the narrow path that led to the woman's house. Wet leaves and grasses clung to his pant legs; his feet grew damp in his boots. He came to a place where he could see the cottage in the distance and sat down in a stand of ferns. There he waited, listening and praying.

He sat for an hour, the sun rising in the sky, drying the rain from the earth and causing the old man to sweat and itch in his damp, woolen suit. Then, when his discomfort became too much to bear, the front door opened and the old woman, using her broom for a cane, hobbled down the stairs and onto the path.

“Good,” she said. “You came back.”

The old man stood, brushing leaves from his pants. “Pardon me for intruding, Babushka.”

“Come,” she said. “I have something for you.”

She sat the old man at a birch table. There was a fire in the woodstove, a bed of straw in the corner. Tree branches hung from cracks in the roof. Each branch was peppered with tiny buds, the colors timid and pale. The old man felt he was dreaming – trees, upside down, in a house. “Some people have paintings. I have my branches,” she said. The rabbi nodded. A pot was boiling on the stove, emitting a scent that tickled the back of the old man's throat. A dark smell, like the insides of an old samovar. “Chocolate!” the old woman shouted. “A gift from my grandson in Moscow!” She poured the liquid into a mug and carried it to him. The rabbi sniffed the steam. “Cures most everything, Rabbi.” He dipped his finger into the mug. “Very popular in the cities,” she said.

It was the most bitter thing he'd ever tasted, but at the same time, not unpleasant. There was a sweetness, and something that reminded him of almonds, of mud, the pages of books.

“They use it to make cakes, breads, all kinds of things,” the old woman said. The grains stuck to his lips. He took small sips. The whole time he drank, the old woman sat across from him at the table, nodding her head.

“Babushka,” the rabbi said, looking into her eyes, “our village is full of pious people. They love God as he commands. But when they pray...” The old man took off his hat and held his head in his hands, elbows resting on the table. “Our synagogue is a laughing stock. No one should have to endure such noise.” He closed his eyes and took another sip of chocolate. A brown streak stained his beard.

The old woman tapped the table. “My grandson, God protect him, comes once a year,” she said. “He brings the chocolate every time. It keeps me in health, Rabbi. Next time he’ll bring some for both of us, if he lives. The boy is trying to join another war.”

“Babushka,” the old man said.

The old woman stood and walked to the stove. She poured the rest of her chocolate into another mug and took a rag to the pot. The rabbi moved his chair closer to the stove, and gazed at the fire.

As he breathed in, it seemed to the rabbi that he could smell every speck of dirt in the old woman’s house. He smelled the hardened sap of the pine walls, and through their cracks, the forest air. He breathed the rust of the stovepipe, the woman’s unwashed dress, her musty bed. He looked around at the room, the floor was tamped earth. Cobwebs grew from the ceiling like lichen. A small trail of pebbles lined the periphery of the stove, like a wall made for ants. The rabbi leaned over and picked up a pebble, pinching it between his thumb and forefinger. He looked at his hands, blue veins like accidental pencil marks staining through skin. There was nothing beyond his perception. The usual thoughts that clouded his mind had vanished. The old

woman bent to take the cup from him. He saw her wrist, thin and freckled. In the outline of her face, he saw another face, young and full, a wistful smile, clear blue eyes and an absence of hope. The old woman looked at him. She shuffled to the door, opened it and put the mug on the porch. The air outside was cold. She picked up her broom.

“It was you,” he said. She began to sing as she swept the floor, and the rabbi listened. The song had its own weight, a thickness that seemed to press into him as it rose in volume. It was a mourner’s song, empty of everything but grief. The old man wanted to touch it. His hands were sweating.

“Why didn’t you tell me it was you singing?” he asked.

The old woman stopped and turned to him. “He who praises himself will be humiliated,” she said.

“But it’s beautiful,” the rabbi said. “Where did you learn to sing like this?”

“A bell rings because it’s hollow,” she said.

“Why have I never heard you before?” the rabbi asked.

“Nobody listens to an old woman,” she said.

“Will you sing a little more?”

She bent to tend the fire and began her song again. The rabbi closed his eyes, the heat from the open stove warming him. He pictured the stand of ferns where he’d been sitting that morning, their leaves lined in symmetrical seeds, the sun shining through the green. He tried to pray but could only remember single, disconnected words. Her song caught, stopped and began again. He listened to the voice, deep, resonant. *A woman can’t sing like this*, he thought. He watched her stoke the fire. The song was in the room, but he couldn’t attach the sound to her body. The two were incongruous. He stared at her, her face marked with hollows in the light.

Where her ear should have been – raised welts of skin, a few hairs, and this hole, small and dark. He felt he could see in to layers of flesh, bone, marrow, and something more, a close and quiet place where the song pooled like water. His breath caught. He remembered a scent, putrid and sweet, the slick skin of newborns. A woman could not sing like this. The rabbi stood up abruptly and took his hat from the table.

“You’re leaving?” she said.

“It’s very late,” the rabbi said.

“There are stories I could tell you,” she said. “And my grandson needs a letter.” She lowered her voice, “I can’t write a word.”

The rabbi took her hand and quickly dropped it.

“Don’t be afraid,” she said. “The devil isn’t as black as we paint him.”

The rabbi taught Hebrew the next morning to the boys of the village. As he walked around the classroom, peering over their shoulders, he imagined the old woman’s voice in the room, her gravelly speaking voice. He bent down and picked up a young boy’s pencil. *Look, how they shake when you stand over them*, he heard her saying. He looked at the child’s writing, slanted and too big. The young boy’s hand trembled. “You’ll get it,” he said.

During the afternoon prayers he stood alone in his study, and when he began the *aleynu*, the old man heard her voice, so close he felt a shaking in his own throat. It wasn’t imagined; her voice was in the room, low and resonant. It guided his prayers. Each word he spoke felt endless. And as he sang the old man felt himself growing lighter, until he couldn’t feel his body apart from the room, until he was nothing but a voice – his voice all that anchored him from vanishing. But it wasn’t his voice alone. He fell to his knees. *Adonai*, he whispered. She was God’s singer,

he thought. And then he saw himself on the floor, one knee on the open page of a book and he thought, *I'm mad*. But he knew she would sing in the shul. He saw himself standing at the bima, the old woman at his side, and when he opened his mouth, her voice issued from his lips, and a silence surrounded them so that within the prayer there was a hush. The gates of heaven opening. *Mad*, he thought. But the men would know God. They would hear him.

For weeks, the old man could think of nothing else. He imagined he heard the woman everywhere. As he visited the bed of a sick man, she stood with him, humming into the sick man's ear, petting his beard. She sang as he sat in his study, sang every word that he read. Before he fell asleep, the rabbi heard lullabies, his grandmother's songs in this strange, deep voice. It no longer scared him. He thought only of the tone, the open, clear sound. He wanted to teach the old woman Hebrew. It would be a sin, he knew. There was a room, bigger than a root cellar, beneath the floorboards of the synagogue where he could hide his cantor. No one would know. He would tell them the voice belonged to a man from the city, a disfigured man who didn't want to be seen. He would tell them God's work is mysterious. He would tell them nothing. The voice would rise through the floorboards. It would sing at the feet of the worshippers.

When he went again to the old woman's house, the rabbi walked through the forest, forging a path from the shul to her cottage, carrying with him a book and several sheets of paper. He found her sitting on the porch, counting on her fingers. She looked like a child and the rabbi wondered how he could have been frightened in her presence.

"Thirty-six days until the boy should come again," she said, looking up at him. "Last year it was summer. The year before he didn't come at all. You wonder where his mother is?"

Dead.” The old woman waved her hand in the air. “Who isn’t?” She laughed, a dry laugh that seemed to catch in the back of her throat. The old man scratched his beard. He held up the paper.

“We’ll write a letter!” the old woman shouted. She clapped her hands.

The air in the cottage smelled of moss. The rabbi opened a prayer book and set it on the table.

“Dear Asher,” the old woman began to dictate. “He calls himself Oscar, Rabbi, when Asher is a perfectly good name.” The old woman sat on her straw bed and scratched her thighs. The rabbi looked away. “You’re not writing,” she said.

“Babushka,” the rabbi said. Her speaking voice was harsh, like the voices of so many of the old women he knew – worn but full of command. How could she sing? He wanted to hear her again.

“The rain has made off with my best dream,” the old woman dictated. “And Asher, is there still snow in the city?” She paused and stood up, touching one of the branches. A flower fell to the floor. “What does a person say in a letter?” she asked. The old man turned a page in his book. She stared at him. “A pencil! Paper! A hand that writes!” She sat down at the table, pulled the book away and looked at its cover. “Hebrew,” she said. And then she opened it and began, as if it were nothing, to read.

She told him that she’d taught herself as a girl with her brothers’ books. No one, she assured him, could be punished for such a little sin. “I don’t use it for anything,” she said. “I can’t write, so what good is it?”

“Do you know the songs?” the rabbi asked.

“A few,” she said.

He stared again at her missing ears.

“Soldiers cut them from me,” she said. She rested her head in her hand. “We’re lucky, Rabbi, to live so long.” The old man stood and placed his finger on the book beneath the first word of a prayer. She looked up at him.

“Sing,” he whispered. The old woman bent her head closer to the book. She ran her fingers along the words and moved her mouth silently. Then she closed her eyes and sang so quietly, so carefully, that the old man had to bend close to hear. She knew the tune. She could read the words, not all of them, but enough to carry the song.

When she stopped singing she turned to him. “My husband used to laugh. *“A woman who sings like a man is a dybbuk.”* She turned a page of the book and shrugged.

“How long have you lived alone?” the rabbi asked her.

“We’re always alone, Rabbi.”

“How long since you’ve been to the village?”

**

The narrow room beneath the shul was dug into the dirt and lined with splintered boards. There were two entrances, one in the floor of the sanctuary and another in the back of the building, a small door hidden in shrubs. The ceiling was low; there was hardly room to stand. The old man had furnished it with a chair, a table and a lantern. He brought the old woman in the afternoon, pulling her along his makeshift footpath, holding her hand. He described the plan to her as they walked, countering her protests. He led her in through the back door and sat her in the chair while he hunched and paced and argued.

“I only sing for myself,” she told him. She was nervous here. Several times she got up as if to leave, and then sat down again. She rubbed her arms like she was cold, but when the rabbi offered his jacket, she threw it down.

“Please,” the old man said. “Just try it for one Sabbath.”

“My fire needs tending,” the old woman whispered. She looked like she might cry.

“Rabbi, I don’t like this place.”

“One hour,” the old man said. His forehead was sweating. “Babushka...”

“Don’t leave me here.” She was begging now. The old man was perplexed. He sat down next to her on the bed.

“Babushka, don’t you know where we are?” he asked her.

There was a short ladder propped against the wall at the far edge of the room. The rabbi took the lantern, climbed the ladder, and helped the old woman up behind him. “God forgive me,” he whispered.

As she entered the sanctuary, the rabbi held up his lantern and the old woman gasped. She looked out at the empty chairs, the polished wood beams, the Torah in its chest. “But this is terrible,” she said. He could see she was pleased. “I tried to sneak in at home, years ago,” she said. “All the girls did.”

The old man held a finger to his lips. “This is what I’ve been trying to tell you,” he said. “I want you to sing,” he said. “Here.” She looked around at the room and then at the old man’s face. “A cantor?” she said. The rabbi nodded. “It’s wrong, Rabbi.”

“A sin,” he agreed.

“A cantor,” she smiled, then looked back at the dark basement. “Daytime only,” she said. “I won’t sleep in that room.” The rabbi agreed. She would sing on Saturdays. He would bring her home afterwards. “And my chocolate in the morning?” she asked.

“I’ll see to it,” he said, and he led her back to the room beneath the floor.

He walked her home and they practiced the prayers together. She followed his voice. Sometimes she banged the table, and clapped along. Before he left, he marked the pages she should study, and that week, he walked along the road in the evenings, just to listen to her sing.

**

On Saturday morning, the men entered the sanctuary quietly and stood, wrapping prayer shawls about their shoulders. A rumor had already circulated about a visiting singer, and they held themselves stiffly. The rabbi cleared his throat. “I’ve brought a man to sing...” he announced. “This man prefers to go unseen, for reasons I can explain later. Just know that he is a good man, and he is here,” he gestured to the air. “There’s no trickery,” the rabbi went on. The men shifted their feet and glanced at one another. “Of course,” the rabbi began, but all at once the singing started, and the men stood still. They stared at the rabbi, searching the front of the room for the source of the singing. “Pray!” the old man yelled, throwing his hands in the air.

It worked. The rabbi was so excited he could hardly worship. The song carried through the room, rising up just below their feet. The congregation mumbled, their wild, loud prayers reduced to whispers. Some men stared at their shoes, some prayed with eyes closed. The rabbi watched them, their faces softening beneath the melody. Sunlight fell across the floor in patches, the pale wood gleaming, and as they prayed, the men moved into and out of the light – their hands, their books, the fringe of their shawls radiant for a moment, then fading. Their voices lifted and fell like this too, a sustained note and then a whisper, catching the song and falling

behind. There was no more rush, no panic. There was only the song, the words held carefully, drawn out, one at a time. The absence of a visible singer made the rabbi feel that it was the shul itself singing, the wooden walls of the building enveloping them in its prayer.

At the end of the service, after the rabbi had spoken with quiet passion about the wonders of faith, and the old woman had begun her second set of prayers, the student, Shmuel, standing at the back of the room, caught the old man's eye. The rabbi turned away and began, for the first time that evening, to pray.

When it was over, he shook the men's hands and listened to their praise. "Beautiful!" they said. "What a voice." "Give the cantor our respect." And if they seemed shy as they approached him, if they had few words tonight when normally they had hundreds and questions besides, the old man attributed this to the wonder they must still be feeling to have been in the presence of true beauty.

He was asleep at his desk Sunday morning when Shmuel came to see him. "Excuse me, Rabbi," he said. "But the men don't like the singer."

"What?" the old man shouted. "Weren't you there, Shmuel? Did you see them?"

"The voice is nice," the young man said, "but we prefer to sing ourselves."

"Nice!" the old man shouted. "It's heavenly! Divine!"

"It's frightening," the young man mumbled. He sat down, looking at his hand. "I had terrible dreams about that woman."

The old man sat upright.

The young man shook his head. "How can this be right, Rabbi? A woman singing in the shul!"

The rabbi smiled. “Did you know that Elijah often came to earth as a woman?”

“In folk tales, not scripture,” the young man said. “She’s no prophet, Rabbi.”

The rabbi looked out the window over the young man’s head. “Who are we to say what’s right?” he said.

The young man looked around at the rabbi’s books, splayed open in every corner of the room. “We have laws, Rabbi.”

“Have faith, Shmuel,” the rabbi said. “Have faith.”

**

Every Saturday, the rabbi snuck to the old woman’s cottage hours before dawn and dragged her into town with him. After settling her in the room, he returned home to boil water for her chocolate. On Friday nights the men were shy, without a voice to guide them. But on Saturdays they sang, tentative and reverent, nearly harmonious. They sang. For the first few weeks, the old man could hardly pray. He listened in wonder as he had the first day. Sometimes he wept. In the streets, women stopped to thank him. They curtsied and brought him bread, flowers. “No more socks in our ears.” The old man was happier than he’d ever been. If his cantor slurred over some of the words, if she paused sometimes in the middle of a song, it didn’t matter. The sound itself was so pure, it was surely infused with God’s spirit. He brought the old woman back to the forest at night, after the lights of the village had gone dark. And on Sundays, the old man slept.

At home, his wife quizzed him. “A cantor who won’t show his face?” she said. “Is he a fugitive? A murderer?” When he told her the chocolate was the visitor’s medicine, she bent her head over the pot and sniffed. “A potion,” she said. She told him there was talk in the village. “Men say the voice is frightening.”

“Frightening how?” the old man asked.

“The man sounds drunk,” she said. “Some think he’s of the undead. Others say your man’s a woman!”

“Nonsense,” the rabbi said.

“Get rid of this person, Solomon,” his wife said.

The old woman was changing. After the first week, she asked him to find her material to make a new dress. She didn’t want to go to the temple in her old frock. “Or maybe I should wear a suit?” she asked him. “Disguise myself as a man?” The rabbi laughed at this. “No one will see you,” he said.

“God sees all,” the old woman said.

She spent her weeks practicing. He’d left a prayer book but she asked for more. “I want to practice Hebrew,” she said. And so he brought her more books, Hebrew practice books, children’s books. One Saturday he found her in the center of town as he was on his way to meet her. “I couldn’t sleep,” she said. The next week, she was at his doorstep. As they walked home together in the evenings, she discussed every song, she made suggestions for the service, changes to the order, she asked him what he thought of her “performances.”

He saw her several times in the market and pretended not to know her, even when she waved in his direction.

“I thought you never come to town,” he said, when they were alone in her house.

“Not often,” she said.

“Twice in one week is often,” he said.

In May, several men came to his office, one at a time, complaining of the voice, saying that it gave them nightmares, warning of omens, asking him to get rid of the voice. The rabbi started to listen more closely to the woman's mistakes. Her voice, he began to admit to himself, wasn't altogether perfect. It was neither distinctly masculine or feminine. It cleared the mind, but it left shadows, a chill. Three of the younger men stopped coming to the morning service. By summer his happiness had begun to fade. He remembered fondly his first encounter with the old woman. He took to picking up rocks in the road, holding them in his hand to feel some sense of life pulsing there, hoping to think wonderful things. But he only felt a rock, only thought to himself, *rock*.

She came to meet him as he was on his way to her cottage one day, and he saw that her step was strong. She thrust her walking stick into the ground ahead of her like an oarsmen. "Rabbi," she said. "You've caught yourself in a lie, but for what? They are scared of what they can't see. Let me sing on the bima."

"Have you looked at yourself in the mirror?" he said to her. "Are you still a woman?"

"The food is cooked in the pot and the plate gets the honor," she said.

"Stop talking to me in proverbs," he shouted. Her face reddened. They walked in silence the rest of the way.

The rabbi worried. His wife began to bother him, "At least bring the man for dinner. He can wear a mask. Or does he not eat?" And Shmuel came to visit him once a week to nag at his conscience. "It isn't right, Rabbi. It goes against everything you've taught." More young men stopped coming to services. They stopped coming to his office to ask him for advice. The old man began to miss their litany of unanswerable questions. The old woman, in her enthusiasm, began mixing up the verses. Passover songs were sung in the middle of summer, verses of the

Kaddish sprinkled into every prayer. When he asked her about it she said it was purposeful.

“We should remember the beginning and the end with every breath.” She made the old man sit with her in the mornings as she drank her chocolate and went over her “concert notes” with him again and again.

One Sabbath morning in July, the old man caught a group of boys trying to break into the cellar. “Why are you here?” he said.

“We want to see the witch,” one of the boys said.

“There are no such thing as witches,” he said and chased them away.

But the rumors grew, and neighboring villagers, Cossack farmers talked of witches and devils. The rabbi was fornicating with Lilith, they said. Her song was a trapped soul, a boy she’d eaten, they said.

The rabbi told the woman about the rumors and she laughed. She said she’d heard them all before. “Are you a witch?” he asked her.

“Every village needs a scapegoat,” she said.

“I don’t think you should sing anymore,” he said.

“I’m the singer,” she said. “And so I’ll sing.”

He stopped coming to meet her, but she came early every Saturday morning, and let herself into the room. She sang and the men followed her voice. The rabbi still found it beautiful, the silence in the room, the sound of the notes. Maybe it was sad. Maybe it was haunting. Maybe it was imperfect. But it was music. The men carried a tune. They seemed reverent. He struggled to believe that they were, each of them, faking it. He wanted to believe that what he’d done was right.

On the last Saturday in August, he came to the bima and looked out at the sanctuary. Shmuel stood in a room full of older men. The rabbi greeted them. Shmuel cleared his throat and Naftolah, the butcher said, “Excuse me Reb Solomon, but you have to do something.”

“Do something?”

“The cantor has barricaded the door,” he said. And as he said it the woman began to sing, her voice louder than before, the old song the rabbi recognized from the woods, the song without words.

“After Sabbath,” the rabbi said. He opened his book and gestured for the men to join him. He had never missed a Sabbath and did not intend to now. The men looked at each other, and began to pray, their old habits returned, cacophonous and desperate-sounding, honking and hollering, as if calling to their brothers, come in, come in. But now the rabbi heard the strike of metal on the wood of the cellar door below, the sounds of young men and boys shouting. The woman’s voice seemed to grow louder still and he turned and saw her behind him, standing on the bima, her prayer book in her hand, her shawl over her head. The congregation froze. The rabbi gestured for them to continue. The only thing he could think to do was continue. A few of the men obeyed, but several left the room in a hurry. The rabbi sang, sounding like one of them now – loud and off key. The old woman touched his shoulder. She smiled. He saw she was ecstatic. She didn’t care about the noise of the door breaking below. She was singing in the sanctuary, a cantor in front of her congregation.

“Stay,” he said to the men. Whatever he’d done wrong he’d atone for, but after Sabbath, not yet. Still they filed out and he heard the voices of boys he knew below, turning over furniture in the room.

“Rabbi,” Shmuel said. The old man continued to pray. *You shall love your God with all your heart with all your soul with all your might.* The young men came into the sanctuary, and he prayed louder. They surrounded the bima. They shouted, and cursed. Outside, someone threw a rock threw the window. The old woman screamed. The rabbi looked up. Her face had been bloodied. He continued to pray.

“Enough!” Shmuel shouted.

“Get her out of here,” one of the men said. The rabbi noticed some of them had sticks in their hands. “Take your hag and leave,” someone said.

But he continued to pray, saying words he’d said three times a day. Shouting them. They meant more now. Now, as he was nearly carried, shoved and pushed, out into the street, now as his student, Shmuel, whispered in his ear, “Run,” he prayed, the old woman behind him, not running, not afraid, carrying her prayer book and singing.

Corpse

The man lived on our beach for several years. It was a public beach, a small outlet where the river met the sea, the riverside edged with fisheries and docks, now long defunct. He had a little hut close to the cliff wall made from driftwood, long whitened sticks propped against each other like twigs at the center of a campfire. It was torn apart regularly by storms, dogs, teenagers on a dare and always reassembled in some fashion. Our houses were above the beach, on streets that dead-ended at the cliff's edge, and whenever we weren't in school, we were there – a loose assembly of boys and girls running in and out of the waves, scouring the sand for treasures. We used to believe that the man hauled in and carefully placed the things that we found, the beach glass, whelks and broken dolls. We believed that without him the waves would have kept their contents, holding it all close, their rounded edges closed hands.

There was a tacit agreement between the man and the authorities that he only come to the beach at night, but he didn't always keep to this agreement. Occasionally in the middle of one of our games we would see him walking towards his house. He walked quickly with a kind of purposeful anger which made us believe he had come from a city. He could not sit still for more than a few moments and was always moving his things from one place to another, tossing sticks into ordered piles and then rearranging the order, or simply sitting down then standing up again and again as if conducting some strange exercise regime.

Our fathers thought he was a fisherman who had fallen on hard times. Look, they argued, the evidence: thick chest and wide arms, visible muscles in the neck from hauling in catch. And the way he watches us sometimes, they said, like he's waiting to give advice. Our mothers were

frightened, only went to the beach with dogs or children, never alone. He averts his eyes, they told us. He doesn't speak. Not even a nod.

The only sound the man ever made was a piercing imitation of gulls. The way he did it – coming in close, bending low at the waist and letting out a high pitched, angry sound like he was chastising the bird for its limited range of song. He would do this for a minute or so and then stop, stomping away, shoulders hunched, as if chased by the silence that followed his utterance.

His lips were slightly purple always. His face a ruddy orange. We wondered where he shaved, how he cleaned himself, where he went during the day, what he ate. Berries and beach plums still grew in those days on the sides of the roads and in the dunes. Mussels could be scraped from the rocks. Seaweed, we were told, would keep you alive for weeks if you were stranded. Was he stranded? There were paths made to the mouth of his house, strewn kelp and the smoothest bone-white boards erected like fence posts, haphazard random patterns that kept nothing in or out. Tattered canvas sacks full of his collections were tucked under layers of sand. Brave days we touched them. Found shoelaces, dried starfish, stiff drowned and dried books. None of us could stay inside long. We believed there must be something more ominous one layer deeper, in the shadows under the folds of green canvas, something unnameable that we could not bear to touch even with our prodding sticks.

But we liked him, our man. We called him that. *What's our man doing now?* we liked to say. He was not like our fathers, our uncles. We didn't see him as quite human. He might have come from some far off world, from beneath the ground, the edge of the sea. His work here seemed important, this organizing of shells and keeping up collections. We imitated him, building small houses of our own. Marking out property lines, erecting fences. Sometimes we dreamed of living his way: running off to another place, leaving language, leaving tables, leaving

toilets and walls, tap water, fishing nets, chores. At school we thought about it, built boats of grass and paper in the schoolyard, stormed down the hallway, squawking like birds, laughing.

One day, our man made a boy, four feet tall, of clothes and sand. It lay on the beach on its back, swathed in a blanket so you couldn't see a face. Our fathers crept past it at dawn. It was the shoes that had them convinced, the way they were propped at angles, the way our feet fall when we're sleeping. The soles unglued in places and worn smooth.

We came later, examined the angle of the corpse, the tilt of the head. We were sure it was murder, someone strangled in sleep, a small man or boy we'd never seen but who must have lived among us anyway. The blanket was bunched above the head, falling open at one side. We saw a skinny arm, thick ankles, frayed pockets, a button down shirt. There was a small bump under one sleeve. We touched our own arms, searching for swelling. *Hair*, someone whispered and we crowded around to look. A lock of blonde caught between blanket and sand. A strange awe, a wonder. We held our breath.

Our mothers called the authorities, two men who came with rifles. They stood at a careful distance, tapping first a shoulder, then a leg with the butts of their guns. We were shivering, huddled together. Someone was crying. And then the officers started to laugh. No words, but a joke must have passed between them. They were experienced, we thought, callous and brave. We waited, thinking the thing might stir, get up and shake itself off. The shoes had fallen slightly forward as if the ankles had been broken. Small dents could be seen in each place the rifles touched. The strangeness of this terrified us. We wanted to linger in the thrill, wanted each new image frozen. Here. A glimpse of a hand. Here. An indent in skin. Here. One of the men called his dog. The animal came. It straddled the dead boy, took the blanket in its teeth and

shook it, tearing the body open. Then the officers joined in, bouncing like children. Rags and shells, wet sand. The men were giddy, our mothers laughing, messing our hair. But we were looking at the corpse. It was still there. A hissing in the wind, torn clothing, an imprint in sand, the suggestion of arms, of weight, of breath. We stared, sniffed the air, the briny taste of the tide catching in our throats. A smell that would linger with us for years, underlined in tar, sticking to our fingers, our hair. That crooked little boy, that empty boy, his legs thin as ours, his shoes like ours, his hands hidden. When a dog died, when a seal washed ashore, at the funeral of a fisherman, the church air scented in bibles and lilac spray, we would conjure that smell, salt and seagull droppings, a fetid tide.

That winter, our man disappeared. Our parents told us it was the weather, a long rainy season, but it always rained in winter. We thought he was tired of us. We watched the sea from our windows, thinking he went that way. The sticks at the base of his hut were hung with jellyfish, beached and turned to slime. We came out in the rain one day and dug through the sand, tore down the boards, found nothing but coins, a book of matches, a pair of scissors. A girl propped one of the sticks against the cliff and stood on it, breaking it in half. We liked the sound. The wood, wet and pliant, broke quietly. We worked for hours, finished the rest, halved and halved the boards again until they were kindling.

When he came back again it was late spring. We had almost forgotten him and were surprised to see his hut, a tarp erected over the top billowing in the wind. He was thinner. Someone said his hands were shaking, that he walked with a kind of a limp. He brought with him a fishing pole, and stood on the shore in the mornings while our fathers went by in their boats, assembling the rod, cocking back his arm and letting go the line.

He was there every day, catching next to nothing in the rocky shallows. Our fathers spoke to him, suggested he use their docks. He nodded. They were encouraged by the nod. *That man*, they told us, *he's really coming around*. They expected him to be at work soon, gutting fish at the harbor, saving for a boat of his own. They had names for him, Mack and Jim, Stick Man, Jackie. They argued over which he was better suited to.

He didn't seem to mind when we stood surrounding him, watching him fish, or sat at his feet piling pebbles on his boots. His eyes were the color of the river under clouds, a flickering green. We asked him questions that he never answered, but we could see that he listened and he didn't mind our voices, our pestering. He was a different man, this one who came back. He didn't keen at the birds or race in and out of his camp. He left nothing of interest for us on the beaches. His face had gone pale. We could see veins beneath his eyes. The only direction he ever looked was down, at the water, the length of his line. We grew tired of him. Summer came and we became swimmers, worried our mothers, let our fathers throw us from their boats. The man threw out his line and reeled it in again and again. As if that was enough.

Watch him closely. We didn't then. The way he walks waste deep into the water and sways with the tide. The look on his face that doesn't change when he lets go the line or when he pulls it in, when he has a fish or when he has nothing. Gravity weighs the corners of his mouth, the cheeks, the eyes. And how he stares, as if at a flat surface. We watch the boats tip up, their stained metal hulls exposed in the light, their names stenciled carefully in thick black paint. Barnacles, knots of translucent green, the smell of the river. Our fathers brace against the wheels, kneel at the sides, readying the nets. Cast them off, shimmering. *Beautiful*, we think. The man throws out his hook, seeing nothing. We dig through his hut and find the ordinary - a bedroll, a knife, a towel, a plate.

That dead boy was his. It had fine features, lips thin like his, blonde coarse hair. The night he made it he only had the moon, the near light before dawn. And he had our things. Our clothes, tossed off to swim, to play, shoes left while we waded in the water. We thought they were lost, at school or at sea. But he took them, hid them somewhere up the cliff and came down with them to work.

See him on his knees, a tin can of water to wet the sand, shaping the leg, cutting the pants to fit around it, tucking the edge of the cloth under. Shaping and reshaping, making the kneecap flat, a slight bend in the elbow. He was still for this one night, some vision before him. A boy to see himself in, a boy who slept the way he did, a hollow for his head dug into sand. Our clothes. Our legs. Our arms and feet. He worked for hours, perfecting the way the hips narrowed, the edge of the shoulder, the clothing, a blanket to bolster the illusion. He must have been proud. His child. He must have hidden and watched us find it, stayed to see our faces in the flat light of morning lit with wonder. How we saw there, wavering and empty, a body and an empty space, a dead boy, a man, our own fingers, sleep and murder, skin and sand, and all of the things undefined and in between, that we were not supposed to see.

Dorothy and the Scarecrow

That morning, I took my father's watch from the top of the dresser where my mother kept it, stuffed a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in my jacket pocket and ran away. We lived near Sunset Park and before he died, my father and I used to take walks together, pretending to be Dorothy and the Scarecrow, lost in the saltbush and mesquite, asking strangers and pigeons for directions. Though my father probably was not pretending. He was always getting lost. Driving around the city, he kept the Stratosphere in sight and panicked if he couldn't see it. "Minna," he'd shout, "where's the spaceship?" pulling the car over and sometimes hoisting me onto the roof. My father was the center of a crowd of musicians and artists, an organizer of events, flash mobs, protests, an investor and business owner. His desk and floor were piled with bills and books, paper towels, pages torn from magazines. He left bite marks in the cheese. He left the stove on all day. He made messes. He made noise. After he died, our house was silent. My mother spent all of her time with lawyers and bankers. When she was home she sat on the couch and stared out the window. I imagined she was becoming a cat. She was already gone when I woke up that morning. It was Saturday and I was bored. I was ten years old. I wanted to have an adventure, to follow a road, to find my father. I let myself out the front door and ran across the wide street alone for the first time.

It had rained the night before and the dirt was still wet under my shoes. A nervous family of quail crossed my path and I took it as a sign, their bobbing head feathers pointing a direction. I followed them to the playground, and watched them march under the slide. I'd never seen the park this empty. The merry-go-round was moving by itself in the wind, emitting a slow squeaking noise that scared me and I continued on to the pond. There the birds were awake,

preening and chattering. An old couple I'd met before were watching them, the man tossing the crumbs of a dried baguette into the water, his wife standing a few feet away gazing through binoculars. I sat behind them on a bench and looked at my father's watch. The band still smelled like his cologne. I tried to wind it, the way I'd seen my mother do every morning. Standing in front of the dresser in her pink robe, she'd turn the knob, as I listened to the small click, click, click, and watched her face in the mirror.

"Give the girl a crust, Al," the woman shouted. "You want to feed the babies?" I looked to where she was pointing, a line of nine or ten yellow ducklings swimming towards us. Her husband handed her a grocery bag. "We watched them hatch," she said. She was dressed like a park ranger, in a vest with large pockets, hiking boots and green pants. She handed me a piece of bread and I hurled it at the birds. "What an arm!" She said. And then she started talking about a trip they'd taken, birds they'd seen, egrets and hawks, and herons. Her face reminded me of an apple doll; her cheeks looked painted pink. She pulled a book from one of her pockets and opened it to show me a picture, a loose photograph of a green blur against the sky. "Parrots!" she said.

Her husband squawked.

"Al," she said, then turned to me. "You're alone today," she said. The last time we'd met her, my father had nicknamed her "Babbling Bertha." I shrugged and she went on to tell me that there was a family, *a human family* sleeping in a tent on the other side of the park. "We almost walked right over them," she said.

"Are they hobos?" I asked her.

"Are they hobos, Al?" she said.

The man tilted his head. "Red-winged blackbird," he said.

The woman focused her binoculars on a tree across the pond. “Look at you,” she said to the bird. And while she and her husband admired it, I snuck away.

When you make your own path, walking straight through the desert, you have to walk carefully, one foot in front of the other, like you are walking a tightrope. This way you don’t fall into cacti, or step in squirrel burrows. This is how I was walking in search of hobos. I was thinking about my mother, and how I should have left a note, and how she only made food out of cans and boxes now, things I used to beg to eat, Spaghetti-O’s and frozen pizzas, things my parents only ate when they were drunk or tired. I was thinking about our substitute teacher. She was there when I came back after the funeral, this new woman, sitting in my teacher’s desk wearing cat-eyed glasses and smeared lipstick. She gave me a box of crayons and said I should draw my feelings. “You’ll always be broken hearted,” she told me. I wondered if the other teacher had ever existed, or if I’d imagined her. I thought about Dorothy – was Oz more real than Kansas? My parents and I once made a plan to walk across America in a straight line from Las Vegas to the Atlantic. We would walk through people’s yards and houses and chicken coops, in and out the front and back doors of grocery stores and bars, restaurants and malls, across freeways. We would grow potatoes in our backpacks and sleep in open fields, forget our old life, our apartments, the cities we’d lived in. Hobos move on because they want to, my father said.

I could see the tent from a distance, and the man in front of it, shoving things into bags. He was blonde and skinny, his dirty jeans sagging as he darted about, humming to himself. There wasn’t anything to hide behind, so I stood there watching. It was a nice tent, blue and shiny and wet with rain, but it seemed too small for a family. He pulled off the rain flap and hung it over a

bush and as he turned, he noticed me. "What do you want?" he said. I started to walk away. "Wait," he said. He rifled through a backpack he'd picked up and held out a piece of string cheese wrapped in plastic. I shook my head. "Car stalled out," he said. "No living in vehicles, sir. No sir." He knelt and started pulling out a tent stake. "We're on our way," he said. "Scrounging up the dough." I noticed a Barbie doll sprawled in the dirt and wondered where his kids were. He stood and looked at me. "You all alone?" he asked. I didn't like his smile.

"With my dad," I said.

"Where's he at?" He took a few steps closer.

"He's coming," I said.

"You're lying," he said, grinning at me. I heard a shout and turned to see a little girl racing up the path, a woman behind her. "Keep her quiet," the man shouted.

"No one's around, Pete," the woman said.

"Cops around," the man said.

"Who's she?" the girl asked. She was probably five years old, her hair wet in pigtails. She approached me slowly.

"We gotta hustle," the man said, throwing one of the bags at the woman, who was sitting in the dirt, pulling a rock from her shoe.

"Give me a fucking minute," the woman said.

"Who's she?" the girl repeated.

"Some kid. Thinks we're zoo animals." He pulled a monkey face at me.

"Pete," the woman said.

"Get off your ass," the man shouted.

“Where’s your house?” the girl asked me. Her parents were taking down the tent. I pointed in the direction of where I lived. “Are you coming with us?” she asked. Her mother glanced at me.

“She’s lost,” the man said.

“No I’m not,” I said.

“Waiting for her daddy,” the man said.

“Where is he?” the girl asked.

“He’s coming,” I said. And I pictured him behind me in his bright yellow rain jacket, sipping a cup of coffee, listing off the names of plants. *Burrobrush, brittlebush, rabbitbrush.*

“Where did he go?” the girl asked.

“Nowhere,” I said.

“Where?” she repeated.

“Baby, leave her alone,” the woman said. “Go with daddy to the car.” I watched the man scoop the girl up with one arm, carrying the tent in the other.

The woman stood in front of me. “You’re just going to stand here all day?” she said. That was what we did when we got lost, my father and I, stood in one place until we knew which way to go.

“He leave you in this spot?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“Where?” she said.

I couldn’t answer.

“Jesus, what’s your problem?” she said. I started to cry. “Alright,” she said, and she took my hand and pulled me along behind her back to the pond and sat me on a bench. “You see

him anywhere?" I looked at the murky water, at the trees. There was a fisherman sitting motionless in a folding chair, tinny music playing from his radio. A young couple, holding hands, stopped and asked her to take their picture and I watched them smile, frozen against the sky, everything still and quiet. It felt like a dream. I could hear cars on the road. A cormorant vanished under the surface of the water.

"Where did you see him last?" she asked. "What was he wearing?"

In one of the Oz books, a witch transforms Dorothy's friends into objects – vases, rocks, statues – and she has to walk through a room, cluttered with things, and figure out which is the Tin Man, which is Toto. After we read this, my father and I made up a game. Walking through a store, he'd touch a one-eyed plastic doll. "Minna!" he'd say. I'd touch a head of cabbage. "Daddy!" After he was gone, I imagined him everywhere. My father the spoon. My father the spider plant. My father the cat that followed me through the yard. My father the wadded up piece of bubble gum. But Dorothy only had three chances. If she guessed wrong, the scarecrow would be stuck forever as an ashtray or a can of soup. So I never guessed.

"Stay here," the woman said. She stood to go. I stared at the lake. "You were my kid, I'd look for you here."

Larry's Diner

George won't look at me. He's holding the salt and pepper shakers in his hands, rubbing them against each other. The glass edges make this quiet, grinding sound.

"I don't even know what the hell I'm supposed to think," he says.

I don't say anything.

"It's just weird, Jesse. I mean –" I clear my throat. I watch the sign blink off and on outside: *Larry's Diner*. Glass bulbs shining red – something about those bulbs – I want to hold one in my mouth, feel it there and try not to break it.

I shrug.

It's three in the morning and we're coming down from a night of whiskey and weed. It's our weekend routine. I've been back in town a few months. I guess I drank my way out of college. I flunked out anyway. George went to Mexico after high school. Met a girl. He still calls her some nights, says he's going back down there when he gets enough money. I like to say I'm going back to Davis as soon as I get my shit together. Probably I'll end up at the JC, taking classes with all the bonehead jocks who used to want to kick my ass.

"It doesn't mean anything, man," I say. "It's just something guys do sometimes."

George is all worked up because I told him how I fucked around with my dorm roommate, this kid Mitch.

"No, Jesse," he says, "It's not something guys just do. I mean, okay, maybe when you're twelve you play doctor, but –" He stops. George and I have known each other since kindergarten. We played doctor or whatever he wants to call it, more times than I can remember.

“George, that’s normal kid’s stuff, what we did. Don’t freak yourself out.” I can see he’s trying to think back. He’s compiling evidence.

“Jesus. You kissed him?” He stares at me. I start laughing. I don’t know why, it just seems funny, me and George sitting here having this conversation. George has had the same choppy haircut since eighth grade. He’s giving me this serious look, like his whole body is about to implode, he’s concentrating so hard.

“Hey,” I say, “You know Sara knows this guy in Seattle, an EMT or something. He was called to Kurt Cobain’s. He saw the body and everything.”

George is staring at me, looking like he wants something, like he’s going to cry or kill me. I hate him for the face he’s making, wide eyes and those fat, stupid, red cheeks. He looks like a girl. He reminds me of Mitch.

Some mornings I’d find myself in Mitch’s bed. I’d be sleeping with my leg hanging off, naked, and he’d be there next to me, pasty white and skinny, smelling like sour milk. I’d get up, put my clothes on and open the door. “Where are you going?” he’d ask, whining, half asleep. I wouldn’t answer. I’d just leave. I had to leave. We lived in a room the size of a closet. One small window, manure-scented air breezing in from the surrounding farms. I would go for weeks without talking to him. I never told him why. I’d stay in my corner and he’d stare at me from his bed with that aching fucking look on his face.

“We’re talking about this Jesse.” George has dark green eyes that just about turn black when he’s mad. “I’ve known you my whole life and now it’s like you’re some other person. Did you kiss this guy? I mean, like, how many times did you --”

“Fuck?” I smile. I don’t know why I’m being such an asshole.

“Yeah.” He takes a sip of his cold coffee. The waitresses want nothing to do with us. They’re in the back room watching late night TV.

“I don’t know.”

“Did you like it? I mean, did you like it, Jesse?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Maybe. I don’t know. I told you we were wasted.”

“But you liked it. You liked this guy. Did you kiss him, Jesse? Did he... fuck you?”

George has to spit those last two words out.

“No, okay? Jesus Christ. Do we have to make such a big deal out of this?”

George and I had gone by our old grade school after the bar closed. It’s up in the hills. You can hear crickets, owls, sometimes coyotes. And there are so many stars. This town is too much: bright yellow mustard flowers light up the fields, blackberry bushes grow into the road and along the riverbanks, and at night the air soaks it all in and smells so goddamned sweet. It’s a kind of beauty that hits you like quicksand. You can never leave it. We were lying down on the merry-go-round, watching stars blur into streaks, spinning the thing faster and faster. I started to wonder if maybe I would just stay here, in this town, for the rest of my life. It didn’t seem like such a bad thing. George laughed at me. He wanted to hear about college girls. We talked about sex, about all the stupid things we did when we were too drunk to care.

It didn’t seem to bother him when I said it. He wasn’t shocked or anything. We just kept talking, about his girlfriends, girls I’d slept with, parties we’d been to. Then we came here.

“You lied to me,” he says. I don’t know what he means.

I don’t want to make anything out of it. I want it to be just something I did. Like how he fucked that girl in Mexico. Why does it have to be different? Yeah, I kissed him. We ‘made

out? I guess. But we were always high or trashed. It was part of our routine. I kissed him. It wasn't just fucking. That's what George is looking for, that goddamned distinction. I can't think about it, the way he's looking at me right now.

"I'm not gay, George."

George wipes the table with the corner of his napkin, brushes grains of salt into his palm. I look out at the sign again. There are steady blue lights making a square around the blinking words. The blue bulbs are small, in thin rows of two and three. George is pouring more salt onto the tabletop just so he can brush it off again. I look for the waitresses, worried they'll care. But they won't. We've come here forever. They're used to our inspired messes.

"I guess Cobain shot himself with a hunting gun," I say.

George doesn't say anything. He squints down his crooked nose, hands working across salt.

"The kind where the bullet doesn't exit, it just blows apart inside your head."

"Shut up, Jesse."

"You know what I want to do?" I say.

"Shut up."

"I want to switch the light bulbs on that sign. Make them all different colors."

"Shut the fuck up." He's just saying it. Not yelling, just saying it like it's hello or how are you or anything.

"Wouldn't that be funny? Stand out there and unscrew them all? I wonder how long it would take." I tap my spoon on the sugar jar.

“Fucking fag,” he says. There’s a copper taste in my mouth. He says it again, looking right at me. I don’t say anything. I can’t breathe. I just look at the sign, blinking red, blinking off. Then I stand up and walk outside.

There’s a weird kind of brick wall that the sign is cemented to. It’s taller than I expect, a foot taller than me. I dig my fingertips into the cracks between the bricks. The rough surface scratches my knees. I pull myself up, balancing on the wall’s edge, and start at the bottom. I unscrew the blue ones first. They burn my hands. Once I have three in my palm, I squeeze as hard as I can, but they don’t break. I look at George, bent over his coffee cup, and throw a bulb hard at the window. It shatters. He doesn’t look up.

In high school, George and I were losers. We had a few casual friends, had our own little parties where we’d get high and lip sync to Monty Python movies in front of George’s tiny bedroom TV set. I liked to blow things up, experiment with household chemicals. George wanted to make movies. He had a huge collection of Star Wars action figures, some still in the original packaging. I swear we played with them until we were sixteen. I guess we were alone a lot, holed up in his room, listening to the Pixies with the bass turned up. There were rumors. Graffiti in the bathrooms. Once there was a drawing of us: me on all fours, George on top. That one had a caption. We learned to walk at least two feet apart. We ate lunch with kids we didn’t like so that we weren’t seen alone together. I don’t think we ever talked about these things. Junior year, George joined the football team. He got a girlfriend too, a science geek with buckteeth, and he made a point to do just about everything but fuck her in public. The rumors about us stopped after that. I dyed my hair black and lifted weights, took up smoking, hung out with the Goth kids in the bus yard. I had girlfriends too, nothing serious.

I gather the bulbs in my shirt like I'm picking fruit. I must have like fifty of them in there. I don't know what I'm going to do with them, but I like turning out the lights. The sign says, *Larry's er, now.*

When we were kids, twelve or thirteen, we'd sleep naked. My dad slept naked. In my mind it was a manly thing to do – lie out under the stars in our birthday suits. We'd set up our tent in some far off place in the yard, crawl into our sleeping bags and take off our clothes. We had flashlights in case we heard mountain lions. Sometimes after we got quiet, I'd unzip my bag part way and jack off, knowing he was awake. Usually he'd join in. Sometimes I'd do him and he'd do me.

There was one night, I guess I got curious. George was panting. I'd already finished. Maybe I just wanted to freak him out. I mean, in daylight we never admitted that this stuff went on. I crawled between his legs and opened my mouth. George didn't say anything. I moved my head a little and he started moaning. So I kept going. He kept going. Afterwards I ran out of the tent. I threw up. When I woke up the next morning, he was mummified in his sleeping bag at the other edge of the tent.

I throw another light at the window. I have almost all of *Diner* off now. I want to unscrew all of the blue lights. I want to plug them into my arms and legs. I want to be electric. I don't want to think.

Sometimes Mitch looked pretty to me. No, not pretty. I was high. I looked at him and I wanted something. Afterwards I always hated him, hated the air around us, the smell of my own sweat. That last time, I gave him a bloody nose. I've been beaten up a few times, but I've never fought with anyone. He was sitting at the edge of his bed, giving me this look like everything

was supposed to be beautiful and romantic. But it wasn't. I needed him to see that. I left the dorms after that. Moved into a house with some kids I knew from high school.

"You don't know who you are," Mitch said to me. He didn't cry. He just shook his head, his nose bleeding into his mouth, like nothing had happened.

George is standing on the sidewalk under the sign. "You're such an idiot," he says. "What the hell are you going to do with all of those?"

"Take it back," I say.

"What?"

"Take it back, George."

"Come down, Jesse," he says.

"Just take it back." It never really stopped: the graffiti, the whispered stupid rumors about me and the special ed kids, me and the biology class lab rats, me and the sweater vest teachers. All of it quiet, all murmurs and glances. I could almost ignore it. An empty can thrown at the back of my head from a car window. *Faggot*. Pretend it was nothing. Little pushes in the halls. *Faggot*. They didn't know me. George was there. He knew me. I throw bulbs at the sidewalk. They break on either side of him. "Take it back." I'm starting to cry.

He won't.

I don't look at him. I climb down the wall, hugging the bulbs in my shirt. On the ground, I pour them all in front of him. They fall and fall from me, red and blue, falling around our feet. And once they're all lying there, some of them already broken, I start to stomp them under my shoes, one at a time. "It feels good," I say. The glass crunches like teeth breaking. George puts his boot over a red one and pushes down. We break every bulb.

Lithuania

The old couple was sitting in front of the television eating their dinner when the stranger walked in. Tall and dressed in a style from an earlier era, the man stood in the entryway watching over the room. He held a faded beaver hat in one hand and in the other a small cloth sack, which looked like it had been carried, its top wadded up in his palm, for several weeks.

The old man attacked his carrots with the side of his fork. “Why’d you cut them so thick?” he yelled at his wife, who shushed him with a wave of her hand and turned up the television. A cheerful song blared into the room and she shook her head to the beat. “Sing, sing, sing,” he muttered, bopping his head from side to side in imitation, “dance, dance.” Then turning from his wife, he saw the stranger in the doorway. The old man stood.

“Whatever you’re selling mister, believe me, we don’t need any,” he announced. The stranger put out his hand and the old man shook it, continuing, “My wife bought all of it on sale years ago – that’s why we’re living in this hole.”

The stranger glanced nervously at the old man, took a step into the room and sat on the couch in the old man’s place, resting his sack on the floor between his feet. He sighed.

“You want some water?” the old man asked.

The stranger grinned, revealing a mouth full of holes where teeth should have been. “No, thank you,” he said. His voice had a kind of whistle to it and the hesitancy of a foreign tongue.

“You oughta have those teeth looked at,” the old man said.

The stranger nodded, ran a finger across his gums and spat onto the carpet. “A strongman!” the old man shouted. He looked the stranger up and down. “When’s the last time we had company, Martha?” he asked his wife, beaming at the visitor. She didn’t answer. The

old man touched the stranger's collar. He liked the feeling of the rough fabric under his palm. His eyes began to water.

A puzzle appeared on the screen – glowing white squares filled here and there with bold letters. “Gone with the Wind!” the old woman shouted and when the music began to play again, she clapped her hands. The stranger clapped too and the old woman grabbed one of his hands, held it, then let it go.

“Where you from?” the old man asked.

“Lithuania,” the stranger said.

“Martha!” the old man shouted, “He's from Lithuania!”

The old woman turned to the stranger. “Lithuania,” she said, then looked at the lit up squares on the screen as if trying to insert the word.

“My wife was from there. Born there,” the old man said. “I come from nearby.” He smiled. “This goes way back,” he said, batting a hand in the air. “Who can remember?” The old man looked around at the room filled with things his wife had bought at second hand shops. Cracked porcelain dolls. Quilts sewn by someone else's hand. He glanced at the bag between the stranger's feet, at the man's worn boots. His wife giggled.

“She's not in her right mind,” the old man said. The stranger nodded and the two men looked at the woman clutching the remote to her chest. On the screen someone exclaimed over the strength of his paper towels and the old woman smiled, her mouth yawning open. The old man saw her teeth, the color of new corn, her lips drawn thin, wrinkles above the mouth branching like tributaries.

Above the couch, taped to the wall, a white paper doily she'd made in some class. Her name was scribbled in pencil at the edge of the paper. The tape had picked up red lint. It was losing its stick. He pressed a finger there. His wife gave the television a wave. The old man sighed and turned back to his visitor.

“Let's see what you've got in that bag,” he said. The stranger held out his sack. His face seemed to soften and for a moment he reminded the old man of his wife, twenty years old, holding a handful of plums for him to catch as they boarded the already packed train, eyes wide in a kind of dumb hope or wonder, arm outstretched.

The old man lifted the sack and emptied it onto the table. Thick dark silt, pebbles a few stones. The stranger smiled.

“Are you crazy?” the old man shouted. Grains dusted the carpet and stuck in the pages of magazines.

The old woman looked from the television to the table covered in dirt. She pointed at the stranger sitting next to her, holding a handful to her face like an offering. She laughed.

“Get out!” the old man yelled. The stranger waited. His face grew pale. The old woman pushed his hand away, laughing. “Get out!” the old man screamed. The stranger emptied his hand, wiped it on his leg, then stood and collected his empty sack and hat.

In the hall, he turned and looked back at the two old people. Bright colors – blues, pinks, violets – played across their faces. The old man was cursing, sweeping dirt from the table to the floor. The old woman turned the volume up one more notch.

After the door closed, she bent over, pushed her hands into the dirt and brought a fistful to her mouth.

Cold War

Alex is piling books into her red wagon – *Colette, The Way of Zen, Autobiography of a Yogi*. “Work faster, comrades!” she shouts at her little brother who stacks the books as she throws them. “The purity of the state is in your hands.”

The bottom shelves are nearly empty, open books strewn around their feet. When their mother comes in, the pages flutter in the wind.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“The books must be destroyed,” Alex says. She pulls off battered copy of Henry Miller’s *Sexus*.

“Do you know how much these books cost?”

“Comrade Caroline,” Alex says. She is wearing jeans tucked into red rubber boots and a white tee shirt on which she has scrawled “CCCP” in magic marker. She paces the floor in front of her mother’s feet, her short, blonde hair standing up in patches on her head. “Comrade Caroline,” she says in her best Slavic accent, “don’t think your dirty capitalist thoughts.”

Her mother stares at her. “Put them back when you’re done,” she says, walking into the kitchen. “We’re having company.”

Alex pushes a stack of books from the shelf to the floor. She looks around at the half-empty house. Her parents sold everything when they moved here, everything but the books. Her uncle Rama left the furniture – a couch, some mattresses on the floor. He built the house, a rough wood A-frame, the second floor open in the middle where he planned to grow a tree. There are no stairs, just a ladder that leads from the living room to where she and her brother sleep.

She follows her mother into the kitchen, Luke dragging the wagon behind her. “Leave it,” she says. The kitchen table is a picnic table her uncle stole from the town park. Alex lies down on the bench and stares at the ceiling. “Another party?” she asks.

“Just a few friends,” her mother says.

“The ceiling’s wet again,” Alex says. There are chinks in the roof where rain seeps in and stains the wood in angular patterns. She has been watching the stains spread all winter, their shapes changing like clouds. Moths, beetles, sometimes even bats wedge themselves in through the empty spaces. Her parents try to seal the holes with rags, with scraps of wood but there are too many.

She watches her mother pace from the sink to the stove, filling pots with water. “What are you making for dinner?”

“I don’t know,” her mother says.

“Make oatmeal,” her brother says.

“I hate oatmeal,” Alex says. Her mother lights a cigarette. “You smoke too much,” Alex says. She flips through the pages of a schoolbook on the table. “Cigarettes are a capitalist evil.”

“They smoke like crazy in Russia,” her mother says.

“No, they don’t,” Alex says. “When’s Dad coming?”

Her mother stares out the window. It’s raining outside – the rain making the forest around them darker. Alex looks at the photographs in her book: old women in kerchiefs standing in a line that wraps around a gray building. Her mother starts to sing to herself and Alex watches her, swaying on her feet, her hips pressed against the counter, dancing. There’s a leaf caught in her long hair.

“When’s he coming?” Alex asks.

“I don’t know,” her mother says, “tomorrow maybe. He has to work.”

Alex traces the line of women with her index finger. The photograph is gray and fading. Her teacher brings her new books about Russia every week. It’s a small school, a one-room schoolhouse, and Melissa, the only teacher, encourages the children to learn about anything that interests them. At recess, Alex and her friend Oscar examine their classmates’ homework, line the deviants up against the fence and shoot them, using sticks as guns. Melissa tells Carol this is only a phase. “They pick up what’s going on in the world, you know, and this is really heavy stuff.”

Her mother takes oatmeal, cinnamon and a bag of chocolate chips down from the shelves. She picks up an onion and starts to chop it. Alex watches her, standing at the sink, staring out at nothing. Her eyes begin to tear and she wipes them with her sleeve.

“My friend Mateo has a snake,” Luke yells, hammering clay into the floor with a spatula, “and two lizards and two sisters...”

“And an ugly mother,” Alex says.

“Shut up, Alex,” her mother says. She pours the oatmeal into one of the pots of water and ashes her cigarette in the sink. She looks at her children. “Luke, clean that up.”

“Who’s coming tonight?” Alex asks.

Her mother empties chocolate chips onto the pages of her open book. “Get out the bowls, would you?” she says.

In Sacramento there was a swing set and a swimming pool. They lived in an apartment with white walls that Alex drew on in crayon and pencil. Her father worked at the hospital and came home every night. And in the mornings her mother walked her to school where there were

classrooms and a hundred teachers, and when the bell rang she stood in line, and didn't make a noise. They moved to the mountains because it was beautiful, because her mother missed her brother, because her parents could live a better life here with all of their friends. But her father couldn't find work, so he stayed at his job in the city. Now he rents a room in a house with a man name Harold who frowns when he smiles and drinks tea out of jars. He only comes home on weekends.

“Oatmeal is not a dinner thing, Mom.” Alex says.

“In Russia you eat what you are given.”

Alex slams her fist on the table. Her mother opens the window to let in the sound of rain. She walks into the living room, throws her cigarette in the woodstove and turns on the record player. Luke's hand is buried in the bag of chocolate chips and the oatmeal is bubbling over the top of the pot. Alex turns it off. “Clean up your clay,” she says. “Mom, who's coming?”

Her mother turns up the volume, loud jazz, and starts to dance. Alex empties a box of spaghetti into one of the boiling pots of water and turns off the others. “This music is offensive!” she yells. Luke screams like a saxophone.

They drove up in the middle of June, the car filled with clothes in garbage bags. Her uncle, Rama, was waiting for them, sitting on the couch, laughing. “You're here!” he shouted. Alex dropped the bag she was carrying and ran up the ladder to the second floor.

“I'm sleeping upstairs,” she yelled. She remembered when her cousins lived here and they played tag, scrambling around like monkeys.

“What can you see from up there?” her mother asked. Alex cupped her hands in front of her eyes like binoculars. Luke climbed up behind her.

“Everything,” she said.

Rama put his arm around her father’s shoulders, “You’re gonna love this place, man.”

When the sun went down, her mother lit candles. The power was off. Alex watched moths with giant brown wings flutter around the flames. Her parents’ friends stopped by. They crowded together on the couch or sat on the floor. She listened to the sounds of crickets singing underneath all of the talking and watched her parents kiss and hug one friend after another, her father’s cheeks red as he talked, as he ran a hand through her mother’s hair. Alex watched her mother spinning with Luke in her arms, her parents leaning into each other, her mother brushing her father’s cheek. Out the window, the trees were like paper cutouts against the sky. They surrounded the house. She had never seen so many.

Luke picks up a noodle and drops it into his mouth. A car is coming up the driveway, a dented yellow pick up truck. “Holly’s here,” Alex says.

“Holly’s here!” her brother yells.

Her mother hurries to the living room and starts straightening the couch cushions. Alex watches Holly getting out of the cab in her bright yellow raincoat and heavy boots, a bowler hat on her head. Holly calls herself the cosmic gardener. There are daisies painted on the side of her truck. She comes over almost every day, bringing old books and ugly thrift store dresses for Alex and stuffed animals for Luke. She laughs too loud, she talks too loud, her truck smells like manure.

“Holly, it’s raining and we’re having chocolate for dinner!” Luke says, opening the door. Holly takes off her hat and puts it on his head and Alex watches her mother and Holly kiss, Holly’s hand on her mother’s waist. They kiss on the lips.

“Gross,” Alex says.

Holly walks into the kitchen laughing. Alex stares fixedly at her book. “In Russia women walk around holding hands,” she says. She rubs Alex’s back and kisses the tip of her ear.

Alex turns a page. “It’s the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,” she says.

“They’re playing war at school now,” her mother says. “The Russians and the Americans.”

“Reagan is an idiot,” Alex says.

“She’s just trying to understand them,” Holly says. “Love thy enemy and all that.”

“Understand them?” Alex shakes her head. “No, comrade. I am a Soviet citizen.”

Holly sits down. “Jim coming tonight?”

Her mother shakes her head. “Rama’s coming later,” she says, “with everybody.”

The first weekend, her father hung beads in the living room closet. He lined the walls with pillows. Alex watched him sitting cross-legged on the floor, his eyes rolled back in his head.

“Why do you meditate?” she asked. She was sitting outside of the beaded curtain, staring at his bent back.

Her father turned around and uncrossed his legs; he rubbed his chin and looked at the ceiling. “I think because I want to be a good person,” he said.

Her mother was on the couch, reading a book. “It’s relaxing, Alex,” she said. There were pictures tacked to the closet walls: old men dressed in white and orange robes, men with

wide, round eyes and cheeks that bunched up when they smiled. Her parents had names for them that she couldn't pronounce or remember.

Alex looked at the old men and imagined her father in one of these pictures, gazing off into the distance, a slight smile on his face. "You're a good person," she told him.

Her father leaned against the wall. "I don't know," he said, "I think you can always be better, you know? More in touch."

Her mother walked past the room, then, laughing. "Listen to your daughter," she said. She tied up the curtains and kissed her husband on the head.

Holly is bent over the kitchen table, helping Luke build a castle out of blocks. Alex watches from upstairs. She is trying to do her homework, a math book open across her legs, but is distracted by their voices. Her mother sits across from them at the table, eating spoonfuls of oatmeal.

"That looks awful," Holly says.

"I'm starving all of the sudden."

"It's gray, Carol," Holly pushes her finger into the bowl. "Food shouldn't be gray."

"Put trees on the roof," Luke says.

"Did you see he lost another tooth?" Carol asks.

"Did you swallow it Luka?" Alex watches Holly hold her brother to her chest and whisper in his ear. Luke giggles.

"Jim pulled it," her mother says. "I think it hurt him more than Luke."

"I'm making them hats for winter," Holly says.

Alex writes her father's name across the top of the page; she covers the numbers. It's dark in the loft. There's a lamp on the floor next to her bed, Snoopy on ice skates dancing around the lampshade. The kitchen seems bright and far away. Headlights stream into the window from a car coming up the driveway.

In the fall, the rains came and never left. Alex walked from the bus stop every day, dragging Luke behind her, their feet soaked through. At first, Carol lit the stove, wrapped them in blankets and draped their wet things around the house to dry. Sometimes she stood in the rain in her sundress, blue jeans underneath, and kissed them when they climbed from the bus. But then she stopped coming. She left Alex to watch her brother, taught Alex to light the stove. Carol ran errands in town and didn't come home sometimes until it was already dark. Alex sat in front of the television in her parents' room. She watched the news while her brother slept beside her. "There are enough nuclear bombs now to destroy the planet a hundred times over," she heard a man say. His lips twitched when he spoke. Alex memorized the names of the Soviet leaders, memorized the faces of the Russian girls in the streets. We could all disappear, she told herself, staring at the girls, their hair long and braided, the streets in Russia covered in snow.

There are only twenty-three kids in her school and Alex is the oldest. The classroom is small and cramped and they have to go to the lunchroom for reading time. The lunchroom smells like dirty carrots. Melissa sends Alex there with the kindergarteners every afternoon. The little kids sit on pillows on the floor and Alex reads them stories, making sure to hold the books open wide and not to turn the pages too fast. They like to look at the pictures; they just stare, their mouths hanging open. "Are you guys listening?" Alex asks them. Once, she stopped reading the words on the page. She just made it up. "There's a man in a room smaller than this

room who can blow up the world,” she said, “if the president tells him to. Everything will turn to dust – people, buildings, everything. It blows up in a big cloud.”

“Do you die?” a girl asked.

“First your eyes pop out of your head and then you just burn to nothing.”

“When’s it going to happen, Alex?” her brother asked.

“Soon,” Alex said. The children were staring at her, their faces white. “Ashes,” she whispered.

There was a meeting. Her father drove up a day early. Melissa was worried that Alex wasn’t adjusting very well. Alex sat in a plastic chair, swinging her feet back and forth. “How do you feel?” Melissa kept asking. “Are you scared of the bomb?” her mother asked. Alex felt hot; her throat was aching. She wanted to go home. Her father watched her quietly. His eyes were green and he bit his lip and smiled when she looked up at him.

“Maybe we should send her to a public school,” he said in the car on the way home.

“Maybe this is all a little too much, you know?”

“Don’t you like it here?” her mother asked, turning around to look at Alex.

Alex shrugged her shoulders in the dark car.

“She just needs time,” her mother said.

“Carol,” her father said. He touched her mother’s hair and then pulled his hand away. He wiped the windshield with his shirtsleeve. “Maybe we should move back,” he said.

Alex was kneeling in the backseat, watching the moon following behind the car. She wanted to say something but it was too quiet now.

“I read about this town in New Zealand—” her father started.

“We’re not moving to New Zealand,” her mother said. “This is our home.”

Her father turned on the radio.

“We don’t get any stations here,” Alex said.

The house is full of people. Her uncle is there; he brought his harmonium and sits on the couch playing one long note over and over again, his eyes closed. A few women sit around him on the floor, gazing into space, their lips turned up slightly at the corners. “They’re so high,” her mother whispers. Luke is sleeping and there are no other kids, so Alex wanders around downstairs. People touch her head as she walks by. She listens to their conversations, picking up pieces of words, half-sentences and stringing them together into a monotone kind of song. The television is on in her parents’ room. A man and a woman are sitting on the edge of the bed, their legs touching. The man reaches out his hand and presses it against the TV screen. The woman laughs. Alex closes the door. Outside, the red ends of cigarettes move like slow sparklers and people hold their breath when they talk. They stomp their feet in the muddy ground and lean against the house.

Inside, Alex climbs up the ladder and sits down on the edge of the floor, dangling her feet over the party. She hears Holly’s laugh from the kitchen and watches her mother, long dark hair covering her shoulders, stepping over bodies on the floor, making her way to the stereo. “Time to wake up,” she yells. Jefferson Starship plays and Carol pulls Rama from the couch. Alex watches her uncle spin under her mother’s arm, watches her pull him in and rock him from side to side, their arms stretched wide in both directions, bumping into people. Holly steps in and the three of them are arm over arm in a circle like Russian peasants, twirling around until Rama falls back onto the couch and Holly and Carol hold each other close, hardly moving, other couples

following, turning the living room into a dance floor: arms around necks, hands at backs, intertwined.

Sometimes, when she is alone like this, Alex imagines that her family has been transplanted to the Soviet Union. They live together in a small apartment. The walls are thin and the next-door neighbors can hear everything that they say. In the Soviet Union you have to work all of the time just to survive. Alex works with her mother in a factory. Her father spends all day in a government office. She waits in line for hours with the old ladies for a loaf of bread and a bottle of milk and everyone gets the same thing. Every night they come home at the same time, the time that every Soviet family comes home, the women in their red kerchiefs embroidered with gold emblems, the men in their woolen coats. They sit down and eat dinner together; they listen to the radio. Luke tells them about school; their father talks about the news. There is an old man who lives next door; he looks like Lenin and after dinner he sits and talks with her parents about communism, about history. Alex listens. *There are no bombs*, the old man whispers; *it's all a game*. She closes her eyes.

She wakes up on the floor, the party quieted down to whispers below. She is so close to the edge she can feel herself falling, cut loose from gravity, nothing to catch her. She pulls away and starts to cry. "Mom," she calls out. It is dark except for the fire dying in the stove. There is a bat in the house again; Alex can hear it circling. "Mom," she whispers. She climbs down the ladder and tiptoes past sleeping bodies. On the couch a woman is mumbling, her mouth open to the ceiling. Alex turns on the kitchen light. Her uncle is asleep at the table, his head resting on his arms. "Rama," Alex whispers, "where's Mom?"

“Hey kid,” he says, running his hand over his mouth. “Bad dream?”

“Where’s Mom?”

“You want some water?” He winces at her and shades his eyes with his hand. “I’m thirsty.”

“Is Mom in her room?”

He gets up and fills two glasses with water, sets one on the table and drinks. Alex waits. He sits and runs his hands through his hair, opens his mouth to speak, then closes it again. “You guys are coming over tomorrow?”

Alex shrugs. The light in the kitchen seems blue and hazy. Her uncle is staring at her like she’s supposed to read his mind. She can still feel herself falling. “The kids miss you,” he is saying.

She hears Holly laughing through the walls of her parents’ bedroom. She hears her mother’s voice, a kind of moan.

“Hey,” Rama says. “Hey. You’re a kid, okay? You don’t have to understand all this shit.” He waves his hand at the walls surrounding the kitchen, the people bunched together in the living room. Alex is crying. Her uncle pulls her into his chest. She can smell the grass on his breath. “Can I help you?” he asks.

She lets him carry her upstairs and tuck her into bed. “Rama, the bat’s inside,” she tells him.

“It’ll be gone in the morning,” he says. He kisses her on the forehead and she listens to the floor creaking as he walks away.

Alex doesn't get up until the last guest leaves, until the only sounds left in the house are kitchen noises – her mother's bare feet on the floor.

"Comrades," she yells from the edge of the loft, standing in her tee shirt and underwear. "Comrades. It is time." She climbs downstairs.

Her mother is making breakfast. The living room is filled with empty glasses, with sleeping bags that still hold the shape of sleepers. "Ram says you had a nightmare?" Her mother presses a palm to her forehead.

"Comrade Lukavitch," Alex holds a hand out to her brother. "Come."

"I'm making pancakes," her mother says.

"I know," Alex says. "I can smell them."

"Dad will be here soon," her mother says.

They carry the books up the ladder in an assembly line in stacks of three at a time. At the top, Alex stacks the books at the edge of the floor, making sure to put the larger ones on the bottom. "A wall?" Luke says.

"We need more books," Alex answers.

When the wall waist high, Alex takes out a pen and notebook and writes out the title of each book, and next to each title lists the book's crime (*illegal words, too much god, this book stinks*). When her father comes home, Luke runs downstairs yelling and pulling on Jim's sleeves, but Alex keeps writing. "Daddy, we're making a wall of books," Luke says.

"Wow," she hears her father say, "what happened here?"

"The usual," her mother sighs.

"I don't want to see everybody this weekend," he says. Alex stands up and looks over the wall at her father, standing at the door with his hands in the pockets of his jeans. He is taking

in the room – cigarette butts and roach clips scattered, a dirty sock draped over the woodstove. He looks up and waves. Alex smiles and ducks down again behind the books. She hears him walking into the kitchen, hears her mother’s questions, her father’s quiet answers. Under *The Tropic of Capricorn* she writes, “Makes no sense.” Luke climbs up and watches over her shoulder, pointing at one book and then another. “Alex, this one’s pink. That’s bad, right?”

“Very bad.”

She tears him a piece of paper and he makes his own list in shapes and lines. Their parents talk in murmurs, the sound of water running in the kitchen burying their words.

“Look at this place, Carol,” she hears her father say. Her mother says something Alex can’t hear. Her father walks into the living room and starts to clean. “How long are we supposed to live like this?” he asks.

Her mother is crying, her arms crossed over her chest, standing between the kitchen and the living room. Alex peeks through the stacks of books. Her father picks up blankets and sleeping bags, folds them and stacks them on the couch. He shakes his head and sighs, “We’re getting old, you know?” Her mother is standing behind him in the doorway, staring at his back. He sits down and runs his hands through his short hair over and over again. Her mother is quiet. Her father picks up a bottle cap from under his foot and pinches it between his thumb and forefinger.

“Look,” he says, pointing upstairs, “they’re remodeling.” He laughs and shakes his head. Her mother is crying. Alex catches her father’s glance and holds it; his eyes are dark, his smile breaking. She holds him there, staring from behind the wall. Luke is humming to himself, at her side, drawing clouds, drawing birds, writing his name over and over again. Alex feels the books beginning to fall.

The Birds of Minnesota

The night I was conceived my father ate a bag of honey roasted peanuts for dinner, flipping through the channels of a muted television, while my mother read “A Natural History of the Desert Tortoise” in a king-sized hotel bed, in a room they’d been upgraded to when they complained about what they thought looked quite like a blood stain on the bathroom tile of the first room they were given. They were fighting. What I would learn later about my parents is that for them, a fight consisted of a brief quibble, a few lines of dialogue: six at most. This was followed by a deadly, uncomfortable silence – four, eight, occasionally thirty-six hours of silence. And this is where the real battle took place. He rearranged his position on the bed and she glared, turning the page of her book with a ferocious slap. She cleared her throat and my father stood and locked himself in the bathroom. And more than gestures and movements, they seemed to be communicating by vibration, seething at each other. As a child in these moments I did everything I could to bring them into a conversation, but I was powerless. Inevitably, that night, one or the other of my parents turned out the lights and they lay together tensely in the dark, and eventually one reached for the other, he touching her thigh lightly with the tips of his fingers, she rubbing her foot along the inside of his calf, and they met again in silent, angry, grappling, frustrated sex.

It lasted no more than fifteen minutes. My father fell asleep professing his love. My mother got up and took a shower.

My parents were amateur biologists. Both followed a prescribed path to their chosen careers, leaving their passion as hobby. My mother was an elementary school teacher whose

classroom was filled with cages and tanks: fish, mice, turtles, a gerbil, a parakeet that too often interrupted her math lessons with its loud shrieking chirp. My father called himself a bean counter. He was an accountant in a high-rise building full of accountants, all of them dressed in identical polo shirts. Before he met my mother, he spent his weekends hiking the hills around his home in Berkeley, squatting to examine and identify flowers and to watch pollinators, bees, butterflies, bathing in gold, plunging their proboscises into petals and pistils, their furry legs coated, sprinkling dust like fairies, this subtle act of procreation.

They met at an Audubon Society picnic in Pleasanton, and in a circle of bird lovers, bonded over their passion for bats. My mother had found one in her classroom's wastepaper basket and devoted the weeks of the class she was supposed to spend on test preparation, teaching her students about the chiroptera, its webbed wings, its cry and echolocation. "Did you know," my mother asked him, holding a neatly cut square of PB and J delicately between thumb and forefinger, "that scientists are using vampire bats to cure stroke patients?"

"The blood clot reducing enzyme," my father said, watching her thin, pink lips curl into a smile. A crumb of bread caught in the corner of her mouth. He wanted to press it with his pinky.

In the hotel where I was conceived, my mother was unsatisfied and irritated. My father was snoring. In the bathroom she first flushed and then washed away millions of possible half-mes. All this carefully bundled genetic material: blue eyes, a strong jaw line, a leonine head of hair, or maybe the genius gene, maybe the thick shoulders of a linebacker, all of this potential lying dead on the tile floor of a bleached hotel shower. She turned off the water. She dried herself, dressed and thought about the city and how she'd always hated it. Vegas was my father's idea. He was lured in by the cheap room and the promise of a pillow-top bed and cable

television. My mother wanted to sleep outside, startled awake by the yelping of coyotes. They were on their way to the Mojave. It was spring and they were hoping for a display of wildflowers.

She looked out the window. What he'd muttered under his breath as they drove into the city, what had caused the fight was: *Jesus Marjorie, can't you have a little fun?* It rankled her. It echoed like a refrain all night, and now down below in the street, a group of women walked, talking loud and drunk, a parade of young men, hair slicked and glistening in the lights made their way to a nightclub, and downstairs eighty-year old women sat in front of glowing machines nursing cocktails. My mother was scientific. She was curious. She decided to find out about fun.

As she stood and as she dried, and as she dressed, as the elevator dropped her down eleven floors, these precious little half-me's were determinedly defying the laws of gravity, trying to move up, when everything seemed to be pushing them down, clinging to the walls with nothing but their thin, shivering heads, to burrow to safety, great numbers of them dying, the act of conception a war zone, the living surrounded by the corpses of their brothers, calling to each other. "Charlie? Walter? You still here?"

In the elevator my mother made a list: "What is fun?"

My book group

But then she remembered how the other teachers got tipsy and laughed when she wanted to answer all of Oprah's questions. (*Jesus, Marjorie, have some fun.*)

Folding laundry at the Laundromat, the smell of warm sheets

Classroom art projects

Sex (sometimes)

Singing in the shower

Ice cream sundaes

And then the doors opened and she was overwhelmed by the sound of the machines, the hum of voices, the flashing lights. She sat down at a machine next to a man in a cowboy hat. “How does this work?” she asked. He looked at her and smiled. There was a lasso hovering in mid air tattooed to his hand. She wondered if she lifted the sleeve who she’d find holding the rope. She dug through her wallet for a credit card. “Do you win anything?” she asked.

“Maybe,” the man said. “If you believe.” He tapped his chest with his open palm. My mother suspected that his next sentence would contain the word Jesus. She put her credit card into the machine. For twenty minutes she pressed buttons, losing, then winning, then losing, the orchestra of computerized notes rising to crescendos. The man next to her watched for a few minutes then drifted away. My mother felt a twinge of sadness when he left. And then she felt lonely. She was on a slot machine island, swiveling in her chair. She pushed the “play all” button and she wanted to feel a thrill, and she wished she was the kind of person who looked at the whole world with wonder, like her yoga teacher sister, like the kids when they first enter the classroom in the fall, circling the perimeter, touching the bars of the animals’ cages, their sticky fingers on the aquarium glass.

She lost forty dollars and got up to wander the casino.

She continued her list. What *is* fun?

Bats. Holding that animal, the skin of its wings taut, its enormous ears and tiny eyes. The lunchtime nerds who refused to play outside huddled around her, following as she marched the creature into the shadowy side yard of the school and released it. A real wild animal and she had held it in her hand.

Watching goats graze the blackberry brambles at Tilden Park.

Gardening: pressing the sliver of a seed into the dirt, watching it sprout, a small string.

Bird watching. Hawks and kestrels were her favorite. In Kentucky she'd seen cardinals, the brightest red, candy red streaking through the summer-green forest.

This was wonder. She did have wonder. A group of girls, no older than twenty, jostled past her on the carpet, a wash of blonde hair and tight jeans and tee shirts in boldfaced text, the smell of fake strawberries and liquor. They were a cloud of songbirds, jumping, twittering, humming with energy. One of them, long legs, a thin horse-like face, paused for a moment, touched my mother's arm, and looked at her. "You're so beautiful," she said. The other girls, passing, called their friend away. They pushed open the doors of the casino and fled – and my mother thought of the flush of birds from a bush, the sudden burst of their bodies into air. Wait, she wanted to shout. And driven by some faint memory, by the smell of strawberry bubble gum, she followed them.

Inside my mother's body, the sperm were now swimming through the cervix. I imagine the few in the lead twitching with enthusiasm, the desire to continue, a surge of energy, a shout of "Charge!" A feeling of victory, as those behind them slacken and die.

The girls poured out onto the street. My mother followed, listening to them talk about their bras. “It’s killing me Marcy. It’s totally cutting off my circulation.”

“Shut up. You bought it. You wear it. It looks hot. “

“Hot! Hot!” Another girl shouted. “I’m so hot!” She pulled up her tee shirt and flashed the passing cars.

“Hey!” the horse-faced girl turned around. “It’s you!” She stumbled back to where my mother stood on the sidewalk, embarrassed, a thirty-year-old woman in hiking boots stalking a sorority. “*You* are totally coming with us,” the girl said. “She’s coming with us!” she yelled to the other girls. There were seven of them, not including this one, my mother counted. They didn’t seem to notice the announcement.

“Do you know where I can get an ice cream sundae?” my mother asked.

The girl shrieked, “Ice cream!” And her friends shouted back, a cacophonous chorus: “Ass!” “Dick!” “Beer!” “Ryan Gosling!” “Hot pants!” And then they all started laughing, and the girl at her side swept her into the group, this fast moving cloud, this strange organism.

“We’re going dancing,” the girl said.

My mother imagined my father peering out the window, seeing her here. She started to laugh. “What’s your name?” the girl at her side asked.

“Aster,” my mother said. Her favorite flower.

“Wow,” the girl said. “Are you an actress?”

“Yeah,” my mother said. “New York.”

“Oh my god,” the girl said. “Broadway?”

“Off Broadway,” my mother said. My mother had never been to New York.

“Oh my god!” the girl said, “Do you know how much I love you right now?”

“Marcy, she’s an actress!” the girl yelled. “Fucking Broadway!” The crowd of girls cheered and hollered.

In my mother’s body, the egg began to sing. Textbooks tell us that the body emits chemicals that draw the sperm in, but why not a song? Why not a conversation?

The egg hums a bar or two of moonlight sonata, feeling like a kind of moon, floating alone in space, wearing her crown of protective cells. “Anybody out there?” she sings. She listens to the echo.

And what about our teeming mass? The dying float and living swim past them, too occupied to hear her.

Soldiers in the trenches become friends for life after a five-minute bombardment. In these survivors a kind of camaraderie develops, a groupthink. Here’s one we’ll call Stanley. Swimming through the tunnel, his tail is caught fast. He curses. His friends turn back. “Go on,” he tells them. It doesn’t matter anymore who gets there first.

At a booth in a loud bar, my mother made observations. The girl she no longer wanted to call horse face had greasy bleached blonde hair, her roots showing. Three of the other girls were also fake blondes, while only two were real – the one called Marcy who seemed to be the leader and another pimply girl who was short and quiet. Two were brunettes. The girls always spoke in a kind of call and response that did not in any way seem like conversation. One shouted, “What is that?” and the others chimed in with, “Oh, I know.” Or “watermelons!” Or, “Shinalingaling.” And then occasionally, they burst into song. Songs from *Grease* or *Wicked*. They were, my mother had deduced, theater geeks trying to masquerade as cheerleaders, or some

crossbreed of the two. They were also, most of them, having fun. Marcy pushed her half-empty, very pink drink across the table at my mother. “The actress needs to get drunk,” she said. My mother drank.

“Where are you guys from?” she shouted.

“Minneapolis,” someone said.

“St. Paul,” someone said.

“Minnesota,” someone said.

“Oh my god I love this song!” someone said. And they all got up as one body and moved to the dance floor. My mother sipped her drink. The music was so loud, she could feel it, not hear it. She thought about the birds of Minnesota. Flycatchers, treecreepers, wrens, magpies, snow buntings. The smallest girl she could call a snow bunting. Marcy would be a towhee.

“What are you doing?” horse-face shouted. A loon, my mother thought. She pulled my mother into the mass of bodies. A bare-chested man was gyrating against a pole. My mother closed her eyes where they stood. Her feet began to move, her body followed. The drink was warm in her stomach. The last time she had danced was four years ago at her wedding. “You’ve got moves for an old chick,” the girl said. My mother laughed. She felt a weight lifting, something cracking inside of her. She wanted to sing.

In my mother’s body, the one we’re calling Stanley is alone, the dead bumping against his head, slimy and rigid. He wriggles to free himself. He waits. He thinks he hears a faint singing. The sound excites him and he wriggles again and his tail comes free. “Hello!” he calls. “Hello?”

She opened her eyes and realized that she was dancing close to a thin young man, whose eyes were also closed. He was dark-skinned, Latino she thought, dressed in pressed jeans and a plaid button up shirt. He was moving his hands as he danced, in a way my mother could only characterize as elegant. If she leaned in two inches, her lips would be on his cheek. He opened his eyes and they both smiled, embarrassed. He held out his hand, "Dance?" and she nodded and then she realized she didn't know how to do whatever it was he wanted her to do, so they ended up doing a kind of elementary school ballroom dance. He looped her under his arm and spun her around and she bumped into everyone around them. She tripped over his feet. "I'm having fun!" she shouted in his ear.

"You're really terrible," he shouted back.

She laughed. She was sweating. She'd forgotten to put on deodorant. The man was holding her close or she was holding him close, somehow they'd been pushed together, everyone around them still jumping to a beat. He had beautiful lips. She kissed him. He was an elegant kisser. He sipped at her mouth. She liked kissing him. "I like kissing you," she said. He laughed.

In the uterus, contractions pull the sperm closer, pushing them towards the fallopian tubes, where the egg drifts slowly towards them. And it's easy to imagine that the few in the lead will get there first. But instead they are devoured by immune system cells and die. If they manage to evade the killer cells, millions go through the wrong door, the empty half of the fallopian tube, and crowded together, their noses bumping against a dead end, they die. If they make the right choice, the tube that contains the egg, many get trapped in the small hairs that line the tube and die. In my mother's body, the leaders died, leaving a few of the slower ones, those

who were trapped, who took their time, to take their chances. And now the immune system cells were full, the dead carpeting the walls, so that no more could be trapped. The world, for the few that were left, had gone quiet.

“Come with me,” the man yelled in her ear.

“Where?” my mother shouted.

“Outside?”

In the light she saw that he wasn't young. He was probably her age, a handsome man with pockmarked skin, full lips, lines under his eyes that made him look world-weary. They stood on the sidewalk and she felt suddenly embarrassed. The heat of the club had worn away and she was talking to a stranger on a crowded street across from a miniature Eiffel Tower. Her husband was snoring in a hotel room. He asked her name and she gave him the fake one.

“You're funny,” he said.

“Why?”

“That isn't your name,” he said.

“How do you know?”

He smiled and held out his hand, “I'm John,” he said.

“Marjorie,” she said.

He laughed. He didn't stop looking at her when he laughed. And something about the warmth in his eyes made her feel drunk again.

“I have a husband,” she said.

“Come sit with me,” he said, gesturing to an empty bench.

She followed him, sat close to him. She kissed him again. His cheeks were soft. “The only person I ever kissed besides my husband was a boy in tenth grade,” she said. They kissed again. “Do you think I’m boring?” she said.

He laughed. “No.”

“I won’t sleep with you,” she said.

“Okay,” he said. One of his hands was under her shirt, and then under her bra.

“Oh god,” she said. “Do you know where I can get a good sundae?”

And now we find our hapless hero, the one we called Stanley, moving slowly, cautiously towards the two doors. He’s heard rumors that if you get too close, they suck you in, so he stays back, swimming laps to resist the currents. He listens. He thinks he hears the sound again, a faint singing.

“Hello?” he yells.

He hears nothing.

“Hello!” he yells.

Nothing. Someone darts ahead of him and into the tube on the left. He can hear a kind of pulse, a heartbeat. He is going to have to take a wild guess. He tries one more time. “Marco!” he yells. He waits. The walls begin to shake.

“Polo!” she calls back. His tail twitches. Where did the sound come from?

“Marco!” he yells again.

“Polo!” she sings.

“Keep singing!” he shouts. “Sing loud!”

He hears, “Row row row your boat gently down the stream.” He follows the sound. A joker, this egg. The right side. He swims in. “Let’s go for a moonlight swim,” she sings, “Far away from the crowd...”

My mother was alone. She’d found a Denny’s and was mesmerized by the glossy pictures of desserts on the menu. She was momentarily in heaven, held by the soft vinyl booth seats. Everything was quiet. A couple was whispering together at the other side of the large room. A woman next to her was eating eggs. The waitress smiled, her pen at the ready. My mother ordered. Her phone rang. She stared at her purse trying to understand the sound.

“Where are you?” my father said.

And maybe he was pacing the street looking for her. And maybe he joined her, wiping chocolate off the plate and licking his fingers, like he did for years every time we ate sundaes, which we often did. But I prefer to imagine my mother alone in that booth, slowly spooning ice cream into her mouth, the world outside streaming by, my x and y chromosomes joining now, the promise of a slow and pasty-faced child, a thick, pasty-faced man, the seed taking root. And something echoing in her head, something her brief lover had said when she, again, told him she was married. “It doesn’t really matter.” The taste of cold metal and chocolate sauce. My mother laughing.

Brothers

One Christmas Eve, many years ago, my brothers got drunk, very drunk, and tried to kill each other. Our parents were on vacation at the time and I lived away from home. My brothers each tell different versions of the story and never tell the story when they are in the same room. If it gets mentioned between them it is a bitter joke. In both stories the objects are the same: a chair, a cabinet door, a kitchen knife, but the person holding the objects is different. In both stories these things are the same: the police, the early morning phone call to our parents in Mexico, the older brother sobbing, the younger brother quiet and withdrawn. There were witnesses and certain facts have to match.

The fight began with an argument. They were walking home together after a party. The younger brother hated the way the older brother acted in public, playing up his accomplishments and his connections in the world, referring to pop stars he'd met by their first names. The younger brother told the older brother that he was full of shit, that he was a failure who acted like he knew something about the world. But he didn't know. He didn't know. The younger brother had spent a year in and out of jail. He felt he knew things that no one in our family understood, things he could not translate. The older brother thought the younger brother was a drunk who would rot in that small town and who would never listen to anything he had to say.

It went on for hours, rolling through our small house, tearing apart the kitchen and knocking over chairs. It was a storm, bigger than either of them, and when they look back on it separately now, they shake their heads, unable to understand how it happened. One brother went

after the other with a knife, cornered him in the kitchen and held it to his throat. One brother threw a chair over the other brother's back, breaking the wood. One brother threw the other against a kitchen cabinet, cutting a gash into his head. I'm going to fucking kill you, someone yelled. Maybe the older, maybe the younger. Maybe both. In each brother's story it is the other.

Over time I conflated them in my mind, saw them as one man, consumed, throwing himself into walls and over chairs, hurling himself against bookcases, pushing his own head through the glass of a window.

What they say about Cain and Abel, each longing for the love of a father, one spurned. I don't see it. Our father loves us equally. Every present we give him he gratefully acknowledges and then loses in the depths of his closet. Cain and Abel, my brothers, were fighting for air. Locked, somehow, in the same body, wrestling to be the one who owns it. Hating the mirror of the other's swagger.

Eventually one of them will move thousands of miles away in order to find himself apart from the other. To make himself in his own image. And the story will vanish, and the two will meet once or twice a year, look at each other and wonder how they became strangers.

But I wonder about our parents. The awe in their voices when they tell the story. *How horrible! What's wrong with them?* The vowels emphasized. They are impressed. Our mother especially, impressed by the passions her sons possess – the rage and hunger to survive, to be the man of that empty, ravaged house.

Eve knew long before God ever did what would happen to her sons. She watched and waited, one day rooting for one, the next for the other. Cain's whine sometimes got on her nerves. Abel could be a bully. But she saw the way they looked at each other, clung to each other, their lives so entangled they weren't sure whose thoughts belonged to whom. *I like macaroni*, Cain might say, then stop and wonder, *don't I?* She'd remind him that it was his brother who liked macaroni; he liked rice. And a storm would blow across the boy's eyes, and then it would be gone, and he would run outside to find his brother, help him bring in the sheep.

When I was younger, I'd walk past my brothers' room in the middle of the night on my way to the bathroom and sometimes I'd look in on them. They slept in twin beds, arranged so their feet almost touched. Sometimes I'd see one bed empty, the two together, the older boy's arm flung over the body of the younger. And sometimes I'd look in to find the younger brother awake in the dark in his own bed, staring at the sleeping shape of his brother.

Circus

The man was taking his son to the circus. They rode the train to the outskirts of the city, the boy looking out the window searching for the criminals and danger his mother had warned him about. Maybe it was a little darker out there. Maybe there were fewer cars on the street. The man picked up a newspaper from the floor. He'd heard the news earlier that morning. The election had been cancelled. The president had chosen his successor.

"Shit," he said. He turned to another passenger, a young man in a brown suit. "There's no precedent," he said, jabbing the headline with his finger.

"Safety," the young man frowned. "It makes a lot of sense," he said, then he scowled at the boy who was fogging up the window in order to write his name. *Ben, Ben, Ben.*

"Ben, stop it," the man said.

"You hate elections," the boy said, "It's a waste of time."

"Sure," he said. "Because it's botched. Nobody goes except when they give away prizes."

"I won a personal secretary just last year," the young man said.

"So, who cares," the boy said.

"Ben," the man warned. "We're going to the circus," he told the young man. "He's a little keyed up."

The circus tent was a dirty yellow. The man held his son's hand tight. At the entrance a clown stood wearing a mechanic's jumpsuit, "Chip's Automotive," stitched to the front pocket.

The clown lunged to tickle the boy and Ben shrieked and ran inside. The ring was encircled in pastel colored plastic chairs.

“Looks like a Laundromat in here,” the man said. A few other families were sitting, clustered against the cold. “Glad it’s not raining,” he whispered, looking up through the holes in the tent roof.

“Shhhh,” Ben whispered. “It’s cool, Dad.”

Nobody recognized the name of the president’s successor, but nobody had known the president before he was elected either. It didn’t seem to matter anymore who was in government, the man thought.

There was a clown in the ring now. Loud music played, trombones and tubas that sounded like they were being broadcast through tin. The clown was doing nothing but running in circles and clapping his hands. But this made him tired and every so often he’d stop, bend over and pant. The kids laughed. The man, a doctor, could see that this was no act. “Asthmatic clown,” he said.

“Dad, shhhh,” his son whispered.

He’d fought to convince his wife that the circus would be safe. She’d made a list of reasons against it. There was a curfew. There were criminals in that area. The animals could get loose.

“Do you remember the circus?” he’d asked her.

“I never went,” she’d said.

“Didn’t you want to?”

“Of course,” she’d said, “but it was years ago.”

“What else didn’t you do because it was dangerous?”

“It was another time,” his wife said. Ben was sitting at the kitchen table driving his pens back and forth like cars, listening.

“People are always afraid of something,” the man had said. His wife had sighed, and tucked a stray curl behind her ear. He knew she would give in.

He’d wanted to show the boy something outside of his scheduled activities. He remembered the circus, the thrill of stepping into a world of color and noise. The impossibility of it then seemed a miracle to him, that a cloth tent could house another universe. He’d only wanted to see that again.

But now he thought his wife had been right. He looked up. The tent must have been devoured by giant moths. He could see low clouds moving through the gaps in the roof. No stars. There were never any stars here. The air was cold. He wanted to put an arm around his son. The tent was so thin, the night outside creeping in. There were seven clowns in the ring now, the ring just the abandoned foundation of a torn down building. The clowns were dancing a waltz and falling all over one another. The music was loud and warped. After each time around, they would pull a child into the ring, the child hopping over their giant shoes. Disproportion makes for comedy, the man thought. It was so patched together, nothing like he remembered. A little cloth and makeup, an old radio. His son was laughing, squirming in his chair. Ben saw a whole world here in these cobbled pieces. It was a terrible trick. There were goose bumps on the boy’s bare arms. He wanted to put an arm around him but he knew it would be pushed away. He wanted a strong muscled arm, not this wispy suited thing. The boy needed a bear’s arm to protect him. He was used to walls, used to a certain thickness that kept one place from the next, night from interiors and presidents from men. The world was bleeding through the cloth. He looked down at the ring and saw the remnants of an older city. Saw his son hand

in hand with a clown in a dress, his son looking up and waving, cheeks red as if they'd been painted. The clown pulled the boy around, around in the center of the ring, past the other children, quickly blurring costume colors, leaping red shoes, spinning and spinning until the earth on its axis spun with them.

The Edge of Mercury

She was making a list. Too many things had been disappearing and Emma believed in ghosts. She looked up at Henry standing at the sink. He'd used too much dish soap again. White foam freckled his arms and dripped into the basin. He was so attentive in his chores. She thought of getting up, of grabbing hold of his arm. Numbers were scribbled on the pages in front of her.

Last week on the way to the mailbox, she'd heard a voice distinctly saying her name. It was a man's voice, half whispered as if he had something important to say and wanted her full attention. She supposed it was the wind or a flight of fancy, but there were so many other strange things. They'd been happening more and more. The bath left running when she'd gone to answer the phone was turned off when she returned. Henry had been outside pruning trees. The radio had been turned off when she knew she'd left it on. Things disappeared and reappeared. Eight years ago she'd lost her favorite brooch on a trip to New York and last month she'd found it sitting next to the bathroom sink. She almost cried when she saw it. Henry swore he didn't know where it had come from. Nights, sometimes, when she was watching TV, she thought he'd come into the room, thought he was sitting in the corner chair, but he was already in bed. Asleep with his pants on again – she'd stopped bothering with that. And how many times in the night had she felt him stroking her hair, touching her shoulder, only to turn and find him curled into himself at the other edge of the mattress? She wrote all this down, pressing the pencil firmly to the paper.

“Did you water the roses?” he asked. “It's gonna be hot all week.” Henry was looking out the window at the yellowing weeds.

“No,” she answered.

“It’s gonna be hot,” Henry said. He ran the water again.

Water the roses, she wrote at the bottom of the page. It had been hot. They’d kept to the house, shopping at night if they had to. She’d thought of a movie or an air-conditioned mall, but never decided to go. Henry fell asleep at the movies. He didn’t like any of the ones she picked. Space travel movies, that’s all he’d watch. She used to have a nightmare, hadn’t had it in years. In the dream she’d be standing over the sink, just where he was now, and she’d see him in the yard looking through his telescope. It was night. Everything dark and unseen but her husband and the stars. It was good, usually, the beginning of this dream. Because how often do you really see a person? There he was, his pants loose at his waist revealing white skin. She smiled. She’d had the dream so often. It changed from time to time. Sometimes she’d call out to him and he would turn his head and there would be nothing there. Nothing at all. Sometimes she would watch as Henry was devoured by sky. It was slow; the blackness came and blotted him out in patches. It was disgusting. Why dream such things?

Water the roses, Henry thought. Emma won’t remember. She flits from thing to thing, always up and doing something else. He scrubbed the bottom of the pot, trying to rub the black out. It needed something stronger – a soak in vinegar and soda. The yard went dry again. Nothing he could do. Burrs stuck in his socks. He spent hours picking them out. Didn’t bother to change his clothes much lately. Emma complained. Dirt and whatnot on his pants, it made him feel productive to see it add up the way it did. Why put on another pair? People don’t make sense. Change their clothes every half hour. Wash their faces three times a day. Pay attention to the most trivial things. She reads to him from the paper in the morning, “So and so adopted a

puppy. So and so wed.” Who are these people? Why is this written down for others to read?

Fill their minds with chatter. At the store the girls talk about their teams and their shows. What are you going to do with your future? He wants to ask them.

Emma’s chair scraped against the tile. There she goes again, he thought. It bothered him more lately. He could sit in one spot for three hours and in the meantime she’d have made a thousand revolutions around every room. He could always concentrate. Once in awhile a young man would search him out to ask him about Palomar. How did they know him? Astronomy bled into cosmology and there was the entire universe to grapple with. Distracted, absent minded. He loved his work. Now they wrote about implosion. Dark matter. The solar system was archaeology – they wanted the whole universe. The way the new generation changes things. Challenging Einstein! Now Anne calls to tell him about her therapy. “Dad, you were never there.” What did she want him to say?

The steel wool scraped his fingertips raw. Emma was playing the piano. It was fall. She was playing the piano and Anne was outside chasing the dog. They ran around the trees, the girl shrieking, the dog barking. So much lightness in the air around them. The laughter bubbling up, filling his head. The piano – staccato high notes bouncing. He was dizzy. They kept spinning, wearing patterns into the grass beneath their feet. Stop that, he thought. Stop. But there was no one. It was another time. He put down the pot and picked up a bowl. Emma’s oatmeal from this morning. It was easy to wash clean. Just hot water and a sponge.

Emma didn’t play songs anymore but made up her own melodies. Maybe it didn’t sound very good but she loved the way it felt not to care, not to think about where her hands had to go next. For years she’d played strictly, even taught Anne, “Now arch your palm.” She held a ruler

under the girl's hands as she'd been taught. And a ruler to her back. Anne in her tutu squirmed and giggled. "You're tickling me!" She wanted to be a dancer. A dancer should know something about music. Now Emma played with her eyes closed. Her hands wove the sounds together. She wondered if Henry had noticed. He used to love to listen.

He would come to her father's house every Saturday – a well-dressed, quiet man. "Harvard!" her father liked to point out to anyone who would listen. "He studies at Harvard!" After dinner, they were left alone in the front room. Her father called it the parlor, though there were only four rooms. For months they hardly spoke. Emma wasn't accustomed to suitors. She played the piano and Henry listened, sitting on the couch behind her, hands clasped between his knees. He paid attention to music in a way she'd never known possible, as though every tiny detail mattered, every note, the up and down movement of her elbows, the weight of her foot on the pedals. When she glanced at him, she caught him looking at her the way she'd observed people looking at paintings. It made her nervous. But Henry kept coming back. Emma began to pay attention to herself under his gaze. She noticed the fluidity of her movements, the rise and fall of her breath against beats to a measure. She noticed the freckles on her arms, the curve of her waist.

Now Henry was eighty-three. The tap ran in the kitchen. There were the roses. There was her list. What would she do with it when she finished? Her hands were splayed across two octaves, the webbing between her fingers stretched thin. The room was darkening and Emma hummed a melody. There hadn't been that many dishes. He did everything so slowly now. It chilled her to think of him like this. There was just something about the bend of his back over the sink, the way his feet rooted to the floor as she'd noticed him earlier. It was as though she'd seen an image that would always remain fixed to that spot. An old man washing dishes. His dirt

heavy clothes, beads of soap and sweat stuck to his pale skin. He was fragile and strong, unquestionably solid, and yet there was nothing about her husband that Emma could ever touch, could ever hold onto. He would always be there, just out of reach. And she would remain at a distance, observing him.

A car drove past the house. She used to pace the yard, waiting for him to come home, his dinner in foil on the stove. She used to yell so fiercely – she wanted a husband, not a scientist. “That’s your line,” Henry would say. “Put it in the papers, Emma.” She played one note of a song, over and over, her eyes closed. What had happened to all that anger? It fell asleep somewhere along the way. Buried itself, sunk down and gave up. You can only repeat yourself so often before your words lose the thread of the thing they were once sewn to. She mouthed lyrics without sound, imagining the two of them dancing, his hand warm at her back. Emma noticed a red blooming beneath her eyelids. A light had been turned on. Henry. She smiled and continued to play.

He turned off the water. Emma was singing, a timid song. There was a room in the house where he used to sit, going over images. The scarred surface of a planet. Her voice just outside putting their daughter to sleep. A lullaby. A gray wash of dust brightened by heat. He’d held his face closer to the photo. He’d brought it home to show them Mariner’s miracle. *A pearl*, his wife had said. *It looks like a pearl*. In the bedroom, Anne’s voice lilted questions and his wife shushed her. The edge of a crater raised from an impact four billion years ago. *Listen*, Emma was saying. He looked through the magnifying glass. The ticking of a clock. What had made that crater? *Listen*. A song. She was singing, the girl’s eyes closing. The edge of Mercury and behind that, behind that, silence “Who made the pearl?” his daughter wanted to know. It all

came down to questions he could never answer. Just listen. That's all a man could do. She was singing and he was listening, her father clearing his throat in the next room. She was singing and he was listening, running his finger along the edge of a planet, standing at the sink, lost in a wash of time. Listen. He couldn't isolate a single note.

It was dark and Henry had turned on the light for her. She hated singing aloud but felt compelled to for this rare feeling. Her face was flushed, her eyes still closed. She rested her fingers for a moment. He was there – leaning against the wall, just behind her left shoulder. She could hear his breathing, strained through a stuffed nose and see him in her mind's eye, hands in his pockets, face lit with a quiet smile. She heard the sound of a cup being placed on the kitchen counter. She opened her eyes. There was no one. Henry hadn't left the kitchen. The light was off when she came in. Now it was on. Her mind couldn't play such tricks. She had numbered them. There were at least eight things on the list. Now another.

“Henry.” He turned, dripping water to the floor from wet hands. His quizzical look, bubbles floating around him – he was their daughter at five, fresh from a bath and about to ask one of her impossible questions. Her heart made itself known in her chest. She nearly forgot what she'd come in to tell him.

“Henry. We have a ghost.”

Henry turned to face his wife. “What?”

“We have a ghost.”

“A ghost?”

“I just saw it.”

“You’re telling me you saw a ghost.”

“I did. Yes, I did. My eyes were closed and it got dark. The light came on. I thought it was you, but you were here the whole time, weren’t you?”

Henry had read all the brochures in the doctor’s office. His mind attacked him with disjointed phrases. Warning signs. Personality changes. Alzheimer’s. Deterioration. Ghosts? “I don’t understand what you’re saying.” He didn’t mean to yell.

“There were other things. Remember my brooch? It was sitting there, plain as day.”

If it were a mouse he could chase it off with a stick, kill it and show her the carcass. How do you chase a ghost? White sheets with smiles cut out. People die. Their bones break down. The towel he was holding fell to the floor and he bent to pick it up. He thought about magnetite – slim evidence for life on Mars. One thing becomes another over time. Emma was standing in the doorway. She was breathless and frightened. Something had upset her. Where had she been? A burglar. A stranger. A man in the street called her a name, followed her halfway home. Henry wanted a knife, a bat, a gangster’s defenses.

“I’m calling the police,” he said.

“Don’t mock me Henry.”

“They’ll make a report!”

“You don’t believe me? I lost that pin after your sister’s funeral. I wore it to your graduation.” She was looking at him like it was all his fault – everything that had ever gone wrong. He didn’t know what they were talking about anymore.

“You don’t remember?”

“I can’t keep track of these things!”

“It was a ghost, Henry. Not a bad ghost.” He glanced at the floor. White linoleum.
“What did it look like?” he asked.

She drew a breath and exhaled before answering. “I think I felt it more than –” she interrupted herself. “It’s strange. I imagined you. I mean I felt you watching me. There was a presence in the room with me. I’m certain, Henry.”

“Me.” Henry ran a hand under his belt. His face was hot. The room was hot. He didn’t want this conversation anymore. A ghost that was him and not him. What did she want? He was used to having his responses mentally prepared, sorted by topic: the house, groceries, television shows, the weather. He had nothing for ghosts. Emma shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Her knee must be bothering her again. He needed to change the subject but she wouldn’t let it go.

“I made a list,” she said. She thrust a piece of paper at him. He left it in her hand.

“Did it scare you?” he asked.

He could never match the excitement she came at him with. The things she spent her time with didn’t interest him. Party decorations. The affairs of neighbors. He couldn’t force himself to care, even for her sake. A ghost was an excuse for an absent mind. Henry was pretending. He was tired of pretending.

“No,” she said. “It didn’t frighten me at all. It was pleasant actually. The feeling I used to get when you watched me play. That wonderful, warm feeling you give off at times.” She paused. “I sang to you. I knew you heard, but there was no one there.”

Emma was a girl, twenty-five. She was standing in the doorway in her yellow flowered dress, her gray eyes clashing against that smile, those round cheeks. Her hands and knees were muddy; she’d come in from planting the last of the saplings. Henry blinked. He was lost. “Tell

me what you think,” she seemed to say. Bold, flirtatious, proud. She scared him. “Tell me what you think.” He could never quite answer. He was an old man. His hands shook. Emma held one hand at the back of her neck, the elbow pointing towards him. Her gray hair hung loosely at her shoulders. She wore the blue jeans Anne had bought for her on her last visit. “So you can match dad,” she’d laughed. The pants looked attractive – modern and simple like their daughter. She was still beautiful. It frightened him.

“Do you remember how you used to listen?” she asked. Henry didn’t answer. He was staring at nothing. At a corner of the ceiling. He hadn’t said a word in what felt like hours. His mouth was open, his thin lips receding. His expression was blank. She realized that this was how he looked often lately. She felt the silence of the house around her. The refrigerator made a ticking sound. Moths clung to the windows. There was too much air; the night was too wide. She didn’t want to be left alone. She said his name and he started as if jolted from sleep. She wanted to cling to him, to tear at him, to dig under his skin. He looked at her coldly.

“You believe in ghosts?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?” She looked at the piano in the empty living room and imagined she could hear her song the way he must have heard it, thin and faltering. “I thought you said you saw this thing!” He was yelling now. The room swam with light. Henry’s face was too bare, his eyes wide in a kind of panic. He gripped the edge of the counter.

“Henry,” she said.

Emma had left him once. Called from a pay phone with the baby in her arms. A train station near San Francisco. He'd been up all night. *Tell me where you are. I'll come.* Instead she told him about the weather. The scenery out the train window. The quality of light in the morning. On and on. *What did I do?* He'd asked. He had looked out at the yard and almost expected to see her there under her favorite tree. Heard her breathing over the line. A crackle. A hiss. The universe had been dated by a sound like this. An echo of radio noise like static over the phone. Emma was waiting for him. Always waiting for him. *What are you thinking?* Late at night, sitting up in bed. In the car while he drove. Standing in the doorway, keen and angry. She was pulling at him. *What are you thinking?* How could there be an answer? His mind was his own. A vast expanse he couldn't explain in words. The operator came on to ask for more change. He held his breath. If the line went dead, how would he find her? She would take their daughter. She would take on another life. Another house. Another husband. A street looking over the ocean. The silence over the line seemed to stretch. He heard her crying. He thought he heard her crying. Why couldn't he speak. "Don't hang up," he said. He looked up and saw her standing in the kitchen doorway. She looked shocked.

"I'm here," she said.

"I'm sorry." He directed the words to her bare feet. Her toenails were painted an odd sea color – when did she paint her toenails? His wife was getting younger. It was absurd. He wanted to shake her into his world where people followed the simple rules carved into their biology. There was that look she used to take on so often, curious and angry, about to break open. She was trying to tell him something, ask him something. She was pulling. She wouldn't let go. And Henry wanted to shout, and to hold her, just hold her because she was something rare, something that defied logic, something perpetually waiting for him. Waiting for what?

He was staring at the floor, at the gap between their feet. Emma counted eight tiles. Her frustration was fading, replaced by worry. He had spoken from a memory. She imagined him in a few years, confused by simple sentences, easily upset. It was already happening.

“There’s a lot of stars out tonight, Henry,” she said.

“It’s a new moon.” He didn’t look up.

“Will you tell me some of their names again? The way you used to?”

“You never remembered.”

“I probably never will,” she said. Emma walked across the kitchen to where he stood.

She buttoned the top buttons of his shirt, pressed her palms to his chest and leaned her head close to his shoulder. His breath was warm against her neck.

“Stars,” he whispered.

She led him down the back stairs and into the yard. It was dark and they took small steps. There was a clearing just past the orchard where they used to sit on summer nights. Emma made her way towards it, pulling him along behind her.

She knelt and helped him find the ground, watched him lie back and then lay down next to him. Dried yellow grasses caught in her hair. They tickled her skin, uncomfortable and comforting. The smell of those weeds, baked in the sun all day and cooling, reached out to her in echoes of memory, eclipsed one above the other; summer and the freedom always bound to the season, a feeling she imagined to be like flying. She turned her head towards him. “Tell me,” she whispered.

Henry pointed to the sky. “The bright star there is Vega. And beside it, four stars make a square, you see?”

She nodded. “Lyra,” she said.

“You remember.” He was so pleased by this very simple thing. Emma didn’t understand why. But she said it again, liking the sound of the word in her mouth and his joy in hearing it.

She leaned closer to him; rough wool scratched her cheek. Henry exhaled and she felt his arm curl around her, holding her to him. But she knew he had not moved.

Curriculum Vitae

Aurora K. Brackett aurora.brackett@gmail.com
1203 Wyoming Street, Boulder City NV 89005

Education

- 2012-2015 Black Mountain Institute PhD Fellow in Fiction, University of Nevada, Las Vegas
(ABD and graduating in May)
- 2005-2008 San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA, *MFA Creative Writing*
- 2003-2006 San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA, *MA English* with a
Certificate in the Teaching of Composition
- 1996-1998 The Evergreen State College, Olympia, WA, *BA Media Studies*

Teaching Experience

Veterans Write, Las Vegas Veterans Recovery Center, January 2016 to Present. Teach poetry and fiction to veterans living with mental illness and traumatic brain injuries.

Creative Writing and World Literature Professor, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Fall 2012 to present. Teach Fiction Workshop, Introduction to Creative Writing and World Literature.

Writing Tutor, Academic Coach and Owner, Write Well, Oakland CA, Fall 2009 to present
Coach high school seniors through the college application process.

Creative Writing Teacher, The Writing Salon, Berkeley CA, Summer 2009 to Summer 2012
Developed and taught classes on the craft of poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction.

Adjunct Writing Instructor, Johns Hopkins University *CTY*, Summer 2008 to present
Teach composition (drafting, revision, grammar and usage) online to gifted fifth, sixth and seventh grade students.

Adjunct Instructor, Introduction to College Reading, Diablo Valley College, Fall 2009
Taught reading strategies, critical thinking and comprehension.

Adjunct Writing Instructor, College of Alameda, Spring 2009
Developed and taught a hybrid English Composition class recommended for non-native English speakers.

Composition Tutor, Classroom Matters, Berkeley, CA, March 2008 to January 2009
Tutored high school and junior high school students in expository and creative writing.

Adjunct Professor of Creative Writing, Short Story Writing and Introduction to Creative Writing, San Francisco State University, Winter and Summer 2007. Developed and taught classes on the craft of poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction.

Awards and Residencies

- 2014 Finalist Coal Hill Review Chapbook Prize
- 2013 Sozopol Fiction Seminars Fellowship
- 2013 Thomas Morton Prize for Literary Excellence
- 2012 Finalist Crab Creek Review Fiction Contest
- 2009 Hedgebrook, June
- 2009 Ed and May Chan Scholarship for Excellence in Teaching, College of Alameda
- 2008 San Francisco Browning Society Prize
- 2007 Vermont Studio Center, October
- 2007 Distinguished Achievement Award for Academic Excellence, San Francisco State University, College of Humanities
- 2005 Prague Summer Program, July
- 2005 Wilner Award for the Short Story, San Francisco State University

Editorial Experience

Fiction Editor, *Witness Magazine*, Fall 2012 to Spring 2014

Associate Editor, *Hope Deferred, Narratives of Zimbabwean Lives, McSweeney's/Voice of Witness*, 2010

Publications

Beginnings, *Glimmer Train*, Spring/Summer 2016

I Wrote a Story about a Boy who was Dead, *Bellingham Review*, Spring 2016

Ode to Light, *Coal Hill Review*, Spring 2015

Ambrosia and Corpse, translated work appeared in *Mandragoras*, in Greece, Summer 2014

Sabbath, *Thrush Poetry Journal*, Spring 2014

The Birds of Minnesota, *Getting Better All The Time: Las Vegas Writers Explore Progress*, 2013

The Edge of Mercury, *The Puritan Review* (Canada), prize-winning story, Fall 2013

Shadowed, excerpts from a forthcoming poetry anthology, *Nimrod*, Winter 2011

From Dexter to Sinister, a collaboration between artists and writers, *Annual Transcultural Exchange Conference* Boston, April 2011

Brother Death, *Eleven Eleven*, Summer 2010 – nominated for Pushcart Prize

Lineage, *Tinfish*, Fall 2009

Larry's Diner, *Portland Review*, Spring 2009

Ambrosia, *Alimentum*, Winter 2008

Cold War, *Fourteen Hills Magazine*, Summer/Fall 2005