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SYMPATHETIC LIGHTNING: ESSAYS

By

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Thesis

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### *PART I: ALL THE SAME FIRE*

On Burning.....	2
Smoke: A Love Story.....	5
Bolt.....	29
Neighbors of Fire.....	54

### *PART II: COMMON SPACES*

On Defenestration.....	76
Mlsná.....	80
My Own Bed.....	93
Rendezvous.....	113
I and Thou: A Bigfoot Encounter.....	135
Junk Drawer.....	165

### *PART III: A CAREGIVING HANDBOOK*

On Certainty.....	172
A Caregiver's Diary.....	175
Elders.....	201
A Brief History of Dog Walking.....	222



PART I:

*ALL THE SAME FIRE*

## On Burning

“If you are flammable and have legs, you are never blocking a fire exit.”

– Mitch Hedberg

It is sometimes hard to believe that we can burn – that not only our clothes and hair, our outskirts, but even bone, given enough time, can burn.

Richard Pryor, after pouring a bottle of rum over his head and lightning himself on fire, said afterward that he didn't believe the pain until he was finally in the midst of it; said, “When you burn up your skin goes to sleep.”

It is hard to believe burning and sleeping could ever coincide, hard to believe there is space for red and blue within a single flame, believe, as a tour guide in the French Quarter once told me, “ghosts who died by fire haunt the longest.”

We are asked to believe that Jan Hus, in the midst of being burned alive for heresy, watched an old woman throw a feeble amount of brushwood into the flames and called out to her, “*Sancta Simplicitus!*” Holy simplicity. If any act is both holy and simple, surely it is the act of burning; surely, the act of drunkenly lighting a cigarette in the street, and lighting instead by accident, the scrap of paper you hold in your hand, a receipt from the purchase of a hot dog, and watching the thing alight, so near to your eye,

a flash of red so raw that it makes you fear red a little forever afterward, you drop the burning receipt to the ground, trying to trample the flame back into shadow, but instead your shoe catches, the heat clinging along the arch of your foot, and you try to shake the flame loose, shaking your leg as if you'd stepped in something, and it's right then that a middle-aged couple appears, pointing at the source of the smoke (your shoe) and telling you with holy simplicity, "You're on fire," while you finally stamp burnt rubber and burnt paper and little scrambles of flame back into silent smoke and bad smell, and looking up to meet the eyes of the couple who have stopped to stare, openmouthed, you say to them, "No big deal," and because they are still there, looking, you say it again, "No big deal."

It is hard to believe, but all true, there were witnesses, men in bars who afterward would strike a match and move it back and forth quickly then ask each other, "Now what does that look like to you?" answer, "Richard Pryor running down the street," or Czech peasants who called out to each other, "Holy simplicity!" when they watched their neighbors trying to start a fire with damp kindling, and their neighbors called back in annoyance, "No big deal."

And years later, you might walk past the statue of Jan Hus, might walk also past the blackened cross embedded among cobblestones where a twenty-year-old university student named Jan Palach poured gasoline over his head, shook the liquid from his eyes, struck a match – and walking past these memorials, you might begin the smallest belief in ghosts as you feel a whole separate heat in the air, wondering: How long did he hold the



match between two fingers before it caught? How long before the small flame grew large, suddenly the size of a man, containing a man within it? How long was it before someone scrawled in dripping graffiti the words *Do not be indifferent to the day when the light of the future was carried forward by a burning body* across the vast stone figure of Jan Hus? And how much longer before people were able to believe it?

## Smoke: A Love Story

*Oh unanswerable  
affliction of the human heart: how to divide  
the world's beauty into acceptable  
and unacceptable loves!*

– Louise Gluck, from “Parable of the Hostages”

*I had never known what I was like until I stopped smoking, by  
which time there was hell to pay for it.*

– Deborah Eisenberg, from “Days”

### How to Receive Bad News

It is easiest, they say, to replace one addiction with another. I have chosen sleep as my second addiction. I sleep curled like a scrap of orange peel. I dream nightly that I endure the worst news with utmost calm. Doctors have left a handwritten note on the countertop informing me I have cancer. “The bad kind,” they say. My mother phones to tell me about my sister’s last moments. “She left you all her porcelain figurines,” she says. I am upset. At some point in our childhood, it was decided that my sister would collect rabbit figurines and I would collect mouse figurines. And now, in this dream, she’s died and I have to deal with a delicate army of bunnies. I don’t want them. I don’t want them the way you don’t want the death of someone close to you. And yet, there they are: brown and white and pink-eared. Some of them wear blue jackets and hold carrots in their forepaws. They look at me with glossed black eyes.

I haven't had a cigarette in three weeks.

## Repulsion

Neither of my parents smoke. My sister and I do. These things sometimes happen.

There have been times in the past when our mother has felt the need to explain our father to us. In these stories, he comes across as weird and misunderstood and forced by our grandmother to wear carnival-colored sweaters. "He smelled of Pinesol," she tells us. We shrug, unimpressed. "And cigarettes," she says. We are slightly more intrigued.

She describes a domestic scene in which my grandmother has prepared a nice dinner. The family eats; the adults sit back and enjoy a smoke after their meal. My father dreads the moment he knows is coming. Plates with sweating potatoes, clammy little lakes of gravy, bits of chicken sprawled nakedly. No ashtray for grandma and grandpa. They lower their cigarette butts into a chicken thigh, a scummy pond of mushroom gravy. There is a hiss, ash touching food. There is a smell, ugly and unmistakable: leftovers and burning flesh.

"This is why your father hates cigarettes," our mother explains. We had asked for no explanation, and yet we were given one. This is what happens in the world to sort smokers from non-smokers. This is what happens in the world: people eat, people smoke, children are born, children who can't reconcile eating and smoking, food and flame.

## What the Natives Did

In the late 1600s, when tobacco use was becoming more and more widespread throughout Europe, the term “smoking” was popularized. Before that, the practice was referred to as “drinking smoke.”

Columbus, during his time in the Americas, sent a group of scouts into the interior of Cuba. They returned with stories of the natives’ bizarre practices.

“What kind of ‘practices?’” Columbus pressed his men for details.

“They drink smoke,” the scouts replied.

This tells me two things: 1) we’ve been doing this for a long, long time, and 2) it’s always been strange.

## Amateur Magician

The authorities have said: cravings do not last longer than five minutes. This is exactly how long forever feels. In the kitchen, I open cupboards and shut them again. There are potatoes in there that have begun to grow legs, white and spindly.

The body cannot be denied, but we can deny it things. The body isn’t easily fooled – pretending the touch of your own hand is someone else’s hand, pretending the peeling of an orange is the smoking of a cigarette.

My first cigarette was on a rooftop, in Virginia. The leaves coiled from yellow to red and the creek was full. A girl shook two cigarettes out of her pack, lit them both from a single match, and passed one to me. I pretended it wasn’t my first, but it was my first. I was nineteen.

On the next hilltop over, the forest burned. We smelled the smoke of many burning trees. The smoke was thick, leaned across the interstate to make us cough. At night, the fire glowed. At night, the ends of our cigarettes glowed. That was the extent of our power, but to us it seemed vast.

To those that practice it, magic is never complicated. Fire is only exhale. If you want Time to relax into itself like liquid gold, then smoke a cigarette. If you want to slow Time to a horrible, clammy-gravy distortion of itself, then quit smoking. This is magic in its simplest, stupidest form.

## Pyro

My mother once lit a tablecloth on fire at Christmastime when we were kids, and there was a small puddle of blue flame eating up the fabric. She laughed maniacally, rejoicing in the lapping destruction that spread outward in a black star. We all stared. Her elbow had knocked a candle sideways, and as she patted at the nervous flame with a damp cloth, she cackled. “Mom?” my sister said, tentatively, and our mother seemed to return to herself. The flame was extinguished; disaster was averted.

“Your mother is a pyromaniac,” our father explained, chuckling at her.

“I am not,” she protested, smacking at his head playfully with the singed dishtowel.

“What’s a pyromaniac?” I ventured, curious.

Our father took a sip of his sparkling cider, set down the glass, and said firmly, “A pyromaniac is someone who wants to set fire to everything.”

“Not *everything*,” our mother said, relighting the candle.

## One Definition of Danger

A cigarette burns nearly as hot as an open candle flame. According to a study conducted by British-American Tobacco's research and development team, "when a smoker draws on a lit cigarette, the temperature of the cigarette coal rises rapidly from its resting (smouldering) temperature of around 600 °C (1112 °F). Peak puff temperatures at the periphery of the coal can exceed 900 °C (1652 °F) during a 35 mL, 2-sec puff."

When my mother once asked me why I smoked, I tried to put it in terms she could appreciate. "Imagine," I said, "that you can carry your own tiny fire around with you wherever you go."

She nodded. "That's why it's so dangerous," she said. "It's too much like magic."

## Killing Time

The first cigarettes, historians think, were made from dregs and floor sweepings, leftover stems and little shards of damaged tobacco leaves. Although these bits were not considered worthy of the bowls of their sacred pipes, Native Americans still believed tobacco was a gift from the gods, and to throw any of it away would be ungracious.

So they gathered up the remnants, mashed them into a powder, wrapped them up in a leaf or a scrap of bark, and the cigarette was born. These were distributed as an act of charity among the lesser members of the tribe: the poor, the elderly, women and children.

And these charitable cases were very grateful. To smoke tobacco was to communicate with the gods. So they smoked their cigarettes, told the gods their troubles, and waited for the gods to respond.

"The gods," they were told, "will respond when they're good and ready."

In the meantime, they smoked.

### The Fire Shirt, or: When Reverence and Irreverence Resemble Each Other

In Virginia, we sat on rooftops and smoked. We sat on balconies and smoked. We drove up to balding mountaintops, sat on the hoods of our cars, and smoked. We watched the pinpricks of flame we raised to our mouths. We watched the smoke leaving us slowly like ropes of honey in the air.

It was October, and the patch of Blue Ridge Mountains across the interstate from us was on fire. We watched as if it were a fireworks display; a spectacle celebrating some forgotten holiday. We'd sit at night and watch the burn spread and change color like a bruise, gemstone embers winding between tree trunks. They'd closed down the section of highway that ran past the college. The fire kept trying to jump across to our side, touch the pines behind our fences, ignite and spread. You could walk down toward the road and feel the heat of it on your face. You could smell the citrusy burn of pineneedles.

It didn't seem to occur to any of us to fear it, though there was some talk of evacuating the school; rumors in classroom and cafeteria we half-ignored, half-accepted. You'd hear occasionally, some solemn girl saying "We'll all have to go home" as if she were an extra in *Gone With the Wind*.

We smoked and watched. You could see individual trees igniting, the flame wrapping around them like a garment you can only wear once before it kills you. Fire skirt. Fire shoes. Fire socks. Fire shirt.

It all felt like an act of worship. *Who* worshipped *what* was unclear, and it didn't matter. All that mattered was: we were close to flame. We were breathing it.

## Equivalencies

Coming home – mesh bag of oranges on the tabletop. No one here but me. I feel I've put myself here very deliberately: something arranged on a shelf, a diver poised about to dive, or a mental patient committing themselves, trading in civilian attire for sweatpants.

In 1972, the U.S. military stopped including cigarettes in soldiers' meal rations.

“We're killing them!” they said.

Things I think might be approximate to smoking a cigarette: kissing a complete stranger on the forehead, snorting a tiny amount of cocaine, forcing a dog to make eye contact with you, drinking a soda while driving and throwing the can out the window, drinking a beer in the shower, standing outside my apartment rubbing my eyes really hard then going inside again, lighting something small on fire: a leaf, say, or a candy wrapper; eating an orange.

## Another Definition of Danger

In Scotland there are cigarettes that taste like potatoes. You breathe in and a wafer of dusty-earth saltiness is laid flat against your tongue. You breathe out and your mouth begins to feel like you've licked a potato clean of dirt. After a couple weeks, I got to sort of like them.

When I was twenty, I spent an entire January sitting on low stone walls near the seashore, smoking potato cigarettes and scowling at the ocean. On one such occasion, an old man with a high-collared coat and a little terrier on a leash approached me.

“You know that's really bad for you?” he said gruffly.



Bored, young, I went into my routine. “*This?*” regarding my cigarette with mock-horror, then putting it back in my mouth and saying dully: “Yeah I think I heard something like that.”

The old man shook his head back and forth. The little terrier looked at me with vague disdain. “No, *no*,” he waved his hand dismissively. “Not *that*.”

He took out a pack of cigarettes and went about the tidy business of lighting one. He blew a long slender reed of smoke. “You can’t go around sitting on frozen stone walls in the middle of January, miss. You don’t realize how hard it is on your kidneys.”

You see: everyone has their own idea of danger.

## A Timeline

In 1634, the Patriarch of Moscow was among the first to attempt a smoking ban. The burgeoning tobacco craze was already becoming associated with dissolution and laziness. Workers kept taking time out of their day to pause for a smoke. Also, a fire had recently burnt down half the city and rumor had it: a stray tobacco spark was the culprit. Enough was enough.

The order was decreed: the sale of tobacco was forbidden and anyone caught smoking would have the skin flayed from their backs and their nostrils slit. A few Russian tobacco merchants were publicly tortured.

And people still smoked. Quietly, privately, in attics, in cellars, people smoked.

In 1811, the poet Charles Lamb wrote: “For thy sake, TOBACCO, I / would do anything but die.”

In 2009, I burnt my bangs off trying to light a cigarette from a stove burner, and, like my mother when she set the tablecloth on fire, I just laughed and laughed.

### Something to Look Forward To

When I tell my friend Sara that I keep having dreams in which I receive horrifically bad news with absolute composure, she explains, “It’s because you think that all the good stuff has already happened to you. Your brain is trying to prepare itself for a lifetime of really bad shit.”

### The Fall

I once met a man in Romania who had tried to kill himself. He told me how he’d crawled out a window onto a high ledge. The height startled him, made him feel sick and dizzy, so instead of jumping, he decided he would roll off the ledge, like plummeting from a bunk bed to the floor below. So with his back to the city, he lay down on his side, waiting for the moment like wanting to die in his sleep.

But, he told me, when he tried to will himself forward and over, he felt hands pressing against his back. He said, a pair of hands kept him in place like a door in a dream being held closed against some pursuer. He said, those hands were hot; even through his overcoat, the heat of them was like an opening in the earth. He said, the heat held him there, the weight of those two palms pressed, burning through wool to touch him. He thrashed, threw his weight against them, but eventually he gave up, defeated.

So he climbed back through the window, and kept on living.

“That’s what quitting is like,” I tell Sara. “Like wanting to fall while some weird force holds you in place.”

She listens, nodding, head cocked to one side. Excusing herself, she goes outside for five minutes; when she returns her clothes and hair are heavy with the smell of cigarette smoke.

“I fell,” she says sheepishly.

“How was it?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Just like it always is.”

### Asbestos Joe or: How to Become a Firewalker

My father has heat-resistant hands. Calloused from a lifetime of working with machines, they can hold hot things without feeling pain. Sometimes, he’ll even take dishes from the oven barehanded, lift them to the table, solemn as a priest, then smile when my mother calls him “Asbestos Joe.”

The body learns over time, like firewalkers stepping slow.

A simple fact of physics: whenever bodies of two different temperatures touch, the cooler body heats up, and the hotter body cools off, their temperatures attempting to reconcile. Understanding this basic principle is how walking on hot coals is possible.

“It’s not magic, it’s simple science,” the physicists say.

But watching the smoke rise from a firewalker’s feet as they fall, the coals stirring and hissing, watching my father fish a necklace out of hot embers that slipped from my mother’s neck while she leaned over a campfire, we want to reach for wonder, because wonder is there to reach for.

The usual temperature of firewalking coals is around 1,000 °F (538 °C), which is about 100° cooler than the tip of my cigarette as it smolders noiselessly in my hand.

### An Offering

There are gifts you can give yourself: running a brush through your hair until you fall asleep, taking a long drive at night with something good on the radio, peeling an orange and then not eating it until later. My god – I am so tired of trying to be nice to myself. The body is unforgiving. The body will stare right back at you from the other side of the mirror and say: “Fuck you. Too little too late.”

And then you’ll say, sheepishly, “But I peeled you an orange.”

### Emergency

Last night, I had a dream that I was involved in a pretty nasty car wreck. In the dream, someone was shooting off fireworks near the interstate and they hypnotized me. I clipped the side of a fruit truck that was parked beside the road, went into a spin, and struck the opposite guardrail. Afterward, I sat with my hands on the wheel – ten and two – breathing heavily and shaking. The engine leaked steam. The fireworks were still erupting just above the horizon – little streamlets of blue and green in ripe, fiery clusters.

Suddenly, as I sat there shivering with relief, a thought filled me with immense joy: *Surely, I thought, surely this brush with death, this narrowly averted disaster, justifies one single cigarette.*

With an unlit cigarette in my mouth, I groped in my purse for a lighter, and woke.

## Instructions for Peeling an Orange

I am trying to sleep as normally as possible. Sleep has not proved an effective strategy for avoiding cigarettes.

I am trying to like oranges as much as I like cigarettes, to trade one kind of magic for another. Sophia watches me peel an orange in a single strip, slipping my thumb between flesh and skin – parting the fruit’s edges from itself. She says, admiring, “I’ve never seen you peel an orange before. You do it like a surgeon.”

I’m filled with pride. I am glowing. I am good at peeling oranges.

“Really,” she continues to insist, noticing how pleased I am. “Those are the hands of a master.”

I look down at the two halves of the fruit in my hands, its wet radiance. I am filled with fondness for it. Fondness. But not love.

## Summer, 1964

I sometimes think: my mother would’ve made a wonderful smoker. If only she’d made it past that sliding, dizzy-sick feeling of the first cigarette. She was twelve, she lay on the floor with her friend Vickie and they each smoked a cigarette from the box on the coffee table. My mother smoked, coughed, shook her head. Propping herself up on one elbow, she looked at her friend.

“It’s sort of gross, don’t you think?” My mother had just taught herself to exhale through her nose.

“You look like a dragon,” Vickie said, disgusted but admiring.

My mother decided she didn't like the idea of looking like a dragon. And that was that. Never again.

## Gambling Advice

In his review of the movie *200 Cigarettes*, Roger Ebert writes, "All those cigarettes, and nobody knows how to smoke."

In the review, he complains that cinematographers just don't know how to make cigarette-smoke look beautiful anymore. Clumpy yellowish puffs above everyone's head like sick haloes. He is outraged. He gives the movie half a star.

They should look to *Out of the Past*, Ebert writes – "the greatest cigarette-smoking movie of all time." The trick is all in the lighting. You have to throw a lot of light into the empty space the actors are about to exhale into. Then, when they do, the smoke lifts up into the shaft of light; writhing smooth and snake-like, unwinding moodily like lazy hands reaching for something.

I drive myself home from the bar, out of breath even though all I'm doing is chewing gum. At home, I decide to torture myself with some classic Hollywood cigarette porn and put on *Out of the Past*. Ebert was right: the smoke is gorgeous and glowing. Everyone is half in shadow, nothing moving but their mouths, the smoke. When the ends of their cigarettes brighten, you realize that no one in the movie has a single thing they want. This is comforting somehow. They all exist within their separate mists; longing darkens their faces, wraps itself around their head and shoulders, curls up through that back-lit space where everyone breaths. I watch Robert Mitchum and Kirk Douglas smoke furiously at one another. They both look like beautiful dragons.

I sit, peeling an orange in a single long curl, the white pip perfuming the space beneath my fingernails. I slip into the rhythm of the movie, the curt snappy way everyone has of speaking; it's unnatural but familiar. For example, this little exchange during a scene in a casino:

“That’s not the way to win,” Mitchum says, lighting a cigarette.

“Is there a way to win?” Jane Greer asks, bored and doe-eyed.

“There’s a way to lose more slowly,” he replies, with absolute authority.

## Ritual

I used to sometimes feel the day begin to slip. It would teeter, precarious, between success and disaster, and the slightest thing – spider in the bathtub, oversalted food, cloud moving in front of the sun – could make the day lean toward being irrecoverably lost.

When this happened, I always smoked a cigarette, and the day would reset.

I would stand in my open doorway, breathe out into the yard, watch twilight purple my smoke, my skin. I would watch my neighbor rearrange something on his porch – a birdfeeder. I would feel warmth for him because he was there, faintly purpled also and throwing handfuls of birdseed out over the snow. I would feel calm and awake, the light changing and deepening and everything seeming to catch its breath, release it slow, breathe with me.

And now – there is nothing to grab ahold of when the day slips. It is like falling down a rung-less ladder, an empty slick-sided well, falling forward with the day all crooked and askew. Now, I chew gum to stay awake. I clean the dirt from beneath my fingernails. I eat oranges. But none of these things will redeem the day from its fall.

In pre-Columbian times, the Aztecs had a ritual. It was called the Binding of Years. Also: the New Fire. Every 52 years, when the Pleiades stood directly above the Cerro de la Estrella, the calendar needed to be reset. The world was teetering toward perpetual darkness. The world required New Fire in order to continue.

Here's what they'd do: First, they'd extinguish every single flame. For miles and miles in every direction, fires were quenched until only the stars burned overhead. Then, four priests would gather at the altar at the top of the Cerro. The world below was a vast lake of shadow. The world below waited for the priests to strike flint, for light to enter back into the world. Each priest would then light a torch from the freshly burning fire on the altar and climb back down the mountain. One travelled north, another south, and so on. In each direction, a priestess waited.

When the priests arrived with their torches, they lit a small fire on a small altar. The priestess's task: keep that fire burning for 52 more years. If they failed in this, the sun in the sky would burn out like a dying ember and time would end.

From this fire, all other fires were lit. And life went on.

And yes, the thing I omitted, the thing I didn't tell you: there was a human sacrifice. Up there on that high altar. Yes, they ripped his heart, still beating, right out of his chest, and in that empty space, where the heart had been a moment before, *that's* where they lit the New Fire.

So yes, fire and death and sacrifice: it's all true. Fire, death, sacrifice, and the hideous darkness that we pretend, with our little flames, is preventable.



## What Longing Looks Like

My parents live out in the middle of nowhere, at the end of a labyrinth of twisting back-country roads. Out there, I learned to drive, to fly over the tucked-up knees of hills, window rolled down to dry my hair, still wet from lake swimming; to let my cigarette-smoke trail behind like the wake of a boat. At night, I was careful to watch for the gold-burning eyes of deer in the headlights. At night, there were no lights anywhere, sometimes miles would pass and then, the sudden greenish wink of a porchlight; flutter of airplane brushing over the treetops; or a barred owl would dip through the shadow just beyond my headlights and seem to glow.

At night, I smoked my cigarette down to the strip of brownish paper at the end, then cast it out into the night, watching always the rearview mirror, the moment the butt hit the blacktop and sprayed a sweet scattering of orange sparks outward in a tiny firework. This never stopped delighting me. Always, the smallest catch in my chest while I waited for the sparks to spread. Always, wonder.

This is the thing I miss the most. This is the thing, I know, that will not go away no matter how much time passes: that lonely little dusting of embers in the middle of the road, keeping the full weight of all that darkness at bay.

## Free Agent

The authorities say: your blood will be clear of nicotine after three days of not smoking. After four, your saliva is clean. And after fifteen days, nicotine is no longer detectable in urine. That is when your system is essentially free.

On the fifteenth day you realize: your body has lost interest in cigarettes. And yet: still, you long for them.

This is where the line is drawn, quite clearly, between addiction and obsession.

### Outside a Bar, I Become Dangerously Thirsty

I stand outside the bar doing nothing with my hands while everyone else does something with their hands, their mouths. They are smoking. *Drinking smoke*. I am not.

Not every action has purpose. Sometimes we do nothing. Sometimes we stand and look at faces under lamplight and do nothing at all. Just watch, motionless.

Someone in the apartment above the bar opens their window, letting in cold air and trembling smoke. The air just now smells of man's cologne, someone cooking, of river-damped dog fur and old leaves drying out, of snow moving in folds up on the mountain.

I want to taste all this on my tongue – the moment's flavor. I want it all to be filtered tidily – something I can breathe in through a little tube, like an underwater inhale. I want the air of the night to take shape in me.

I remember how Scotland tastes of seaside potatoes. Back home tastes of cedar and lakewater. And in Virginia: we could taste the fire on the neighboring hilltop. We could taste the fire, and it tasted, oddly enough, like oranges.

### One More Definition of Danger

My sister once drove across the river to Cape Girardeau and brought home a ton of fireworks. Stacks of them in boxes covered with leering cat's heads and little

cartoonish moon-bound rocket ships. These were *real* fireworks. We'd never had *real* fireworks before – just sparklers and bottle rockets and a couple cherry bombs.

“My God, Faye,” my mother said. “There are enough fireworks here for a military parade.”

On the Fourth of July, we waited for nightfall, waited on the porch as if for a visitor. When it was dark enough, Dad lined the boxes up in the yard.

“Are you sure?” Mom said. “What about the trees?”

He looked up at the branches as if they were something new, rubbing his chin. He shrugged. “Should be fine,” he said.

He struck a match and began lighting all the wicks, running along the row of brightly-colored boxes, until they all sizzled, a noise that shards of glass would make if dropped in a hot skillet.

And then, they began to erupt – the whole yard dense with light, slivers of blue and a pink like the neon of bar signs, sparks moving at strange angles. The trees bled bits of tattered leaves as the rockets shredded them, the sparks seeming to roost in the branches like flocks of fiery birds. The bursts went off in every direction, a few sparks even landing on the roof of the house, sliding down the pitch of the roof and waterfaling off the gutters.

We clung together in the midst of the chaos – Mom, Faye, and I – and all gave ourselves over to laughter.

Finally the fireworks were spent, the smoke cleared, our father crossed the yard toward us with a crooked grin on his face. Still, we laughed.

“Well,” he said, “now we know.”

What did we now know? The color of leaves with fireworks moving through them? What a Catherine Wheel looks like close up? That there can be joy in chaos? Sometimes, so much joy that it spills from you, from your mother, from your sister. Stupid, worry-less joy. The kind of joy that can get you killed.

### The Wisdom of Others

People share stories. A man I don't know very well tells me he used to never cry.

"In ten years of smoking, I don't think I shed a single tear. And then when I quit, it was like a switch was flipped. I started crying and now I cry all the time – reading, eating, doing the dishes, taking a shower."

This sounds horrible, but he reassures me he is much happier now. He says he has grown to *like* crying.

I tell him I have recently regained the ability to smell my own skin. It smells like soap. And orange rind.

"That's *wonderful*," he croons encouragingly.

I don't tell him I sobbed uncontrollably during a recent viewing of *Rear Window*. That scene where Jimmy Stewart watches helplessly from his wheelchair as his girlfriend is nearly strangled by the murderer. He sweats and bites his hand. "Lisa!" he calls huskily. He is in agony. I cried. I sweat and bit my hand. I was in agony. I couldn't remember the last time I'd cried during a movie. Potentially: a lifetime of crying awaits me.

More than encouragement, most people like to offer opinions, aphorisms.

"Quitting smoking is most personal thing you will ever do," one woman says.

An old man at a bar says, “Of the million cigarettes I’ve smoked in my life, I enjoyed about 900,000 of them.

“In all fairness,” I tell him, “that’s a pretty good ratio.”

## Scare Tactics

A man in Prague once stopped me as I was leaving my apartment. Seeing me light a cigarette, he crossed the courtyard in two long strides, and seemed to stand only inches from me while he spoke.

He told me he was a doctor. He wanted to tell me horror stories of the body. He wanted to frighten me. He said there are little hairs that grow in the throat. He spoke as one does to little children when telling a ghost story. “Little hairs,” he said. “That try to keep your bronchial tubes and lungs clear of foreign matter.”

He spoke with measured intensity, very clear and precise in perfect English. He had a faint European accent that made his words seem crisp and dapper. The whole time he talked, my cigarette shed smoke beside me. I did not raise it to my mouth.

“You see,” he said, “smoking kills the hairs.”

Such brave little hairs, struggling to grow back while every single cigarette wiped them out. He told me that if I quit, the hairs would grow back. But, at a certain point, after a certain number of cigarettes, the hairs wouldn’t grow back anymore.

“And that,” he said, “is when cancer happens.”

Everything is numbered. Cigarettes, days, hairs in the throat. As I walked away, I tried to tally up all the cigarettes I’d smoked in my life. I counted days and multiplied by years. My throat seemed to itch and I shook a little. I realized: I was afraid. Things that

go bump in the night. Things that go scrape in the throat. How are we this fragile? How is the body's magic this ugly and strange?

I quickly smoked a cigarette to steady my nerves.

Later, I told my roommate about the little hairs in our throats.

“Ew,” was all she said, lighting up.

### My Body Makes its Preferences (Sort of) Known

Cleaning out my backpack, I find an old pack of cigarettes.

Inside, I part the silver paper and look at the sweet white ends, perfectly round, twinned and leaning in rows. I count them. I touch each one briefly with the tip of my finger. They make a shy rustling as they shift against the paper. Sad, sleepy little darlings. There are fifteen of them.

I take one out. One lonely cigarette. I just want to smell it. I smell it, and the tobacco smells like warm raisins, like Christmas trees and spring soil.

I put it back, close the lid of the pack. As soon as I do, I become lightheaded and nauseous. Sick, staggering, I sit down, breathing deeply. I breathe for five minutes.

The authorities have said: cravings do not last longer than five minutes.

Am I sick because I denied myself something I desperately wanted? Or am I sick because my body is trying to protect me from my own weakness?

Who is running this fucking show?

## Packing Light

For North American nomadic tribes, the tobacco pipe was the only item they carried that had no essential role in day-to-day survival. Plains Indians who never cultivated any vegetable crops would stay put long enough to cultivate tobacco, harvest it, and then move on.

I do not know what is essential anymore.

Fun fact: When Sir Walter Raleigh was beheaded in 1618, he carried a pipe with him to the scaffold.

## Don't Break Your Mother's Heart

My mother has never seen me smoke. It is something that I keep to the background, the periphery, when I'm home. It's not a secret. Everyone knows that volunteering to walk the dog is code for "cigarette break." Everyone knows that at the end of the night, I always park my parents' station wagon down by the lake, watch the geese on the floating dock rustle in their sleep, and smoke. I come home, reeking of cigarettes, and my mother embraces me, even buries her face in my hair like an affectionate animal.

Once, I stood on the back porch smoking, while through the lit kitchen window I watched her doing the dishes. Just on the other side of the glass, I was invisible in the darkness.

Of course, she doesn't love the habit. She gives me fluttering, concerned little lectures. But I don't think the sight of me smoking would break her heart by any means. The decision not to let her catch me in the act is entirely mine. This must be shame:

hiding in the shadows, making sure, when I take the dog out, that I can't be seen from the back bedroom windows as I make my way up the cul-de-sac.

In keeping this part of myself from her, does it mean she doesn't know me? My mother, lover of fire. My mother, rejoicing at the sight of small bursts of flame, laughing as destruction comes close, buries its face in the tablecloth, in my hair. Do I remain a stranger by keeping this thing away from her?

I might as well say it: because of her, I have lungs, have a body. I guess I must not like the idea of her watching me poison them. That must be the reason.

My father caught me only once, behind the storage shed, leaning against the woodpile. He said simply, "Oh," as if the sight of me smoking were the answer to some riddle he'd been quietly puzzling over.

### Why Can't Every Night be Firewood Night?

In Norway, there is a recent phenomenon called "Slow Television." Inspired by Andy Warhol's 1963 film *Sleep* in which poet John Giorno is shown sleeping for five hours, "Slow Television" documents events in real time. These projects include live broadcasts of salmon spawning, train journeys, bird migrations, the knitting of a sweater. The broadcasts range in length from seven to twenty-four hours.

In Norway, February 15, 2013 was declared "National Firewood Night." The nation watched on television as three old men cut firewood together, stacked it in piles, chatting quietly as the evening darkened, light lowering between white and yellow, orange and brown, snow clinging to their coats like milk thistle. They talked as they



chopped and sawed of the qualities of firewood, the best trees for burning, the sap held in the wood's heart and coating its inner spaces.

For four hours, the men cut wood, and people watched the live broadcast of the woodpile growing. Afterward, all through the night, a fire was kept burning. For eight hours, the only image on the screen was a fireplace. Occasionally you'd see a pair of hands putting on more wood, or turning a skewer to roast a sausage. The cameraman did not speak.

People said as they watched, they became less and less able to look away, waiting for the moment when finally the next log would land, sending up sparks. They might start to feel drowsy, the image on the screen seeming to taper and slow, until the fire would revive and the audience would startle awake, opening their drooping eyes to see the fire still lit and licking.

At summer camp as a kid, we were taught how to start a fire with a single match.

"In a survival situation," they told us, "you will want to conserve matches."

This is a skill I have never used. Except, perhaps, to light cigarettes quickly and efficiently, taking into account the direction of the wind and turning my back to it, sheltering the flame in my hands. I have never been in a survival situation.

I think, sometimes, of that man in Romania up on his ledge. He'd been so careful not to use the word "angel," but maybe that's what he was getting at, talking about those heated hands holding him in place, pressing and steadying and keeping him from the fall. Or else: his English wasn't great. Maybe he didn't know the word for the thing that pushed him back from the verge. Maybe he wanted to say "angel" and couldn't.

Why can we not find, always, on some channel, a fire being constantly fed, knowing we are watching with others, sensing behind us the warm hands that won't let us plummet.

## World Without End

Come to find out: the color orange takes its name from the fruit and not the other way around. Because of these things that grow and nourish, we have a name for the color of flame.

Each homecoming gets easier – coming inside and greeting myself, greeting the cool blue walls of my apartment. Longing gets replaced with a memory of longing, and that doesn't go away but it does sweeten and ripen in time.

Did you know: there are whole books about smoke? I read one of them and the author tells me that we smoke because we want to remember a lost and ancient world, but can't. We want to remember a time of belief, when smoke fed the hungering spirits that inhabited our bodies. Every act of smoking, he writes, is an act of nostalgia. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be... Well, fine. A little over the top, but fine.

Before bed, I pour a small glass of whiskey, but, setting it on the dresser, I forget it until the morning. I wake to see it gleaming across the room – honey dram of liquid sunlight, a flame for the insides, patient and waiting. Blinking at it, I feel a quick surge of good feeling, and then it passes. But it'll be back.

All of this keeps me in place. All of it: trees burning in Blue Ridge Mountains, logs on the fire in Norway, my father's heat-resistant hands. And that should be enough for now. That is what I want to climb back into: forgiving the self its weaknesses but still

letting certain things remain sacred, in memory. So I'll say it the same way for myself:

I'll climb in through the window like the man with some belief in warm-palmed angels.

I'll climb back in and keep living.

# Bolt

## 1

One thing astronauts do in space: they watch lightning storms. Through thickly-plated windows, they watch clouds spread out below them, lit through with crossing veins of light. And sometimes, from this high vantage, they'll see a patch of storm flicker, and from hundreds of miles away across the globe's curve, a separate storm will flash in answer.

In 1973, astronaut Edward Gibson watched as lightning flashes seemed to hold a long-distance conversation, a call and response across the earth's surface. He called this phenomenon "sympathetic lightning," and the name stuck.

In 1981, astronaut Richard H. Truly flew the space shuttle mission STS-2 and observed two separate areas of lightning activity, reporting that, "It looked like they were talking to each other."

In autumn of 2013, in a Midwestern college town, I sat in a classroom and watched the professor stand, with three minutes of class remaining, and cross to the chalkboard. With his back to us, he clicked out the words "sympathetic lightning." He was old, a poet, soft-voiced and hunch-shouldered, and seemed to lean back against the board wearily while he told us, "Scientists have discovered through satellite photography that moments occur when lightning seems to have absolutely no discernible cause

*except,*” pausing, coughing into his hand, “except that somewhere else in the world lightning *with* a discernible cause is happening.”

I return to this moment often – the slight smear of those two words, this small man saying something vague and grandiose like, “If that isn’t poetry in action, I don’t know what is” while he set the chalk down in its little tray and the bell rang and we all shuffled out into our lives, into the cold blur of the day.

I return to this moment because something about it hurt. In the way you want things to hurt: a shift, a loosening. There is some knowledge you cannot *unlearn*. And I could not unlearn sympathetic lightning.

## 2

On the phone, I tell my mother about sympathetic lightning and she listens, lets me talk.

“You know,” she says after a pause. “Your uncle was struck by lightning.”

I’d heard the story before, some night on the back porch, lightning playing quick and distant out over the lake. My Uncle Charles was twelve. He took shelter from a sudden cloudburst beneath an oak tree. While he squatted there, watching the rain drip off the leaves, the tree was struck by lightning and the current travelled through the trunk, the roots, the damp soil, and up through the soles of Uncle Charles’ shoes. When he came to, addled by electricity, he leapt up, filled with a frantic sort of animal purpose, his body needing to run, to seek the shelter of familiar things. He sprinted down the street and threw open the front door of the first house he came to. He ran up the stairs and dove into

a bed, pulling the blankets over his head. He trembled there in confusion until he fell asleep. The neighbors found him soon after and helped him get home.

*It wasn't luck*, he would say when people tried to tell him he was lucky. Even at twelve, he felt he'd been touched by God. Just as the prophet Isaiah was marked with a hot coal being placed on his tongue, Uncle Charles had felt the heat in his mouth, had felt it claim him. Later, as a preacher, he would tell this story from the pulpit.

I let my mother tell all this, though I'd heard it before – the reach of the lightning and the sprint to seek an unfamiliar room, the belief that a life could be marked for God. In our family, she is the story-keeper, the one who *tells*. We go to her when we want answers.

“What would his life have been,” she asks me over the phone, “if it weren't for the lightning?”

We have no way of knowing. I say as much. There's another pause. I can hear a faucet run. “Are you going to write about this?” she asks.

### 3

In a notebook from that time I wrote: “Narratives often speak sympathetically to one another across great distances. We hear a story, and something flickers – a recognition. Story answers story just as lightning answers lightning.”

### 4

Those days were full of storms. I sought them out – driving twenty miles outside of town to stand on a bridge that spanned the river and watch the lightning reach between

thunderheads. I stood, soaked in a wool peacoat, and waited for a bolt to drop down, like a crack in a windshield, splinter the landscape. It split far-off trees. It sparked from satellite dishes. It never touched me.

I thought of Uncle Charles, climbing the stairs two at a time, still faintly smoldering, and hiding himself beneath a blanket, somehow missing the moment as it passed through him, forgetting the lightning as soon as it happened, forgetting where he lived, falling asleep in a stranger's bed. And I didn't want that. I wanted to be fully awake to both the danger and my place in the midst of it, heat at the top of my head working its way down, cleaning me out.

It wasn't that I wanted to be struck, I just didn't want it to take me unawares.

## 5

My mother tells the stories, and we listen. She tells the story of my great-grandfather who was run over by a freight train and survived, though his right leg was severed at the hip. She tells of my grandmother losing her first baby and how her grief manifested in stripping paint from all the walls, rearranging the furniture. She tells of my Uncle Mark spending six weeks in a coma and waking up changed, his memories tangled from long sleep.

She has appointed herself, quietly and resolutely, as keeper of our griefs. She carries and recites them. She tells her own story as well, and it rises between us, cracking us, searing us together.

In my notebook, I define “lightning narratives” this way: “Stories that one person tells another which somehow transform the listener in the space of an instant, irreversibly. Like a lightning strike.”

When I wrote that, I had just read a newspaper account of a pregnant woman and her boyfriend who were both struck by lightning while watching fireworks in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

It happened on the Fourth of July. I imagined the couple spreading their blanket over a small span of ground, the woman taking sips of her boyfriend’s beer, the baby shifting inside her, and the screech and crackle of the fireworks drowning out the noise of approaching thunder.

They began to feel rain on the backs of their necks and scrambled to find shelter beneath a nearby tree. They do not remember being struck, only waking up on the ground quivering like fish in a net. The air was still split and smoking; the fireworks hanging frayed and blurred in that strip of dark sky, like a painting on black velvet.

The woman was rushed to the hospital for an emergency C-section, and the baby was delivered two weeks premature. Because the father’s last name is Gordon, they nicknamed their newborn daughter Flash, and told reporters that she will either “run fast or save the universe.” All three survived.

The world knows only eleven recorded incidents of a pregnant woman being struck by lightning, and only about half of those babies survived. As I read this, I kept picturing Flash as a young woman, perhaps twelve or so, trying to make sense of her story. This is the story that, as she grows, Flash will hear over and over. She will unfold



newspaper clippings, articles about her birth with headlines like “A Superhero is Born” and “Real-Life Miracle.” The story of how she came into the world will never leave her, will glow beneath her skin like swallowed sparks.

As my mother put it just days before on the phone: “What would life have been if it weren’t for the lightning?”

## 7

We use the same word for a lock on the door that we use for an act of escape. We bolt the door; we bolt from danger. This same word also describes a length of woven cloth and a flash of lightning. When plants, at the turn of the season, produce flowering stems, they are said to have bolted. A bolt, also, is a fastener, screwing into a nut to hold things together. How can we use the same word for all these things?

On reading about the word’s origins, I learned that in its beginnings it meant *to start* or *to sift*. So now we know what these things all have in common.

The past is filled with starts, beginnings. The present is full of siftings, attempts to understand our origins, at what point we can really say we began. We cannot bolt the door against it, cannot bolt from it, cannot hide beneath a blanket like my Uncle. The lightning touches whom it will, when it will, and all we can do, all we Flash Gordons of the world, is to look back and start sifting.

## 8

When I was eleven-years-old, my mother drove me down to the lakeshore one afternoon after school. Our neighborhood curled around in little dead-end cul-de-sacs,

one of which lead down to a sandy beach, a half-submerged dock, a murky inlet, and a roped-off swimming area. This was where we always went to talk.

We sat idling in the cab of the scraped-up blue truck, and she wore sunglasses that she removed at some point, and I was startled by the new thought that, in our family, she was the only blue-eyed one. The lakewater changed between gray and brown and yellow whenever the clouds moved, and in the little inlet where our neighbors tied up their boats, algae coated the water as if a pane of green liquid glass had been laid there. Whenever boats passed, the wake moved beneath like an animal breathing in its sleep. We couldn't roll the windows down because they were taped up, so sometime during our conversation I opened my door a crack just to feel the air move and she said, "Wait..." as if she thought I was about to get out.

A lot of living had gone on in that truck. It was a 1979 blue Toyota pick-up that was older than me, older than my sister, older even than my parents' first dog, Moony. The truckbed had borne Christmas trees and camping gear between home and elsewhere, all symbols of time spent together – this strange little solar system of shared living. It was September. The air was honey and the lakewater was cider, and my mother was finishing her story, saying, "I don't want you to be afraid; I only want you to be *aware*." She was making of her life a lesson for me, because histories want to repeat; the world and the lives lived in it are made up of patterns.

And all at once, every shape had gone ugly. There were frogs grunting beneath the dock, not wanting to be seen. A man was sitting alone in a boat that drifted out toward the lake's center – the slowest drifting. The fishing pole he held moved in painfully sluggish sweeps as the line lengthened and sought the mouths of bass and bluegill; these

motions like hair moving underwater. The sun was bright on the silver hull and on the lenses that hid his eyes, and I wanted nothing more than for him to go away. I realized suddenly that I was sitting there *hating* him – this man, this stranger, our neighbor. He looked up from the water and my mother waved at him, smiled a true and generous smile, showing her bright, lovely teeth.

“Oh that’s Mr. Simon,” she said. He lived across the street from us.

“Why won’t he *leave*?” my teeth clenched, my voice small.

“Now sweetie, he has as much right to be here as we do.”

There are so many things we want to be different. I wished that the windows of the truck would open and that the man in the boat was not there to bear witness to my shock.

## 9

Fifteen years later, I heard my mother’s story retold. My sister, six and a half years older, is a better rememberer than I. We sat with our friend, Sara, on the balcony of a beach house in Avalon, New Jersey – nearly a thousand miles from the lake where I first heard this same story.

All the things that encourage the spilling of family histories were there – wine in high-necked bottles; whiskey coating the bottoms of glasses and melting little shards of gas-station ice; an abundance of cigarettes, tidy in their packaging, smelling like warm raisins as they were lit. We sat around a glass-topped table with our bare feet propped up, and the late hour brought the smell of the tide to us. All the unlit houses on the street seemed to breathe in a deep sleep.

It started because we were naming our grandparents, tracing family trees on the backs of napkins. We enjoyed the shapes of the words in our mouths – delicious gingerbread names like Greta and Marilla; ancient and kingly names like Arthur and Edwin.

Sara, in naming her grandparents, had just told a story about a man trying to rob her grandfather's dry cleaning business. Her grandfather was alone in the building, alone except for the blanket he was in the act of folding when a man with a gun came through the door. The man was standing across the counter, pointing the gun, shouting his demands. Her grandfather didn't know what to do except to throw the blanket over both man and gun. It seemed like an almost childish gesture, as if hiding the danger beneath a blanket could make it go away, but also heroic, like firefighters using blankets to smother flames. The man beneath the blanket dropped his gun in shock, Sara's grandfather picked it up calmly, and there was no robbery that day.

"Blankets save lives," Sara said at the end. "I mean, I might not be here if it weren't for that blanket. If that man had shot my grandfather."

I refilled my glass with wine and everyone did the same – moving as one, drinking as one. We shared more stories – the great-grandfather whose leg was severed by a freight train, the great-great-someone who shot his wife in a fit of rage. We traced the lines back, towards people we'd never even known. Every laugh and murmur seemed gathered into the air – as if all we were saying was being taken from us and stored someplace in the electric darkness. It was that kind of night. Finally Sara said to my sister and me,

"What about your grandparents on your Mom's side? You never talk about them."

“Luella and Lester,” my sister said. “We called her Lolly.”

“Grandma Lolly,” I said. “But after we moved to the Midwest, we didn’t see much of her.”

“And what about Lester?” Sara asked.

“He died when my Mom was nineteen. So we never knew him.”

“How did he die?”

## 10

There is a picture of Lester in an oval frame on the wall of our hallway. He looks very young, perhaps the same age my mother was when he died, when he slipped into a huge tank of oil and drowned in all that dark liquid, pulled out later, slick and dripping like some limp and feathered thing, a puddle spreading where they laid him out.

The picture in the oval frame was taken before he went to war, and his face is soft and serious. It is a very handsome face. It hangs with other pictures, all black and white, of distant family, going back and back – deep in time – pictures of babies in silver tubs, of great grandparents from when photography was almost new.

I remember my sister and me lying on the carpet with the dog, looking up at all the faces – grayish, brownish, yellowish faces. I remember being young, maybe nine, but saying how good-looking our grandfather was, the one we’d never known.

“We should take that picture down,” my sister said. She was angry. “We should put it away.”

“Why?”

“He was a bad man,” she said. “He did bad things.”

On the balcony, Sara shook a pack of cigarettes at my sister, and they loosened and lengthened toward her in their packaging. My sister took the longest one, like a game of drawing straws.

She told the story well – describing the vast oil tanks that Lester maintained. We pictured him circling at the rim, looking down into the tank. “But no one really knows if it was an accident,” my sister said. “Or if he meant to fall. If he jumped.”

“Why would he jump?” Sara asked.

*Because he was a bad man, who did bad things.* I was still curled on the carpet with the dog between my sister and me, beginning to understand that the oval frame contained something else, something other.

“He was fucked up,” my sister said. “In a lot of ways. During World War II, he was a medic on a navy transport, and it was really hard on him. When he came back, he wasn’t the same anymore.”

My mother’s phrase: *never quite the same after that.* When telling of my grandmother’s miscarriage, or my uncle’s coma, always explaining people in terms of before and after.

“He was like a different person, but that was the only way my mom ever knew him, messed up like that. He...” she paused, this moment without words hardening like amber. “He wasn’t good to her.”

“Did he hit her?” Sara asked.

“No...” My sister went silent, waiting, giving the past a space to show itself.

“He sexually abused her,” I said, both wanting my sister to meet my gaze and praying she wouldn’t. “For years and years.” It was the first time I had ever said these words out loud.

“God.” Just that one word, breathless, from Sara. Now we were all silent, all blinking. My sister nodded and found a place to look that was not at me.

“When my mom was nineteen, she finally confronted him about it. I mean, she just laid into him, yelling and asking him how he could be so selfish. She was crying and yelling and just trying to get him to have some understanding of how it felt. She let out all the anger that had been building up over the years and finally said everything she’d needed to say. And that day – I think it was the same day, or maybe soon after – he drove to work and that was the end of him. He fell. Or he jumped. Anyway, he died. I guess Mom was never sure if it was because of what she’d said to him.”

I suddenly felt both too close to all this and too far away from it. It had preceded me, a whole life separate. It was not *my* story; it was not my sister’s. It was my mother’s. I felt suddenly guilty that we had shared something that was so intimately hers. But she had offered it to take with us into the world, she had broken off pieces in the telling like a communion of sorts, given us each a separate crumb, a tiny understanding to take out and examine when we were brave enough to do so. I do not know what she kept in the telling for herself, but I can imagine. I know that each telling was an act of bravery, to look your daughters in the eye and say: This *happened*. These things *happen*. When we were all together, her two daughters safe in her sight, the bread was brought back to a whole, the pieces rejoining so that she could look with love on what her life had become, so that in braiding our hair, or sharing an embrace in the kitchen she might say, “my daughters, my

daughters, my daughters,” as if this were a holy incantation, a magical protection she was speaking over us that was more powerful than any bad thing.

## 12

In the truck, my young self listens. My mother has always been skilled in showing the world to me, in rescuing things from remaining unseen. When I was four, she showed me how to crack open a head of wheat, the grains separating in the lines of her palm, looking warm there, sunlit syllables that we put in our mouths, that we ate together. She showed me the tiny bead of nectar that appears at the base of a honeysuckle blossom when you pull the stamen through. She taught me that counting the seconds between a thunderclap and a lightning flash then dividing that number by five was the equation of proximity; it revealed the number of miles between us and danger.

At the lakeshore, the air is smooth and the truck’s engine is like my own breathing. I do not think of the honeysuckle, or the lightning, or the cracked heads of wheat. I think of the picture in its oval frame. My sister was right: it needs to be taken down. This is the very smallest punishment for a man who, in all likelihood, took his own life out of shame. I open the car door, dangle my foot above the pavement; the world comes inside.

My mother thinks I am “old enough” to hear all of this, though I will not think until later what that means. It means that my body is changing in those slight but crucial ways that someone else could notice even before I do. But who are these people that would hurt me? *Where* are they? Hanging in tidy shapes on the walls of the hallway of our home.



“I want you to tell me if you ever have a feeling that something isn’t right,” she is saying. *This isn’t right*. It isn’t right that my mother, who is good to me, has had to live this.

The man in the boat drifts out to the middle of the lake. I watch him, the fishing line suddenly tautens and there is a quick strain before the fish is pulled from the water, brought into the boat with him, silent and drowning in air. I feel alone in the choice I must make in how to deal with the world. But that is the choice each of us is given. And here is my mother beside me in this small shared space.

### 13

The story that my mother told me in the truck that day by the lake was one I would tell myself over and over. My lightning narrative. It would darken my understanding of the world, just as little Flash Gordon may never again hear thunder without fear. My mother offered a new way of understanding those words, “mother,” “father,” “daughter,” connected electrically, a web of shock.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration tells us that the chances of being struck by lightning sometime during an 80-year lifespan are 1 in 12,000. But what are the chances of a whole small family being struck in a single instant? What, more even than shared blood can make us believe that we are connected irreversibly to our mothers, our fathers, our daughters?

In one of those rare times when my sister and I were both home at the same time, I tried to pull her into my lightning fixation. This was maybe a couple of months after our night of storytelling on the balcony in Avalon, and since I'd begun to make a habit of storm-watching.

Our parents' house carried a damp, mystic warmth that breathed from carpets and walls. It was the last days of summer, and each night carried storms. They'd hit while the whole family sat in the living room watching old Westerns, sometimes the lights and the TV screen flickering as the storm passed to the south. The weather would change suddenly, the smell of everything going wild and sweet. From the back porch, you could almost see the electricity growing in the clouds, and I wanted to be out in it. I wanted to watch the lightning spreading out over the lake like lines in the palm of a hand.

"I'm going down to the lake to watch the storm," I told my sister one evening after our parents had gone to bed.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

We walked down to where the dock reaches out like a pointing finger. The sand was separated into bars of shadow sharp as blades when the lightning flashed. A part of me wanted to stand, ankle-deep, in the shallows, as if on a dare.

"How far do you think the water can conduct electricity?" I asked, "Say, if you're wading at the shore and the lightning hits the water half a mile out?"

She didn't know, and I don't think she liked the question, but I clung to the idea of a bolt touching the surface far from the shore and the current still reaching a person looking into that distance. I felt reckless, wanting to swim out into it, wanting to fly kites.

I felt lured by the forming storm, the clouds twisting and dividing and shedding a glow like the lights of those fish that hunt at great depths. My sister seemed anxious, eyeing the sky as if she could predict where the lightning would next touch down.

I told her about the pregnant woman and her boyfriend in New Mexico, their little baby Flash. She shifted her weight from foot to foot and in the silence between thunderclaps, we counted *one one thousand*, and the sand made a small, sifting sound beneath her.

“Are you afraid?” I couldn’t resist asking her this.

“I mean, it’s a dangerous thing we’re doing,” she said.

I told her I wasn’t afraid because being struck by lightning would be a good way to die, and if you survived, you’d be marked for greatness. Like baby Flash Gordon.

“No, you idiot. I’m not afraid of the lightning hitting *me*. I’m afraid of it hitting you, and having to deal with it.”

The lightning clawed out from some swollen, low-slung cloud, suddenly hostile. I shuddered in my foolish skin. Was it selfish to revel in the lightning’s danger in such close proximity to my sister? To romanticize catastrophe? Would the lightning, if it came, really choose between us?

I moved closer to her, closed the gap, so that our shoulders touched, this little reminder that if the lightning wanted to strike exactly here, these inches of shore where we stood, that neither sister had to survive alone.

In silence, we let the storm move, uncoil. I’d grown suddenly solemn, but the rain still hadn’t come and the lightning was drifting further out over the lake.

My sister asked, “That couple that was struck, the pregnant woman and her boyfriend, they were holding hands?”

“I guess they must’ve been,” I said.

We weather our stories together. We tell them to remind one another of our nearness, of what she share. Shared blood, shared name, same world, same fears. Here is the story of a family who was struck by lightning. Here is the story of your Uncle who forgot himself in the midst of shock, who was “never quite the same after that.” Here is my mother’s story still ringing between us in the place our skin meets; the almost invisible space where we become separate.

## 15

There are dozens of stories of lightning touching multiple lives simultaneously – the story of a young couple being struck while they made love in a grove of trees near a roadway in Germany; the story of a whole family of pioneers being struck when lightning entered through an open window like a thief and touched each – parent and child alike – while they held hands around the dinner table to say grace. Here is the bolt, forcibly shared, that defines touch and proximity.

When asked to describe my fascination with lightning, when, on the phone, my mother asks how I’ve found myself in the grip of this thing, I try to offer an explanation. It has to do with the idea of a life being at the mercy of a moment, the shift that occurs when the lightning seems to choose us, and the narratives we build to help us process that shift.

“So it’s not really about lightning at all,” my mother concludes.

And she's right. I try to tell her what it's really about: that phrase she uses when telling our stories, *never quite the same after that*. That, to me, is where the lightning resides.

## 16

In newspaper articles about the Flash Gordon lightning strike, I could not find that one detail – the detail that began to loom large, becoming essential in my mind: was the couple holding hands or not?

Finally, I found one account that describes the current's course: The lightning “traveled through his ear, jumped to her body and left through her thumb.” This journey described so simply, the electricity closing the gap between them.

The *ear*. Of course. The lightning sought an opening, the body's small space for listening, and entered there.

## 17

A few years ago, before I read about Flash Gordon, I wrote a short story about a woman who told her twelve-year-old daughter all her life that when she was pregnant with her, she was struck by lightning. In the course of the story, the daughter learns that this narrative was designed by her mother specifically to make her feel set-apart, to offer something wondrous instead of the dark truth. She discovers that the lightning story is a stand-in for a much more traumatic origin story, and the daughter is actually a product of rape.

We do a lot in our attempts to process what we know. I am a product of the love of my parents for one another, and their love for the daughter that came before me. For six years, they tried to have a second child and finally (as my mother tells it), when they were biking in the desert, my mother hit a small stone with her front wheel and was thrown over the handle-bars. She lay flat, and she said later of that moment that “something was shaken loose.” Something inside her shifted, her body seemed to wake up, startled at itself. She was pregnant within weeks.

This is the narrative meant to tell me that I was wanted, but there is never just one story that stands alone. The wanting is more than a stone placed just-so in the desert, the wheel catching it at the right angle, a roadless landscape where a little rock waits so that I can be born. This is, I suppose, a lightning narrative in its own right – the “bolt from the blue” descending, loosening the body so that things can happen within it.

My mother, with a strong sense of tradition, likes to tell me this story on my birthday, telling me also what foods she craved while I was getting ready to be born: avocados and ice cream, tart little plums my father picked for her from the tree in the backyard.

We are not uncommon. But those that love us want to tell us that we are, and so we listen; we become. These stories are made up of the strange interior worlds that we share, that enter through the ear, revising us.

Later, I sat in a truck with my mother, listened and became. Later even than that, I wrote a story about a woman shaping a more beautiful narrative for her daughter because she thought the truth was too ugly for her. Remember that ‘bolt’ means: *to start* and *to sift*.

In stories, we start and sift our imaginings of all the possible narratives that can shape our private realities, all that isn't said that we still carry around with us – the lightning narratives that were already there with us that day on that bike ride. From our old stories, we make a new one, because every act of telling is an attempt to understand. This is how bolt becomes bolt.

## 18

I return to old notebooks where I have written “sympathetic lightning,” underlining it six times. Years later, I still cannot shake this idea that lightning does not need a discernible cause other than the distant presence of lightning somewhere else. This somehow makes everything seem less lonely.

Bolts reach the earth as many as 8 million times per day, which averages to about 100 times per second according to the National Severe Storms Laboratory. From 50 miles above the earth's surface, astronauts watch simultaneity in action, watch the lightning bolts “talking to each other.”

What else can I tell you? We are reaching across a great distance to one another. Two bolts, two flashes, two shoulders meeting on the lakeshore, or two hands beneath an arc of fireworks, story touches story. We tell the stories in separate spaces a thousand miles distant and the intervening years collapse. In telling, in repeating, the lightning turns sympathetic.

In November of 2013, I packed up my notebooks, went home to see the changes the season had wrought on a landscape so familiar to me. My mother and I took a drive together, moving between home and elsewhere. The blue truck has long since left us, but the measured distance between our shoulders was more or less the same. The proximity has not changed, though I have grown larger. The wheels clung to the hills almost nervously as I drove, and I told her that I was writing an essay about lightning.

“But it’s also about you,” I said. “And about your dad.”

We moved around curves in parallel, and whenever I imagine my mother, I think of her in profile, the strength of the unbroken line of her face.

“I wanted to ask you,” I said. “Because it’s your story.”

The window was open a little, and I rolled it up, the better to hear her, the better to be heard. I told her that even though the story she’d told me that day in the truck had made me afraid in many ways, it had also made me feel loved. I’d felt comforted that she would share her life for the sake of our protection, for the sake of knowing. Everything I said sounded very small to me.

“I’m glad you told me,” she said. “And I’m glad you’re writing about this.”

And the story happened again. She spoke, and the world within the story shifted once more. I realized all the details I’d been getting wrong my entire life. She was not nineteen when Lester died. She was seventeen. Lester did not fall into a tank of oil, but a tank of water. Somehow my sister or I had invented that darkness, that black pit, had changed the color and texture of my grandfather’s occupation, and of his death. On the day he died, my mother did not confront Lester as my sister and I phrased it to ourselves,



but rather, in a rage, she screamed things that she cannot remember. She only remembers saying, “How can you call yourself my father,” this man having forced her to redefine her understanding of the word ‘father.’ It was the last thing she ever said to him.

“And he never came home again,” she said. “I guess I realized then how powerful my anger could be. How powerful words could be. They could change everything. You know?”

I did know. Or I thought I did. For my mother, the lightning was not located in some choice my grandfather made to rearrange what father meant; it was located in her own anger, in the words she spoke to him to remind him of that choice. This is what was passed down; the words, the anger, but in witnessing the moment from afar I thought, *How have I misplaced the lightning all these years?*

She described the whole scene. It was in the kitchen. Early morning. Lester was making coffee. He was in a foul mood, grumbling as he waited for his coffee to brew, and he said something unkind to my mother. She responded sarcastically, and he’d slapped her across the face, maybe said something about “respect.” My mother exploded.

This is the moment that is always with her, continuing. I wanted to offer her something, but felt in that instant that everything I had was already hers. The stories almost tell themselves without us willing them. The lightning waits, happens, then waits again.

My mother was silent. We would be home in a few minutes, but we could always drive down to the lakeshore to finish talking.

“You know, I lost a whole year,” she said suddenly. “Before it started, I was in fifth grade, and I remember everything so clearly. That was the year I learned all those

songs: ‘Jacob Get the Cows Home’ and ‘Sweet Violets.’” These were folk songs about farms and families that she used to sing to us before bed when we were growing up. “But right around sixth grade,” she went on, “I just can’t remember anything. I remember being in school, looking down at my desk. All I can see is that desk; everything else is gone.”

What we lose cannot always be restored. This was the image that became truly vivid, made everything she’d told me before seem like a blur in comparison: my mother in a classroom, staring down at her desk, looking at the initials carved there, the nicks and stains, the wad of grayish gum underneath – and that is all she would let in. That is all she could understand about her world.

Somehow this detail made the whole story become more real than it had ever been. And suddenly, it was all there with me, with us, moving in the gap between our shoulders like a shock of electricity, moving through mother and daughter like the couple on their blanket watching the fireworks bloom.

My mother watched the side of my face, tears moving across the features that echoed hers. Everything else was stripped away. The lightning had withered up. I was just me. She was just she. *Mother* and *daughter* – the meanings held. We were somehow still in that blue truck by the lake, looking out at a man drifting there, facing the moment in which a mother has to tell and her daughter has to listen.

## Neighbors of Fire

*“I am molten matter returned from the core of the earth  
to tell you interior things.”*

– Geryon, from *Autobiography of Red*

By midnight, the air is swept through with sulfur. Kircher has chosen this hour because the lava will be easy to see, the gleaming fissures marked in wide ribbons of liquid light. He’s chosen someone strong to hold the rope, a laborer that he describes later in his notebook as “an honest countryman, a true and skillful companion.” They seem the only ones awake. Vesuvius sleeps, but restlessly; its snores send gusts of smoke up from the crater.

When they arrive at the crater, Kircher loops the rope around his chest and waist, the ropes creaking as he is lowered down. He hangs there, like a spider on a strand of web, turning slowly in the updrafts. He looks down, past his feet, into the space of rumblings, writing later of this moment, “I thought I beheld the habitation of Hell.”

When he’s had enough, he tugs thrice on the rope, and the “honest countryman” hauls him up, gasping. “It’s just as I thought,” he says when he can speak again. “It’s all the same fire.”

Athanasius Kircher, a 35-year-old Jesuit scholar, has reached the conclusion that Earth contains a single central fire in its core that connects to the surface through volcanic conduits. It is 1638, and Kircher is at work on his two-volume tome *Mundus Subterraneus* (Underground World).

In it he writes, “The whole earth is not solid but everywhere gaping and hollowed with empty rooms and spaces, and hidden burrows.” He describes how deep beneath its surface, the earth holds great oceans of flame which are connected by intricate labyrinths and passageways.

He writes, “Volcanoes are nothing but the vent-holes or breath-pipes of Nature.”

He writes, “Volcanoes do sufficiently demonstrate to be full of invisible and underground fires. For wherever there is a volcano, there also is a storehouse of fire under it. And these fires argue for deeper treasuries and storehouses of fire in the very heart and inward bowels of the Earth.”

Kircher believed this because he’d dangled above the heat and breathed it in and concluded, “Surely this fire is every fire.” And later, if challenged, he could always say, “But I saw it. I was there.”

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*“How does distance look?”*

– Geryon to Herakles in *Autobiography of Red*

As a child, I once spent an afternoon sleeping atop a bookshelf, a single blanket across me. I climbed drowsily up to that narrow height, wanting even sleep to become dangerous, and my mother had later opened the bedroom door a crack to see me perched, sleeping soundly on that verge, dreaming of canyons, craters, flight, and falling.

I thought of this years later as I drove west, sixteen hours between me and the coast, between the continent’s edge, this shelf it seemed I could drop over as easily as turning in my sleep. Crossing the California border, I started to see all these signs along

the highway that said “Volcanic Legacy,” Mount Shasta swallowing the skyline and never seeming any closer even after hours of approach. Scientists now describe Mt. Shasta as a “potentially active” volcano, although it hasn’t made a real peep in centuries. Still, it is the potential that keeps us watching, keeps us mindful of what this valley may have looked like coated in a thick layer of liquid flame. As I drove, those green and white signs marked proximity to this thing that slept at a distance. They spoke softly of its days of wakefulness.

I undertook the drive not merely to reach a destination (my sister, her terrier, her apartment well-stocked with beer and leftover Easter candy) but also for the act of driving in and of itself. At the time, I didn’t like flying because the miles slipped too easily through me up there. I liked to earn the distances, odometer ticking off space. As I dipped southward, Mt. Shasta finally behind me, I felt I was fleeing as much as arriving. I’d been holding, for months, onto a longing that would not move, either forward or away. It sat in my chest like cooling lava, hardening in all my limbs.

I’d gone to see a doctor because I couldn’t sleep; because my sleep was so full of the shape and smell of someone I couldn’t seem to be rid of. The doctor gave me pills and asked, “Do you think you can move on?” Do you think you can *move*? I didn’t know. I told him, “I don’t know.” But. I got in the car anyway, started to move – the silent, dormant volcano ahead and then, suddenly, behind – a blue and white triangle in my rearview mirror.

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*“Everyone seems to be waiting, said Geryon. Waiting for what? said Ancash.  
Yes waiting for what, said Geryon.”*  
– from *Autobiography of Red*

Other things that are “potentially active”: unhatched eggs, the cassette tape before it is played or rewound, the switched-off headlights of a moving car, an unmoving car, a sleeping dog, a slack sail, any item that gets lost in the mail, storm clouds, Band-Aids, milkweed, Christmas decorations, stamps, envelopes, frozen food, frozen anything, paint, rope, unpoured cement. Also: everyone. Every single person that you touch or encounter.

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*“Motion / was a memory he could not recover.”*  
– On Geryon, from *Autobiography of Red*

The car is a great space for longing. Especially if the object of your longing is absent. Why? Because the car moves. Because, in a car, you are constantly entering new space, the light changing as you pass through it. Because there is only one direction to move in – a line that curves or wavers but is still forward motion, as wide-eyed as you are after sixteen hours of driving, driving straight through the night for the simple reason that when you called around to hotels in rural Oregon at three in the morning, the receptionists kept saying the same thing: there is a horse show in town this weekend and all the hotels are booked up. Booked solid. And so – caffeine and protein bars and oranges you peel while steering with your knees and more cigarettes than any lifetime needs. And a song on the radio that goes:

*And love will protect you  
To the edge of the wood*

*Then a monster will get you  
And love does no good.*

And it all couldn't be any other way. Because the hotels are full of horse lovers. Because, in my backpack, books of poems about this very thing. Because my sister settled in a town far away from me and I am going to see her, to lie on clean carpets with her little dog and hear her voice in the kitchen saying, "I know what you mean, jelly bean," and feel the heat leaving my arms and chest in a slow leaking. Because, the semi-trucks as I pass them will creak and groan hugely like giant cattle and it will be a sound I recognize as something ancient, something like lava leaving the earth by any means possible. And because, as dawn lifts and pulls darkness toward it, I will see a volcano covered in snow and really believe for the first time since setting out that this longing, this specific one, will end, and I will somehow (I can only hope) be better for it.

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*"Whenever any creature is moved to reach out for what it desires,  
that movement begins in an act of the imagination."  
– from Eros: The Bittersweet*

The world has openings. Kircher knew this, believed that the earth's core contained spaces for interior flight. In *Mundus Subterraneus*, there are diagrams of dragons, winged and spitting flame. There are some creatures, he maintains, that belong only to the "lower world."

In Anne Carson's *The Autobiography of Red*, the winged monster, Geryon, flies into a volcano and survives. He flies in search of a connection with the basic forces that make love tangible. He flies in order to better understand the splendor and agony of what

he feels for his beloved, Herakles. He flies to put longing into action, to embrace his nature as desirer.

This book made the sixteen hour journey with me, and upon my arrival, I sat in my sister's backyard breathing smoke, the book in my hands smelling like a damp map, whispering advice to Geryon as if he were a character in a soap opera. *Come on, dude, is he really worth all this?*

In this novel-in-verse, the plunge into the volcano is the only time we see Geryon in flight. It is the only time we lose sight of him for a moment. It is the only time, we as readers, feel lost. And it is a good feeling. It is the feeling of watching ourselves reach for something, desire it, and emerge from the reaching, still somehow, intact.

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*"A volcano is not a mountain like others."*  
– from *Autobiography of Red*

Today, I spent the afternoon reading about volcanoes, about the French painter who moved to Naples in 1764, set up his easel at the foot of the erupting Vesuvius, and didn't move for a year. His name was Pierre Jacques Volaire, and he was one of the few painters of the time who went on-site to capture the eruption, who let the ash settle in his hair, mingle with the paint as it bled brightly on the canvas. His paintings show figures in silhouette, celebrants who climbed the slopes. The heat touches their foreheads, the lava churning at their feet, and they look away from the viewer, toward the space of smoke and liquid flame.



In the painting *Eruption of Vesuvius, 1771*, which hangs in the Chicago Art Institute, there are six human figures visible, tiny at great distance from the painter. One figure helps his companion while they climb a steep slope together. A group of three stand slightly apart, one figure appearing to rest his hand on the shoulder of another while the third is seated jauntily on a boulder. The sixth figure is alone, resting on a high ledge, taking a moment to gather his breath while he gazes across the distance and the heat seems to touch every part of him. There is an air of celebration in every figure except this one, who appears slightly slumped and serious. I like to imagine that this is the artist's miniature self-portrait, incorporating himself into the painting, describing with dark shading the solitude he feels while he sits all day mixing colors and watching the lava change shape. I like to imagine, also, that it is me.

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*“He understood / that people need / acts of attention  
from one another, does it really matter which acts?”  
– from *Autobiography of Red**

In Anne Carson's *Eros: The Bittersweet*, we learn all about the triangle. She closely examines a fragment by Sappho, in which the poet watches from a distance while her beloved interacts with a beautiful man, laughs at his jokes. In her observation of the far-off couple, the poet feels “fire racing under skin.” Carson says of this fragment, “It is not a poem about the three of them as individuals, but about the geometrical figure formed by their perception of one another, and the gaps in that perception. It is an image of the distance between them.”

Voltaire's painting is full of triangles: the volcano itself, the loose triangle of cloud framing the moon, and, of course, the triangle formed by the placement of the three separate groupings of figures – the pair at the right, the central trio, and the solitary figure at the left.

This lone sixth figure seems invisible to all the others, slightly above and to the side. It is his close proximity to them, separated by a mere inch on the canvas, that makes him appear so isolated. He is the only figure who isn't gazing up at the volcano, and this unwillingness to participate in the wonder that the others are experiencing, places a lonely, flame-edged halo around him.

Carson goes on to say of Sappho's fragment:

It is a poem about the lover's mind in the act of constructing desire for itself...But the ruse of the triangle is not a trivial mental maneuver. We see in it the radical constitution of desire. For, where eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components – lover, beloved, and that which comes between them.

In *Eruption of Vesuvius, 1771* this one isolated figure, by directing his gaze away from the volcano, seems to reach simultaneously for the viewer, the painter behind his distant easel, and the trio who lean together and speak of the lava's path. The trio seems active, each in a state of arrested motion, gesturing toward the fire belching into the air above them. But this lone figure seems unable to engage with the spectacle, instead satisfied to feel its heat on the side of his face. We, as viewers, have no clear idea of what he desires, but it seems to be human rather than volcanic.

Desire can make us ignore the volcano; the vast geometrical figure that looms behind us spitting fire, itself a triangulation of flame, stone, and vapor; or of danger, science, and celebration; or of love, loss, and longing; or of, simply, three lines of

distance. Whatever the case may be, desire can make us lose sight of all the symbols of desire itself.

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*“The reach of desire is defined in action:  
beautiful (in its object), foiled (in its attempt),  
endless in time.”*

– from *Eros: The Bittersweet*

In *Autobiography of Red*, after Geryon returns from his flight into the volcano, he reflects that “We are amazing beings. We are neighbors of fire.”

Geryon’s flight serves as an enactment of his desire to be fully consumed by his love for Herakles. Afterward, he seems to conclude that, although we are “amazing beings,” we can never manage to exist immersed in pure longing, amidst fire itself, but rather, we exist adjacent to flame, to the volcano. “We are *neighbors* of fire.”

The moment of Geryon’s culminating flight and epiphany about the nature of his longing for Herakles returns the reader to an understanding of desire as an unsustainable state-of-being. Desire is as transient as a breath of flame. Or a flight into a volcano. The epiphanies that such a flight reveal may seem permanent, but it just as impossible to live within a constant state of epiphany as to live inside a volcano. Martin Buber could easily be describing Geryon’s flight when he says in *I and Thou*: “The causality of his world is not a continuum; it is a force that flashes, strikes, and is effective ever again like lightning, a volcanic motion without continuity.”

In *Autobiography of Red*, fire is again and again seen as a force that cleanses and reveals, although the “reveal” in the final scene seems to be that we can no more possess

the object of our desire than hold raw flame in our hands. But we can “stare at the hole of fire” as Geryon does. We can call it beautiful. We can address ourselves “to the moment when Eros glances into your life and grasp what is happening in your soul at that moment” and “begin to understand how to live” as Anne Carson herself urges in *Eros: The Bittersweet*. We can be neighbors of fire.

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*“How people get power over one another / this mystery.”*  
– from *Autobiography of Red*

Geryon had his Herakles. I had mine. About him I will tell you: he was child-eyed, green around his edges. He told stories about his father inventing useless machines in his garage. He was afraid of flying and of ladders. He once spilled a bag of pistachios across his floor and just left them there, crunching underfoot, for weeks. He liked to show people a photograph of himself as a child wearing a football helmet. He thrived during long drives and prided himself on how neatly he could piss into empty soda bottles mid-traffic. His car smelled always like fried fish sandwiches and feet and cigarettes. He was clumsy and strong and tried to do justice to the things he loved, which included primarily: writing and basketball. He was a smoker like me and when I tried quitting for two months over the winter, we used to stand outside of bars and he’d breathe long silky plumes of smoke into my face. When I shared this detail with my sister she said, “That is some shamanistic shit,” said, “You got some bad juju, Bun. I tell you what.” My sister, although two-thirds of the way to becoming a doctor, believes very insistently in magic.

But what else can I tell you about him? Maybe the only thing that matters: he did not want what I offered him.

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*“This would be hard / for you if you were weak /  
but you’re not weak.”*

– Geryon’s mother, to Geryon, from *Autobiography of Red*

Living alone in Iowa City three years back – I’d just broken up with my boyfriend, Jon, and my friends had all moved east. I found myself watching, over and over, Rossellini’s *Stromboli* on the tiny TV perched above my fireplace. The story features a frantically anxious Ingrid Bergman who, in the aftermath of World War II, escapes an internment camp by agreeing to marry an Italian POW fisherman. They meet at the camp on opposite sides of the fence, passing cigarettes back and forth to each other between the barbed wire. They don’t speak much of the same language; just enough for the fisherman to make clear that he offers her a life of consistent magic on the tiny volcanic island of Stromboli, his homeland, the place of his birth and upbringing.

Arriving there, Ingrid Bergman realizes that the island is barren and hideous, and sulfuric fumes leak down toward the sea and settle in the still air of the village streets. The locals are suspicious and unfriendly; her new husband is demanding and smothering. We watch her become increasingly trapped and isolated, terrified by the life she’s found herself mired in.

In the film’s final scene, she tries to escape the island by crossing the volcano on foot, desperate and breathing the evil-smelling heat, choking into a handkerchief and

moaning. The smoke surrounds and overwhelms her, and the smoke is genuine. Filming took place on the slopes of an actual volcano, and so when we Ingrid Bergman coughing and gasping for breath, the gasping is real.

The volcano rumbles a little but is mostly silent until she arrives at the crater, gazes into it with the smoke belching hugely. She covers her face with her hands, and speaks in nonsensical fragments: “No. I can’t go back. I can’t. They are horrible. It was all horrible. They don’t know what they’re doing. I am even worse.” She calls out dramatically, “God, my god. Help me. Give me the strength. The understanding and the courage. Oh my god. My merciful god...”

The film stood in stark contrast to all I’d known about it previously, which was based solely on a cheery little ditty by Woody Guthrie that I used to sing while doing the dishes:

*Ingrid Bergman, you’re so pretty.  
You’d make any mountain quiver.  
You’d make fire fly from the crater.  
Ingrid Bergman.*

But the song is thematically similar to the film in that both are about desire divorced from intimacy – about seeing something, someone that you want and admiring them from afar, whether from the other side of the barbed wire or from your seat in the movie theater as you look up at the screen.

The reality: the volcano doesn’t submit to any of us, even Ingrid Bergman herself; it must be confronted, crossed on foot while we weep and grope blindly during the entire crossing. We must be alone with the struggle. We must learn to come to terms with our desires, live with their consequences, to fly head first, wings spread, into the gaping crater. Like Geryon. Like Ingrid Bergman. Like me that summer in Iowa when I sat in a

damp backyard, thick with gnats, and told Jon that the life I wanted wasn't a life with him. Telling him this was one of the hardest things I've done. I remember the whole time I talked I swatted angrily at the gnats, batted at them, while he sat, defeated, and let them settle on his face, sip his sweat, and crawl across the reddish expanse of his forehead.

Three years later, I sat in a car that smelled of fried fish sandwiches and feet and cigarettes and told the man sitting in the driver seat what it was I wanted, asked him what he thought love was supposed to look like, and he'd said, "When you love someone, it should *hurt* every time you see that person." This was the only definition he ever offered me. I accepted it, coughing from the clutter of cigarette smoke and choking just as Ingrid Bergman had, trying to make a journey that stops at the crater's edge.

*This old mountain it's been waiting  
All its life for you to work it.  
For your hand to touch its hard rock.  
Ingrid Bergman.*

We come close, move apart – like the dance that Carson refers to in *Eros: The Bittersweet* – the *bassa danza* that was popular in Italy during the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In the dance, three men and three women change partners repeatedly and "each man goes through a stage of standing by himself apart from the others." And so – in order for the weight of desire to take form, we must stand (or sit, or slump) in a space of solitude, whether crawling across the volcano's face, or leaning against a rock at its foot; in a film, in a painting, in a backyard, in a car.

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*“We have to keep going back to such moments  
if we wish to maintain contact with the possible.”*  
– from *Eros: The Bittersweet*

In the spring of 1638, Kircher bobbed among earthquake-stirred waves in a little sailboat and watched Stromboli “throwing up huge billows of smoke” at a distance. The crew of the little boat was scurrying back to the mainland, the ash from the eruption seeming to reach across the water to make their eyes stream, their hair reek of sulfur afterward. Kircher wrote later that it’s difficult to witness an eruption without feeling that “the cracking of the earth insinuates a complete, fatal and funereal destruction.” He wrote, “You would have said that at that very moment the day of final judgment was looming.”

But it wasn’t. The boat returned safely to harbor. Kircher may have even allowed himself a glass of wine with dinner that evening, celebrating survival. Meanwhile, Stromboli erupted. Aetna erupted. Vesuvius smoked and trembled. And Kircher decided he needed a closer look. He made plans to enter Vesuvius’ crater.

Kircher wrote in his notebook, “I have a great desire to know whether Vesuvius has not some secret commerce and correspondence with Stromboli.”

This is a desire Kircher and I share.

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*“He had a respect for facts maybe this was one.”*  
– On Geryon, from *Autobiography of Red*

Things I’ve learned about the series of Vesuvius eruptions that took place between 1764 and 1794:

- 1) In 1764, a priest lived at the foot of Vesuvius, and he went every single day to record the volcano’s activity in a little book. He threw stones into the lava, but they didn’t sink. They moved with the lava down to the sea, like a bird landing on a horse’s head. The priest saw whole trees walking upright while they burned. He saw the lava touch a wall and the wall surrender into dust and mortar with a small leaning breath.
- 2) Naples was referred to at the time as “a paradise inhabited by devils.”
- 3) It became fashionable during that time period for the rich to build their villas on the southern slopes of Vesuvius, the area “most vulnerable to volcanic attack.”
- 4) Parties of scientists would scale the face of the volcano to gather lava samples, would sometimes spend all night sleeping on the cooling lava beds. The young Michael Farraday writes in his diary of the time: “The courage of these early scientists was extraordinary and unnerving. So cool were they that one party fried eggs on a piece of lava, ate a hearty lunch and sang ‘God Save the King’ as earthquakes made the mountains shake like jelly.”
- 5) During that thirty-year period, all of Europe was blessed with “extraordinarily vivid sunsets.”

\*

*“Facts are bigger in the dark.”*  
– from *Autobiography of Red*

Parallels:

- 1) On the first night I met Herakles, he told me a story about trees walking.
- 2) He and I used to refer to the town where we met as “the valley of the shadow of weirdos.”
- 3) He once had his apartment broken into, while I continued to keep my door unlocked. Always.
- 4) On Halloween, he drove me home and we sat in my driveway eating pizza. I invited him to come inside and in response he turned up the radio, The Beach Boys drowning me out with their

*I may not always love you  
But as long as there are stars above you.*

Getting out of the car, drunk and feeling dramatic, I yelled over the music, “You make me lonelier than anyone I’ve ever met.”

- 5) He cared nothing for sunsets, but once, standing on a sidewalk outside a bar, the sky was seeping color through purple gashes, and he said, “What do you think it would be like to be a painter?”

\*

*“We would think ourselves continuous with the world if we did not have moods.  
It is a state-of-mind that discloses to us that we are beings  
who have been thrown into something else.”*  
– from *Autobiography of Red*

On the drive to California, I moved steadily through a darkness that had no color, even against the force of my headlights. I listened to a song that ends with the lines

*And even if love were not what I wanted  
Love would make love the thing most desired.*

And then – a sudden and terrible silence. I drove without caution through nowhere places where the road curled up against itself as if trying to get warm. I stopped by the side of the road and peed next to the car, hoping, in the densest hours of pre-morning, that no car would round the bend to see me crouching, small and gargoyled and blinking into headlights. But no cars came. As I squatted, I could hear the rush of water beside the road to my right, but couldn't see the river. I hummed to myself while I peed: *Even if love were not what I wanted...* The stars were close, moving hugely within their spheres, fixed points of motion.

Carson speaks in *Eros: The Bittersweet* of the “blind point,” and maybe she was writing about me crouching next to my car when she wrote:

Arrest occurs at a point of incontinuity between the actual and the possible, a blind point where the reality of what we are disappears into the possibility of what we could be if we were other than we are. But we are not... We are not lovers who can both feel and attain their desires.

Maybe she was writing about the figure in Voltaire's painting who cannot quite bring himself to merely peer over his left shoulder at the erupting volcano, who rather, gazes off into the whirring distance of Naples bay, in profile to the artist, the viewer, to me as I stood in the Art Institute chewing on my thumb and not even noticing him, noticing

instead the spectacle, the sublime eruption, that floods the canvas with fluid orange light. It looked as if the paint were still wet.

Maybe Carson was writing about the moment when Herakles stood with me in a backyard telling me about his grandfather weeping at a kitchen table on the day that Elvis died, and I saw, in the night sky behind him, a star streak wildly, falling toward its own end, and I cried out, pointing to the space of sky, now emptied. He turned, looked, but it was too late.

This is the blindness that doesn't choose you, that settles on you like snow, like ash.

\*

*“Does Eros have wings? Does Eros need wings? Does Eros cause others to have wings? Does Eros need to cause others to have wings? Does Eros need to cause others to need to have wings?”*  
– from *Eros: The Bittersweet*

A letter from me to Geryon:

*Dear friend,*

*You want to believe we are neighbors of fire, and so you, like so many of us, get as close as you can. I am learning about volcanos, Geryon. I am learning about the temperatures of lava (as hot as 1,200 degrees Celsius), about the age of the earth's insides and the fact that underneath, the world is still forming. I am learning that the plates of the earth move at a speed of four centimeters per year, which, incidentally, is the same speed at which fingernails grow. I am learning that you cannot hold the world in your arms, but the desire to do so is what keeps us moving at all. I know you know what I mean. I know you know that if a man (or a woman, or monster) is winged, and if he is lucky, that he can fly straight into the heart of the world, look around for a minute before passing out from the heat. I know you know what you meant when you thought, “We are amazing beings.” We are. I confess I am a little envious that, like Kircher, you are able to say with confidence, “Surely this fire is every fire,” are able to say, “I saw it. I was there.”*

*All My Love,*

*Renee*

*P.S. I wonder if you've seen the film Stromboli. I think you would like it.*

\*

*"I once loved you, now I don't know you at all."*

*– Geryon, from Autobiography of Red*

A letter from me to Herakles:

*Dear friend,*

*When I told you I was writing about volcanoes, you said, "Of course." Which made me feel known somehow, but also: is it really a comfort to be predictable? Once, after reading an essay of mine, you said, "Why aren't I in this?" Well here you are. I will think always of you this way: you breathing smoke into the air and then me breathing the air.*

*When I reminded you about that time a star moved just behind your left shoulder, that time you turned to look a millisecond too late, you said, "Are you sure that was me?" Yes, I'm sure. My memory is good, and you were on drugs at the time. It can be useful to remember how quickly things move and shift; lone star trailing dead behind you. From the start you were always elsewhere, long stride walking in step, bending forward a little onto porch steps. I watched while you drifted – like bad history, like the tree that walks, like the sore tooth you can't keep your tongue away from. This remains true: I have never been crueller to anyone than I've been to myself. "I like moments in stories," you once said, "when a character realizes they're not okay." What if, I wanted to say then, what if the realization happens and it changes nothing? This remains true: I hope you're okay.*

*All My Love,*

*Renee*

\*

*“His eyes ached from the effort of trying to see everything without looking at it.”*  
– from *Autobiography of Red*

I recently attended a lecture about volcanoes, and the speaker, a man who’s devoted his entire life to the study of volcanism, kept referring to Vesuvius as “she.”

He stood at the podium, and told the audience that volcanoes cause diamonds to form. Deep beneath the mantle, pipes will develop where pressure is so high that carbon rearranges itself into diamonds.

He told us that in 1902, Mount Pelée on the island of Martinique erupted, killing every single person in the city of St. Pierre except for one lone survivor, the only prisoner in the underground holding cell of a jailhouse.

I don’t know what to do with all this. I want to get as close as I can to the belief that Kircher carried – that all the earth’s fires reach across great distances for one another, that we can all survive even the closest brush with that central fire, can hover above and “argue for deeper treasuries and storehouses of fire in the very heart of the Earth” as Kircher wrote.

I want to believe that after the plunge into the crater, the space created by longing will leave you open to other loves, loves even more generous and consuming than the one that brought you there; that afterward, a space remains where you can measure, triangulate, and find that there is just enough in you, just enough flame rising to the surface, to form something both permanent and gracious.

\*

*“New Ending. All over the world  
the beautiful red breezes went on blowing  
hand in hand.”  
– from *Autobiography of Red**

Unable to stop for the night, I kept on. The smell of the road seemed like it would never leave me again; my legs shook a little and I reeked of sitting down for hours. The stars seemed to chase me, lifting their fruit to my mouth. I pushed through, punched through the backdrop of darkness into morning. Along the highway, men (and maybe women, maybe monsters) slept in the cabs of their trucks – all these bodies tucked inside separate spaces, motionless, at rest. And alone of all of them, I moved – a comet streaming flame, steady in swiftness. I gnawed at the uneven corner of a fingernail.

Things have to first occur to you before they can become action. You have to first desire motion before motion is possible. In the meantime, you can wait, wait for desire to shift. I recently discovered that the word “ecstasy” means “to be beside yourself” or “to stand beside yourself.”

And so: I stand and stand and stand. It’s all I can do.

Look, this is going to sound crazy but I promise it’s true: when I finally pushed into California, the sun was fresh and full and Mt. Shasta cut its shadow firmly across every part of me. As I rounded a curve at sixty miles per hour, I startled a huge eagle who was feeding on a fresh-killed rabbit. It flew alongside me for the distance of a few yards, peering in at me, curious and angry.

Maybe this is all I really know: we are winged and we are lucky.

PART II:  
*COMMON SPACES*



## On Defenestration

1. Starting at the city's center, it may take a year to build any kind of useful map, to stop moving underground and find where the alleyways spit you out. The streets open into squares that always offer some sort of easy landmark – statue of a man about to burn, an ice skating rink dusted blue, high clocktower with windows sealed shut. Orient yourselves with these fragments, and eventually you won't need to look at them any longer, won't need to scan the face of the tower for the small window near the top where the head-and-shoulders outline of a man can always be seen, unmoving. In the first few weeks, I walked everywhere with a companion. The two of us would set out, following the curled lips of the streets for hours, their tugging little currents, until one of us would say, "Are you sure this is the right way?" and the other would say, "I've just been following you."
2. One thing this city is famous for: throwing men out of windows. The word for this is *defenestration*. Tourists can climb the narrow stairs to the room where Catholic noblemen were defenestrated because of a religious dispute in 1618. You can look down from the window to see exactly the length of their fall. Catholics say these men were saved by angels, cradled in the arms of the Virgin herself, lowered gently to earth. Protestants say the men survived because they landed in a dung heap piled below the window. Looking down, it is easy to imagine an angel in the

space of air between sill and cobblestones; easier still to imagine a pile of shit, and easiest of all to conclude: the city holds both of these in the loose clasp of its hand.

3. That year, I lived in an airy whitewashed apartment where the river coils back from its banks. I kept the curtainless window of my bedroom cracked during the summer months, waking some mornings to find gray feathers snowed across the floor, sometimes crustings of white and purple bird shit just beneath the sill. I swept and scrubbed. There was a dirty magic to the act of cleaning up after these visitors, and once, sifting through the feathers in the dustpan, I found a single pinion, brilliant green and shimmering.
4. “Sometimes when I get up and emerge from the mists of slumber, my whole room hurts, my whole bedroom, the view from the window hurts, kids go to school, people go shopping, everybody knows where to go, only I don't know where I want to go,” wrote Czech author Bohumil Hrabal, who died in 1997 after falling from a fifth floor hospital window. He fell while attempting to feed the pigeons that had gathered on his sill.
5. Near the Strahov Monastery, there's a brown door tucked back from the street with a sign just above it: “MUZEUM MINIATUR.” Inside, the museum is a single room. You bend over low-power microscopes, peer down to see, tucked safely behind little glass windows: a flea wearing tiny shoes made of copper, a

train of camels in the eye of a needle, a grasshopper with minuscule violin propped beneath his chin. These things, too small to be seen with the naked eye, were made by a man who had to practice breathing exercises, had to “work between heartbeats,” because even the blood pulsing in his fingertips would make the flea’s shoes tremble, could cause the camel’s slender neck to break. The smallness of these things was terrifying – inscriptions on a shaft of hair, a microscopic book with pages that turned but were too fragile to be handled by anyone but the maker. I was told by the curator, “some miniature artists go blind after only a few years of work.” I was told that some of the tools needed to make these things were too small to be seen without a microscope. My body, bending to look, seemed massive. Outside, the city itself was impossibly, scarily vast. Lost within it, I held my breath, tried to still my pulse, looking through the curved lens.

6. At the top of the city, on Petřín hill, there’s a labyrinth made of mirrored walls. You enter at one end, and are faced the entire time with the image of yourself, lost, wearing whatever you’ve chosen to wear that day, the little banner of red scarf around your neck. I watched myself, constantly tricked, thinking a passageway opened only to be greeted by smooth glass, finally maintaining the faintest touch on the surface, fingers trailing against the reflected image of fingers trying to find the maze’s edges. With my shape shoulder-to-shoulder with me, I turned to glimpse the bend of my eyebrows, thinking to myself: *This is what you look like when you can’t find your way.*

7. In October of that year, I took a tram, metro, and two buses to get to a job interview at a school in a far district. When I arrived in my pencil skirt, I walked the sprawled-out streets from the bus stop, and the school behind its low stone wall was empty; its windows blank and dark. I circled the building, trying to peer into the windows, seeing empty desks inside scattered and thick with dust. I touched the locked front doors, pressed my face to the glass, saw a hallway dripping with Czech graffiti. I looked down at the scrap of paper where I'd scrawled the address, checked my phone for missed calls – no service this far out. On the window, a little smear of make up where my nose had touched. I turned away, moved down the walkway to the street, and began the long journey back home.

## Mlsná

“*Mlsná*,” he said to me.

We sat at his little kitchen table with an English textbook open between us that we were both ignoring. On the windowsill, three goldfish avoided each other, circling like fall leaves caught in a slow gust.

“It means,” he paused, the words seeming to wait at the back of his throat. “It means having a craving that nothing can satisfy.”

“*Mlsná*,” I said, drinking the word. And “*mlsná*,” I said again, tasting it; the word itself was its own expression of hunger, flat on the tongue like a communion wafer. He chewed his lip, clearly not satisfied with his definition.

“Okay,” his hands bloomed, suddenly alive with gesture like small fleshy fireworks. “Let’s say you are very hungry, but hungry for something specific that you can’t name. And so you go to the fridge looking for the thing you can’t name, and you eat everything inside this fridge. You eat and eat and eat until you are full, but after all the eating, the craving is still there. Because none of the things you are eating is the thing you wanted. And so you walk away from the fridge still,” he paused again, “not satisfied?” I nodded encouragingly. “This is *mlsná*,” he breathed finally, relieved to have finished with his flurry of words.

He looked at me as if waiting for something, sucking in his cheek a little. “You understand,” he asked, insecure about his English.

“Oh yes. You explained it very well,” I said, almost wanting to pat his hand, which was now unmoving on the tabletop. “It’s a good word.”

“Oh yes,” he said, mimicking me. “A nice word. Very useful.”

\*

I used to dream frequently of a thief with dark-gloved hands who would noiselessly unlatch the window of my old college dorm room. I waited, unmoving beneath a quilt while he went about his work, and as soon as he disappeared back through the window, black coattails still drifting like soot over the sill, I rose from bed and tallied up what he took. Of the things that were plentiful – photographs, bracelets, coasters, books – he always took all but one, seeming to select with care the single postcard, bracelet, coaster, or book that would mean the most to me, and leaving it. On the dresser, I might find only: a picture of my mother in an empty wheat field, a post card my sister wrote to me from Cape Town, a silver cigarette lighter with my initials embossed, a book of nameless poems, a Joni Mitchell record without its sleeve.

For this courtesy, I felt an immense gratitude. And I began almost to wait eagerly for these nightly thefts, for him to show me what it was I most loved, and to forget all the rest – all that he’d shoved into his sack and taken with him into the night. I came, in sleep, to love this thief, though I never saw his face.

But later, I started to think that perhaps even thieves who know what to leave are not worthy of love.

\*

After my fourth month in Prague, I began to steal things. Only small things from the white-walled superstores that loomed in city squares, full of escalators and frosty glass-doored freezers. I only stole small things that I wanted, or even *needed*, but the thought of paying for these things, taking the pink and green bills from my wallet and handing them to a cashier with maroon-dyed hair, seemed impossible, ludicrous to me.

After the first couple of times, it seemed more natural than brushing my teeth. The movement of hand to shelf to pocket was like pushing hair back from my face on a windy day.

Things I took: a roll of packing tape, a pair of white sunglasses, a yellow coffee mug with an orange stripe around the rim, a squat bottle of cherry-flavored cough syrup. My favorite item that I stole was a deck of playing cards with elaborate drawings of strange figures on each of the cards: naked women intertwined with winged dragons, vampires and skeletons and crossed swords, blue-pale ladies in low cut dresses with black ribbons around their necks looking into crystal balls.

My roommate and I would sit on the bare floor of our empty apartment, dealing out the cards, and they eventually became so familiar to us that we knew them by name.

“You got the naked lady of diamonds?” or “You got the dragon of clubs?”

“No, go fish.”

I always stole with no prior planning, sweeping things from shelves, feeling almost as if the objects had been waiting for me, as if I was helping them to escape, and I'd tuck them neatly in inner coat pockets, in the frayed depths of my purse. I always bought something too – a candy bar; one of the cheap boxes of wine that I often saw bearded, shabby men drinking outside the metro stations; or a bag of day-old rolls,

flattened and faded and so cheap that sometimes the cashiers didn't even ring them up, just flung them into a paper sack and handed them to me, which always felt like a private blessing on my thievery.

And I'd go home with my pockets full of spoils, feeling like a visiting relative who comes to call with small gifts hid all over for the children to find, one by one.

\*

In the trams, there were always signs posted that said "BEWARE OF PICKPOCKETS" in several languages. The Czech word "*KAPSÁŘ*" seemed to me like the name of someone familiar. A fellow thief from a dream.

On a crowded tram, I rode home with a sleeve of stolen cookies tucked beneath my jacket. A space, like an empty halo, opened up around the little Roma girl who sat at the back of tram with her hands shoved deep in her pockets.

*Of all here, who among us has stolen at one time or another?* I felt like the only one.

I watched the halo around her shift and widen, people touching wallets in backpacks to make sure they were still there.

"Gypsy hands are quick," one of my students once said to me. "They take everything and then what they don't need they throw away."

I didn't know what to say. I perhaps pointed to a word in a book, changing the subject.

"What is the word," my student asked, "when you think everything belongs to you?"



\*

In high school, I'd sometimes steal donuts from Walmart. I used to take a single cake donut from the glass case and eat it while I wandered the aisles, unspooling a length of fabric or taking the lids off kettles to look inside, and perhaps a single crumb would disappear into the polished darkness there. I might return to the case, take a second donut – a cruller, bear claw, or apple turnover, then slowly, deliberately dispose of the evidence of my theft. I'd chew thoughtfully, without hurry; I'd crumple up the wax paper and throw it away, wipe the crumbs from my face, and leave the store, feeling heavy with donuts I hadn't paid for but somehow always hungry again soon after.

\*

As a child, I remember watching a movie in which a little boy inquires of the villain,

“Are you a robber?”

To which the villain replies, “No, I'm a thief!”

I did not understand the difference at the time, or why the distinction was important. I've since come to understand that thieves are quiet; they keep their own secrets; they love the silent spaces within darkness; they love unlocked windows and trying to make their bodies noiseless; they love to be invisible, masked, hidden. They love shadows and corners and closets, small spaces they can fit themselves into easily if necessary.

I have known some thieves. They all love what I love.

\*

In Prague, as the year passed, I became more and more bold. I started stealing boxes of wine, tucking them into my backpack.

Outside of the Tesco was a little city square with a metro station at one end. Every day, a group of four or five men would spread their coats beneath them like picnic blankets on the cobblestones. They all wore beards and some sort of hat, unkempt, their longish hair knotted as if with burrs. They drank the cheapest wine, opening the box at its seam with their teeth, the cardboard sagging and wet, their mouths and beards stained violet.

They never asked for money, although a few of them sometimes removed their hats, left them upturned on the ground as a gentle suggestion. There were never more than two or three coins in the hats. I started giving them cigarettes as I walked past, sometimes breaking candy bars into pieces and handing them around: a breaking of bread. A couple of times I stole wine for them. I'd kneel and open my backpack, the zipper chirping between my fingers, pull out a little box of cheap wine as if I were presenting a trophy, and they'd all cheer, fists in the air. On those days, I was their hero, their Robin Hood.

None of the men spoke any English. "*Na zdraví,*" they'd all chime, and lift the box to me.

There was one man among them who always only wore one shoe, his other foot wrapped in a bloody bandage. The wrappings never looked clean, always ancient and

brown, and it was the place my eye avoided, although as I was leaving, my eye would often land there, on that soiled, crusty bandage, would linger for a second, repulsed.

One day, I crossed the square to deliver my spoils. The men greeted me as they always did. I knelt and unzipped my bag. Looking up, my eye fell instantly on the man with the bandage. He was passed out on a bench with a newspaper over his face. His foot was gone. Instead of a foot there was just a bandaged nub where his pantleg was rolled into a cuff.

The other men saw me openly staring, horrified. “Lost,” one of them said in English, shaking his head. “Gone,” another said, solemnly.

I had never realized they knew these words.

\*

I stole, in part, because I felt the things I took already belonged to me somehow. They didn't, I knew they didn't, but it seemed the easiest, simplest kind of wish fulfillment. I stole because it gave shape to my day, made me linger over things, forced me to read the faces of the maroon-haired cashiers, of the elderly security guard at the door. I stole because I liked the weight of these things I knew weren't mine. I stole because I wanted there to be a small secret between me and the world, out in the open. I stole because I knew Prague didn't want me, didn't want to shift or make room. I stole because I was haunted by the fact that one day you might have a foot, and the next day you might have a space where a foot once was. This fear drove me up and down the escalators, looking, looking for things that fit easily in my hand, my sleeve – things that fit against me like an extra limb. I stole because it gave me my own sweet and private

darkness to drift inside of, even in the midst of all those white fluorescent lights. I stole because buying seemed less logical than stealing. I stole because I didn't know the right words for things. I stole because I had nothing better to do, or else: I just didn't know what else to do.

\*

After returning to the States, I retired as a thief. I would see things occasionally, think how easy they'd be to steal, but the desire was never very strong. I'd put them back on the shelf. Or I'd go up to the counter and pay.

In Iowa, my friend Tara once confessed to me that she'd started stealing. From an overpriced Antique store on Market Street called "Artifacts." Her mouth lingered over that word, the hiss of the 's' at the end like opening a bottle of ginger ale. She listed her spoils for me: an autographed copy of a novel, a brown decanter, a bowl too tiny for any real use, a barometer that she put in her bag for a moment then put back, thinking, "I do not *need* a barometer."

I asked her the question that the world asks every thief, the question my roommate used to ask me in Prague, "What if you get caught?"

And like every respectable thief, she shrugged.

\*

I've taught the word *mlsná* to many people: strangers in bars; friends; to my sister when she told me she once attended a potluck, tried every dish, "but nothing was what I

wanted;” to boyfriends who would turn the radio dial while I drove and say, “nothing is quite hitting the spot.”

It is a word for seeking without knowing what is sought, for maintaining faith in the nameless, for putting things in your pockets just to see if the weight might satisfy, for trying on different places and worlds and languages and disguises to see if any will fit. The word itself fits, is easily carried around, shared. *Mlsná* is a feeling that everyone understands; one that is good to put a name to.

And whenever I teach it, as I was taught by my student in Prague, always the response is the same. “That’s a good word.”

“It is,” I say. “Very useful.”

\*

I once attended a costume party as a thief. With black bandit mask, striped prison garb, sack of loot thrown over one shoulder. I made a show of sneakily putting items from the hostess’s apartment in the bag: framed pictures and candlesticks. She would then laugh and I’d take them out again, set them neatly back in their place. We all quickly tired of the joke, but as the night went on, the bag felt increasingly like a space for strange magic, a space that could transform the things I put into it. At its bottom, my ordinary belongings knocked against one another: wallet, key ring, cigarette ends like birthday candles, small parts of a spell. They seemed to call out for more weight, for a new constellation of foreign objects.

The costume yielded a strange freedom – a version of me that spoke fluidly, moved with confidence. I felt sleek and hidden, unseen even among all the bodies in the

cramped apartment, comfortable brushing against strangers, comfortable in the room's half-darkness. My voice seemed to lower a pitch, to hum in the private space of my chest. And the sack on my shoulder sat, lispng its prophecies of the things I could own.

I took nothing that night. The sack was still weightless and deflated when I left. But I later confessed to the hostess that I'd been weirdly tempted.

She'd laughed heartily. "Next time," she said, "take it all."

\*

In Prague, I did eventually get caught. It was the only time I tried stealing from the multi-level mega-bookstore that loomed above Wenceslas Square. It was mid-December, and the city smelled of Christmas. Which in Prague smells of sugared dough, mead, and the salty open tanks where live carp shifted darkly like strange organs.

I had no money saved from teaching, and so I'd decided to steal a few Christmas gifts to mail to family members back home.

Inside, the store was clean and carpeted. Into my backpack I slipped a book of poems for my sister and a book of glossy black-and-white photographs for my mother. The books were beautiful and expensive. They weighed my bag against my back so that I felt anchored, nestled against these secret things that I carried down the three flights of stairs to the cashier desk. I carefully selected a postcard to purchase. I don't now remember the image on the postcard. I think it was of one of the statues on the Charles Bridge, all streaked with rain as if it were sweating a gray mist.

After I paid for the card, a stout security guard grabbed me firmly by the arm. He led me back up the three flights of stairs to a cluttered little office. He seemed to know

only one phrase in English, or at least it was the only thing he would say to me. He kept saying, over and over, “You’re gonna get it.”

He phoned the police and we waited. I did not cry. I didn’t even think about crying. But I did feel shame move in me like a tide, shame for each thing I’d stolen over the past six months. I could name every one of them. I could confess each item to the thick-faced security guard as he sat in the corner with his arms crossed over his chest, never taking his eyes from me. *A tube of toothpaste, I could say. A book of matches, a little coin bank in the shape of a castle, a disposable camera, colored pencils, a beige scarf with red dots on it...* It seemed to me then, such a sad and stupid list.

The two police officers when they arrived looked like Laurel and Hardy. One was tall and skinny and blonde, while the other was squat and dark-haired and spoke no English. They turned the books over in their hands that I’d tried to take.

“Why did you steal?” the officer who could speak English said.

I didn’t know what to say. I shrugged, as Tara would later shrug when asked what she’d do if she got caught. I said, “Because I didn’t want to pay?”

The officer wore a bored expression, as if I were a dull and lengthy movie he was being forced to sit through. “But,” he said, “you must pay. Everyone must pay. It’s the rule.”

I think I tried to shrug again but the backpack felt heavier now, even without the stolen books in it.

He sighed and sort of shook his head. The short officer said something in Czech and the tall one nodded.

“Okay,” he said. “Do you have any money? For your fine?”

I opened my wallet and showed him a single five-hundred crown note, about twenty-five dollars. A student had just paid me for last week's lessons.

The tall officer sighed again and extended his hand. "It's enough," he said, and pocketed it.

They escorted me down the stairs. "No more stealing," the tall one said, almost smiling as we parted ways.

Out on the street, the air was good again. I felt drained but incredibly relieved. I moved with the crowd toward the tram stop around the corner. Everyone carried shopping bags and boxes, knit caps sliding down over their eyes as they moved. Everyone was in hurried good spirits, and there was a quartet of teenagers down the street singing carols beneath the freshly lit streetlamps.

I stood waiting for the tram to arrive, greedily smoking a cigarette, when a man approached me. I had never seen him before, though I wondered later if perhaps he'd been a customer in the bookstore. He was late middle-aged, a little bent, but cleanly dressed. He wore a tan raincoat and no hat. His bald head came up to my chin. He said something in Czech, maybe three sentences, and was visibly angry, visibly disgusted with me. He spat the words directly into my face, his lips quivering slightly and his bald scalp reddening. I said nothing, but looked around me at the crowd of people also waiting for the tram. Their faces were all turned away in shame, looking down at their feet, but clearly in a posture of listening, clearly affected by what they'd just heard. The teenagers on the next corner had stopped singing. The man finished his speech and moved off toward the square. Still no one would look at me.



I rode home on the tram with those words I couldn't understand ringing through me. A circle opened up around me on the crowded tram like the one around that little Roma girl I'd seen months before. I felt tired. And ugly. I pretended to sleep. I hid in the open. *Everyone must pay.* I just kept reciting the words as I rode home. *No more stealing.* The officer's words buzzing over my skin me as the tram jostled my head against the glass window. *It's enough.*

\*

I thought of that moment on the tram when Tara told me about putting back the barometer, not needing badly enough this outdated instrument sloshing with blue poison, mercury – the weather coming inside as if through a trap door. “Why did you want it in the first place?” I asked her. “It caught my eye,” she said, her peripheral vision loving the shiny thing only for the sake of its shininess. It made me remember the desire to reach in anywhere with a gloved hand, take at random, build up an inventory of useless plunder. I'd wanted to gather, to build an assembly that, in the end, would make some sort of sense.

In *mlsná*, there is a kind of generosity; a world flexible enough to know that not everything will fit, that we will seek sometimes in dark corners, that what we take can then be given elsewhere – apple, bottle, set of hairpins, deck of cards – even when we are at a loss to know what it is we really want. Even then, *mlsná* forgives.

## My Own Bed

The relationship between a person and a bed is most intimate. Whenever I move to a new place, I first install a bed to sleep, then I take care of other things...”

– From “Beds and Curtains” in *Casual Expressions of Idle Feeling* (Xian Quing Ou Ji) by Li Yu (1611-1680)

There were mattresses everywhere, propped up on curbs, against fences. On one of them someone had spray-painted the words “NOTHING REALLY MATTRESS.” I used them as signposts to navigate the tangled New Orleans streets, so that when finally one was hauled away, a gap would be left in the map of the neighborhood, and I’d be more likely to take a wrong turn. They weren’t reliable landmarks.

In those early days, I was always just a little lost, looking up the curved neck of one street and sometimes turning the wrong way on purpose, leading myself away from the new apartment, from the damp holiday smells of that creaking building with its mirrors in strange places. There were nights when I could feel the air loosen; the whole city suddenly going slack and everyone moving as if their feet couldn’t quite grip – the sidewalks a soup of chewing gum and beer and dull streamlets of piss, the piss smells of many men meeting in the air like dogs touching noses. Once, a bright puddle of blood bloomed on the sidewalk. I stepped around it, thick and vibrant as tempera paint; someone had passed through it before me, footprints leading away with the swish of a Nike checkmark in the center of each one, as if a tally were being kept.

My roommate, Sara, and I explored our new neighborhood tentatively, as if we were deep sea divers picking up small pieces of wreckage, turning them over in our hands: a baby's shoe, a few lost pieces from a board game, flaking and tarnished vending machine jewelry. And always the mattresses loomed, with torn pieces of notebook paper reading "FREE! GENTLY USED," as if only the gentlest things could've happened there, only light sleeping, soft touching.

In a bar with an empty-sounding name ("Back Space" or "Avenue Pub"), a bartender wrote down a list of advice for us on a napkin. He wrote in blue pen, all in small, even capital letters so it read like gentle shouting:

- DO NOT PICK UP FREE MATTRESSES (UNLESS YOU ARE FOND OF BED BUGS)

And just underneath he wrote, ominously: YOU'VE BEEN WARNED

We left the mattresses alone.

\*

The bed was nothing special. The man selling it said as much on the phone. But, he said, it was clean and firm; it was only a year old.

"It's been a good bed," he said. He sounded wistful. A sentimental man. The sort of man who gets attached to his bed after only a year of use.

It reminded me of something my father would say. His words always pulling toward the simplest path: *He was a good dog, It's been a good car, or That was a good movie.* Always signifying some kind of ending.

I told the man that if I could borrow a friend's truck to haul the bed, we'd be in business. He seemed neither pleased nor displeased, just a dead sort of calm, the kind that precedes a final parting.

\*

At home, a narrow twin bed covered in a patchwork quilt. My parents bought it when I had my growth spurt at age twelve, tired of seeing my feet hanging off the end. I fit better in the new bed, but I'd already trained myself to sleep on my side with my legs tucked up like a pill bug.

In the public library there was a book about a man trying to sleep in a tiny bed. I used to look at it and feel disgusted with myself, my size. On one page, an image of the man trying to cram his feet against the footboard with the words underneath, "Sammy began to wish he didn't have legs."

I showed my mother the image and she'd laughed. Then, looking at my face, she said, "I guess it's time we get you a new bed."

On the phone with me now, my mother stands in the doorway of my childhood bedroom.

"I'm in your room now, Nay," she says. "And your bed just looks so empty."

\*

Sara and I had been renting a furnished sublet in Mid-City for four months, before finding a cheap place Uptown in an old, crumbling building with high ceilings, hardwood floors, and two fireplaces with hand-painted tiles.

That first night in the new apartment, the power went off suddenly. There was a pop, as of lightbulbs making small noises of shock, then the silence as the air conditioner whirred down like the engine of a stalled ship. I was unpacking, placing tubes of

toothpaste and bottles of Advil in the medicine cabinet when the lights clicked off. My arm was mid-reach, suspended toward the little shelf above the sink. I wanted to finish, put the mouthwash in its rightful place, and so kept groping toward the mirror, the darkness where my face had just been.

From the other room, Sara swore quietly. There was a space of quiet before she shouted to me, “I forgot to call the power company.”

We took the quart of ice cream from the freezer and sat in the yard, eating it with the only two spoons we owned. We waited for Sean to come with his truck.

He was the only person we knew with a truck. Sara had dated him briefly. They’d broken up over something small, but then the whole thing had seemed small, only a month or two start to finish. He spoke with a drawl; he wore hats always; he had three brothers, a family sailboat, and a red truck; he joked self-deprecatingly about being illiterate, but if pressed would say his favorite book was *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. This was really all I knew.

We drove to Metairie separately. Sara and Sean in Sean’s truck, and I took my station wagon in case some of the other furniture the man was selling caught our eye. There’d been talk of floorlamps on the phone, of bookshelves, of “a large wooden Tiki head.” He’d said, “Everything must go.”

I watched Sean and Sara at stoplights as we drove, watched their faces in the rearview mirror, Sara leaning forward to turn the radio dial, to tuck her hair behind her ear. I watched their mouths move and half-pretended to know what they were saying. The air was soup as always. We all smoked and let the gusts nip the ash from the ends of our

cigarettes. We all wore a look of purpose, a mild resolve that hung between us. We were doing a *task*. We were getting a bed.

\*

In college, in the dorms, we all tried out each other's beds. Entering a friend's room, you'd sit on the edge of their bed, bounce a little, maybe even remove your shoes to lie down fully. "Your mattress is so much better than mine," we always said. It was a courtesy.

In my case, though, it was true. Freshman year my mattress sagged horribly in the middle. I tried flipping it and it bulged horribly. Coming into my room, my friends would bounce, remove their shoes, and say, "Man you've really got a shitty mattress."

Eventually, I got used to the sag, the bulge. They, like many things, became familiar.

\*

When we arrived, the man met us in the parking lot. He introduced himself as Victor, shaking each of our hands in turn, then leading us down a corridor to his apartment.

Inside, there were seashells on shelves and ceramic bowls he made himself. There were no curtains, and the door to the back room was closed like a book shut on a finger. We stood close together in the living room, asked Victor where he was moving to. *Florida*. Why was he moving? *Bad breakup*, he said; the two words hung there like a very small hex, the kind that is only meant to make your enemy itch or smell bad.

Such a strange, strange night. In a stranger's space, the air in his apartment the color of ocean twilight, the bed there in the corner, mattress stripped and naked, and he invited us each to sit, to bounce gently, feet flat on the floor, to feel its give, to lie down, even, if we wished to, to picture ourselves sleeping there. I curled onto my side like a seahorse. I could smell two scents blending like different trees growing close together, cedar and sweet olive in bloom.

He quoted a price for mattress, frame, box springs. It seemed fair. He offered his hand again. His was the cedar smell.

\*

In a boyfriend's apartment, in Chicago, I took a book from his shelf and carried it with me back to the twin bed we tried to fit ourselves into when I'd visit. He'd left two hours before for his office job. I avoided the kitchen where his roommate was frying plantains. I read

“I saw you could live and furnish with grace  
Even a lion's den, if you've no other place.  
I don't even mind to die alone, to be dead,  
But I want to die in My own bed.”

I thumbed the pages and felt a homesickness for a place that didn't yet exist for me. I smelled the clean peachy tang of my boyfriend's hair still on the pillow and tried to conjure a fondness for the space he'd left for me to fill. I rolled into it, spread myself large across the narrow mattress, and listened to the stranger in the next room whistling while he made himself breakfast.

Of the beds I've slept in, I thought then, were any of them really *mine*?

\*

“What else is for sale?” Sara and Sean were at the edges of the room, examining things on low tables: a dish filled with old coins, an empty picture frame, a wooden mask hanging on the wall with two yellow stripes painted beneath each eye.

We each wanted something to come away with. I had my bed. Sara chose a lamp made out of a rock. And Sean took the mask down from the wall, held it to his face.

I sheepishly took out my check book. Victor sheepishly refused a check. I couldn't blame him; checks are fragile, untrustworthy, but still I felt a pang, not having earned Victor's trust merely by curling up on his bed for half a minute.

He told us where the nearest ATM was. A gas station just up the road. As we walked, there was thunder. There were clouds that worried, lit from behind like Victor's lamp made from clear stone. The clouds piled and scattered into bruises, sorting themselves like paperwork. We, too, were scattered, Sara and I walking in step with Sean a little behind. She said, loud enough for us all to hear, “So, I mean, there's three of us and one of him. We can do whatever we want to that guy.”

Sean didn't realize she was joking, a look of horror beneath the brim of his baseball cap. I laughed with her in solidarity, but I shuddered a little at how vulnerable Victor suddenly seemed with his sun-bleached hair, with his naked bed now propped up against the wall, ready to be hauled away. And all those things on shelves that his absent lover had given him; they could so easily shatter if only we brushed roughly against them. Everything began to seem fragile – this little life of trinkets in rooms, of the nightlight above the kitchen sink that he offered me for free, of the bed that still held his lover's smell.



In the gas station, I bought a can of juice. The ATM machine made noises, and I rolled the money into a little wad for my back pocket. We all bought cigarettes – white, yellow, and blue packs. Sean held a scratch-off ticket, picking at it with his fingernail as if it were a scab. We walked back along the highway, smoking and feeling like a very tiny army. It felt like no time had passed. The night would not move. The storm would not take shape.

Sara was saying that walking along the highway like that reminded her of New Jersey: “Like we’re high schoolers going to some guy named Bobby’s apartment who lives by the interstate and there’s weird booze there and we all swim in a dirty pool and when we’re good and drunk we walk to the Cineplex and don’t sit through a whole movie but pop into each of the theaters for ten minutes at a time.”

Sean and I didn’t say anything, just let her story seep. I tried to pretend with her that we were going to a guy named Bobby’s apartment, but that wasn’t the sort of thing I did in high school. I sought small invisible spaces I could fit into easily, curved at the foot of my bed around a pillow reading *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*.

No one had said anything for a long moment when Sean finally said, “I can’t believe he only wants fifty bucks for that mask.”

I wanted just to go home and sleep in Victor’s bed forever. I wanted the bed to already be waiting for me back in our dark apartment.

\*

After college, I lived for a year in Prague. My landlord’s son spoke gentle English and sometimes smoked cigarettes in the stairwell. When I told him I had no furniture, he

brought up a bed for me from the basement. It was actually two twin mattresses fitted together in a king-size frame. At first, I always found myself in the gap between the mattresses. Waking up, floundering there in the crack. By the end of the year, I kept always to the mattress on the right, furthest from the window. At my back, the space of a whole separate bed. It felt sometimes like a ghost slept there, very quietly.

\*

We loaded the bed, Sean artfully tying sailor's knots with a length of rope and naming them for us. *Running bowline, soft shackle, zeppelin bend*. I drove behind, watching the bed strain against the ropes like a circus animal. We drove alongside the river. The night came on sudden, lowering like a blanket laid flat on the green thigh of the levee. Sean's taillights ahead of me looked as warm and steady as the port and starboard glimmerings of towboats.

We unloaded the bed, balancing, bending from our knees, sharing the weight among us with smooth grip. We brought up the bed in stages: first the metal frame piece by piece, then the box springs, then the mattress. Sara went up ahead to light candles and set them in the empty fireplaces, in rows along the floor. They formed paths like the lights on airfields, landing strips. The candles lit our ankles as we moved past; we nudged them gently with our feet where the path was too narrow. We passed through pockets of light, feeling strong and holy.

On the empty floor of my bedroom, Sean bent to assemble the bedframe. In the center of the metal frame, a single candle made the walls seem curved and distant. I held another candle and hovered behind Sean's bent back, white wax dripping onto his hands.

He hissed, and I touched his shoulder in apology. He groped at the metal pieces, pushing his cap back to wipe the sweat from his forehead with the back of his burnt hand. “Bring the light a little closer,” and I’d lower it toward the floor, careful now to let no wax fall.

The darkness seemed to carry its own heat, the candles close to our faces, showing sheen. We hadn’t yet learned which windows opened and which were painted shut, and Sara and I hurried around the apartment, prying at the windows with blunt fingers. When they opened, the heat seemed to spin inward. “God,” Sara said, knotting her hair at the back of her neck. “God this heat is mean.”

At last, Sean stood. The frame was ready. Lowering the box springs into place, we almost forgot to move the candle that waited there like its own lit island. We slid the mattress on top, and just like that, it was finished.

“God,” Sara said again. “It’s such a specific thing we are doing. Moving a bed is such a specific thing.”

I lay in the very center, gleeful. *I have a bed now*. In the corner, by the window: I have a bed.

\*

After Prague, I rented a furnished apartment in Iowa for three years. It was a full-size bed that I tried to soften with padded mattress covers. If ever someone shared my bed with me, I would insist they sleep on the side closest to the wall. In the Prague bed, that was the side where the ghost would’ve slept. In Chicago, that was the side where the boyfriend had slept.

Sleeping alone, I'd think of all the past tenants that had spent nights in that bed, sleeping or not sleeping: the girl that lived there before me, and had left small things on empty shelves for me to find, coffee pots and scented candles and bottles of reddish spices. When I rented the apartment, my landlady had told me with a tired sort of pride, "My grandfather was born in this room," turning and gesturing around her as if his presence still filled the whole space, had lingered and might easily settle beside me on the mattress, set it gently creaking.

Sleeping alone, I'd often wake in the early hours of the morning and, having misplaced sleep, was unable to find it again. I'd lie and wait. I'd read. I always kept Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book* on the little shelf above my bed. Her lists lulled me, her talk of sleep and fabrics:

"[26] *Things that make your heart beat fast* – A sparrow with nestlings. Going past a place where tiny children are playing. Lighting some fine incense and then lying down alone to sleep. Looking into a Chinese mirror that's a little clouded. A fine gentleman pulls up in his carriage and sends in some request."

I read her lists, made my own, listening to the soft noises of the old house as it shifted. This was the best I could do for my insomnia. But it felt like enough.

\*

It was too hot in the dark so we went outside to drink and smoke in the yard. We clanked our bottles.

"To the new bed," someone said.

We became faint outlines in the dark of the yard, mixing up one another's packs of cigarettes, unable to see colors or faces, groping for the metal tabletop where the

ashtray loomed like a little cake. The woman in the downstairs unit turned off all her lights and shushed us gently through her open window.

“No way she’s gonna sleep through this,” Sara said, our voices ringing against low clouds as if we were alone inside a cathedral.

Sean wanted to go swimming, said he knew a place in an RV park. I pictured old camper vans and trailers circled around a marshy pond, but he said it was a pool and we all lost interest. The lightning stayed up high and whenever I went upstairs for more beer it colored everything blue and white in flashes – the clouds tumbling like a churning of purple snow. I’d grope my way to the countertop, feeling all this inward drift, a sense of leaking, my body disappearing from the waist down. I carried the beers down for everyone, the curtainless windows in the stairwell letting the streetlights flood in. Inside one of the lightning flashes, I thought I saw the shape of a man, a dark outline of head and shoulders on the landing below me, but, eyes adjusting, there was no one.

Back outside, I said, “I saw something spooky,” and we wondered for three and a half seconds if our new apartment was haunted.

It began to rain. Upstairs we closed, one by one, all the windows we’d opened a few hours before. On the floor next to the bed, we spread a blanket.

\*

All told, I could count the number of people I’ve shared a bed with. Childhood friends, relatives, girls and women, boys and men. In hotels, or soft pallets on floors, in my various beds, in their various beds. Curled toward or away, hands in hair, arms looped

or tangled; bodies that fit or avoid one another, no parts touching; pressed back to front or with a few shallow inches of no man's land between us.

Tallying them all, it would be a long list. But, really, not that long when you consider a lifetime.

\*

The candles had spread their wax, a loosening of their shape. We pressed our fingers into the wax. We flaked it off and wished it were food. We talked about cartoons, smoked a small joint, made confessions. Sean confessed he had always been afraid of drowning.

Sara said, "We are all afraid of drowning."

Already we'd gotten used to being low and flat and lazy, leaning up against one another, using bodies as pillows, the ceilings so distant they could be storms out over the gulf.

I thought: *There have always been nights like this. There will be more. They are not precious.* But the way we all spoke reminded me of uncles and family reunions, of my father and I meeting in the kitchen when everyone else in the house is asleep and we both are hungry, able to speak only in those moments, of anything.

I felt like we were camping. I felt like a child with no sense of its own smallness.

I listened. Sean told us that a sailor who sails across the equator is called a *shellback*. Sean told us that bananas are bad luck on boats.

We drove to a bar, all crowded in the cab of Sean's truck. We listened to James Brown, and I watched the side mirrors, the taillights reddening the wet ground behind us.

The bar when we got there was that same color, lit with red Christmas lights, strings of them hanging up near the ceiling along all the edges of the room. There were no other lights.

Sean and Sara danced together in the center of the room, tried to get me to dance with them but the song was slow, meant only for two. “La Vie En Rose.” But I watched them and felt warm and good, just as I’d felt earlier following behind Sean’s truck when it was loaded with my bed – the three of us doing this “very specific thing” of moving a man’s bed: piece by piece, mile by mile.

\*

Once during my year in the Czech Republic, my friend and I took a train to a little town in the countryside. They had a castle that they were proud of and you could pay only a few crowns to take a tour, walk through and look at the furnishings. We paid our crowns, and in one of the bedrooms, the tour guide paused, motioned toward a massive four-poster bed in the corner.

“Everything happened here,” she said. “At least for the rich, for the lucky ones. If you were lucky, you were born in a bed like this one. If you were lucky, you died in a bed like this one.”

I stood, looking at the bed with its satin green coverlet, with its heavy curtains hanging like hair. I stood and thought: *Is that really what luck is?*

\*

Back at the apartment, we were all drunk, all sleepy, all a little in love with one another. We all lay down together in my new bed and slept. We slept like children in a little row. Sean on the outside, Sara in the middle, and me against the wall.

Waking in the night, someone moved in the dark beside the bed. The bed heaved gently as someone sat down on the edge of it. It was Sean removing his pants. First one leg and then the other. He laid back down, curling against me. Where was Sara? Only half-awake, still drunk, I breathed it out loud, “Where’s Sara?” She had gone to her own room, to sleep alone on her sagging air mattress.

Sean breathed warmly into my hair. His hands moved down the length of me.

“What are you doing?” as if this were new. As if I were a child.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” His wax-burned hands beneath the fabric of my shirt.

I turned toward him then, in a sort of lazy curiosity, briefly wondering what it was Sara had liked about his hands during the months they were together, what she’d liked about his mouth. Wondering in the same way I wondered what Victor had dreamed of when he slept in this bed, his lover tight against him, their bodies together like a fossil of fern leaves, like a flower pressed between the pages of a book. I let him kiss me, wetly, just the once. *No*, I thought; Sara and I did not like the same type of man, the same too-much-tongue, the same pressings and sick sort of hunger. My curiosity satisfied, I pushed against him. He resisted my push. I tried to turn away. He held me in place. His sailor’s arms, knotted fingers at my spine. I noticed, without his baseball cap, there was a space of white on his scalp; the strands of hair thin and showing a white of skin so pale it seemed to glow in the darkness.



Did he think I owed this to him? After roping the mattress in place in his truck bed? Crouching on the floor in the humid dark while the candles spit and scalded? To move a bed, to share a bed; was this what it meant to him?

I was suddenly afraid. Afraid not only that if I called out, Sara, drunkenly, would not wake, but afraid also that the bed was not really mine, not really “My own bed” as it said in the poem, that somehow, horribly, it belonged in part to him.

“You need to leave. Now.” He stopped moving against me, pulled back to look at my face though I couldn’t see his eyes. Only blank little pools like the mask he’d bought.

“Is that really what you want?” he’d said, unbelieving.

“Yes,” I said, closing my eyes against the sight of his empty face. “Please go.”

“Is it because of Sara?” he breathed. His breath smelled of wine, though we’d had no wine all night. “Because you think Sara would mind?”

“Yes,” I said because Sara *would* mind, but then “No,” because it wasn’t that; that really had nothing to do with it. Confused, I finally said, “I just want to sleep alone.”

I don’t know why I said that, as if it weren’t him I was resisting, but rather the presence of any body, as if I were just voicing my preference for the space he would leave behind, the space for a sweet ghost.

He held me for a second longer, looking down at my mouth. Finally, he let me go. His hands sliding away behind my back. He sat on the edge of the bed, putting on his shoes, tying the laces slowly, carefully.

Just before he left, sitting there with his back to me, he said, “Nobody actually wants to sleep alone.” And it felt like an echo of Sara’s earlier words: *Everyone is afraid of drowning.*

\*

Later that same year, I sat in a chair in that same room with my feet propped up against the window sill. I sat and read these words:

“I walk the  
unbelieving streets  
I walk the  
unbelieving streets  
In a strange city.  
At night in cold new beds the welcomed  
strangers  
Achieve in memory the city’s promise.”

I thought of the stained and sagging mattresses that I had learned my way home by. I thought of Sean deftly tying those knots as if the bed were a sail, testing their strength with the pull of his hands. I thought of later sharing that same bed with a stranger who’d complained, “But I don’t *like* sleeping on the side closest to the wall.” I thought: it is the living you do in a space that makes it your own.

Maybe this was the luck that Czech tour guide spoke of: to have any one thing that you can truly call your own.

\*

The next day, Sara drove alone to Big Lots to purchase a plain queen futon mattress that she laid on the floor of her room. She’d somehow managed to cram the thing into the backseat of her little Nissan Altima. We rolled up the deflated air mattress and tucked it in a closet.

That night, we watched a movie together in her room, both of us propped up on her new mattress and smoking cigarettes out the window. We fell asleep with the movie bright and whirring on her laptop between us.

At some point in the night, I woke to the sound of her screaming beside me. I thought, blearily, that she'd wakened and was startled by my presence, forgetting that I'd fallen asleep in her bed, and so I tried to calm her with the words, "It's just me! It's just me!" but she trembled and pointed with a shaking hand toward the open door of her bedroom, where a figure moved out in the hallway, a black shape, head and shoulders of a man coming to stand in the doorway.

"You know," the man's voice drawled. "You should really lock your windows. Anyone could just climb up your drainpipe and come in through the living room." That word: *Anyone*.

It was Sean. He was drunk. He was soaked to the skin. He said he'd realized he was too drunk to drive and so he'd walked here from a nearby bar in heavy rain. He said he just wanted a place to sleep. Sara flew into a rage at him, and I fled from the room, furious, shaking. I could hear her voice, shrill, through the wall, and his was low, a sort of dumb pleading. I lay on my bed, wide awake with my heart still wild, and finally I heard Sara's voice rise; she was saying, "You don't even realize just how much you've fucked up everything. Now get out of our apartment." And I heard the sounds of his leaving.

I went back to Sara's room. She sat cross-legged in the very center of her mattress; she was sobbing. I sat next to her, and she covered her face with her hands, spoke through her fingers. "I don't know when I've ever been so afraid," she said. "I thought that was it for us. I thought: *here we are, just sleeping like babies, and now we are going to die.*"

"But it's all okay," I said, trying to reassure. "We're just fine."

We weren't fine. We both knew it. Nothing was fine. The fear still sat in our chests like rabbits in a hutch, like some furred and quick-hearted thing, unsure it would ever find sleep again.

I told her what had happened the night before and she said, out loud, the words I had been thinking: "How is it that can you share a bed with a person for two months and still not know them?"

"For most people," I said, "it's years."

\*

Whenever I can't sleep, I try to think of other times of sleeplessness, tally them, stack them in layers one over the other, try to inhabit each in memory: the pigeons cooing on my windowsill in Prague, how so many mornings I would wake to find feathers cast on the floor like dice; the snow blowing onto my porch in Iowa, shuffling through it with cigarette tip between fingers like a glowing ruby, getting sleepy again with smoke in my mouth; in college, hearing the train whistles pass through the open window in autumn, the smells of distant fire, the sudden cold air like something landing on your chest and walking there all night.

Maybe I bruise more easily than I thought – a fear gripping me just the other day as a spider walked out from beneath my couch as if he owned the place, as if he were going to open the refrigerator, peer inside. Perhaps I thought of Sean in passing, immediately guilty that the spider's innocence had made me think of that intrusion.

Add to the list of *Things that make your heart beat fast*: spider crossing the floor, knowing that dawn is only three hours away and you have not yet slept, shadows in hallways, sharing your bed with a stranger.

Sara had told Sean that if he ever broke into our apartment again, we would call the police. I never saw him after that night. Sara once ran into him at a party, a small, dark-haired girl on his arm. She'd said, "What are you doing here?" and brushed past him before he could respond.

When Sara and I moved out of that apartment after a year, I sold the bed to the man I was sleeping with at the time. Victor's bed. My bed. Now, Jeff's bed. We were lying side by side on the mattress and he'd said, "What are you gonna do with this bed when you move?"

"I'll take a hundred bucks for it," I'd said, and I think we even shook on it.

I wasn't even there when he came to haul it away. I was at home visiting my parents, filling up the width of that narrow twin and watching old movies, my mother coming to stand in the doorway and say, "It's so good to have you home."

God, how we long for a space to lie down. Driving home at night, hungry, thinking of the pillow's first touch of coolness, coming home with the porchlights and the soft glow of your own bedroom window rising behind your eyes like the last thing one might see before sleep.

# Rendezvous

**rendezvous, n.**

1. a place designated for a meeting or assembling, especially of troops or armed forces.
2. a favorite or popular gathering place.

## Part I: History

Begin with history. The year is 1757, and the French are still here and still building. They've stripped trees of their leaves and bark and stuck the naked trunks upright to form walls that will keep out unwanted forces, including wind and weather, hostile Indian tribes, and British soldiers. The river is full of canoes, and the canoes are full of pelts. When the fort is built, it is given a name and that name is "Massac."

Beyond that, I know very little. I know that I was happy here. I know that I wore striped bodices laced with ribbons and white cotton caps and a petticoat that once filled up with angry bees while I was playing in the moat that surrounds the Old Fort. And the bees and I moved together in fear back to camp, where a man I didn't know very well took a plug of tobacco from his cheek and broke off small wads to place over the stings, and the juices ran down behind my knees in brownish-red stripes.

So it's a place, like other places. The river can be seen from the walls, from the blockhouses, which smell like you'd expect: buckskin and wool and gunpowder and candlewax. These are good smells. In those days, my father was a French Marine. My mother was the wife of a French Marine. During the day, I ran wild with the children of other French Marines, and at night, fires burned, cards were played, tobacco was chewed.

The days were sharp-edged; each began with the raising of the flag and ended with the lowering of the flag. Sunsets were tallied by the firing of the cannon from the steep bluffs that rose above the riverbank. And yes, there were battles, but even defeats did not stop us from celebrating; from raising and lowering the flag, loading the cannon with powder and letting its noise seep and strain toward the river's opposite side, toward the wilds of Kentucky.

And each and every night, when the glass panes of the lanterns were opened and the candles lit, when darkness had fully fallen and after the crowds of spectators had gone home, we would lift the canvas cover that hid our family's cooler from sight, and inside, nestled among gas-station ice: the glistening bodies of 2-liter bottles filled with Doctor Thunder and Grape Crush. We poured the soda into tin cups, into baked clay mugs, into goblets carved from polished bone. The plastic bottles were then placed back into the cooler, and the canvas was pulled back over it, and the dull dream of the past rushed back, history undisturbed by this one small infidelity.

The soda was a shared secret. It broke through the magic of the past to remind us of the ugliness of our cars in their distant parking lots, of the Walmart Supercenters where we bought our beef jerky and our boxes of matches and our Doctor Thunder, but it also reinforced the magic. It spoke of our ability to exist in two eras at once, to navigate them, to feel the fizz of soda on our upper lips while wearing tricorne hats and carrying powder horns across our chests—to engage with the past without abandoning the most cherished modern tokens that kept us separate from it.

Everything modern or contemporary was kept hidden from sight, so that what appeared to the naked eye was the world of the past, while beneath was an invisible

underlayer of the now. Inside the cluster of twenty or so canvas tents that made up the French camp, nylon sleeping bags were covered over with deer skins or wool blankets. Some women wore spandex shorts beneath their petticoats to keep their thighs from rubbing together in the heat of the day. No woman I knew wore authentic underwear, although there were rumors that a few went commando, and this was acceptable; several sported corsets over their *chemises*, which were long white shifts worn under bodice and petticoat.

This reality required a lot of careful craftsmanship, a lot of collecting, in order to maintain the fragile balance between worlds, between 1759 and 1999. When my family first joined this community, my father was told by a more seasoned participant that his eyeglasses weren't "authentic," so he ordered brass frames from a catalogue and had prescription lenses inserted at the Walmart Vision Center. My mother bought hand-embroidered tea towels from thrift stores and sewed them into "pockets;" these were small cloth sacks with a slit in the center, worn on a ribbon around the waist. Traditionally, "pockets" were concealed beneath petticoat and apron if the woman were married, or worn outside if she were single to showcase the marriageable young lady's sewing prowess—a tradition we maintained even though, at age thirteen, it grossed me out that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, I'd be considered marriageable. Inside my pocket I kept a small wad of cash for the food vendors and a sticky paper bag of rock candy, lemon drops, straws filled with honey. Inside my mother's pocket were breath mints, hand sanitizer, a digital camera, car keys. She jingled slightly as she moved.

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Not quite visible from the interstate, Fort Massac squats above the Ohio River, tiny at a distance, like a child's stack of Lincoln Logs. I-24 snakes past the last town on the Illinois side of the river, and if you are looking, if you know it's there, as you cross the bridge into Kentucky you can make out the shape of the fort tucked back on its low bluff—a little leathery brown whirl of history above the water before signs for Cracker Barrel and IHOP begin to flick past. It is easy to miss.

Most weeks, this place sleeps. Maybe a couple of locals come with buckets of KFC when the weather is good, to sit outside the dull wooden walls and watch barges drowse on the river. But twice a year, for a week in June and a week in mid-October, lines of cars packed with canvas tarps and long wooden tent poles arrive. My family was among them every year of my childhood, from age seven well into high school. During that week, the place would wake, stir, hold us in its rickety frame. It covered us with its smells, smothered us in fry bread and wood smoke.

My father was born not far from here, ninety miles due north of the fort, along a rickety two-lane highway. He moved to California with his family when he was nine or so, and he grew up there, met my mother in a college art class, and fathered two daughters. The four of us moved to Southern Illinois when I was seven, and I think my father saw the fort as a way to enter back into the history of his birthplace, to engage with the past by becoming an active, living part of it. The rest of us tagged along as we always did with his hobbies: kite flying, trail biking, model train expos, vintage car shows. Most were short-lived, but this hobby stuck. And we all got swept in its pull, mixed in with these strange history buffs, seamstresses, and rednecks excited by the prospect of carrying a musket around and not bathing for a week. These were people who dressed in

costume, camped in canvas tents, cooked in cast iron skillets over an open fire. It was all in the name of fun and for the sake of history—touching up against it, making some claim on its daily goings-on, trying it on, taking it off again like a garment.

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Begin with history. We've inserted ourselves somewhere in its sprawl. It is sometime between 1757 and 1763. The French and their Indian allies are battling the British for control of the Ohio River Valley and its rich fur trade. But this hardly concerns us. It has already been decided. The British have already won, and the fort has been abandoned by the French, has been burned to the ground by a band of Chicksaw Indians, has been reconstructed and labeled a "historic landmark." Meanwhile, we dress up. We convert tea towels into pockets and make judgments about the authenticity of each other's outfits. We build small fires and drink purple soda from tin cups and play "Bullshit" and "Crazy Eights" and talk about things that have nothing to do with history, although sometimes, they seem to. We talk about the things people talk about when they are gathered around a fire and the stakes are low and there's gossip to be spread about the drinking and debauchery that goes on in the British camp, about the ignorant questions we were asked that day by spectators (whom we, the costumed elite, referred to as "flatlanders"), and later, after the adults have gone to bed, about the kissing that is rumored to go on between the teenagers who gather beneath the George Rogers Clarke statue, and about the drummer boy who lost his virginity beneath an overturned canoe.

We pretend to exist "authentically" in spite of our soda and our spandex and our zippered sleeping bags and plastic coolers and digital cameras. We pretend because the pretense builds a blister of magic between us, as if by wearing the clothes, by firing blank

cartridges from replica muskets across a “battlefield” marked off by haybales, by dressing fake wounds and eating fry bread and stew, we know what it means actually to be here, existing, fearing for whatever life has been allotted while fighting a war that at its heart is all about territory and commerce and vague promises of prosperity. And a very small part of the shared magic resides in the sly feeling, the sneaking suspicion, that we can exist here, in a historic space, in our costumes, with our guns, and still have no fucking clue what any of it means.

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## Part II: Fighting the Good Fight

After history, there’s whatever is left over. There are men and women, boys and girls. There are fathers and mothers and my sister and me. My father was a soldier. He trained to move in formation with his fellow soldiers. He learned how to load and fire his musket. He responded to commands shouted in French. At night he made cartridges by hand using thin tissue paper and raw gunpowder, rolled up like a cigarette with both ends twisted so the powder wouldn’t leak out. He carried these in a leather cartridge box embossed with the emblem of the fleur de lis. My father also carried a powder horn; into the bone, he hand-carved a map of the Ohio River Valley, because a man must remember what he is fighting for.

On Saturdays and Sundays, battles took place. Shots were fired and men fell. When this happened, nurses called “mollies” would run onto the field carrying baskets full of strips of torn cloth, pre-bloodied with a mixture of cornstarch and red food dye,

too-bright like in a bad movie. The mollies would approach the fallen man and ask, “Are you dead or are you injured?” If the man made no response, she would move his tricorne to cover his face and scurry over to the next fallen man. If he said, “Injured,” she would ask, “Where?” and he might say “ankle” or “stomach” and she’d set to work staunching the invisible flow of blood and placing a flask to his lips. If he could walk, she’d help the fellow off the battlefield, while he limped dramatically, arm slung across her back.

Near the edge of the battlefield, a few hay bales were grouped together to form a “surgeon’s table.” A man everyone referred to simply as “Doc” appointed himself as surgeon, and no one argued with him because Doc was a collector of historical medical tools, which he carefully arranged on a canvas tarp. Doc prided himself on his extensive knowledge of medical practices of the time. He gave presentations on amputation and archaic surgical practices to groups of horrified schoolchildren who came to the events by the busload. During battle, a lot of ugliness occurred on the surgeon’s table, involving the kind of fake body parts anyone could purchase at a Halloween store. But this was war, and war is always ugly.

At thirteen, I made a horrible molly. I was slow and clumsy and didn’t like the intimacy of bandaging the “wounds” of strangers. The surgeon’s table disturbed me, the gunfire was loud, and I was made especially uncomfortable by the element of acting. Once, Doc instructed me and another girl my age to weep over a wounded soldier who had been helped off the field. The soldier was a man I scarcely knew at all. We cried, “Papa! Papa!” and he lay on his back near the surgeon’s table with his hands clutching his chest and Doc said solemnly, just loud enough for nearby spectators to hear, “There’s nothing to be done for him, *mes filles*.” When I looked down at this stranger’s face, his

eyes closed and chin tipped back to reveal a dusting of crumbs in the tangle of his beard, I could think only, “This is *not* my father.” I was insulted by the idea of pretending, even for a moment, that this man, this scrawny stranger named Sonny, was in any way similar to the man who sat at our kitchen table for hours, meticulously carving a map of the Ohio River Valley into a hollowed-out steer’s horn. I looked around at the spectators gathered to watch the battle. It seemed impossible, ridiculous, that any of them would believe that this man and I were family. We looked nothing like each other, had no single shared memory in common. It wasn’t believable, wasn’t *authentic*.

I stared at the man on the ground in front of me. The girl beside me hid her face in her apron and shrieked. I did not shriek. I did not call him “Papa.” To do so seemed like a betrayal.

And just then, my father, my actual father, hobbled off the battlefield with a bandage wrapped loosely around his knee and lay down in the grass by himself. A flutter of recognition went through me. This was the man I knew, who did everything quietly and purposefully, who built kites from fabric scraps, mowed our lawn, made huge pots of chili that lasted through long mid-winter weeks, and brushed the dog and threw the excess hair into the yard so the birds could use it for their nests. And no one was weeping over my father. No one was crying out “Papa” for him. What had Sonny done to deserve two mourners while my father had none? But my father seemed unaffected by the unfairness of this, didn’t even notice his daughter watching him across the surgeon’s table. He just looked sweaty and contented, pleased with his performance in the battle, pleased to be sitting on the sidelines taking slow and steady swigs from a nearby canteen. I kept very still and watched him: my father, Papa, Dad. I don’t know if I was proud of

him—fake fighting the fake good fight—but I did feel a sense of deep acknowledgment. I *knew* him, *knew* that sometimes he snuck up behind my mother while she did the dishes, sometimes marched through the house while singing: *The lights are much brighter there. You can forget all your troubles, forget all your cares.* But there was a painful space opening up between what I knew to be true and what was “real” in that moment: that a stranger was my father, and my father was a stranger.

On the hour-long drive to the fort that year, my father and I sat side-by-side in the cab of our truck, saying nothing. My mother and sister were driving up separately, and the truck was full of gear: tent poles, huge canvas tarpaulins, wooden boxes packed with food and supplies, cast iron skillet, and trunks bursting with bulky costumes. I flipped through a book about World War II fighter pilots, and my father glanced over at the pictures occasionally, and the radio was a cluster of static, and we kept our thoughts to ourselves. This was not unusual for us; we liked to be quiet together. At the time, I appreciated the silence, the fact that speech wasn't *necessary* between us. But later, watching my father across the dense air of the battlefield, I wondered: did we say nothing because we didn't *need* to say anything—or because we didn't know how?

Sometimes, my father died. He fell on his side with one arm extended, his musket beside him and his glasses askew. He kept very still. He was good at being dead. I watched for his side rising and falling, a barely discernible lifting of the white wool coat he wore. If he was tired that day he might choose to die early in the battle. If he was enjoying himself, he might not die at all. The battle's victor was pre-determined by coin flip; heads for the British, tails for the French, and the troops were instructed by their commander, “We'll need to lose twenty men in the last third of the battle.” Beyond that,

it was up to you when and how you chose to die. Occasionally, in the noisy confusion, a single shot fired would fell two men at once. A commentator narrated the battle's movements over a loudspeaker so that the spectators could get a sense of what was going on, and once the battle had ended, the field littered with motionless bodies and the smoke beginning to clear, the commentator would say, "All right, ladies and gentlemen, the only thing that can bring these fellows back to life is applause. Give them a hand." And the spectators clapped their hands and the dead began to stir, and my father picked up his hat and his musket, smiling wide as if he'd just performed a trick. And, of course, he had.

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The fort stood like a beacon among a sprawl of white canvas tents. Toward the parking lot and easily accessible to spectators, the food vendors set up their stands. There, the smells of meat pies, kettle corn, turkey legs, fry bread, homemade root beer, and an authentic 18<sup>th</sup> century deep-fried pastry called a "pippen" kept spectator and participant alike in a near-constant state of hunger. On windy days, a breeze might lift the mouthwatering smells and carry them 300 yards westward to mingle with the fragrant row of blue port-o-johns. Waiting in either of these lines—toilet or tasty treat—was one of the only opportunities for spectators and reenactors to mingle freely. A woman with many-tiered petticoats and elaborately ostrich-feathered chapeau might stand in line directly behind a skinny teenager in muscle t-shirt and cut-offs. We were always polite, even when asked ridiculous questions like, "During the battle, where do the bullets go?" or even, once, "Are the campfires real?"

To the north, the battlefield was bordered by hay bales that served as both boundary markers and seating for the spectators. When there wasn't a battle, the fife and drum corps or regimental bagpipers marched and played tunes that, over the years, became so familiar they almost went unnoticed, a ceaseless white noise that after the week-long encampment lingered in the ear, like tinnitus.

The French made their camp in tidy rows along the fort's west-facing wall, a tiny neighborhood marked by hand-stitched banners of gold and white. Along the east-facing wall, closest to the river, the much rowdier British camp sprawled less neatly. Over the years, they gained a reputation for drinking, late night carousing, and a lot of off-color jokes involving kilts. At dusk, musicians shouldered fiddle and bagpipe, stomping their feet until just shy of 2:00 AM. As I grew older, I sometimes looked longingly toward the British camps when their whoops echoed rhythmically out over the water, their cries as wild and songlike as the lowing barge horns.

Other than at Saturday night dances, there was generally little fraternizing between the British camp and the more family-oriented, early-to-bed French camp, although occasionally the two communities would collaborate to stage a military kidnapping. It was almost always a shrieking woman, slung over some burly soldier's shoulder, feigning hysteria and barely masking her delight. Representatives from each camp would meet to solemnly negotiate her ransom.

Sometimes this took place for the benefit of the spectators, who might even abandon the turkey leg line to watch these surges of spontaneous action. But it seemed that, just as often, a kidnappings would occur after most spectators had gone home for the day. It was its own source of fun for the participants themselves, a dramatic game of



pretend that heightened the stakes, passed the time, made the identities formulated within this place seem all the more real.

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### Part III: Men and Women, Boys and Girls

Surely it doesn't seem like a stretch to imagine that this environment fostered a lot of romantic feeling. Men are "dying"; women are wearing corsets. The clothes, I think, had a great deal to do with the romance—not just the fact that gender was constantly emphasized by what we wore, but also that we were in disguise. Disguise allows a lot of freedom.

Men doffed their tricorn hats ceremonially and bowed low, women curtsayed, and couples would walk arm-in-arm to the Dairy Queen a few blocks from the fort, exiting the world of the past in order to eat ice cream and attract stares from "flatlanders," and to flaunt our game of pretend. We loved to wear our costumes into modern spaces: John's Convenience Store, Burger King, the snow cone stand on Main Street. Little kids would gawk, and sometimes the jokers among us would bend toward the open-mouthed children in fake confusion; looking around at the bright cereal boxes on shelves, at the stoplights and steady flow of evening traffic, they would feign amazement like a dazed time traveler and say, "Pardon me, young lad. Can you tell me what *year* it is?"

At night, the fort became a maze of shadowed alcoves. Lanterns hung from iron hooks and couples kissed just out of reach of the light. You could walk along the bluffs with the barge horns lowing across the water, the campfires a far-off glow. You could

hear the loud and bawdy songs that leaked from the fort, softened by darkness and distance:

*Here's to the girl who steals a kiss and runs and tells her mother.  
She's a foolish, foolish thing. She's a foolish, foolish thing,  
For she'll not get another.*

*Here's to the girl who steals a kiss and stays to steal another.  
She's a boon to all mankind. She's a boon to all mankind,  
For soon she'll be a mother.*

It was easy for the girls to feel beautiful in their brocaded bodices and layers of petticoats, walking barefoot over the wet grass. And it was easy for the boys to feel strong with their hair full of gunpowder smoke and battle sweat. Everyone wanted to kiss, and to sing about kissing.

It was not rare for couples to pause on the stretch of open grass at the edge of the bluffs, at the foot of the statue of George Rogers Clarke, leader of American troops' "Illinois Campaign" against the British during the Revolutionary War and brother of famed William Clarke of the Lewis and Clarke Expedition). They'd pause and steal a kiss, as the song said, and then stay and steal another. It was slightly more rare (though certainly not unusual) for a preacher named Randy to read from *The Book of Common Prayer* and marry a few of these couples on that same stretch of open grass, beneath that same statue.

And in the midst of it: I was thirteen, and the only time I felt beautiful at all was when I was wearing those clothes. At the end of an encampment, everyone would change into jean shorts and t-shirts to pack up our cars, and we'd all become suddenly ordinary again. We'd look around at one another in the harsh afternoon light, and we were all so glaringly plain and androgynous; fish-white ankles above tennis shoes, faded cotton

sweat-bleached around the armpits, and we'd work as quickly as possible to pull up tent stakes and roll sleeping bags, our eyes on our hands. Girls avoided the eyes of boys they'd kissed. Boys seemed shrunken and small in their loose cargo shorts. It became the test for the force of one's affection. If you could see your crush in his "flatlander clothes" and still have feelings for him? Well, then, maybe you really had something there.

And knowing that the moment loomed when the ribbons and stockings must be shed, fostered an urgency in all the walking and talking we did, gave us a sense of mission. In four days, in three, in two, we'd all be ugly again. We had to *act* while we still had the chance.

So we taught each other card tricks, our hands lingering on the deck, turning each card over slow, drawing out the moment. We told each other ghost stories: the phantom funeral procession that was rumored to cross from the fort to a nearby abandoned cemetery every year. Legend dictated that the ghostly apparitions of horse-drawn hearse, mourners, and pallbearers would appear *if and only if* the Fourth of July fell on a night when the moon was at its fullest; would appear at the stroke of midnight *if and only if* two couples—two men and two women (or two boys and two girls)—were present.

So we paired ourselves off: Libby and Daniel, Sarah and Aaron. We cast about desperately for someone to await the ghosts with. We made plans. We waited to be asked as if to a dance. We rejected and were rejected. We listed aloud every young militiaman, drummer boy, grenadier. By the time the Fourth actually came along, none of us seemed to care about the ghosts anymore. It was merely an exercise in coupling, in who-likes-who, in the magic of pretend that permeated everything.

And in the midst of it: there was a boy named Justin.

Justin was not a soldier. If anything, he was a dandy, but he referred to himself as a “gentleman.” And he was certainly gentle, soft-spoken, kind and polite. He wore lavish velvet coats with embroidered “skirts” (the 18<sup>th</sup> century term for what we might refer to as “tails” on a tuxedo). He was a pianist with a pianist’s hands and played accompaniment for his church’s choir. He had lush brown hair and a delicate face and was three years older than I, and I channeled every ounce of my adolescent feeling for him into the task of relentlessly teasing him at every turn. I made fun of him for his insistent use of peach-scented shampoo and for the striped pajama night-shirt he occasionally wore around camp after hours; I called him “Choir Boy” and “Fancy Boy,” and he took it all in stride, laughed loudly at himself, let himself get beat soundly at cards, held doors open for me, tipped his tricorn hat, sang ballads in clumsy French, read aloud from volumes of 18<sup>th</sup> century poetry—all of which I used in my arsenal of insult and all of which thoroughly charmed me.

It was a shock, at the end of the encampment, to see him in his green sweatshirt with “Wheaton College” printed across the chest. But to me, the ordinariness of his modern attire only emphasized the secret we shared: for a week each summer, we were beautiful. Our costumes represented what was real about us, and the sweatshirt and jeans were the actual disguise.

I was thirteen; he was sixteen. I never dared make any hints to him about the George Rogers Clarke kissing post, or about the Fourth of July ghosts, but we did dance together on occasion, and, of course, he was an accomplished dancer.

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#### Part IV: The Dance

The dances were held on Saturday nights. Flatlanders were strictly forbidden. A band played reels and jigs and waltzes. We reeled and jigged and waltzed. Everyone wore their finest. Everyone waited anxiously for the “Broom Dance” to begin, but it was saved for late into the night because once the Broom Dance began, who knew when it would end.

The Broom Dance went like this: everyone would form into two long lines—a line for the ladies and a line for the men. At the head of the line, a lady steps up and grabs the broom and two gentlemen approach to stand on either side of her. She glances back and forth between them, deciding which she’d like to dance with. She hands the stick to the fellow she doesn’t want to dance with, and goes off with the fellow she’s chosen, dancing and spinning between the two lines down to the end where they part ways and get back into their respective lines. Back at the front of the line, two ladies come up to stand on either side of the fellow who was left holding the broom, and now it’s his turn to choose. And so it goes, on and on, choosing and being chosen and getting left with the broom.

For us adolescents, there was a lot of shame associated with the broom dance. A boy or girl we considered particularly homely might be described as “getting left with the broom.” We allowed ourselves to be cruel in our choosing, never considering the pain our rejected partners felt while gripping the broom handle, until it was our turn to either be chosen or passed over.

It was, I guess, a miniature of everything else, just as the world of the fort was its own miniature world outside of time. And because we dangled, always, somewhere between past and present, we felt, perhaps, less accountable than in our ordinary lives outside the fort.

What I remember is Justin. Who he chose, who chose him. On the particular night I'm thinking of, it seemed like I'd been up and down the line dozens of times and still hadn't had a chance to dance with him. Everyone whooped when I chose a man named Bear who wore a kilt and spoke in a Scottish accent (whether or not he was actually Scottish was up for debate). My mother chose my father. My sister chose a boy named Daniel, who had a reputation for lifting you bodily from the ground and twirling you around so fast that afterward you were too dizzy to stand. My mother approached me where I stood in the line and asked, "Have you danced with your father yet?" I shook my head. "Pick him if you get the chance," she said. "I know it would mean a lot to him."

This is how we spoke of my father, knowing as we did that he was quiet and took things seriously, that his feelings were fragile in spite of his uncomplaining silence. But I was not thinking of my father then. I nodded when my mother spoke and said, "Of course," but I was thinking of Justin, his lightness of foot and the clean sweetness of his peach shampoo.

And it wasn't long after that, when my chance finally came. Justin was left holding the broom, and I was the next girl in line. He stood up very straight—his posture was always excellent—and his shoes were polished brighter than usual. I moved to stand on his right, and the girl in line behind me stood at his left. The other girl, I knew, was sixteen. Her name was Lauren; she was plump with full breasts and seemed to smell

always of bread. Justin looked back and forth between us, grinning broadly, grinning a ridiculous and exaggerated grin. He handed the broom to me, and I reached out to take it mechanically, my grip loose around the handle, my face already beginning to sag. I watched him dance, graceful and quick, down the line with the other girl. At the end of the line, he bowed deeply, sweeping his hat from his head, and she curtsied and laughed a little laugh. I was destroyed.

The past does stay with us, sometimes small and ugly, like a splinter beneath skin. Our own histories don't seem any smaller, or bleed any less, just because they happen in the context of a larger history. Those days, in costume, forced us to question what was real. The sleep in our sleeping bags was real. So was the stew we ladled onto tin plates, the soda in our cups, the songs about kissing, and the flutter of hurt when I was left standing with the broom. The game of pretend included a lot that was *tangible*. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I did my History Fair project on the French and Indian War, because I considered myself an authority. I had lived through a war that determined which language future generations would speak and what lands they would occupy. But in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, are you really an authority on anything? On even the textures of the wooden broom handle against your skin? On the things that will stay with you, the splinters you will carry, pulsing and dull beneath the uppermost layer of flesh? On where the lines are drawn between what is real and what is pretend?

But, looking back, it wasn't Justin's rejection that stayed with me. It was what came after.

I was standing with the broom in my hands, and the next two men in line came up to stand on either side of me. One of the men was my father. The other was a stranger. It

was my turn to choose. Everyone was clapping in time to the music, laughing and jolly. All eyes were on us. They waited. My father and the stranger waited. I couldn't seem to move.

In conversation, as adults, we sometimes drink wine together and ask about a moment we would return to if we could change one thing. I don't know why I always think of this moment, but a little trapdoor in the brain springs open and I can see my father, the sturdy shape of him. I watch the expectancy on his face, a kind, reddish haze beneath the hanging lanterns, a flood of recognition as the thought moves through him visibly, *This is my daughter*, and a little blush of relief because he is shy and quiet, reluctant to dance with strangers. A smile flits around his mouth. He is proud that we are a part of one another, and that other people here know that he is my father and I am his daughter, that I am thirteen and already the top of my head reaches his chin, that I look fresh and pretty with my hair braided like that. He breathes out a calm breath, starts to move toward me. He is thinking, *This is my daughter and she is about to dance with me*.

And then I watch myself hand him the broom.

I wish I could take it back. But the fact is so simple, so straightforward, so much a part of the decisions we make and the pasts we build either recklessly or meticulously, like the carving of a map into bone. And the fact is this: I can't take it back.

Yes, I was flustered. Yes, I was embarrassed. Yes, it was really a small thing when you think about it. Fathers and daughters, throughout history, have done much crueler things to each other. But you did not see my father's face when I handed him the broom.



Sometimes the scale of betrayal is really quite intimate. And this, too, is a fact: there was a brief instant, before handing my father the broom, when I delighted in my power to cause him pain. When I rejoiced because the hurt I felt at being rejected by Justin could now be given an outlet. I could receive hurt. And then I could dole it out.

I danced down the line with the stranger. He wore a green felt cap and smelled of mushrooms, an earthy damp smell that was overwhelming and horrible. He spun me around, and I knew my father was up at the head of the line gripping the broom just as I had moments before. And I thought of how I'd watched him on the battlefield, how I'd been unable to pretend to be someone else's daughter, unable, even for a moment, to dismiss my knowledge that I was the daughter of this strange and solitary man who could sit beside me in a car for an hour without speaking but whose thoughts and feelings ran deep, even as he sat apart from all the other soldiers with a little dribble of canteen water running down the front of his uniform, or as he stood up in front of everyone with a sad slump to his shoulders, gripping the broom until his knuckles went white, as if it could save him from what had just happened.

After the dance, when the last waltz had been played and we'd returned to camp, I lay in our tent watching the canvas billow like a soft and steady breathing, and I could hear my mother just outside asking my father, "Did you get to dance with Renee?" And his simple response, "No. But there'll be other chances."

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## Part V: History (Again)

Begin and end with history. We are swollen with it. The year is 1999, and my mother and father and sister and I are camped along the Ohio River in celebration of the past. We celebrate by wearing the clothes and eating the food of the past. We do this because we have the power to easily blur the lines between eras, to fight battles that decide nothing, to clap our hands and watch the dead rise. To create a version of the past that makes room for us. We fit tidily there.

Beyond that, I know very little. I know that at times it seemed ridiculous, misguided even, to live that way. To call men our fathers who weren't our fathers. To pretend death when death was nowhere near. To cook over the fire and then, when it suited us, to walk to Dairy Queen. To live a different life that wasn't really different at all.

After a week at the fort, we reeked of cannon smoke and cooking fires, and even after changing back into shorts and a T-shirt I didn't want to wash that smell from my hair, wanted to carry it with me back into an air-conditioned world. It was a sacred smell, and on the drive home from the fort, I'd still feel swollen with its magic.

After the years began to add up, my parents started wearying of the mess of it all – trying to set up a wet canvas tent during a rainstorm, the sudden early morning cannon fire that jolts you from sleep, the sweat and lack of privacy. Or maybe the untidy stress of returning to the real world after a week in the past began to outweigh the pleasure of pretend, like a sudden surfacing from a great depth. We became “outsiders,” dressing up for the day and then, instead of camping, we'd drive home at dusk. This halfway role was

not sustainable, that constant wavering between eras, and eventually we stopped going altogether.

Of my family, I was the sole hanger-on. The last time I went to the fort, I was nineteen. I went alone, driving six hundred miles from my college in Virginia to attend the forty year anniversary of the Fort Massac Encampment. I went because I missed the rows of lanterns hung from tent poles, the soft noise of moths trying to enter that little world of flame, just as moths have been doing for centuries. I missed the pockets of firelight that touched the sides of faces, bathed them in something ancient. I missed the dances, my feet refusing to forget the movements of the reels. I missed the noise of the river, how its murmur would so quietly outlast us.

At the time, I didn't know this would be my last visit to the fort, but I also knew that no matter how reverently and insistently I might strive to reach the past, I would always fail. I would still, years afterward, open the trunk of costumes in my parents' closet and smell the woodsmoke and gunpowder in my father's wool coat, find a loose breath mint in my mother's pocket. I would still wish I could go back into whatever innocent wildness there once had been, knowing that it is *because* we can't reach the past that we keep loving it with such simple abandon.

# I and Thou:

## A Bigfoot Encounter

On my first visit to New Orleans, I bought a shirt at an outdoor market that I still wear pretty regularly: red plaid flannel with a hand-stitched sasquatch in classic mid-stride on each shoulder. It takes people a beat or two to see the figures, brown thread against the crisscross background. They stare hard into the fabric covering my collarbone.

“Is that...Bigfoot?” they ask, as if they’ve discovered something that maybe even I wasn’t aware of.

The two figures stride casually away from one another across the span of my chest, like the pocket-sized angels and devils in the cartoons, one on each shoulder; one with lilting contralto for whispered good advice; the other gravel-voiced and often seen smoking, an advocate of risky fun, dangerous good times.

Sometimes when I wear the shirt I like to pretend I hear those split voices. When I first moved to New Orleans, months after purchasing the shirt, I used to wear it on nights when my roommate was out of town and I’d hit the bars solo, walking the two miles from our Mid-City apartment to the loud, dirty, shoulder-to-shoulder dancefloors I liked on Saint Claude Avenue. I’d find a place close to the stage and lose myself in movement – sweat-soaked, wildly solitary. Then I’d walk to the dive across the street and sing karaoke to a room filled only with strangers. Sometimes as I sang I’d make inadvertent eye contact with some lonely out-of-towner: a TV producer or Canadian tourist. They’d ask

to buy me drinks and I'd let them. They'd point at the little sasquatches on my shirt.

"You into that stuff?"

"I guess you could say that," I'd reply, and with straws in their mouths they nodded knowingly. Shouting to be heard above "Bennie and the Jets," they'd tell me they'd seen a UFO once, an enormous blue light low over empty fields. They'd talk about some relation who'd been to Loch Ness years ago, and how the water had trembled against the shore as if something below were stirring in its sleep.

The shirt functioned as a kind of disguise, a foreign extroversion I could try on, wear happily, and then discard when I returned to my dirty shotgun apartment at the end of the night. I didn't admit it to myself at the time, but I also saw the shirt as a good luck charm. Because nothing bad ever seemed to happen when I wore it, I believed it provided a layer of protection. The mysticism of those two miniature sasquatch somehow kept the ugly stuff at bay, brought forth the loners, dreamers, believers from the edges of the room to say, "I like your shirt." We greeted each other with recognition – the saddish blurred look around the eyes of people who, against all reason, still cling (timidly, recklessly) to a belief in some sort of magic.

Years have passed, and I still wear the shirt, although I test its run of good luck less and less. And still I marvel at how many people, seeing a fraying patch of thread in the shape of Bigfoot, use it as an excuse to talk about doubt and belief. Bigfoot seems to have become, at some point, a currency for discussing meaning, for seeking beauty in the unknowable, for approaching topics that are otherwise unapproachable outside the context of church or a drug trip. People encounter the idea of Bigfoot easily, because he

provides an opportunity for depth but in the guise of something light, something nonsensical.

And inevitably what ends up showing itself in these conversations is fragmentation, a split between the sweet voice of the shoulder angel and its more sinister counterpart. The dual nature of Bigfoot is this: he represents, on the one hand, curiosity, magic, and an avid desire for wonder. On the other hand, he stands for weariness, frustration, and a jaded disappointment when you realize that time and time again: wonder is not easy to find.

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It's difficult to now trace my interest in Bigfoot back to its root, but I think it begins with my father. My sister and I used to joke that we know Bigfoot isn't real because if he were, our dad would've seen him by now. This is simply because he is a man the world wants to show itself to.

Once, riding his bike on trails that weren't even particularly remote, he rounded a slight curve into a clearing. It was still early in the day; the sun was low, and bluish mists made every inch of the trail a soft surprise. In the clearing, the mist parted as if gently ripped. A bleach-white stag stood there, head-lifted, ears cocked to my father's presence. They looked at each other, as if waiting politely for one or the other to depart, until finally the stag, a twelve-point buck with a rack of bone-colored antlers, shouldered its way back into the mist. My father watched the fog swallow the shape of him, the antlers fading like underwater coral, and then rode on.

There are other stories. A rabbit grazing mere feet away from my dad in our backyard and a bald eagle clutching down on it, descending all at once with no sound. A

bright red fox that held his gaze while it pissed into the ferns that line our woods. Once, my father came across a mountain lion crouched downwind and facing away from him, tail twitching like a housecat stalking a bug. In South Carolina, an alligator slithered toward him then veered away at the last minute, its eyes a stony squint. He said it was like being at a party when someone across the room seems to recognize you, starts to approach, then, realizing you aren't who they thought you were, retreats back to their corner.

Some sources estimate that the chance of an albino deer being born are close to 1 in 100,000, so the chances of seeing an adult male albino in the wild must be pretty slim. I think my father considers himself lucky, but at times sees his luck as exhausting. This constant barrage of wonder drives him back to the ease and safety of his model train sets, his bonsai trees, his easy-chair naps with *The Andy Griffith Show* chirping in the background. Simple things. My father has always been incredibly private. It's not difficult to imagine him coming face to face with Bigfoot while splitting wood in the yard, and just deciding to keep the encounter to himself.

Where I grew up in Southern Illinois, our local version of Bigfoot is known as the "Big Muddy Monster." He appears on t-shirts, and breweries name their beers after him. Most of the sightings occurred back in the '70s. Teenagers who parked down by the levee to kiss in the dark would catch sight of a seven-foot creature covered all over in grayish, mud-smearred hair. On the Fourth of July, 1973, just outside the town of Murphysboro, a group of traveling carnival workers saw the monster circling a pen full of Shetland ponies. The Murphysboro police chief made a formal statement to the press along the lines of: "A lot of things in life are unexplained."

My father spent twenty-odd years as an office technician travelling over backroads between tiny Illinois towns to fix copy machines. His company was based in Murphysboro, where the Big Muddy River sludges and forks toward the Mississippi, and he carries within him a map of these places. He's an expert on the most private and remote distances between outposts of civilization. If you ask him about the Big Muddy Monster, he might get a little gleam over it. He'll tell you the same stories other locals tell, and if you ask him outright what his take on it is, he'll likely shrug and say something noncommittal like, "I guess I don't feel totally comfortable ruling it out." He might pause, weighing his words, remembering the sheen on the stag's antlers, the quickness of the eagle's talons, the wildness of things and the good fortune of near brushes with something terrible and wondrous and tentative. "It's a nice idea," he might conclude.

That "nice idea" is this: it's possible, even likely, that somehow all of us, even those among us who pay close attention, have missed something. There are spaces in the world that we can't know, and those spaces are close – in our backyards and the backroads that circle outward into less and less familiar landscapes.

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I think I have always been particularly susceptible to belief because I grew up in a household where belief was rampant, where Biblical miracles were accepted as fact.

As a child, I developed a curiosity about God as he was described to me by my parents and Sunday school teachers. I was particularly interested in reconciling the fiery, all-powerful Mt. Sinai figure with the more intimate iterations of God, a God who would take up residence in a nearby bush in order to converse with Moses. My childish attempts



to make any sort of sense of God's dual nature manifested themselves, in part, in endeavors to "locate" God physically in space and time. When I was still quite young, I decided (through a series of fairly illogical deductions) that God must surely live above the lake that sprawled behind my parents' house. My childhood home looked out over this lake, and it embodied for me, both closeness and mystery: the two qualities I associated with God. Gazing out, at night, from our back porch, the dense darkness above the waters somehow echoed for me, God's pre-creation state as it's described in the first chapter of Genesis: "And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." It seemed obvious to me that God would take up residence above the surface of the lake in the storm clouds that often massed themselves, gathering into dense and towering pillars, rumbling ominously while flickers of lightning revealed their vast forms. I had created, for myself, a physical illustration of a God that was both proximally nearby and also somehow distantly remote, grand and unreachable. I was attempting to reconcile the paradox in God's nature of being both close and faraway.

When, eventually, my faith in these things dried up, I was left with the remainders – a feeling of something godlike that sometimes still descends when I return home, park my station wagon down by the lakeshore, smoke a couple of cigarettes, tune the radio to that late-night DJ who makes me feel we're the only ones in the world still awake, and ask something to show itself to me.

What shows up is more often than not a flock of geese, breaking their migratory journey to drift sleepily out toward the lonely center of the lake. Or the moon, just a glowing wisp of smoke building undercurrents of light beneath the clouds. But some

nights, I can feel in the closeness of the geese, in the distance of the moon, a convergence between what is near and what is unreachable – an overlap between familiarity and awe.

On these nights, I might catch myself thinking of that story in Genesis where Jacob wrestles with the angel, though I can't for the life of me remember why they wrestled. Or what came after.

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Although, as I've aged I've found belief increasingly difficult, I still like to cultivate proximity to belief – sitting alone in the back pews of cathedrals, or asking a friend to read my tarot for me. A couple of times when I lived in Iowa, I invited a pair of door-to-door Jehovah's Witnesses in for coffee. Their certainty was both sad and wondrous, like the glossy pamphlets they gave me with images of heaven on the cover: a wolf and a lamb nestled together in the foreground while behind them, a family gathers apples. We didn't end up having a lot to say to one another, but I liked the language they used to talk about God, how it would oscillate between simple and elaborate, statements like "God is just" swinging into vivid portraits of Christ's apocalyptic, sword-yielding return.

I think this is why, whenever I move to a new place, I visit the Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization website. I like to read stories of encounters that took place a mile or two away, learning the names of nearby roads and wilderness areas, and discovering that a relatively high number of people in this new place believe their immediate surroundings contain inexplicable strangeness.

The BFRO website seems designed to make you feel that these encounters are close to you. You click first on a map of the United States, then hover the cursor over the

state you wish to read about, and then an alphabetical list of counties appears. I click on the names of places I'm beginning to recognize, and read about people laying claim to mysteries that happen close by, footprints left in their flowerbeds.

A few months after moving to Iowa, I read about two young men who volunteered at the Macbride Raptor Center. I'd recently visited the Center with friends, so I could easily visualize the network of cages, owls awake and hungry inside, and a span of dense woods behind the cages. The witnesses had driven out through the woods to feed the owls at one in the morning. There was a full moon, but it was covered over by a low haze. Jacket weather, they said. The owls were open-eyed and fidgety in their cages, gulping raw strips of meat. Then something stirred, a heavy shadow breaking free of a greater darkness, and they could hear it walking. Long strides, heavy footsteps, impossibly huge. It moved away from them and they followed, down toward an inlet of the Coralville Reservoir. It turned back to look at the men just once before disappearing, the slow drift of two red eyes blinking out.

In this case, belief is such a specific choice. That open stride surely could've been a bear lumbering upright, could've been a late-night rambler who'd lost the trail. But the two men wanted to believe it was something else, so they did, and they told the internet about it, where I can read the yellow words on a black background and I can think: why not choose wonder if wonder is there to be chosen? Why not make this the story you tell one another to maintain faith that the world is still unknowable, at least in part?

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We have to teach ourselves how to cultivate magic, reverence. It's not always an easy task. I find that booze helps. The right sort of companion. Nightfall and good music.

On the night I bought the sasquatch shirt, my sister and I let the streets carry us in and out of bars. Strings of Christmas lights hung above an outdoor market where a man stood beside a rolling clothes rack with flannel shirts on hangers. He told us it was his mother who had taught him embroidery and showed us his work, running his fingers over the threads. I shrugged into one of the shirts, and didn't want to take it off again. It was mid-March – jacket weather – and the soft weight of the shirt was good on my arms, so we paid the man what he asked, moved back into the sway of the night. I wore my shirt into a bar where an old couple was dancing in a circle and the man, bearded, with wet eyes, kept bending in half to rest his head on his partner's shoulder. Watching them, my sister, half-drunk and beginning to go a little limp, asked me if I believed that people can complete one another. "Like: the kind of shit that *lasts*," she said, watching the old woman's hair gather tint from the lights above the stage.

"Well, I think it takes a lot of work," I said. Then, revising: "I dunno, maybe."

I felt blurred from drinking. It's not what we believe anyway, I wanted to tell her, it's what we *want* to believe – carrying our faith around with us, wearing it like a garment. Earlier in the day, a middle-aged woman who called herself "Gemini Cricket" had read both our palms. She sat on a canvas folding chair in Jackson Square, and asked us to touch each card in her tarot deck one at a time. My sister was told she was limiting herself by placing too much faith in dead-end relationships. She sort of blushed and nodded, "Yeah, okay."

I was told, among other things, "You need to start believing in your own abilities." But she probably said that to everyone.

We left the bar with the dancing couple to get some air, saw a boy on the sidewalk sitting at a little table with a typewriter on it and a sign: "Poet for Hire." My sister was already talking to him, gesturing at my shirt. She commissioned him to write a poem about Bigfoot and he said, "Come back in fifteen minutes." I remember thinking, "That's not enough time," but I looked at my watch and we walked down the street to stand outside a junk shop.

"You think this guy is for real?"

"Probably not."

She'd asked me the same thing earlier about Gemini Cricket. I didn't know. I didn't know anymore who was real. We walked back to get our poem and it was all ready for us, like a pizza we'd ordered for carry-out. The guy said, "It's been a long time since I wrote a Bigfoot poem." He seemed proud of what he'd written. It wasn't great, but I liked the ending:

*and a chorus of sasquatch songs  
echoes through valleys of ancient trees  
scaring children out of their idle curiosity.*

He told us that where he came from a sasquatch was called a "Skunk Ape." We shuffled off. I felt exhausted by the interaction; we'd tried to force magic into the night but everything had gone flat.

"What do we do now?" my sister asked.

We headed back to the little room in the French Quarter we were renting for the week. My sister asked if I'd read her a story from the book about local hauntings she'd bought earlier in the day. I read and she fell asleep almost instantly. I kept reading out

loud over the sound of her steady breathing, as if afraid of the silence that would be left when I stopped.

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Combing through the Bigfoot Field Researcher Organization website, I find a lot of language that echoes familiar church lingo from childhood: the words of Christ in red ink saying, “You are witnesses of these things.” The gospels are rampant with semantics of seeing and belief: “He came as a witness to testify...so that through him all might believe.”

The Bigfoot community is similarly built on a catalogue of personal experiences, encounters, more so than the hard evidence that has accumulated over the years: casts of footprints, hair samples, blood and feces. Folklore scholar Joyce Bynum points out that the vast “bulk of evidence to support belief in Bigfoot’s existence comes from personal accounts of people who claim they saw him.” The gospels are built on this same concept.

The word “encounter” itself seems specifically religious, a word that appears all throughout the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber’s two hundred page treatise on God, *I and Thou*.

*I and Thou* introduces the concept that God resides in any sincere and holistic “encounter,” in which the pronoun “You” can be used in the fullness of its address. Whenever real encounter occurs, any entity being addressed can no longer exist as an “It,” but arises into “You-ness” by having its entire nature fully acknowledged in an isolated (and usually brief) moment of sincere recognition. Buber offers as an example, the contemplation of a tree. He says a “You” encounter occurs when “whatever belongs to the tree is included: its form and its mechanics, its colors and its chemistry, its

conversation with the elements and its conversation with the stars – all this in its entirety.” God exists, according to Buber, in these encounters.

Buber stresses that these encounters can’t be forced or sought, they must occur as natural relationships between the observer and what is seen. He says, “The You encounters me by grace – it cannot be found by seeking.” Similarly, Bynum points out that seekers of Bigfoot, professional “hunters,” who go on excursions with the specific purpose of catching sight of the beast, never seem to have any luck. “He *always* comes quite unexpectedly,” she writes, “surprising the witness. In fact, those who have intentionally gone to find and photograph Bigfoot have not succeeded in finding him.”

The very word “encounter,” implies this in its definition, meaning first “to come upon or meet with, especially unexpectedly,” and second: “to meet with or contend against (difficulties, opposition, etc).” The idea of encounter already implies opposition, as if it serves as a dual container for surprise and resistance against disbelief.

The BFRO website is littered with accounts that echo conversion stories in both form and content. The tellers admit that they *know* their experience goes against logic, but that the spectacle they witnessed forced them into belief in spite of initial resistance. Witnesses also tend to report that they were somehow irreversibly changed by the experience, crossing over from the realm of skepticism.

At times, the witness’s phrasing is devastatingly tentative. An Iowa turkey hunter relates his story in a single breathless paragraph with childish misspellings scattered throughout. “I do not know what I saw,” he begins. “But I do know it was something that should not have been there and it will remain with me the rest of my life. I have never told my story due to I feel people will not believe me.”

He tells how the previous night's heavy rain allowed him to walk through the woods without the noise of crackling leaves, and how the silence followed him as he scaled a hill overlooking a valley where a creek wound through. That silence was broken by "a very strange paced sound. The rythym [sic] of it seemed odd. Nothing I could think of would make a sound like this." The noise increased in volume until a figure emerged from the woods fifty yards away. His first assumption was this must be a hunter wearing a ghillie suit. But, he writes, "This was no human." He watched the creature walk upright on two legs until it stopped upwind of him.

What happens then, he says, is the creature turned its head and met his gaze.

This is where the story dips toward spirituality. Throughout the narrative, there's a distinct feeling that the writer is hurrying to get the story into words. He feels compelled to tell what is there to be told, and wants the task to be over and done with. But even in his apparent rush to get the story down (I imagine him, a man in late middle age, typing rapidly at his computer), the story slows at this point. You can feel a shift – time erasing itself while he stares at something wholly foreign and it looks back at him. You can feel his reluctance to believe, and belief gripping him painfully: "It was as this point I truly realized what I was seeing," he says, somewhat wearily.

In his account, the hunter refers to this moment as "the stare down" and says it "went on for what seemed forever." The moment strikes me as particularly reminiscent of Buber's "I-You" encounters: "Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and You, no prior knowledge and no imagination; and memory itself is changed as it plunges from particularity into wholeness. No purpose intervenes between I and You, no greed and no anticipation; and longing itself is changed as it plunges from the dream into appearance."



The turkey hunter's account implies that something passes between them – a mutual fear and acknowledgement that is based in animal instinct but also contains human recognition. The hunter takes a moment to inhabit the creature's perspective when he writes, "I was in full camouflage including a facemask so maybe it was not sure what I was," trying to make sense of himself through its eyes. This reaching for understanding in the midst of wonder is, in part, where the magic of the story resides. There's an acknowledgement of the creature's deep innocence, of its thoughts when it, too, encounters deep strangeness. We, as readers, are invited to take part in the complexity of belief: its stages of fear, uncertainty, discovery, and acceptance. Buber's word for "encounter" in the original German is *Beziehungserlebnis*, which means literally "the living experience of relation," and it seems applicable to the turkey hunter's "stare down" – a moment in which he is forced to brush up against the heart of things.

When the witness emerges from this moment, and the creature finally moves off through the woods, the hunter seems to become self-conscious again, acknowledging that people will surely consider him a liar or an attention-seeker. He seems to recognize that the cost of belief is knowing you are alone in it. He ends his story simply: "I do not want to be famous nor do I want my story posted all over the internet. I just thought I should tell somebody my story."

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Back when I myself was fully immersed in belief, from childhood up to the age of seventeen, I sought out spaces filled with likeminded seekers who seemed able to conjure up God's presence like a spell just by gathering together, standing in a haze of unified silence with hands raised, palm-up, in a gesture of receiving. I sought also the solitary

and unexpected encounters – dusk in its damp glory, the lake holding mist in its open palm and cricket frogs gleaming slickly among algae, bright as emeralds. I felt this was proof enough. The world itself satisfied me that there was more beyond the world.

In those days, inviting encounter seemed easy and natural. Members of the church I attended with my parents all knew the failsafe recipe: keep the lights low, open yourself up along some invisible seam, give yourself over to possibility. God will reveal himself if you ask him to.

But of course, he didn't. Or at least: not always. And the fact of his simultaneous accessibility and elusiveness only convinced me further that the undertaking of belief was gloriously complex. We are mere human shells, I decided. We can't *always*, in every moment, serve as containers for the divine – we'd burn out. We have to retreat back into the tactile grace of the flesh – climbing up to sit, legs dangling, atop a local watertower with friends, cramming handfuls of Sourpatch Kids into our mouths, and spitting long, rainbowed strings of multi-colored saliva down to the pavement far below us. There was, I concluded, a space for seeking and a space for turning away from mystery, letting the night and God and Bigfoot sort themselves out somewhere in the distance.

Jerome Clark and Loren Coleman, cryptozoology researchers and authors of *The Unidentified and Creatures of the Outer Edge*, might easily be writing about God when they say, “Whatever the source may be, its signals must be filtered through human consciousness and perception, which shape the manifestations to conform to certain archetypal forms that are both strange and yet oddly familiar to us. Strange because they appear supernatural, but familiar because, in a sense, *we have created them.*”

We shape our beliefs to our own known selves, filling in the cracks and gaps with achingly human twinges. The opening line of Buber's work *I and Thou* is this: "The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude." In God, in Bigfoot, we invent a divided nature because our own natures are divided. These dualities recur over and over in conjunction with belief. God (and also Bigfoot) embodies both closeness and unreachability, both wonder and weariness, both a quest for truth and an acceptance that certain truths are unprovable, the space where science and myth both embrace and resist one another. Just as God (in the form of Christ) is both living flesh and all-knowing spirit, Bigfoot is both completely animal but also *like us*, imbued with human attributes.

In a documentary from the mid-'90s, the camera follows Bigfoot believer, Henry Franzoni, as he drives out through remote forests, and in a clearing, sets up his full drum-kit complete with snares, bass, cymbals. He begins to play furiously, then pauses to explain to the camera, "I'm thinking that this drumming that I'm doing will, uh, possibly entertain Bigfoot. But if not, I'm hoping that it makes Bigfoot curious. And that Bigfoot comes and listens to me."

When I saw this, I laughed heartily. The impulse to rock out in the woods in the hopes that Bigfoot will suddenly appear, possibly with his own bass guitar to join in, swerves into rich absurdity. But Franzoni goes on to justify his logic: "A lot of times Bigfoot is seen observing people operate heavy machinery in the woods. Lots of people search for Bigfoot. They never seem to find Bigfoot. The only time Bigfoot is actually seen is through accident and happenstance. People camping sometimes find that a Bigfoot is observing them. So what I'm doing is, I'm trying to make Bigfoot curious. I believe that Bigfoot finds you. You don't find Bigfoot."

This is the same theory that such folklorists as Joyce Bynum and Linda Milligan propose is an essential element to the perpetuation of the belief legend. Milligan calls this element of the legend “the surprise encounter motif,” and it serves as both an explanation of Bigfoot’s nature as well as a justification for why those who set out to track or hunt Bigfoot are always thwarted. It continues to keep Bigfoot in a realm of the elusive and unreachable – which is what Bigfoot believers want. They don’t *need* him to be proven; they are satisfied with the legend. As Margaret Atwood writes in a poem about the creature, “Sasquatch can never be known: he can teach you only about yourself.”

Based on his theory that Bigfoot exhibits the human quality of curiosity, and on the common understanding that Bigfoot can’t be *sought* but must be *encountered*, Henry Franzoni has invented his own method for creating (what he considers) the ideal conditions for Bigfoot to appear. What he is doing is not so different from my gathering with fellow churchgoers, or driving down to the lakeshore in the hope that something will press forward, make itself known, indelibly. He is creating a space where wonder can be experienced, whether or not Bigfoot actually appears.

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The church I attended for years had a particular smell I associated not with God but with the bodies that gathered beneath the slow-whirring ceiling fans that stirred everyone’s perfumes and hand-sanitizers and coffee breath and armpit sweat into a single richly tangled odor, a smell both holy and fully human. The freely mixing good and bad smells made the pastor’s sermons seem more tangible: stories about the light and darkness warring within each of us, about the origins of our own divided natures.

Recently, in an airport between flights, I wandered past a newsstand and grabbed a special edition of *Newsweek* that focused on Bigfoot. Flipping through it, a brief article on sasquatch origin stories caught my eye. The article describes theories on the origin of Bigfoot that sometimes reach for Biblical precedents: Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau. Bigfoot is always, it seems, the ugly brother, the “evil twin” so to speak.

The Esau story, from the book of Genesis, goes like this: Isaac and his wife Rebekah want children but can’t conceive. Eventually, after years of “entreating the Lord,” the Lord finally gives in and grants the couple a pair of twin boys who, even in the womb, don’t seem to get along: “And the children struggled together within her...And The Lord said unto her, ‘Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy body; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger.’”

When the twins are born, Esau (meaning, in Hebrew, ‘rough’ or ‘hairy’) is covered all over with reddish hair. You can see where this is going. The rivalry between the twins leads to Jacob’s tricking his brother out of his birthright, and the brothers become estranged. Esau’s descendants, the Edomites, are traditionally described as red-haired giants.

Joshua Blu Buhs, author of *Bigfoot: Life and Times of a Legend*, mentions this story as an argument “that Bigfoot is humankind’s brother, and that humanity’s relationship to sasquatches paralleled the incestuous, ambivalent, love-hate relationship of all brothers, of all twins, of Jacob and Esau.”

The implication is we are looking everywhere for evidence of brotherhood – consolidating legend with religion, history with myth. What could illustrate more

potently a reconciliation between closeness and distance than the idea of sibling rivalry? What could be truer to our nature than explaining the unexplainable through this lens? The symmetry is pleasing, something resolving in the mind, when we position Bigfoot comfortably in a Bible setting. But these Biblical origin stories are not the only ones that see Bigfoot as a “brother figure.” The Lakota tribe refers to Bigfoot as Chiye-tanka; which translates roughly as “great big elder brother.” Believers among the tribe profess that the creature appears in times of trouble to look after them, relaying spiritual messages that signal change and growth. As brother, Bigfoot is seen as either the less-favored outcast (Esau) or as spiritual leader (Chiye-tanka), but in both cases the connection remains inseverable. We are linked for good or for ill.

There are many stories of the creature’s own divided “twofold” nature. Utah resident Ron Mower claims he’s had contact with “both good and evil Bigfoots;” the evil ones are easily identifiable by their burning red eyes. A story in the popular tabloid *Weekly World News* bears the headline “Two-headed Bigfoot Shot by Iowa Cop.” It describes the two heads as possessing conflicting personalities: the head on the right seemed to pursue more civilized impulses, while the head on the left was filled with wild and salacious urges. This rather inventive tabloid writer describes how, “In one incident, a female hiker claims she was set upon by the two-headed Bigfoot as she skinny-dipped. The more aggressive head drooled lustily and groped her breast with the left hand. But the right head intervened, scolding the other with monkey-like chattering and smacking the left hand away.”

This is oddly familiar. It seems to echo and underline my own impulse to assign the two sasquatches on my shirt a good and bad nature, a visual illustration of the

inherent divide we all feel tugging us in opposite directions. Bigfoot perpetually recurs as a two-sided coin, both good and evil, both like us (our brother, our hairy twin), and completely other, inhuman and distant. He creates a setting for belief that, like the church sanctuary with its freely mixing array of sweet and ugly smells, allows us to experience at once what is sweet and what is ugly about being human – the good and bad speaking across the gap to one another, greeting each other as brothers.

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In October of 2015, I attended a Bigfoot convention in Hot Springs, Montana. I went with a group of friends who were curious or just bored, eager for an excuse to straggle out from the familiar boundaries of the little mountain-bordered college town where we'd situated ourselves.

On the drive, we drank beer in the close, contained air of an SUV, cranked the radio to the highest possible volume and shouted over it if we felt we had something worth shouting. The day was broadening beneath low cloud cover, and we got noisily lost in a grid of gravel roads that divided shorn fields where cows, mute and brown, watched the car move through their world – a sight of weary wonder they'd forget as soon as it was gone.

I was wearing the shirt. Its weight was straightforward and familiar, easily forgotten against my skin. I was trying to make sense, as we drove, of the role the shirt might play in a room full of true believers – masking my doubt or ratting me out as someone who regarded Bigfoot as mere kitsch, as a badge to be worn when convenient and removed at will. I ran my fingers over the threads, trying to make sense of what I was even doing in that car, or why I was so drawn to these narratives of belief. I didn't know

quite what I was seeking, or if I was even seeking anything. I wouldn't say I was hoping to be convinced, but I was certainly expecting to reverently approach the mysteries I was presented, the evidence, to touch belief on the cheek, then pass back into my day-to-day, unaltered but thoughtful.

We arrived three beers deep, a little sloshy and lightheaded, not yet slurring but our words rose slow and tentative to our mouths. The town, we noted, was hideous. This bothered none of us, but we marveled a little at the muddy hillside pocked with scorched trees. All the buildings were a brown and grimy brick except the hotel where the conference was held. It rose out of the surrounding landscape – a garish coral orange built in a lumpy pueblo revival style. It was surrounded by pools and hot tubs lined with cracked tile and seeming to bubble faintly with the mineral waters piped in for soaking. It seemed tourists used to come here; they don't anymore, and everything had the slow dirty look of abandonment, eerily reminiscent of the Bates Motel from *Psycho*.

Inside the lobby, folding tables were spread with crystals, sasquatch beer koozies, sasquatch baseball caps, books with titles like *Flying Saucers: Serious Business or UFOS? Yes!* On one table, an amateur Bigfoot researcher had brought plaster casts of footprints, a photo album full of pictures of the insides of caves.

A crackly microphoned voice spilled out from a room adjoining the lobby and we filed in. The room was packed wall-to-wall with people sitting on metal folding chairs; a few stood leaning against the back wall, or sat cross-legged on the carpeted floor. They all seemed rapt, a few were taking notes. We hovered in the doorway, swaying slightly and trying not to look tipsy. I felt distinctly other. Not as a skeptic, but simply as



someone who didn't have an encounter to share, who didn't quite know why I was here. At the front of the room, a woman gave her testimony and the room nodded.

The woman who spoke was tall and heavy. She held the microphone close to her mouth and her 's's hissed and 'p's popped; between sentences her breathing sounded labored. Behind her, photos scrolled on a screen – stills from the famous 1967 Patterson footage taken at Bluff Creek, crayon drawings done by children who'd claimed they'd seen a huge hairy ape man. She'd seen a lot, built a world from that seeing, felt compelled to collect and chronicle the sight of others. She'd lived for several years on the Fort Hall Indian Reservation, where she said a nearby community of sasquatch would regularly come down from the hills, and leave offerings of bark and roots on the outskirts. "Tokens of peace," she called them. There was a deep gentleness to her, as if she were falling into her own words, nesting inside of certainty, inviting the room to enter into it with her, but understanding, also, why we'd want to hang back, why we'd choose doubt.

During the Q&A that followed her talk, a woman raised her hand to ask if the speaker had ever seen a baby sasquatch.

"Never an infant," she replied without pause. "I've seen adolescents. They're beautiful. They look more human than the adults do, because, you know, they're still small."

She went on to tell a story she'd heard about a woman who'd fled the reservation, disappearing to live in the woods for a year. When she returned, she was pregnant, and eventually gave birth to a child covered all over in reddish hair. The child quickly grew to

six feet and lived to thirteen, before dying of “health complications.” But, she said, he was always “slow,” never learned speech.

I listened, aghast that she seemed to believe what she was saying. What she described pushed further and further from the realm of possibility, and yet she reported it as if it were the most natural thing in the world for a woman to live amongst sasquatch, to bear their child. I pictured the child: hairy and mute, lonely and freakish. I didn’t want to believe in it. I felt myself resenting the speaker: her reconciliation of the impossible with the possible seemed far too breezy and dismissive. It made me recoil, and I’d already made up my mind: *these people don’t know what’s real.*

But there was something remarkable in the fact that this story even existed, that someone had invented it. Perhaps this woman had imagined it herself, in order to test the limits of her own belief, the belief of those gathered here. Or perhaps the original storyteller was a woman who’d fled the known world in search of wildness and had come back bearing a remnant of it, wanting to make sense of what it was she carried. As Gregory L. Morris writes in his essay “Imagining Bigfoot,” “Bigfoot demands an act of imagination that surpasses belief and drifts into creation.”

I turned away, already exhausted by proximity to these believers. My friends beside me in the doorway had opened another beer and were passing it between them. They were snickering behind their hands. One gestured to the woman on stage, and mouthed the word to me: “nutcase.”

A part of me wanted to tell them, “Look. It does not matter if Bigfoot is real. But it does matter that we stop thinking of all believers as liars or fools or madmen. The world is vast, and couldn’t we make room for a little uncertainty? Regard belief as

beautiful in and of itself? Couldn't we come close to belief without fully entering, bear witness to our own doubts, catalogue them like collections of stones, feathers, plaster casts of something's imprint."

And, equally strong: a part of me wanted to laugh with them. Dismiss this woman, dismiss all of it.

The fact was (and is) this: I sometimes miss believing, look longingly toward the days when I was satisfied by mere testimony, by a feeling I'd get looking closely at the spaces that open in the world. There seemed to be encounters everywhere. They all attested to great mystery.

My own belief began to crack at seventeen, when I confided to a youth leader in the church that I was skeptical about "witnessing," Christians forcing their beliefs on "nonbelievers" – the implication was that if you didn't believe in Christianity, you didn't believe in anything. The youth leader informed me that there were vast numbers of people in the world who would suffer eternally in hell *because of me* if I didn't share my faith with them. In that moment, hyped up on Mountain Dew and gummy worms, feeling a righteous wrath welling up, I snapped back impulsively, "I don't believe in hell." And as soon as the words left me, I realized they were true: I didn't believe in hell. It was a hideous concept, completely opposed to the loving God I thought I knew.

I eventually broke with the church, continued to seek an understanding of God in private, but everything I'd greeted with such certainty only drifted farther and farther away from me. Eventually, all that remained were those rare flashes of encounter that Buber writes of in *I and Thou* – instants that briefly align to show a fleeting glimpse that

something rare and holy and benign might exist beyond the known world. And, growing older, those encounters became more and more rare, ever-threatening to dry up entirely.

One thing I came to understand at the Bigfoot convention was this: the community of Bigfoot believers is keenly aware of all the world's reasons for disbelief. They know, as folklorist Linda Milligan points out, that "the evidence is ambiguous because it is difficult to verify and because it is often accompanied by negative evidence." They know that, in spite of the fact that hair and fecal samples have been found in the Pacific Northwest that can't be matched to any known species in the area, and in spite of a few fairly convincing casts of footprints, it is still fairly probable that the evidence acquired is the result of a hoax.

But, they'll be quick to tell you, if it is a hoax, it's one of the most beautiful and elaborate hoaxes of all time.

Recognizing the possibility of a hoax does not seem to detract from the beauty of the legend, from the longing that drives us to invent something wilder than ourselves, and then, by whatever means are possible, to seek an understanding of it.

The rest of the day unspooled quickly. We listened to another speaker give tips on maintaining your cool long enough to snap a decent photo should the creature appear. We practiced breathing exercises together that were supposed to keep our adrenaline under control, practiced holding an imaginary camera steady in spite of the inevitable shaking of our hands. The evening culminated in a "Bigfoot lookalike contest" where two or three tall men stood on stage wearing cheap gorilla suits. One of them was given a prize, I think it was a t-shirt with a traffic sign that said "Bigfoot Crossing."

A couple of people complimented my shirt; I think it even earned me a high-five. In a damp, crusty bathhouse locker room, I hung the shirt on a little hook, changed into a bathing suit, slapped barefoot with my friends out to the pools. We sank into the warm hot spring water where women sat in clusters around the rim of the pool, speaking in a hush. One of them was telling her companions that her husband had been scared to leave the house “afterward.”

“He thinks he saw something. He’s been sort of shook up about it.”

And this woman, still on the threshold of belief, tried to describe what it was her husband had seen. The way her mouth trembled around that word ‘creature’ gave away her doubt.

“I don’t know. I just don’t know what to believe.”

It was a plain-faced woman who spoke, her hair parted in the center like the line that rises naturally in a loaf of baking bread, as if it’s trying to split from itself. She told the women gathered around her that her husband had gone duck hunting one morning and came home with a new stutter, his speech labored as if half-forgotten, as if language had shed itself back in the woods where he saw something moving between the tree trunks, looming and gray as if some shard of the morning had broken free, gained its own shape, its own will. Its hair was soft-silver and harbored the half-light so that it almost seemed to disappear when it stood still. It walked upright, graceful even in its vastness, sometimes stopping beside trees and fingering the leaves as if examining them, as if seeking evidence of something.

The bread-haired woman shook her head, fingering the strap of her bathing suit nervously, and her voice tried for an even lower register when she said, “He’s convinced he saw Bigfoot and that’s why we’re here.”

I watched the woman’s face, how she seemed to be trying very hard not to blink.

“You don’t believe him?” one of her companions said finally, and she half-reached a hand out toward the other woman’s shoulder, as if the story had momentarily struck her blind.

“I don’t know. I half believe that Rick had some sort of stroke out there. The stutter went away as soon as he got the story out, but he’s still not quite the same. Not himself. I just don’t know what to think.”

Something in me ached for her, my thoughts reaching out to her like her friend’s wavering, outstretched hand, hovering there the way my youth pastor used to pray for people, a little space between his palm and their forehead or shoulder.

We live in such desperate hope of unknowable things— all blind and stuttering.

I found myself envious of the husband, envious of anyone who’d seen something that convinced them fully. Just as I was envious of my father for his encounter with the white stag, envious of the turkey hunter who’d locked eyes with this thing, envious of people who found God easily and everywhere and without compromise. But I knew, listening to this woman, that I’d continue to exist in the realm between belief and doubt, learn to navigate there, as Gregory L. Morris writes, “Bigfoot seems to exist conceptually in the intersection of history, myth, and belief, in a sort of liminal space, a perceptual ‘divide.’ Bigfoot inhabits dark spaces in our landscapes of consciousness, and we must

illuminate those spaces, call out the beast, and recover the value inherent in its existence.”

I felt my body go still in the warm water of the hot spring. I had left my shirt on its hook in the locker room and so felt stripped of the disguise it provided: the mask of someone comfortable with mystery, someone who could leave a path open between conflicting voices, lend an ear to each in turn. I felt naked without it, but no more or less exposed than this woman who wanted proof but also wanted to blindly trust her husband’s story. I thought of the thick air of the church I grew up in, how the smells of believer and skeptic bled together, and within the gently churning water I breathed in the tang of chlorine and hints of unfamiliar shampoos and felt the unknowable truth in that ancient assurance that “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” My friends were splashing at each other, an empty beer can bobbing toward me, and I felt a vague sense of rare communion, stewing in our collective juices. The woman who’d just made her confession wiped beads of sweat from her forehead, dipped her hands into the water to slick back her hair.

I thought then of my father, who always seemed to see things that neatly closed themselves off from the sight of others. Always, he was trying to point out falling stars to me – these quick, white sweeps, an urgency undercutting his voice while I stood beside him, watching my own feet furrow the gravel.

“Look! Look!” There was never more desperation in my dad’s voice than when he thought his loved ones might miss the sight of something wondrous. Pointing up, his arm extending such a very small length to try to direct my eye to the tiny space of sky where something distant had shifted. I would look up in time to see only the blank space

it had left, the sky closing back up like a tightened fist out of which something had escaped.

“There, did you see it?

And sometimes I would even lie, wanting so badly to be a part of my father’s wonder.

As a kid, my dad once saw the Northern Lights blazing upward from the horizon, as if some far-off portion of the world were on fire, giving itself up in ridges of deep color. He’d been alone with no one to explain what the lights were, a very rare sight that far south.

One winter when part of the river had frozen over, he’d seen a wolf crossing the ice, delicately, as if walking on water – the quiet of it making his heart go still, a kind of waking sleep he’d said later, watching the wolf pause to look over its shoulder at him, their eyes greeting each other with strained acknowledgement: *I see you. You see me.*

Just as Buber describes in *I and Thou*: “Neighborless and seamless, he is You and fills the firmament. Not as if there were nothing but he; but everything else lives in *his* light.”

To my father, the appearance of Bigfoot might seem perfectly natural, but he would be, nonetheless, deeply grateful for it, accepting whatever the world and the God he still quietly believes in choose to lay across his path. But I suspect, to him, seeing the creature would be no more or less marvelous than the sight of a falling star, Northern lights, white stag, or wolf crossing the frozen river.

As Buber writes: “The form that confronts me I cannot experience nor describe; I can only actualize it. And yet I see it, radiant in the splendor of the confrontation, far



more clearly than all clarity of the experienced world. Not as a thing among the ‘internal’ things, not as a figment of the ‘imagination,’ but as what is present. Tested for its objectivity, the form is not ‘there’ at all; but what can equal its presence? And it is an actual relation: it acts on me as I act on it.”

Leaning back at the edge of the pool, I scanned the blue-black expanse for trails of stars, plummeting loose like the colorful spit we let fall from the water tower. I felt startled from idle curiosity like the last line of the poem my sister had commissioned for us to take away with us, folded and tucked into the front pocket of my shirt. I waited, dipping myself deeper into the water, half-expecting something to press forward out of the night. Nothing came, but I believed finally with the darkness pressing close, that there was plenty of room out there for it to be found.

## Junk Drawer

I try to tally strangers.

One of them left an umbrella in my car. It didn't even rain that night. He wore a snap-brim cap that he never removed at any point, which made me think, "He must be bald." This was never verified.

Walking is a common first date activity. Either we stop for a bottle of wine, or he tells me, "I don't drink." I ask about his tattoos. "Once I had a dream about a penguin," he says, rolling up his sleeve to show me. "This is the penguin."

For encouragement, my grandmother offers the story of how she met her second husband. It was the 70s and becoming common for middle-aged widows to resort to phone-dating services. You'd record a message of yourself saying, "I'm a 46-year-old beautician with three kids. My favorite activities include canning, drive-in movies, and raising Shetland Sheepdogs." And then men would call you up and you never split the check.

About Internet dating, my roommate says, "You will meet a lot of people who mean nothing to you. And that's okay."

But there were times it felt like I was unearthing these men from the strange, tangled magic of the Internet, a world that hoards voices and faces like a witch shrinking souls to keep in jars. It felt like we were rescuing each other, shelved in adjacent jars, somehow seeing out of the corner of my eye this fellow silently tapping on the glass.

My sister met her last girlfriend on a dating website. After they broke up she told me, “You know when you try to screw a lid on a jar, but if you don’t align the lid with the grooves, it won’t screw on right?” I nodded. “Well the whole thing felt like that.”

A librarian named Chris used to meow in his sleep. Maybe he still does. He’d nuzzle his pillow and make little kittenish noises. On our first date, we drew pictures on napkins and watched music videos on my phone. We kissed in a little alcove outside a nail salon. We smoked cigarettes and a drunk frat kid asked us for directions to “the bar where my sister is waiting for me” though he couldn’t tell us more than that. We gave him directions to a bar called “Ugly’s” that was around the corner. Back at Chris’s apartment, I looked around and said, “I’ve been here before,” and told him about the girl who used to live there, a poet named Katie who snorted adderall and threw disco-themed parties in the attic. I emailed my friend the next day to say “I have a pretty good feeling about him” and “I *miiiiight* have landed a good one.” He told me on Valentine’s Day that there would be no future for us. “We can still have sex though,” he said, consolingly, rubbing the back of my hand. “Not tonight,” I said. “I’m on my period.”

The hope is really pretty simple: Maybe this one will be *someone*. You allow yourself to believe that the time is never wasted because there is always something to walk away with, even if it's just the knowledge that someone meows in their sleep. You allow yourself to believe that everyone is equally vulnerable.

I can't remember the name of the guy who showed up to the bar wearing an oversized coat and sweating heavily. When I asked him why he was so winded, he said, "I walked seven miles to get here." After the date, he walked the same distance back home and texted me a photo of the moon.

My mother tells me she still prays for my old boyfriends. "Maybe no one else is praying for them," she says.

In church when I was a kid, I used to watch the backs of boys' heads, try to guess their faces. It was like a game my sister and I used to play. We'd open the junk drawer and feel inside with eyes closed to guess each item: spools of thread, sweaty nickels, paper clips, a broken plastic Christmas ornament, and tiny spoons much too small for our hands that leaked a milky coin smell, so that later I remembered and said, "Boys smell like the junk drawer."

I look at pictures of boys, read their profiles. A picture of one buried in a pile of autumn leaves. This one has two cats. His favorite books are *Breakfast of Champions* and

*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Based on all this, I think long and hard about what I could say to make him laugh. I type it, click send, then wait.

I tell myself the waiting is good for me. You can learn a lot from private moments of suspense. I am surprised by how often I think the phrases “meant to be” or “not meant to be.” “Oh,” I say, “this one doesn’t like tall women,” or “this one doesn’t like funny women.” I always choose a single quality to isolate for rejection. This makes every silence manageable.

It was, in retrospect, so little about sex. Even if it happened, it so rarely felt like an event, mostly like absently flipping through a book. Once a boy took me up to his studio apartment, and we sat naked on the floor while he read aloud to me from *Tropic of Capricorn*. We did not end up having sex.

One boy removed his belt and tied my hands behind my back with it. “Do I like this?” I asked myself. “I guess I like this,” I decided.

On dates, I learn what stories I like to tell. Sometimes, they are about me. Sometimes, they are about other dates.

A boy named Jeff and I spent our dates sneaking into rooftop pools. We pretended to be a tourist couple, crossing the hotel lobby to the elevator with confidence. We wore

our swimsuits under our clothes and no one ever questioned, not once, our right to be there.

A soft-spoken vegan told me he once saw a UFO hovering above a cornfield. “Just hanging there,” he said, a softly blue-lit disc that seemed to pulse like a gentle breathing before rising and disappearing. A recovering alcoholic named Jeremiah told me he used to mow a fortune teller’s lawn in exchange for tarot readings. “I showed up one day to do yard work for her,” he said. “And her neighbor told me she’d died in her sleep the night before.” He paused, took a sip of his ginger ale. “It was weird. She seemed to know so much about my future, but couldn’t see her own.”

I was at home for Thanksgiving when I started talking to James. At night, after my parents were asleep, we talked on the phone about nothing. We shared what was easy to share: the fact of whether or not we have pets, which pieces were missing from the boardgames stacked in corners, what we do when we drive long lengths. We mapped our hometowns together – the cemetery, the train tracks, the water tower. On the night of Thanksgiving, he told me, “I miss you even though I’ve never met you. Is that weird?” I paused to think. “Yes,” I said.

I met James a couple of weeks later, face to face. He drove from Chicago to meet me after I’d said on the phone that we have to make room for certain people in our lives, whether or not it’s convenient. “I’ll be there in three hours,” he’d said. When he arrived at my apartment, I could smell his cologne through the door before I even opened it.

There was a moment, his scent still reaching inward, when I thought, “I could leave it like this. I could not open the door.” I felt suddenly the weight of all that this stranger and I would never share – as if a fortune teller had turned over a line of cards. Through the door I could feel the silence wide and unmanageable, nothing left to say because the miles between us had eaten up all our words, and now in this closeness, we blanketed and went mute. He shuffled on the steps and knocked again. When finally I opened the door, I saw that he looked nothing like his profile picture.

PART III:  
*A CAREGIVING HANDBOOK*



## On Certainty

These are the things we were uncertain of:

Whether, when the bandages came off, the dog's eyes would be shrunken and clouded like juniper berries, or still brown and clear, though unseeing.

Whether the persimmon tree would produce any fruit that year, or if we even cared.

Whether the man who came to tune our piano had killed himself deliberately or accidentally.

Whether my sister liked boys or girls and whether this had anything to do with her being touched inappropriately by a babysitter when she was practically still a baby.

Whether I was actually beating Ryan at arm-wrestling, or he was occasionally letting me win.

Whether or not my father blamed himself for the dog's blindness.

Whether or not my mother blamed herself for the inappropriate babysitter.

Whether or not Uncle Mark would ever wake up from his coma.

That year, we were certain of a small handful of things. We knew the proper way to kill and dispose of a spider. We knew that Uncle Mark had never been to Africa; that the piano was deeply out of tune (though our mother still made us practice); and that the dog was an expert at being blind, brushing between the furniture quick as a fish through underwater reeds. I thought to myself pretty often, "I will never love anyone as much as I love this dog," and I believed it.

When Uncle Mark finally woke up, his hair had grown back enough since the surgery that no one hesitated to hand him a mirror when he asked for one. But when he saw himself there, in the tiny pink-and-white frame of the makeup compact, all he could say was “*Ay, caramba!*” And we all looked at each other; one of the uncles laughed because he didn’t know what else to do. And then Mark said it again, “*Ay, caramba!*” and we all started to titter, couldn’t help ourselves. It was all he said for days, rolling his head side to side on the pillow, lifting spoonfuls of pudding all the way to his mouth then letting them plop back onto the tray. “*Ay, caramba!*”

Before the accident, he’d looked like Paul Newman. After: like someone who was once told they look like Paul Newman.

When he began to speak whole sentences again, his tongue seemed to get in the way. He bit it and it bled. He talked at length, sharing memories that none of us could remember: dogs none of us had ever owned, bones we’d never broken, continents we’d never been to. He talked to me about the first time I saw snow, driving to the top of Mt. Diablo and packing snow into shapes, monoliths and turrets we sculpted barehanded. I looked at my mother, mouthed the word as a question, “*Snow?*” She shrugged and mouthed back, “*Ay, caramba.*” That phrase had become code between us, code for: your uncle’s mind isn’t quite right.

But, strangely, he remembered it all so vividly: even the purple coat I had worn, even the fact that he’d begun to worry I might get sick from eating so much snow.

To his fiancé, he said, “Remember that time we went to Africa?”

We watched the fear shiver through her and waited to hear what she’d say. She said, “No, Mark.” With calm certainty she said, “We’ve never been to Africa.” Mark’s

scalp showed the color of rage through the fuzz. She, of all of us, was the only one who refused to humor him and so we watched him begin to hate her.

“In Africa,” he told us once, “it is so hot that people leave stones out in the sun and use them to cook on like hot plates.”

“In Africa,” he told us another time, “the soil and the trees and the animals are all the same color and that color is red.”

“In Africa,” he told us, “people go to war with monkeys over watering holes.”

After weeks of this, his fiancé stopped coming to see him, returned his ring in a yellow manila envelope.

“How,” my mother once asked, “could he be so convinced of something that wasn’t real?”

And yet, week by week, year by year, I’ve become less and less certain about the snow, seem now to remember how cold my hands were, curved ice walls melting and hardening beneath. I’m almost certain of one thing Uncle Mark never mentioned: that on that day, on the mountain, I put snow into my own hair, as if anointing myself, and I cried because it burned with cold, and my scalp shrank and tightened.

## A Caregiver's Diary

The days didn't feel like days. Always either stretched or shrunken, the hours, gaping and vacant, were like gaps in the mouth of someone who'd just lost a handful of teeth. Chip was the only thing that summer that gave any shape to my week. On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays I walked to his house over the shadeless sidewalks of that garish little beach town, sweating and sweating in all the places where my skin touched itself; way more, it seemed, than anyone else was sweating. And looking around: families with elaborate baby strollers, couples swinging their arms between them, small packs of teenagers on bicycles, balancing with snowcones and at nightfall, Coronas in koozies; and always, I was the only one alone. The whole summer long I never saw a single other solitary person by daylight; only a few times on the beach at night, a man by himself walking his dog. But still: there was the dog.

I remember that cross-town walk, trying to keep my stride long and sure because I was so glaringly alone, still squinting even behind sunglasses, behind the grayish halo my cigarette was making (I was also the only person I ever saw smoking). I relished it though, drank in the silent space cupped around me like a pair of hands, because I knew that, after arriving at Chip's, I wouldn't be alone again for a full 24 hours. The weeks kept on ticking that way, like two sides of a coin turning in the air: a day on my own, a day with Chip, a rhythm I fell in step with, a sweet and natural division down the middle of things.

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There are moments between a caregiver and her charge that almost arc toward romance: holding a cup to his chin, he looks up at me while he drinks, our eyes meeting over the rim of the cup, very close. Sometimes I think: he is wooing me a little bit. Sometimes I think: How strange is it that I know his body as well as I do and he doesn't know mine at all?

Tipping his coffee cup back, he wants me to notice my own reflection in the dark liquid. We lean forward a little to look at ourselves: a Chip and a Renee, our shapes darkened and sloshing slightly. He says something about Plato and the shadows moving on the cavewall, then makes a feeble play on words involving "shadow of a doubt." Did I know he minored in philosophy in college? Yes, I knew that.

I slide my hands beneath him, lift him smoothly; he is curled against me like a huge, heavy child. This is called a "transfer." This is the very first thing I learned when Chip hired me.

"You look sturdy," he'd said on that first day, and winked.

I have to fold him forward so that his head rests on my shoulder, and I arrange the wheelchair so it's at a 45 degree angle to wherever I'm moving him to or from. I pivot fluidly, and he makes a sort of breathless noise when I set him down. Chip is not a small man, and this never fails to make me feel strong. *My body is strong; yours cannot get from wheelchair to sofa on its own steam.* Let's not compare. I can't stop myself from saying, "There!" proudly whenever I lower him down. And always, always, always, he says: "You're starting to get really good at that."

He likes to stay up late, expects me to stay up late with him watching hours of television. If I doze off, he hisses at me, “psst!” and makes me change the channel for him. Whenever an episode ends he always feels the need to say something about it, as if I am waiting with bated breath for him to weigh in. Usually he says: “Well, that was weird” because, most nights, we are watching episodes of *The X-Files* on Netflix. He then engages me in a Q & A about the thing we just watched that I was sleeping through.

“How different would this show be if Mulder were the skeptic and Scully were the believer?” or “You know what my grandmother used to say to me? She’d say ‘never trust a redhead.’ When she passed away, we found out she’d been dyeing her hair for years; there were all these boxes of red hair dye in her bathroom cabinet. You think Scully is a genuine redhead?”

At night, we drink. Almost always. He wants me to match him drink for drink. *You know, I am thinking, I will have to lift you from your chair into bed at the end of the night.* Maybe he wants me a little bit drunk for this, even a lot drunk – for rolling him onto his side like an enormous infant, unbuttoning his pants. He doesn’t look at me while I do this, looks nowhere, but chatters the whole time about a lady bartender he has a crush on at The Rocking Chair, about one of his prep school students who started a theological essay with the phrase “If I were a dog...” He laughs a garbled laugh to himself. Not until he is flat on his back again and I am fumbling with the catheter does he look at me. The end of the tube fits over his penis like a condom, and the whole time I’m easing it off, his eyes are fixed on my face. I’ve never asked him if he can feel my hands at all, my fingers trying to gently pull the tube free, but he watches me, and I’m a little clumsy but increasingly business-like as the days go on. I want to be steady. I want to be

sturdy for him. I wonder sometimes if this is its own sort of love moving between us like the curled lip of a rising tide; and this particular brand of intimacy simply boils down to holding someone, the full weight of them tucked against your hip, and praying very briefly that you'll be strong enough and sober enough not to drop them.

His overnight urostomy bag is larger, holds more liquid, than his daytime bag, and it hangs from the end of his bed on a little silver hook. I take the day bag into the bathroom and empty the last few hours' worth of urine into the toilet. It makes a noise like a lot of liquid being emptied into a toilet. I raise the seat so it won't splash. There is a blue valve at the base of the bag. You have to hold the tube in one hand, upright, so the urine won't leak out and then turn the bag upside down so all the urine runs to the other end. Then turn the valve and dump. I didn't realize this the first time and spilled Chip's urine all over the floor of the bathroom. I mopped it up with a towel, then flung the towel into the bottom of the shower, flustered and embarrassed, almost as if it were my urine, as if I'd just peed all over the floor.

As I hold the bag over the toilet, it flattens like a leaking water balloon. There are little measuring lines along one side of the bag to show how much liquid it contains, and as I empty it, I watch the level lowering slow like floodwater going down: 35mL, 15mL and so on, all the way down to drip, drip, and done. Empty.

On his bed, against the pale sheets, his legs seem tiny. The legs of a twelve year old boy on the body of a man, something almost crustacean-like about them. Reddish with small fine hairs. The knees are bent slightly and folded a little to the left with his claw-like hands at his sides on the sheet. At the end of the day, when I lift him from chair to bed and he unfolds like a paper flower blooming in water, he shakes all over, trembling

from head to foot like a revival-tent miracle. “Slain in the spirit” they call it. I stand over him and wait for the muscles to go quiet again, to stop screaming. He lies there wincing a little and I place a pillow between his knees. He rests, finally silent, like the space in a musical score, and his body there on the clean white sheet, is curled exactly like a quarter rest: ♪

I pull the sheet over him, then the thin blue blanket, up just beneath his chin. This is the way he likes it. I stand with one hand on the lightswitch by the door, wait for his nod, and then the room snaps into darkness.

“Sleep tight, Renee. Don’t let those bedbugs take advantage of you.”

“Sweet dreams, Chip.”

I duck into the caregiver’s bed in the corner; it creaks as I settle and turn. I wear a giant t-shirt and little cotton shorts to sleep in. I lie awake for a little while, listening to the sound of him breathe, the air loud and alive around him, the shared darkness simmering with the ease of his hushed snore. He always falls asleep before I do. In a few hours, he will call my name across the quiet span of the room, will break into my sleep. I will roll him onto his other side, adjust the pillow between his knees, hold his water bottle to his mouth for the space of two or three loud swallows, and then he will sleep again, will sleep soundly until the morning.

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The name of the town was Avalon, as if we could all be fooled into thinking of it as something mythic. It was rich and white, too-clean and too-bright, the sun seeming to hit every surface at once. My eyes were in a permanent squint that summer, even indoors. Chip’s sunglasses always rested on an end table near the door of his house; I’d place



them carefully on his face before wheeling him out into all that light. At times, this small gesture felt like I was decorating him for a parade.

My friend's mother owned a beach house in Avalon, just two houses up from the shore, and she'd told me no one would be using it that summer.

"It'll just be empty," my friend's mother had said over the phone. "It'll be a weight off my mind to know you're there looking after things. Really. You'll be doing us a favor."

I was invited to stay rent-free in exchange for keeping the place well-aired – opening the sliding glass doors on the balcony and letting the sea air sweep through like huge and ragged breathing. I pulled up the scrubby little weeds that grew among the white stones that lined the driveway. I fished stray leaves and dead dragonflies out of the pool. I swept up the sand I tracked in. I brought bottles of Corona Ultra-Lite up from the refrigerator in the basement and, on my evenings away from Chip, drank them while sitting in the empty lifeguarding chair on the shore.

Chip and I had found each other over the internet. At the beginning of the summer, I'd responded to an ad on Craigslist for a "Personal Care Assistant" with flexible hours and good pay. He'd written back with his phone number and the link to an article *Sports Illustrated* had written about him.

His email said, "This story will give you some idea of who I am and my situation."

I watched a video that opened with a close-up of a sandy-haired blue-eyed man in his early forties. He looked boyish, wearing a little baseball cap pushed back slightly from his forehead, like a kid in a 1950s sitcom.

“My name is Chip Doyle. I’m a school teacher, an avid sports fan. I love to work out. I’m a huge fan of live music. Pretty much your average single guy in America.”

The camera zooms out to show the whole room. Chip in his wheelchair. Polished hardwood floors.

“The only difference is: I’ve been in this wheelchair for twenty-three years after sustaining a life-altering spinal cord injury while playing hockey my freshman year of college.”

There was footage of an older woman with curled grayish hair moving him from bed to wheelchair and wheelchair to car. There was something glowing about him – maybe just a trick of the lighting in the video, as if he were made purely from blurred edges. He smiled broadly. He winked into the camera and said, “I’m available, ladies.” He looked bright and solitary and charming. I liked him immediately. I thought to myself: “Sure. I can do this.” And I emailed him back.

\*

At noon on work days I make the walk across town to Chip’s house. I walk in without knocking, and one of Chip’s many caregivers is there in the kitchen, wiping out pint glasses with a dish rag, chattering while Chip slumps and fumbles with his Kindle. She works Mondays and her name is Mandy so Chip calls her “Monday Mandy.” She greets me vaguely. We don’t know each other. Or rather, I only know her through Chip, who will start talking shit about her as soon as she leaves.

“All she does all day is talk about her dickhead boyfriend,” he will say.

All his caregivers are young. All similarly tall and willowy with longish brown hair. All female. Chip certainly has a type.

I wonder if, whenever I leave, he talks shit about me. If he says to the caregiver replacing me, “All Renee does all day is smoke cigarettes and drink all my Powerade.”

Isn't it in his best interest – a survival tactic so to speak – to reassure each of us that we are his favorite? That every single one of us is the only one he has a *real* connection with?

I know that he is going to keep me talking until lunch time. I am special because I am “the smart one.” That's what I have going for me.

“Some people you can just talk to,” he'd said early on. “Some you can't.”

So we talk. Mostly about nothing. Mostly about the things Chip loves: pizza and beer and Bruce Springsteen and hockey. He still loves hockey though it almost killed him. There was a day early in the summer when he surprised me by wanting to talk about his accident, unprompted.

“The puck got too far out ahead of me,” he said. “And as I went after it, the goalie reached out, and his stick went under my skates. I hit the ice and slid headfirst into the boards. Five seconds later I tried getting up. Ten seconds later I knew something wasn't right. I couldn't move anything, or even feel anything. Within a minute, I was pretty sure I'd broken my neck.”

He told me that, as they were wheeling him off the ice he'd looked up at the stern undersides of the paramedics' faces and remembered suddenly that he had an old high school buddy coming to visit him for the weekend, and he'd told the paramedics: “He's getting in on a 7:30 Greyhound. Someone has to go to the bus station to pick him up.”

“Poor guy,” Chip had said. “Thinking he was gonna have a wild party weekend at college, and instead just spending the whole time at the hospital.”

Chip is generous. “Poor guy,” he’d said of his able-bodied friend who is married now with three daughters and his own law firm. I often think: I would not do so well if I were the one in the chair. I would think, surely, that I deserved all the love, all the good the world has to offer because I endured a betrayal of fate and of my own body.

I sometimes wonder if he knows the exact space in his spine where everything went wrong. I am probably touching it all the time without knowing it – when I hold the back of his neck while I shave him.

I told him that first time, “I’ve never shaved a man before.” And he said, “I’ve been the first time for a lot of ladies,” our eyes meeting in the mirror and winking at me, turning his head side to side afterward to examine my work. “Steady hands,” he said. “That’s the key.” There was a tiny nick along his jawline that was welling with blood.

“Sorry,” I said sheepishly, patting at it with a damp washcloth.

“That’s okay,” he said. “I like to bleed every now and then. Reminds me I’m human.”

And when we talk, we talk about human things. Pizza and beer and Bruce Springsteen and hockey. He tells me about growing up in Philly.

“What was growing up in Southern Illinois like?” he asks.

I tell him: “Oh you know. Lots of lakes and forests, sometimes also pizza, also beer. We had a blind dog and a piano that no one could play but was always kept in tune. Okay, that’s a lie actually – my sis and I could both play it but we didn’t want to. Our Mom made us, always telling us to sit up straight.”

I look at Chip who is slumped in his chair, who needs the pull of my hands beneath his armpits in order to sit up straight.

He surprises me some days, wanting to talk about poetry, wanting me to read out loud to him from the book in my overnight bag. Once, leaning forward a little in his chair, he recited Dylan Thomas' "Do Not Go Gentle Into that Good Night" in its entirety. All the way through without pausing, without fumbling for any of the words. The entire time, he kept his eyes locked on mine, cool slate but burning whenever spittle flew and flecked on my cheeks as he repeated that line: "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." I sat, blinking, forcing myself to meet his gaze. The recitation had come out of nowhere and when he finished, he leaned back, watching me, waiting for me to weigh in.

"That was fucking intense, Chip," I said afterward and he laughed a big laugh.

Today he is explaining some economics theory to me and I am half-listening. He tells a joke I don't understand about three economists in a bar. I laugh feebly and he says, "You don't get it do you?" I don't.

We wait until we are that good kind of hungry, when the idea of food is exciting but we aren't uncomfortably starving. I'm about to run down to the corner to pick up the cheese steaks I ordered over the phone. I take a twenty from the stash in the junk drawer, tuck it in the front pocket of my shorts.

"Don't forget to pick up a Powerball ticket," he says.

"Right, right," I say. Chip always reminds me. I always forget.

"Seriously though. We could be millionaires."

"*You* could be. It's your two bucks."

"I'll split it with you. You just have to do one thing for me."

"Oh yeah? What could that be I wonder?"

"You gotta write my life story."

“Uh-huh. You want me to leave the TV on for you?”

“Naw. Get outta here. Those cheesesteaks are getting cold.”

These spaces that open in the day. I feel I am leaving him behind somehow. I *am* leaving him behind. I breathe and breathe, smoking one cigarette on the way there and one cigarette on the way back. The day is sticky hot, stupidly bright and the hoods of parked cars are putting out heat like their own suns. It’s strange to miss him, to worry, but also to breathe easy, to be grateful that I’m free of him for a moment. When I get back he is sitting quietly and staring; there is a halo of thought around him hanging in the air, and for a moment I don’t know how to greet him, how to talk to him. His face breaks into a slow smile at my return.

“Did you remember the lotto ticket?”

“God *DAMN* it!” I always forget.

I do wonder sometimes about his faith in luck. Like how a person’s chance of being struck by lightning increases if they’ve been struck once already, perhaps being singled out by fate makes Chip believe that fate still has its eye on him.

I help him eat his sandwich. He complains that my hands smell like cigarettes and I go wash them at the kitchen sink. I turn on the TV and an episode of *The X-Files* plays in the background. A woman asks Mulder if he’s ever tasted blood and then they make out. Without even thinking, I wipe Chip’s mouth with my sleeve. He frowns.

“There’s a napkin right *there*,” he says, annoyed.

I fear that, when my shift ends and I walk back home to the empty beach house, he will say to the next caregiver: “She cuts me shaving and stinks of cigarettes and

always forgets to buy my lotto ticket.” And on the phone with my sister, I will say: “He drinks too much and tells lame jokes and talks about women’s butts.”

*Are we tired of each other yet?* I wonder daily.

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By the end of the summer, I’d slept in every single bed in the empty beach house. There were two vast kings with eiderdown comforters upstairs in adjoining bedrooms. Downstairs were the basement “kids rooms;” one had a rickety bunk bed, the other had a pair of twins with matching quilts. I moved like a slow planet, night by night, leaving my small deposits of sand on all the sheets, my tiny geology, compiling these slight timelines of sediment. There was a silence to the house that almost had a flavor to it, would sit on my tongue like old wine. On my days with Chip, I sometimes longed for the flavor of that silence, for the space that curved around me in each of those solitary beds. On my days away from him, I missed his weight and the shape that his routine gave to my day.

On my days off, I started jogging though I’d never jogged in my entire life, running along the shore, chasing sandpipers so they lifted silver and copper above the surf. I celebrated the use of my legs. I didn’t mean to, but I did. I wondered if Chip missed running along the shore, standing in the surf and daring the lightning to strike. Perhaps, after twenty-three years he was beyond missing. *Twenty-three*, I thought as my legs worked against the sand, *he has been paralyzed almost the entire time I’ve been in the world.*

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He always tries to put everyone at ease. He does this by not apologizing for anything strange his body does. The first time I lowered him onto his bed and he'd started shaking, I felt a lurch of fear, thought he was undergoing some kind of seizure.

"It's normal," he said. By which he meant: *this happens every night*.

His body has gradually lost its shape, or gained a new shape, heavy like a pear, settling into density after twenty-three years of sitting down. His chest is thin and bird-like but his beer-bellied gut swells large above his lap, and then his legs: bent pencils below. His hands are curled in on themselves, small undexterous claws. He does not have the motor control to raise fork to mouth, but he can brush his own teeth as long as a caregiver puts the toothpaste on for him. He seems to take pleasure in doing this one small daily task for himself.

After cheesesteaks and an afternoon of *X-Files*, Chip wants to go out on the town. I pat his cheeks with aftershave and wipe the limp span of his naked chest with a damp washcloth. I dress him in a blue pin-stripe button down and run a wetted comb through his hair. He is ready. He looks at himself in the bathroom mirror. "I clean up nice, don't I?" he says. I assure him that he does. We are both proud of how he looks.

On a typical Saturday night, we sit across a table from one another at a restaurant and make chit chat. When the waitress brings our drinks, I move closer. He sips his gin and tonic, his eyes on mine. His eyes seem especially blue in the dim lighting. I wonder sometimes if anyone thinks we are dating. He never introduces me as anything other than "Renee," never explains me to anyone.

When our plates arrive, I feed him pieces of shrimp and try not to stare at his mouth as he takes the food from the end of the fork. I wonder sometimes: *when will I get*



*used to this?* I can feel the light touch of his mouth, his teeth on the fork's prongs. I pull back too soon and half a shrimp falls onto the front of his clean shirt, sliding down his chest onto the floor, pink and obscene-looking. The first time something like this happened, I expected him to be annoyed with me, but instead he just leveled his unwavering blue eyes at me and said,

“Are you trying to start a food fight with me?”

I duck under the table in search of the shrimp, little stray curl of pure flesh. It rests in the space beneath his wheelchair, that small patch of shadow that moves whenever he moves.

“Leave it,” he says.

*I'm not getting this right*, I think.

“No one gets it right at first,” Chip told me at the beginning. But I think maybe what he meant was: *no one gets this right ever*, because there is no “right” to this, nothing right about any of it.

The Rocking Chair is his favorite bar. Everyone knows him there and the bartenders always cut his tab in half at the end of the night. Everyone there touches him when they speak to him, a hand on his shoulder, leaning down to say something into his ear while a smile plays over his face, sometimes it is meant to be overheard by me: “I like your style, Chip. You always keep a pretty girl nearby.” Sometimes they attempt an awkward fist bump with the shriveled curl of his hand. I stand beside his chair with his drink in my left hand and mine in my right, smiling faintly, waiting to be needed.

He “dances” with a tall long-haired woman in a flowing dress named Celia. She pulls his wheelchair toward her on the dance floor, then pushes it away in time to the

music. They move in little half-moon arcs, and he raises his arms just above his head so they hang like branches, sways them side-to-side, bobbing his head. He buys drinks for everyone but especially, it seems, for me. My eyes get sleepy and the air goes soft and golden; the bar smells like the good kind of spill. A three-man band in the corner plays Bruce Springsteen covers, and at some point they call Chip up to the microphone. One of the band members lowers the mic for him and he leans a little toward it. His eyes are like mine, heavy around the edges; his face and neck have deepened to a light crimson, and perfect beads of sweat line his face like dew on the skin of an apple. He is drunk.

He sings. His voice sounds old and young at the same time, a sweet ringing sharpness like a piece of stray gravel kicking around inside a bell. He sings and makes what seems like very strategic eye contact with some of the women in the room – with Celia, with the buxom lady bartender, then, briefly, with me.

*Everything dies baby that's a fact.  
But maybe everything that dies someday comes back.  
Put your makeup on. Put your hair up pretty.  
And meet me tonight in Atlantic City.*

He sings. He keeps his mouth close to the mic like singing into the ear of someone you want to lull to sleep. Everyone is silent. No one makes a noise, though there is a middle-aged couple half-entwined on the dancefloor and they shuffle the air around, stir it into warm billows. Chip's eyes look full. He seems almost frantic with love for the room, its corners and the people in it. A bleary longing breathes itself outward from him, tremblingly. It seems almost that he is making the words up as he goes along, as if he knows, through and through, that the song is *his*, and he is offering it, very graciously, to these people who stand and lean and sway while he sits, and sings. The light is very blue.

I think for an instant that I am happy, but realize a second later that I am just drunk. I feel warmth creeping up and down the length of me.

I have never actually given two shits about Bruce Springsteen. This is something that Chip and I used to get into mock-frantic arguments over. But I'll tell you: this was real. This was what you want to believe music is: a ghost moving in and out of everyone, a man who can no longer walk singing his guts into "*maybe everything that dies someday comes back*" and then you – and then the darkest part of you – saying to yourself through the drunk blue-gold haze: *maybe it doesn't...*

The song ends, and I go up to the stage to wheel Chip away, out from beneath the lights. He wants to go outside, to "grab some air," he says. He watches me smoke a cigarette and "tsk tsk."

"You know that shit'll kill you?"

"Yeah, yeah. So will a lot of things."

This is what someone would see if they walked past: a man in a wheelchair, a young girl smoking.

He asks me to check the clear plastic bag strapped to his ankle and tucked modestly inside his pantleg. It has been slowly growing heavy as he drinks, filling up with urine the color of late summer goldenrod, as warm as his hair had been after that afternoon of wheeling him up and down the boardwalk, the sun dusting him, pink and creamy beneath his thin layer of sunscreen.

I bend down and lift his pantleg just enough to see.

"It's full," I tell him. "Bathroom?"

"Naw, just dump it here."

Every night, I always wish him “sweet dreams” and wonder, inevitably, whether he dreams about running and sex without complication. Or: those dreams are long gone. Or: the medley of pills in their plastic cup that I hand him mornings and evenings do not let those dreams sneak through anymore. Or: yes, of course, almost nightly a dream of walking the beach alone, what can you do? Everyone longs to be whole.

I remember him once saying, “I got bored thinking about it so now I don’t anymore.”

And I remember thinking: *I don’t believe you.*

And still – *rage, rage against the dying of the light.* And still – *everyone dies baby that’s a fact.* And still – hold a Kleenex while I blow. Drink with me and talk about life on other planets with me and empty my pee bag. Keep living.

In that video of Chip I’d watched before I’d met him, he’d looked steadily into the lens of the camera and said, “If somebody told you that when you’re 18, you’re gonna sustain a life-altering injury that makes you a quadriplegic and you’re not gonna be able to move all but your arms a bit, and you’re gonna have to depend on other people for pretty much all daily living activities, you’d say, ‘No. There’s no way I can do that.’ But when you’re in this position you really have two choices: you know, get on with your life and make something of it or do nothing.”

So here we are, light and laughter leaking out from the bar and puddling around us. Here we are: making something of it.

I untuck the little blue tube and turn the valve. With one hand I hold the tube so the urine runs down the slant of the sidewalk, with the other hand I hold my cigarette.

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I remember sleeping in those beds full of sand, my feet in the mornings still crusty. On my nights off, I'd wake thinking I'd heard Chip's voice in the darkness asking for a drink. I'd wake in one of the many strange beds in the beach house and wonder where I was. The dressers in that house were covered all over with things that didn't belong to me. Even the bottles of Corona Ultra-Lite in the basement weren't mine. They, too, belonged to the owner of the beach house; I would decide at the end of the summer if I would replace them, or if it didn't matter. There were little inspirational signs all over the walls that said things like "*The best and most cannot be – THEY MUST BE*" or "*Remember, YOU ARE BRAVER than you believe, STRONGER than you seem and SMARTER than you think.*" I hated them, thinking: the people who are actually inspired by these things are the same people who laugh out loud at Garfield comic strips. The shower was filled with rich people shampoo.

"That shit works," I told Chip once while he watched me brushing out my hair before bed. My hair looked great that summer. No one really saw it but me and Chip but it was glossy and shining and streaked through in places where the light had changed the color, stained it golden.

Sometimes I wondered things like: *do I care deeply for Chip in his own right, or only because I have to, only because I am daily enacting love by cleaning and feeding him?* It never felt anything like romantic love, but something that was beyond friendship, beyond employer and employee: the love that passes back and forth between care-giver and care-receiver like a current. It exists in action. In touch. It exists in time shared.

I was constantly trying to recognize some kind of magic in him and wondering if that glowing halo was a reality or if I was just staring into circumstance and longing for

those moments of glimmer in this man I was being paid to share the day with. Someone to be bored with. Someone to be alone with. Someone to do nothing with.

I'd shave him knowing he would never be able to see himself from this angle: the side of his face, the curve where his ear began like lichen on a tree trunk, like a lone white bloom on still water.

The world wrapped itself around him; I was part of that wrapping. He was the center, the center of my day. He was loved. He made sure he was loved. He situated himself so that each person in his life wanted to be his favorite. This, I realize now, is a power we all wish we had.

I remember once saying to a friend: "What if there's no one to take care of me when I'm old and helpless?"

Her response: "You could always pay someone."

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After we leave The Rocking Chair, I think: *I need to be away from this just for a little while*. The darkness is at its very plainest and simplest – hovering above the town like a black gull riding the breeze. We don't know but we do know. About the darkness. About the questions I think of asking him sometimes: How dark does it get? Like me, I think he gets tired of the workings of his own mind. Like me, he has realized no one wants to be around unhappy people. Everyone sympathizes with someone who loses everything and remains cheerful. Everyone wants to buy them drinks. People live this way and then – *put your makeup on and your hair up pretty*. God it fucking hurts like shit to love anyone at all.

I can't articulate anything worth articulating, and Chip is talking a mile a minute about once winning \$4,000 at a roulette table. *Chip!* My brain is screaming at him. *Chip, please let's go home!* But Chip doesn't want to go home. He wants to go somewhere where the music is so loud it wipes everything else right out of you, leaves only itself in the dead weight of your limbs. He wants to go somewhere packed with bodies that are like his but not like his. He wants to be surrounded. He wants to drink more, losing gradual sight of himself and being pleasantly swallowed in the night's misty throat. I just want to go back to his house and order a pizza. I want Chip to ask me if I find David Duchovny attractive and for me to sing that "David Duchovny, why don't you love me" song for him and then fall asleep sitting upright with an empty paper plate in my lap. But it isn't up to me. I am being paid for my services. Chip calls the shots.

You can believe in the density of moments. You can think understanding passes between you and another person when really there is nothing – worlds on their separate tracks, planets moving from bed to bed. Here's something true: every time I get drunk I feel like I am in love and right now I am in love with Chip. But in twenty minutes?

I wheel him a few blocks to the loud, rowdy dance club he wants to go to. It's called The Princeton and smells like cheap beer and vomited Fireball. Chip is very drunk – his whole face just one reddish sag. The bartender shouts a greeting at him and tries to make us some sort of special drink, grabbing a bottle of Kahlua off the shelf. Chip stops him, gestures at me.

"She only drinks gin and tonics," he says, which isn't true but still makes me feel understood. Because I do hate Kahlua. I do hate shots with names like "Slippery Nipple"

and “Red-Headed Slut.” I do hate the idea right now of milky liquor sliding down my throat and lingering in my stomach, heavy.

“You okay?” Chip is finally getting a good glimpse of me, as I lean to gather the drinks off the bar.

“Yeah,” I say.

What’s going on here? How have I lost track so suddenly of what is good? How the fuck am I supposed to hold the drinks *and* push the chair? I put one drink in the little cup holder on the back of the chair and hold the other, pushing one-handed. I’m not good at this and I almost push Chip into a couple of backwards-hat-wearing, fake-ID-wielding teenagers. Chip is getting cranky.

“Watch where we’re going,” he slurs at me.

“No backseat driving,” I snap back.

He directs me toward the dance floor: a sea of bodies all touching, all sweating. A lot of skin. He wants to be in the middle of it. The crowd parts around us like a fleshy sea. Chip says, “Excuse me, buddy” to the men and “Excuse me, darlin’” to the women. I say nothing. The mute girl behind the wheelchair. Our presence registers briefly with the people around us: *that drunk dude in the wheelchair and his lady attendant*, then they go back to their standing or swaying or stamping or grinding or whatever it is they’re doing.

Chip wants to be closer to the stage. There’s a DJ up there with headphones half-on, and he looks infantile in his giant t-shirt. He is playing the sort of shit you’d expect from a Jersey Shore town on a Saturday night. It’s ugly and too loud and I’m too drunk. Chip sits like a king on a little throne, bobbing his head, moving what parts he can in time to the music. I hold his drink to his chin. Will there be a night when I drink one too many



and drop Chip on the floor? Am I more afraid of this or of refusing him when he orders me another gin and tonic, orders me to drink, orders me to hold his drink beneath his chin so he can sip from the straw? Blue eyes turned upward: “Don’t make me drink alone” or “Just one more, babe.” It is the only time he ever calls me “babe.” I hate it. But I let it slide every time. Is there a point when I say: *I’ve had enough. You’ve had enough. Let’s go home.* Will I ever be brave enough for this?

I find myself sometimes jealous that Chip has other caregivers. Monday Mandy. I wish sometimes that I was the only one, even though I know I would go crazy if I didn’t have the empty stillness of the beach house to go back to. I wish sometimes that places would disappear after I leave them. Like the Garden of Eden, angels with their crossed swords flaming. Instead, people are always tramping over the floors in the spaces you once lived in, tracking sand in, sweeping it up. Does it mean anything that you are forgotten, so easily? There are people you think of who don’t think of you anymore. Will Chip think about me when the summer ends? Memory is an active thing – something you have to help along. Your own erasure is very possible.

It is easy to pretend the world loves us when really – it just loves us more than the space that would be there if we were absent, the space we occupy, take up, like water in a cup, like piss in a bag –

He is mouthing something at me. I lean down so his lips are close to my ear.

“The bag,” he shouts. “Is it full?”

Again. Yes, you empty and then it fills again. Over and over – the body and what it does. The body full of beer. I lift his pant leg and the bag is bulging. The urine glows faintly like something radioactive, nuclear.

“So?” Chip shouts again. I’ve just been staring at the bag.

“So,” I say. “This shit’s ready to pop. We gotta get you to a bathroom.”

His face is all sag. Red sag with lights playing over it. He shakes his head a little side to side like a sad mule.

“Just let it out on the floor.”

Everyone pressing in. People keep stepping back thinking that the space where Chip sits is empty space and then, startled when they realize a man in a wheelchair occupies that space. We are all at eye level. Chip, alone of all of us here, is at waist level, essentially invisible.

“On the *floor*?” I yell back, hoping that I have misheard him. I feel a sense of time focusing in, adjusting its lens. Something’s eyes are on me. Is this where I draw the line? *No, Chip, we are gonna pee in the restroom like people do.* I’m drunk. Oh god, am I as drunk as Chip? Am I sag? Am I a sagging bag of piss? Yes. But also that fellow in the white tank top. And her and him. All ugly inside our skins. I kneel. I am about to do what I am about to do. The floor is already wet with spill. The bad kind of spill. Cheap beer and vomited Fireball. Maybe even piss. Maybe even the piss of some able-bodied man-child in a backwards hat.

I’m remembering past times of pissing. Crouching in cornfields at night and watching the red blink of an airplane pass overhead. Smelling the oily corn-silk that shimmers, the warm stream making a noise as it hits the soil, a noise like the earth is shifting very slightly to make room for me. Or some cobbled back alley, near the dark solid bulk of a dumpster, its stench making everything sinister and alive.

I am kneeling. I know Chip is looking at me but I won't look at him. I don't want him trying to read my face, the slow drunk unfolding of his eyes saying, "What are you waiting for?" The blue float of them, the quiet press. The tick tick tick of eyes tracking my movements as my hands decide to do what they have done so often.

The urine spreads outward in a gold halo, a loosening; the good kind of spill. The puddle moves, touches the backs of the sneakers of the boy standing in front of us, then moves off to touch a high heel. It moves like a living thing. Seeking.

Chip looks serene and I feel relief, a pressure leaving as if it were my urine on the floor. As if we share a body. The feet of everyone except Chip lift and lower. No one sees me kneeling and holding the valve. No one in this shithole notices the smell of a man's piss covering the floor beneath their feet. Chip looks drunk and content – king on his little throne. The people around us dance happily in his piss. And I'm down still squatting until the bag is empty. I am just doing my job.

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Days and days and days. Always seeming endless when you're in the grip of them. What do we owe each other anyway when all is said and done?

On my last day, we sat close but without touching, like teenagers afraid their parents might walk in at any moment. We saw each other as equals. We wondered at the presence of the other with a sort of blurred gratitude.

At the end of the summer I decided not to replace the beers in the basement of the beach house. They wouldn't be missed. Nor the empty bottle of expensive shampoo I threw away. I did wash all the sheets and make all the beds. Erased myself from the floors. I pulled up the fresh clusters of weeds that were struggling among the stones. I got

in my car and drove the distance back to the Midwest, and Chip went back to teaching boys about God and the economy.

When we said goodbye, I bent down to hug him awkwardly, the same motion I made daily when I went to lift him out of his chair. I presented him with a crumpled Powerball ticket.

“Sorry if I was a pain in the ass,” he said.

“Me too,” I said.

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Walking back, the darkness has lifted and the air is all blue, like the reflection of sky in water. The horror of the bar has already disappeared and we say nothing about any of it. We are friendly again, laughing easily, softly insulting each other.

Outside Chip’s house, I smoke a cigarette, leaning against the railing of the wheelchair ramp. We are looking up at the sky and it’s all littered across with white light. We watch the moon shifting its weight beneath a cloud, and Chip is trying to teach me about distances. What they are. What they mean.

“Let’s say,” he says. “That your mouth is the earth and the end of your cigarette is the moon. How far away do you think the sun is?”

I hold out my arm to its fullest length.

“Not even close,” he says. “It’d be at least as far away as that lamp post.” He lifts an arm to gesture at a flickering streetlight at the end of the cul-de-sac.

“That means The Princeton would be just about at the edge of the solar system and the nearest star would be in Philadelphia.”

I'm watching my cigarette shrink, watching the distances collapse. My eyes are heavy. I feel sleepy and content but don't want to listen to Chip's astronomy lesson right now.

"Isn't it past your bedtime?" I ask, yawning. "It's 3 A.M."

"It's bedtime when I say it's bedtime," Chip says, childishly. He doesn't want to leave the night behind.

The cigarette burns to its end and I stub it out on the railing where it leaves a black smear.

"Apocalypse," I say.

"Armageddon," he says.

We all, each and every one of us, know what it is to be lucky. To be unlucky.

I wheel Chip inside, put him to bed. We lie in the mute darkness, breathing. We reach across the silence to say goodnight. The distance of the room holds us separate, and in that clean unworried space, we sleep.

## Elders

**Monday/Wednesday/Friday**

*Guadalupe, 7:35am*

The trailer was small, even as trailers go. On one end, Guadalupe lived and slept in a single cramped bedroom. On the other, her son's room, a smell like sweat and incense and carpentry breathing from the crack beneath his closed door. Holy, ugly smells. He was never home when I was there, and I'd met him only once. He'd taken an array of fruit down from a bowl on top of the refrigerator and lined them up on the counter. "Mango," he said, pointing with the end of a knife. "Very important."

In the living room, he kept his porno tapes in plain sight because his mother was blind. An unlikely pair of roommates; if they weren't related, it could've been a comedy.

I prepared her mango slices on a white plate, helped her pivot on her single leg from bed to the toilet chair that sat in the middle of her room. Her other leg, amputated just below the knee was always dressed in a single white sock and looked, against the sheet or dangling from the edge of the toilet chair, like a baby's foot.

She knew very little English but would greet me in the mornings with "Jesus loves you," repeating it as I moved about the room, gathering stale pieces of laundry. She listened for hours to an audiobook of the Bible in Spanish, a tape player on her bedside table with huge brailled buttons. Sometimes while she slept, I would try on the brightly

colored accessories that hung in her closet – yellow scarves and purple hats, church things. They smelled clean and old, like attics in expensive houses.

We greeted the day together. I was always clumsy about waking her up, hand on the tininess of her arm while her blind eyes blinked open, milky and juniper-colored. I think I loved her, at least a little, but it's hard to say. I loved that, even someone who spent all their days in bed could try to be good, could open wide her pink mouth to tell me I was loved by the same person she loved, *Jesucristo*, and so we could be connected that way at least. I've always been sentimental early in the morning.

I'm not sure she ever knew my name. Certainly she never knew what I looked like, maybe putting together a picture based on my height and the texture of my voice. I hoped she gave me brown hair, intelligent eyes.

She did know my hands well enough though, when I'd daily peel off her sweaty nightshirt, squeeze a blue washcloth so warm soapy water ran down the gourd-like shape of her. I kept my fingernails trimmed as we'd been instructed in training. Sometimes, she'd sing while I brushed her hair, parted it neatly, braided it long all the way down to her waist. Her hair was thin and tame in my hands, a gray that wanted to be silver.

Sometimes I brought her mango from the kitchen and she demanded something else. I'd bring an assortment of fruits, and she'd feel them all with her hands, sniff them disdainfully like a cat, deem them all unworthy. Once, angry, I thought about stealing her yellow scarf, knowing it would never be missed, thinking, "She never goes anywhere anyway," and "She can't be long for this world" – a horrible thought, guiltily settling the scarf back among all the pretty things she never wore.

I silently asked for her forgiveness while I watched her eat slices of pineapple I'd brought. Her hands, so dainty as she ate, made me think of embroidery.

**9:20am**

I liked the long, solitary drives between clients, how I could privately reset between homes and whatever they held inside them. I'd play the radio so loud it almost hurt, smoke as many cigarettes as I could fit into the commute. I'd find places in my hometown and outside it I'd never known – an old cemetery behind the Wendy's where a few Civil War dead were buried, a watertower they kept repainting in spite of almost nightly fresh graffiti, a farm at one end of a long gravel drive that sold canned peaches, collie puppies, packets of seeds.

If I arrived too early at a client's house, I'd often circle back out into the countryside, park in an empty field and read in the idling car, sun blazing through the windshield to fight the air-conditioning. Books left in the passenger seat would slip from their bindings, glue loosening in the heat; one book, appropriately called *First Light*, came apart in my hands toward the end of a particularly hot day, pages flapping around inside the car that I never bothered to regather. And later, as I drove, stray pages would escape through the open windows, stirring up into tiny cyclones above the blacktop that I'd watch in the rearview mirror, wondering if I'd ever know how that story ended.



*Geneva, 9:40am*

Geneva lived on the eighth floor of a vast public housing complex, and her apartment was crowded with things that she was always telling me would be mine when she died – sewing machines, a broken microwave, tangled windchimes, a guitar-less guitar case, a coffee-stained lace counterpane she claimed was “worth something,” a pair of chinchilla stoles that were bald in places from cigarette burns.

She always promised these things to me after fighting on the phone with her two children.

“That’s it!” she’d shout, flinging the receiver back into its cradle. “I’ve had it with those little shits. I’ve half a mind to leave it all to you.”

I didn’t want any of her things, and in training we’d been strictly instructed not to accept gifts from clients, but I knew it was all the show, made her feel in control. And by the following day, she’d forget all about it.

She shouted everything. She was going deaf and missed the sound of her own voice. I, also, had to shout to be heard, and so when I’d take her grocery shopping, our exchanges echoed around us, the surrounding world overhearing every word, politely trying not to listen and failing. She’d yell to me down the length of an aisle, an impossibly loud, earthquake voice, “WHERE ARE THE PEE PADS?”

Her floors were lined wall-to-wall with blue and white quilted “pee pads,” that somehow, magically, her toy poodle would often manage to miss.

The world, she mostly hated. But that poodle, she loved. Maybe she liked that she could hear it bark, its constant yap shrill enough to crack glass. Like many of the things in her apartment, the dog’s once-white fur had turned an oily earwax color, and it

smelled like milk left out on a humid day. Its name was Butch, but she sometimes called it Samson, sometimes Remus which, I learned, were the names of the two preceding Butches, one of which met its end when her ex-husband accidentally stepped on it. This story was told often, and that fatal footstep was deemed “an accident” depending on her mood.

I never quite knew what was real with her, her stories stretching and fluctuating, and I liked collecting the different versions of events, like a movie that changes every time you watch it. Sometimes her husband left her by going down to the drugstore for a pack of cigarettes, never returning. Sometimes he robbed the drugstore and became an outlaw. Sometimes she was a costume mistress at the Grand Ole Opry and was friendly with Minnie Pearl. And sometimes Minnie Pearl pulled her out on stage to help her sing the harmonies on “Little Trouble in Town.”

She liked to sing hymns around the house, the rousing, boisterous ones like “Onward Christian Soldier” and “Come Ye Saints, Look Here and Wonder.” I asked her once if she was a churchgoer. We were smoking cherry-flavored cigarillos together on her balcony, and she’d pointed to a spot in the air where she claimed she’d had a vision of “our lord and savior” hovering above the dirty courtyard.

“You know what was funny,” she yelled. “He was only three feet tall.”

“I had no idea,” I said. “Never thought of Jesus as a small man.”

“Well that’s where you’re wrong.”

We were silent, smoking. “Who needs church when you’ve seen the real thing,” she said finally. And that was all she ever offered on the subject of religion.

While I cleaned, gathering up the soiled pee pads and stuffing them into trash bags, she'd sit in her recliner and watch whatever was on TV. Once, when I was still wearing yellow rubber gloves and reeking of Pinesol, she waved me over to sit on the ottoman and watch the last few minutes of *Escape from Alcatraz*.

"This way," she told me, "if they ever put me in a nursing home, I'll know how to escape."

The world, she mostly hated. But she loved me, loved taking my elbow as we crossed the Walmart parking lot together, shouting happily into my ear "PEOPLE WILL THINK YOU'RE MY GRANDKID;" loved to string plastic beads into bracelets that I'd keep in my glove compartment, slip onto my wrist before I entered her apartment building. "There's just no bullshit in you," she told me once, and "You're a good girl," she told me often. It felt good to be loved by someone who didn't love easily.

On my last day of work, we took pictures together with her Polaroid, taped them up on her fridge. She called me a week later and left a booming message on my answering machine: "I've had it with those ungrateful brats," she shrieked. "I'm putting you in the will!"

Her voice angry but somehow joyous. That was the last I heard from her.

***12:15pm***

In the cemetery behind Wendy's, I'd eat my lunch, sitting on the low stone benches, pulling apples and smashed sandwiches out of a paper sack, a chocolate frosty turning to cool soup in its yellow cup beside me. I ate fast, not because I was in a hurry,

but because birds roosted in the trees overhead, their purple shit occasionally staining the pages of the book in my lap.

“A little shit never hurt anybody,” the woman who trained us would have said.

Her name was Mary, and at the beginning of the summer, a class of ten potential “homemakers” (as we were so quaintly called) met every day for a month in a brick office building beside the railroad tracks. She’d pause when the freight trains passed through town, seeming to hold her breath, puffing out her cheeks comically until the horn and clatter stopped echoing, and she’d pick up where she left off:

“These people like to talk about their faith, about the people they love and who love them. They like to tell their stories. You’ll need to *listen*. Listening is a big part of your job description. They’ll almost always surprise you with something. Being surprised on a daily basis is a big part of your job description. It won’t always be easy. Some days you’ll be tired and cranky and you’ll say to yourself: ‘Why can’t Martha just shut the hell up?’ But you have to remember: when you leave a home, you’ll move off happily into the rest of your day. They stay. They wait for you to come back the next day. Some of these people will see no other face but yours in the space of a week.”

***Cheryl Lynn, 12:45pm***

By noon, the day seemed to hurt in places, like a tongue feeling at a sore inner cheek. The heat was saliva and it broke you down – ducking in and out of air-conditioned spaces like trying to keep out of a downpour. But there was no rain – only the afternoon threat of thunder, far-off heat lightning, Cheryl Lynn turning up the volume on her television so the voices on the Weather Channel could tell her what was going on out

there. The screen showed one of those temperature maps of the country, all orange and red and yellow.

“It’s hot as hell everywhere,” she said, matter-of-factly. Then: “Ain’t nothing to do about it.”

Bored, she switched to “Matlock.” Bored again, she switched to a Lifetime movie called “Too Young to be a Dad,” settling finally on a cooking show where hands moved greasily over the bodies of plucked chickens.

We shared the space of the room – a ripe tinny smell, like canned vegetables. A cat that made my nose run nestled against my thigh. At 1:15, Cheryl Lynn woke up hungry in her easy chair. The cooking show’d made her crave fried chicken. I told her I’ve never made fried chicken before.

“That’s okay. I’ll eat it even if it’s bad,” she promised.

She yelled instructions while I banged around in the kitchen: “Crumble old bread with your hands and mix in the seasoning.” The drumsticks seemed awkward and unwieldy in the pan. I kept sneezing into the crook of my elbow because of the cat.

I brought the chicken finally and, as promised, she ate it. I did not watch her eat – watched “Matlock” instead, watched the cat licking itself, watched my own hands in my lap sticky with crumbs and chicken oils. I got up to wash them, grabbed a handful of napkins and two cans of soda, and returning to the living room, I caught sight of her: face in hands, shoulders shaking, beginning to sob the way amateur actors cry in high school plays – high-pitched and forceful.

“Shit,” I said, standing there with the napkins and soda. Then: “What’s wrong, Cheryl Lynn?”

She lowered her hands. She'd smeared chicken grease and snot all over her face.

"I miss my husband," she told me when I handed her a napkin. And then, the same thing she'd said about the weather earlier: "Ain't nothing to be done about it."

**2:45pm**

Another drive. The steering wheel loose and easy in my hands. I tried not to carry them with me into the hot closeness of the car, their worries, thinking of the spaces that held them, not moving from bed or chair or sofa for days on end while I moved with such ease, lucky, speeding through yellow lights and spinning, almost reckless, out onto the blacktop with the radio hammering against me – light and heat everywhere, a golden film of pollen on everything.

I knew only what pieces of their lives they chose to share, but they read their audience well, caught onto what interested me. I wrote a lot of it down in a little clothbound notebook, limp from the humidity, parking in shaded drives and scribbling melodramatic observations like: *What could be lonelier than trying to communicate?* I tried to keep meticulous track of each of their lives, worried they might somehow blur together. I felt sort of guilty about it, like I was spying, describing Cheryl Lynn's face all mucked with chicken crumbs and tears. And by the end of the summer, I'd broken a lot of the rules printed in bold on a handout we'd been given in training.

**#1. Never eat with clients** – Ava refusing to pick up her fork unless I sat down with her, fixed myself a plate. "I don't like to eat alone," she told me. "People shouldn't have to eat alone."

**#2. Never accept gifts from clients** – The pink and blue and white beads Geneva so carefully strung onto loops of plastic twine, hands shaking and beads scattering across the tabletop.

**#3. Never administer medicine of any kind, including pills, topical creams, or enemas** – Adrianna’s nurse only came once a week; her son’s job kept him away 28 days at a time. She had a sore place below her left buttock that she was too stiff and sore to reach herself, a bottle of prescribed ointment. If not me, then who?

**#4. Never photograph your clients or allow them to take pictures of you** – Yellow disposable cameras on kitchen countertops and trying to do a good job of saying goodbye. “My memory’s not good and I don’t want to forget you, sweetie.” Holding the camera out at arm’s length to take selfies – grinning young face beside grinning old face. It was hard to see the harm in that.

***Mr. Cox, 3:15pm***

Always stretched to his full length on the couch, cane beside him on the floor, he napped through reruns of “Arthur,” or “Clifford the Big Red Dog” while in the bedroom I stripped his bed, replaced a set of black silk sheets with a set of red silk sheets, edging dirty magazines back under the bed with the side of my foot.

I’d run the vacuum, exploring the house that way, room by room. I once opened a closed door to find a room with mirrored walls, a single barber’s chair in the center of the floor, hair in piles and drifts across the floor. I paused on the threshold, feeling I’d come upon something somehow secret, sacred, a world not meant for me.

“You mind sweeping up in there?” Mr. Cox called from his place on the couch.

The hair trembled in the dustpan, seeming to breathe. I carefully lowered myself into the barber's chair, spun in an arc to watch in the mirror: a sweaty face, also spinning.

It was a mystery. I never saw anyone leaving or entering the house, never, at any time, even saw Mr. Cox stand up from the couch, but regularly, new piles of hair would appear, soft and billowy, beneath the chair.

One week, Mr. Cox's power got shut off, and I did all my cleaning in the hot dark – the black sheets billowing in the dim room, finding the shadowy corners of the room with the nose of the vacuum cleaner, bumping against things softly, trying to force sight by squinting, and opening the door of the mirrored room and waiting for my eyes to adjust in order to see the tufts of hair, little darker patches of darkness, like sleeping animals.

During that week, Mr. Cox kept very still on the couch, sweat dewing his forehead, sparkling in the darkness where stripes of light fell slantwise through the lowered blinds. He stared at the blank TV screen, at the space where, if the electricity came back, "Arthur" or "Clifford" would suddenly appear.

Toward the end of the week, Mr. Cox asked me to clean out all the spoiled food from the refrigerator. The fridge door sucking open, a dead smell breathed itself out into the kitchen, and I pulled the collar of my shirt up to cover my nose and mouth. Looking over to where Mr. Cox was staring at the blank TV screen, I had to tell myself, "If you don't do this for him, no one else will."

With gloved hands, I began pulling out moist cartons and tossing them, beginning to realize with an uneasy feeling, that the walls of the refrigerator had a hazy, mottled look, like fingers of seagrass moving underwater. Swiping with a sponge and examining



it beneath the beam of a flashlight, I saw what appeared to be grains of white rice. And then, a sick lurch; the rice moved.

I didn't tell Mr. Cox about the maggots. And I don't think he even thanked me when I left. But that's how it went sometimes: you do what you do unseen, and afterward you feel nothing, just drained and numb.

Afterward, I told people dramatically, "I don't believe in hell, but if I did, I think it would be something like that: just wiping forever at swarms of maggots, while an old man stares at a blank TV screen."

### **Saturday/Sunday**

#### ***Adrianna, 10:30am***

A Jehovah's Witness, she kept my car well-stuffed with pamphlets and crumpled issues of *The Watchtower*. She was one of those vast women who moved like noiseless ships. She wore pinafore aprons over house dresses as if nothing had changed since the 50s, and maybe it hadn't. She liked reality television though: "Wife Swap" and "Sixteen and Pregnant." She spoke about herself as if sharing gossip, told me that watermelon and artichokes are good aphrodisiacs, that singing is good exercise for the lungs.

She lived in a sunny duplex with a flower garden out front. Sometimes I'd arrive and find her beautiful son, John, on the couch with his feet up on the coffee table.

Adrianna had six children that all lived elsewhere and John, the youngest at twenty-seven, was the only one who lived and worked close by. He was a soft-spoken towboat pilot who spent a month at a time out on the river, would come home smelling like good

mud and wet air. I was sort of in love with him, quietly brought him dishes of watermelon, washed his shirts.

Driving across town to the Kroger, Adrianna would talk in a flood about the Catholic orphanage where she spent most of her childhood – how the nuns wouldn't let them shower naked, their drenched underwear chafing all day beneath their clothes, drying like plaster around their legs. She told me about the End Times, Jesus coming with a sword to wipe out all the unbelievers, giving the earth over to the Jehovah's Witnesses and heaven to every other denomination.

“But I just can't believe those nuns will be in heaven,” she said.

She invited me constantly to go to church with her. And I'd always ask shyly if John would be there, then, depending on her reply, would tell her I'd think about it.

She spoke so lovingly of the apocalypse that there was something almost comforting about it. After I left, I sent her a postcard with an image of a clocktower on it, and she wrote me back, just the once, to say, “He wants you in his Kingdom, and I hope you'll find your way to Him. Time is running out.”

***12:30pm***

The weekends felt sleepy and slow, and I drove with less urgency, letting the road unspool easily beneath the car, listening to some soft-spoken program on NPR. Mostly my clients didn't want me to do much cleaning on the weekends. They'd watch me dusting their tchotchkes, clinking around in corner hutches and say, finally, “Sit down you're giving me a headache.”

Sometimes I'd take piles of their laundry to the local laundromat, huge blue and gray comforters I'd stuff into the front loading machines. In my memory I was always the only person in there, treating myself from the vending machines while the dryers whirred hugely. I'd sit in stray sunbeams reading giant gluey novels with cracked spines, drowsily propping my chin on my hand, dreamy, sedate. I might think of my friends beering on some lakeshore and briefly wish I were elsewhere, then think, "No. Really, this is fine."

***Ava, 1:45pm***

Ava loved soap operas, tried to fill me in on the storylines, but I never seemed to know what was going on. She loved fresh produce, and lived in Amish country, so we'd drive out to the farms together where, at roadside stands, she'd weigh tomatoes in her hand.

Sometimes her friends would come over in the afternoon to chainsmoke and play cards. I think they liked Pinochle best but settled for Gin Rummy when I was there since it's all I knew how to play. We sat heavily in our chairs, the women gossiping and reminiscing about being "long-legged farm brats," falling out of fruit trees when they were young. A rich fragrant tobacco fog hovered above the card table like a visitation, and we ate fresh bread with thick hunks of braunschweiger, a log of cheese on the tabletop growing smaller, a glossy pitcher of iced tea with cupfuls of sugar poured in, still undissolved at the bottom like sand in a tidepool.

If we were alone, she'd talk about her son. He was only thirty years old but had suffered a massive stroke and could no longer speak. He used to play the piano at their

church, would record songs in the backroom of her house, but now his hands were heavy and unresponsive.

“The doctor says it’s 50/50 whether he talks again, but no more piano either way. No chance.”

She talked about her own story as if it were one of the soap operas she loved, her shrewish, conniving daughter-in-law who would tell Ava, “Richard doesn’t want you constantly visiting. It worries him and disrupts his routine.”

“What routine?” Ava would say. “He sits in a chair and drools all day.”

Once, putting the groceries away, she bent down to put a carton of eggs in the fridge and cried out in pain, her knees creaking and the eggs slipping from her grip. I stooped to wipe up the yolky splatter and she leaned, wincing, against the counter.

“You know what I pray?” she asked me. I shook my head.

“I pray every single day that the pain will be *exactly* as much as I can take. No more. No less.”

### **3:30pm**

Between clients, I sometimes stopped for ice cream, gas station slushies. Greeting my clients with sugary hellos, my tongue blue in my mouth.

It’s strange to think I was nineteen that summer, pretending wisdom beyond my years by spending long hours listening to aging voices. In training, they’d told us things like, “You are *essential* to these people,” made us feel chosen and elect, almost as if we’d heard a calling, responded to it, as if sharing a routine with someone could be its own religion.

***Barb, 3:50pm***

Barb was the only one, out of all of them, that I actually dreaded. At sixty-one, she was also the youngest. She wore hurried makeup, charcoal smudges beneath her eyes and garish pink smears clumping in the cleft above her upper lip. She dyed her hair a chemical red, and from the moment I entered the house to the moment I left, she talked ceaselessly about every wrong ever done to her by another human being: ex-husbands and their new wives, the sister whose funeral she'd refused to attend, her deadbeat slob of a father, her manipulative whore of a mother "who'd always favored Jenny over me." She sat all day, in the crusty dark of her house, and stewed, chewing the lipstick from her lips, reapplying more.

Her house was filled floor-to-ceiling with newspapers and sofa cushions and empty water bottles and things she'd bought herself at garage sales and then forgotten: toasters, baseball caps, snowball kitten jigsaw puzzles, manicure kits. She'd boarded up the windows, "so the neighbors can't look in," she said, then painted over the boards: a dark, military brown. She claimed the man who lived across the street kept a camera trained on her house.

"What on earth for?" I asked.

"Surveillance," she said hissily, as if this explained everything.

She made me realize that people who refuse to engage in conversation, who will talk about themselves without care for the listener, hold great power. And she clung to that power; it was the only one she had left. I never felt I was helping her by listening. And I couldn't escape by cleaning; she followed me into the rooms and stood over me

while I worked. She told me about her glory days as a hand model, about the rich husband who'd bought her furs that his mistress had later broken into her house to steal. There were a lot of stories of stealing. Her son had once broken into her house with his girlfriend while she slept upstairs and "robbed her blind."

"He even unscrewed the light bulbs from all the lamps," she said. "And took those."

Once, driving her into town to pay her water bill, she'd demanded I pull over next to a chainlink fence bordering a trailer park. Pointing at a group of children playing, her long red fingernail quivering, she said, "You see that kid?"

"Yeah," I said, afraid.

"That kid looks *just* like my son."

I said nothing.

"I'll bet his whore lives in this trailer park."

Driving away, I realized that, when she spoke, I was actually afraid of what she was going to say. Years later, long after I quit working for the agency, I'd still sometimes drive down her street, and feel an ugly chill when I passed the brown bulk of her house, caught sight of a small frothy-haired figure standing on tiptoe and peering over her fence, to see if the neighbors were spying.

**5:45pm**

I thought a lot on those drives about what I'd be like when I was old. A part of me wanted to be wild and crotchety like Geneva, the sort to reinvent my past freely, the kind of old lady you might expect to start snowball fights with adolescents in parking lots. I

liked the idea of having a regular crew of visitors, like Ava, feasting and smoking cartons of Pall Malls and talking shit. But it felt more likely that I'd be solitary, surrounded by stacks of books, loose in their bindings. If I prayed anything that summer, I think it was that I not become a Barb, paranoid and resentful, wearing the carpets down with worried pacing and never feeling safe in the ugly little fortress I'd made of my house. The future still felt open like that – like clothes you could try on to see how they fit, like settling Guadalupe's hats on my head, turning to look from different angles, pleased and sort of shocked by the sight of my own face.

***Mr. and Mrs. Wright, 6:00pm***

Mr. and Mrs. Wright lived in a small, tidy house in Murphysboro, and my entire job there consisted of holding Mrs. Wright's hand, the slim feathery weight of it in my palm, while she watched old episodes of "The Lawrence Welk Show" on PBS. This calmed her.

On my first night there, Mr. Wright, a tall, slim, dapper man, impossibly calm, showed me the heavy links of chain looped around the door handle.

"I just don't want you to be shocked," he said. "It's for her safety. Sometimes, she tries to escape."

For a couple of weeks, I simply sat beside her on the sofa, brought her orange juice which she swallowed neatly, and held her hand while dancers' skirts swirled on the TV, a calm in the whole soft air of the house. Mr. Wright might grab a few minutes of easy sleep in the bedroom while Mrs. Wright, always alert and gentle, watched the up and down of Lawrence Welk's white baton, the sheen of the orchestra. Sometimes, she would

bring my hand to her lips, kiss it with a tidy little peck, never taking her eyes from the screen.

“Sometimes she might be confused about who you are,” Mr. Wright had told me early on. “It’s best, we’ve found, to just go along with it.”

I was always in awe of them. How kind and affectionate they were to one another – always cooing ‘darling’ and ‘sweetie,’ seeming to relish the nearness of one another, Mrs. Wright always reaching her arms out to him when he moved past her chair, leaning over to say to me while he was still in earshot, “I’m a lucky woman.”

There was only once, Mr. Wright greeted me at the door, slowly unlooping the chain, and said, “She’s having a difficult time today.” She’d refused to take her medicine, and while we sat together on the couch, she seemed nervous, fluttering, not watching the screen but following Mr. Wright with narrow eyes while he busied himself in the kitchen, organizing pills in their little plastic many-doored containers. She turned to me every now and then,

“Sissy,” she whispered. “We gotta get out of here.”

I squeezed her hand, tried to direct her attention back to the screen.

“You see that man in there,” she said, pointing to her husband. “That’s a bad man.”

“That’s Joe,” I said softly. “That’s your husband.”

“He’s a bastard!” she shrieked.

Mr. Wright peered in from the kitchen. “Now, Judy,” he said. “You’re all right.”

She pulled on my arm, leaned over to whisper directly into my ear, “You ever been raped, Sissy?” I stared at her blankly in horror. “You will if you stick around here,”



she said, and reading my horrified expression as solidarity, she tried to yank me to my feet while lunging toward the front door, fumbling frantically with the chain.

“Let me out of here, you filthy old man!” her hands bruising against the heavy chain, and I watched Mr. Wright slowly cross the room toward her, very carefully unwind the chain. She watched him without speaking, already pacified a little by the promise of freedom. He motioned for me to stand beside her, and his hands trembled as he opened the door. “Hold her hand,” he said to me. And we walked out to the driveway. I helped her into the back seat of their 1971 Lincoln Continental and fastened her seatbelt for her. I climbed beside her, holding tight to her hand, and she sat very quietly, peering out the window as we backed down the drive.

We drove slowly alongside a span of wheat fields, and I watched her face relax as we passed distant farmhouses, birds spiraling up from endless telephone lines. She looked out, and Mr. Wright, at first driving in silence, watched her face in the rearview mirror gradually soften more and more. Her grip on my hand loosened a little, and Mr. Wright began naming the places we drove past. “That’s where Bobby and Marlene live,” he said, or “There used to be a school there, remember?” She said nothing, but watched the landscape flow past, breathing calm and steady. Finally, turning into an empty parking lot, he pointed toward a chapel with a white steeple.

“That’s the church where we were married,” he said. “Fifty-three years ago.” Mrs. Wright blinked, still holding my hand, her face soft and smiling.

At the time, my daily role, my task, my bread-and-butter was caregiving, but what I did for a living wasn’t *real* care – entering a life for three hours at a time, making a sandwich, vacuuming. Real care was constant action, the daily choice that, even if your

loved one is screaming that she hates you, even if she's afraid and shrinks from your touch and screams that you're filthy and evil, that you will wait patiently for the lucid moments when she knows who you are, and kisses your palm, and calls you 'darling,' tells you how lucky she is. You start to realize the horror in your life, in the lives of others, but also, that you're still somehow okay.

Mr. Wright turned to look at the two of us, leaning together in the backseat.

"What do you say, Judy? Ready to go home?"

She nodded, and we all seemed to breathe with relief, soothed in the loose air of the car as dusk gathered around us. We drove back, the three of us drowsing over the dim roads. Mr. Wright switching the headlights on and Mrs. Wright's head lowering onto my shoulder.

## A Brief History of Dog Walking

**dog walker** *n.* a person who walks a dog or dogs, esp. as an occupation.

1887 *Chicago Tribune* 30 Dec. 7/7 A Dog-Walker. The following advertisement appears in a Boston paper: 'Wanted—A person to take a dog to walk.'

Those were the dog days; waking each morning as the heat woke, lifted its head, licked itself. I had answered an advertisement, unpacked a pair of nice shoes, and showing up for the interview, the two women had laughed at me: “You can’t walk dogs in a *skirt*,” they said.

Their questions all shifted around animals. They wanted me to convince them that I was a dog-savvy dog-lover, and so I spoke of the dogs I’d known, family pets: a lab-chow mix buried in the backyard beneath a tiny windmill where sometimes, now, my parents see a red fox crouching to pee. We’d tried to plant eidelweiss seeds there that my sister had brought back from Switzerland but only one had bloomed, just once, and then never again. I did not tell the dogwalking women this.

Instead, I told them that once a year the dog was allowed to eat hot dogs and birthday cake. I told them that my sister and I grew up believing that all animals could talk on Christmas Eve, at midnight, and we used to stay up, staring into the dog’s mouth, waiting for him to speak. He never did.

The two women liked me, ignored my pencil skirt, bought me a coffee though it was too hot outside to drink it. We sat at a little wrought iron table along the sidewalk,

and I seemed to be the only one sweating. “You’ll get used to New Orleans heat,” they said. It was July. I don’t remember what I said to them, only, toward the end of the interview when it started to become clear that they would hire me, I’d blurted out for unknown reasons: “Dogs are really just like people. Some of them are delightful, but some of them are just plain assholes.”

The two ladies looked at me, blinking, and then started to laugh.

\*

***like (or proud as) a dog with two tails:*** very proud or pleased, delighted.

I felt fit for the silence; you could speak to the dogs but they never spoke back. If they were beautiful, I told them they were beautiful. I touched them and they would either ignore my touch or make some small movement of love – tongue or tail. I would unlock doors and call out the dogs’ names – stranger’s doors, stranger’s dogs – and in that moment I’d rescue them from their solitude. I’d suddenly and temporarily become their whole world. They were always grateful.

I’d hold the leash, fasten their harnesses, sometimes take a velvet ear between two fingers. “Who’s a good boy?” I’d ask them. Or girl. *Who is good?* My question meant nothing to them; they knew no goodness beyond me.

We’d move through the heat, through the common landscape. They knew it better than I did, offered to share it with me by lingering over certain empty bottles and garden plots. They’d call my attention to things that other dogs had touched. I remained indifferent. It felt good to be indifferent toward something that was so important to them.

I became aware of what I could smell: the oily trees, the moisture of dumpsters, car exhaust – chemical and mossy, and the cold brush of air conditioning as we passed the church and the doors opened – children in matching t-shirts – the smell of a vast cold room. But the dogs, the dogs could smell *everything*, and did smell everything – nose never afraid to touch small piles. Things leave trails, creatures make themselves known to other creatures. A body is its scent. *I am scent. I am body.*

By the time a week had passed, I was already tired of thinking this way.

\*

***to work like a dog:*** to work extremely hard.

I had been living in New Orleans two months when I started walking dogs. I didn't really know the city yet, but I'd learn. I was given a huge ziplock bag filled with house keys that I kept in the glove compartment of my car. Each key a plastic label attached with the dog's name clearly printed: "Roscoe," "Dexter," "Maggie Mae," "Luna," "Harriet." On the weekends, I did overnight pet-sitting, packed a small bag with pajamas and toothbrush. I brought always a six-pack of beer and drank in little sips while watching Turner Classic Movies. It was solitary, but the good kind of solitary. And the dogs were company.

I usually had between eight and ten walks a day. I developed a "uniform," that consisted of ankle-high boots, denim shorts, a tank top that was either black, red, purple, navy blue, or white with black stripes depending on the day. I kept an umbrella in the car for when it rained.

I listened to audiobooks while I walked. In the course of the year I was employed by Uptown Girls Pet Services, I listened to the following books:

*The Known World* by Edward P. Jones  
*Train Dreams* by Denis Johnson  
*Orlando* by Virginia Woolf  
*In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote  
*The Violent Bear it Away* by Flannery O'Connor  
*The Pale King* by David Foster Wallace  
*Anywhere But Here* by Mona Simpson  
*Butcher's Crossing* by John Williams  
*The Easter Parade* by Richard Yates  
*London Fields* by Martin Amis  
*A Field Guide to Getting Lost* by Rebecca Solnit  
*The Infatuations* by Javier Marias  
*The White Album* by Joan Didion  
*Pulphed* by John Jeremiah Sullivan  
*Mr. Bridge* by Evan S. Connell  
*There's Something I Want to Tell You* by Charles Baxter  
All those Elena Ferrante books

I think, now, that I didn't really hear a single word of them.

\*

***a hair of the dog that bit you:*** an alcoholic drink taken to cure a hangover. Hence elliptically, as ***a hair of the dog.***

July 16. Overnight pet-sit w/ Dexter & Kinsey. 7903 Zimpel St.

A blind diabetic thirteen-year-old schnauzer named Dexter. A healthy four-year-old schnauzer named Kinsey. I prepare dinner for them: scoop of dry, scoop of wet, microwave for fifteen seconds, mix well. It actually smells really good.

I walk three blocks to the pizza place on Oak, order a pie with pineapple and jalapenos, drink a beer while I'm waiting.

The owners said they'd be fine on their own for a while in the evenings. So later, I call my roommate, Sara, and we go to a bar in that neighborhood. It's lit with red Christmas lights. We drink too much and Sara comes back to the house with me. We sit on lawn furniture and smoke cigarettes and she ends up passing out on the couch watching *Seinfeld* reruns.

In the morning, I go downstairs to get breakfast ready for the dogs, and Sara, hearing me banging around in the kitchen, stirs and says, "Dear God, what a night."

I make her a beer-mosa. High Life and orange juice, and the dogs sniff at the sweet drink. She lowers the glass and lets them lap, just one sugary tongue-ful each, and I shove them away, stern and frantic. "Dexter's diabetic," I yell at her.

"Sorry," she says. "I didn't know."

\*

The names of dogs that, in the course of that year, I left alone in order to go drinking with friends: Ollie, Winnie, Monkey, Moonpie, Fitz, Ellie, Peyton, Toby, Handsome Rob, Sophie, Junior, Jack, Drake, Grizzly, Ruby, Rosie, Jackson, Lily, Bo, Buddy, Roscoe, Bear, Lucy, Tito, Beignet, Bella, Kringle, Dixie, Boomer, Dexter, Kinsey.

\*

***to lead a dog's life***: to lead a life of misery, or of miserable subservience. So ***to lead (a person) a dog's life***: to subject (a person) to such an existence.

July 29. Overnight pet-sit w/ Roscoe. 8415 Spruce St.

Watching *Gone With the Wind* on cable with a German Shepherd mix named Roscoe. Whenever he feels I'm not paying enough attention to him, he scratches wildly at the corners of the room, pretends to dig. This seems appropriate. Like Scarlet O'Hara, Roscoe feels trapped in his own life. He calms down when I sing him a song that goes

*I guess you'd say:  
What can make me feel this way?  
Roscoe. Roscoe. Roscoe.  
Talkin' bout: Roscoe.*

When I stop singing, he resumes scratching, deep clawmarks appearing along the baseboard. "Fucking fucker!" We go out into the backyard, and I throw a green ball for him, while still trying to get glimpses of the TV through the living room window. Atlanta is in flames. Rhett and Scarlet navigating the burning streets in a wagon. I hold a mostly empty beer bottle slack at my side, and the night is very damp. Roscoe's fur when he comes near reeks like a glass of milk on a humid day. The upstairs neighbors' kid has left some toys in the yard and Roscoe destroys two of them – an incredible Hulk action figure and a Tonka truck – before I realize what's going on, chasing him around, failing and dramatic, Scarlet O'Hara all over again.

I have been told very expressly not to let Roscoe sleep in the bed with me. He has his own bed in the corner. But I, of course, ignore this. He sleeps curled at the end, licks himself to sleep. I want to try this out – it seems soothing – but when I try licking the back of my own hand, I feel weird about it. My last thought before sleep – not a good



one, not profound – is that if I had to deal with all the shit Scarlet had to deal with, I probably would have slit my wrists in a bathtub by now.

\*

[after Latin *canis caninam non est* ( Varro *De Lingua Latina* VII. 32)] **dog does not eat dog**: people of the same calling, origin, etc., do not deliberately harm one another; conversely **(let) dog eat dog**

August 18. Midday dogwalk w/ Maggie Mae. 808 Lurline Dr.

Walking an obese chocolate lab with a gray face through a rundown neighborhood. There's a scraped-out brick-pile ruin at the end of the block where a colony of feral cats lurk and lounge and fleas breed happily inside their ears. I've been told not to walk in that direction, so I head east, the road curling around toward the train tracks. Maggie will sometimes stop in the middle of the sidewalk, refusing to move, and I have to shove her from behind like a donkey to get her going again. She looks wonderingly at other dogs when they bark at her from behind their fences. She does not understand herself as one of them. She, like so many of them, thinks she is people.

Hers is the nicest house on the block, shrouded in shrubs, with a single orange tree in the yard. I plucked one of the oranges once, ate it while we walked. It was good.

Headphones on, I'm half-listening to an audiobook. A historical novel about former slaves who themselves became slave owners in antebellum Virginia. It, also, is good. The voice of the man reading is rich and lilting; the sorrows he describes seem very distant, soft-edged and drifting. I feel sleepy, the sun a white squint through trees. Maggie Mae pauses to eat something from the ground. It is, undoubtedly, poop. I slap gently at her rump, but she continues eating and I guess a little poop won't kill her.

We pass by a house where a man stands on his porch, shirtless and swaying, holding a Coors that sloshes audibly when he moves. He sees me, sees Maggie Mae, takes a swig, and calls out to us.

“Hey!” he shouts. “Hey, what kind of dog is that?”

“She’s a chocolate lab,” I yell back.

He pauses, watching us for a flickering moment, before shouting again the single word:

“Who!?”

\*

***you can't (also it is hard to) teach an old dog new tricks:*** when one is accustomed to doing things in a certain way, it is difficult to change or adapt.

September 3. Overnight pet-sit w/ Luna. 2372 Constance St.

In a stranger’s house, I find myself washing my hands again and again – the smell of strange soap erasing nothing, only adding an extra layer, a skin that hovers just above and makes the dog sneeze.

Crumbs sit alone on the edges of plates and, at some point, the dog has gotten ahold of a bag of rubber bands and shredded it. The floor is covered all over with loops of color.

The children who live here like to draw pictures of animals and the refrigerator is covered with them. One of the drawings shows a sea otter curled up in a large bird’s stomach. The artist has cut photos of orangutans and hippos from magazines and pasted them over the bird’s feet, as if the bird were in need of other creatures to root it, keep it

from flight. I stare at it while making myself a cup of instant coffee, and wonder: Was the otter swallowed or it is about to be born? What does it mean that I don't know what to eat anymore?

I put things in my mouth like a baby and taste the soil beneath my fingernails – soil I watched the dog try to eat when it was still crusted in the flowerpot, wondering if she knows something I don't, knows all that is good about eating potting soil. She bites her own leg, tries to chew my hand, tastes her urine where it gleams bright on the floor, tries to be everywhere, tries to move so quickly that her heart brings itself forward just beneath the skin, almost a glow of reddish speed through her white fur. I hold her still, feel the heart gradually slowing. I feel cruel keeping speed from her when she loves it so much, but I cannot watch it anymore.

The hallways in this house are long. They keep their books along the walls so you can grab one as you move between rooms. In a child's bedroom, a telescope stands on three legs, and I am suddenly jealous of its steady sight. I try to look at Luna through the lens but she moves too fast and is too close. I love her best when she gnaws at my hand and I say, "No!" sharply and then she very gradually makes her bite gentler and gentler until it is a prickle of thistles, a wet noise on the skin.

What we move toward does not know us. It never does. I try new grips, pinching the soft flesh at the back of her neck. I look through the front window when I hear a car breaking apart on the street. I put an extra blanket on the bed, read postcards that weren't written to me, kiss the soft place behind the ears of a stranger's dog and pretend she is mine.

\*

**to send (or throw, cast, etc.) to the dogs:** to send to destruction or ruin; to throw out, discard as worthless.

September 19. Midday dogwalk w/ Harriet. 8416 Freret St.

Shirt and shorts are soaked and heavy with sweat. We cross Leake Avenue to walk along the green spine of the levee. Harriet lunges with her full weight at cars, bicyclists, and other dogs. I keep tight control on the leash, looped once around my wrist. Always a reddish mark appears there after our walks and stays with me all day, slowly fading back to white.

She is beautiful. I tell her so. A yellow-eyed pitbull mixed with some unknown orange and lanky breed. She is loud and wild and likes to eat paper. She is good at it, sneaky; the mail comes through a slot in the door and she drags a single item back to her crate to snack on, very methodically, chewing around the edges like a rodent.

In high school, I used to watch a boy in my English class tear off long strips from his textbooks, roll them in his palms, place them on his tongue, chew and swallow. It seemed very artful, a ritual of boredom, of concentration.

Harriet's owner is a school teacher who leaves me long elaborate notes about what to do should Harriet consume a large quantity of paper. In her bathroom cabinet, a gorgeous array of multivitamins in colorful bottles. Occasionally, I'll knock one into my palm, swallow with tapwater cupped in my hands. In the bathroom trash: used condoms, cotton swabs gently browned by make-up, a well-thumbed issue of *People*.

\*

***to die like a dog***: to die a disgraceful or miserable death; also ***to die a dog's death***.

October 27. Overnight pet-sit w/ Dexter & Kinsey. 7903 Zimpel St.

There are constellations of stains on countertops. There are deep marks in the butter. A single dog hair beneath the eyelid that bends my sight, sifts out certain colors. I try to blink it away. I count the number to steps that must be climbed in order to carry the blind dog up to bed. He waits in the crook of my arm like snow that hides in folds, his milk-thistle hair like hanging moss and old feathers. He needs insulin shots twice a day. 6am and 6pm. The clock of his body, revolving door of need.

We, all three of us: Dexter, Kinsey, and I, are hungry for sleep.

Their owner, a retired lawyer, lives alone. I think about what it would be like to live alone in a big house like this one, going upstairs then downstairs again – room to room with each movement like a separate holiday, the sun slanting like fish mid-leap and the dogs following close behind until they are too old to follow, must be carried up the stairs.

Eventually, they would die and I would move through the rooms alone again. They would pass away and be replaced by other dogs, and so on and so on until my own end.

We remember better when we are alone. The memories that strike me now: lake-swimming in summer and looking up through my hair to the roof of water; my mother telling me about going to a cathedral when she was alone in Chicago one weekend; my father and I sorting through boxes in the storage shed and him deciding on that moment as the moment to tell me that my grandmother was alone when she died. “I feel bad,” he

said, “about how it happened.” I wanted to tell him he couldn’t always be in that hospital room, waiting, waiting for death, but I didn’t say anything, watched instead a large spider measuring a corner.

The memories are loudest while I open this stranger’s cupboards, drink old milk, eat pickles straight from the jar. I look through things; I open the closets and run my hands over shirts on hangars. I lift the dust ruffle and peer beneath the bed at the stacks of magazines, wonder if any of them are sexy. Sometimes, I will find, on high shelves or beneath the bed, something that I feel was meant only for me: a pair of ancient roller skates that somehow fit perfectly, a letter written to a sister and never sent, an amethyst teardrop pendant with the words engraved: *For Marta – Today. Tomorrow. Always.*

This is too private, and always I feel guilty for digging. Blind dog as my witness, I sing to him by way of apology:

*When Dexter calls my name, it’s like a little prayer.  
I’m down on my knees, I wanna take you there.*

I am never tempted to steal. Except for the vitamins. The milk, the pickles. Things that will not be missed or counted. But I am never struck my desire for the things themselves when I find them, rather for the act of reaching, the simple spaces I can look into, layers of dust you come to know as sweet marks of time; a long look into good, strong nightfall.

\*

*colloq. to see a man about a dog*: used euphemistically as a vague excuse for leaving to keep an undisclosed appointment, or (now freq.) to go to the toilet.

November 4. Midday walk w/ Harper. 1700 7<sup>th</sup> St.

Harper squats in the patch of grass just outside the church on St. Charles, his back arched. I turn a bag inside-out, place it over my hand, scoop up the turd and tie the bag neatly in a thick knot. I repeat this same action at least ten times a day. At first, I would hold my breath, or breathe through my mouth, but eventually I developed an immunity to the smell. It no longer registered as bad, just strong and earthy and warm. It has a good, soft weight when it's in your palm, and then, passing a trashcan or dumpster, you can suddenly be free of it. Shed, gather, dispose. Repeat.

A question I ask of stranger's dogs at least ten times a day: "Do you need to go outside?"

\*

*to let sleeping dogs (or a sleeping dog) lie*: to avoid provoking or interfering in a situation that is currently causing no problems but may well do so as a result of such interference; to leave well alone.

November 28. Overnight pet-sit w/ Birdie & Pip. 1821 Burdette St.

I watch the dogs sleep and can feel how tired and slow my heart has become – mud on the sheets, their ears open to the night, these holes that owl and siren and creak of pipes can pour into. We sleep curled together. Pip is tucked against my chest, and Birdie stretches out long against my back. I try to match my breath to theirs – swelling as one, then emptying of air, contracting – but their rise and fall is much slower than mine. Pip

nestles deeper into my warmth, stretching her tongue to touch my chin just once before rolling herself up tight again.

They love but think nothing of love. I want to be like that. I want each blink of the eye to frame a beginning, the world still as quick and green as the lizards they chase over the stones in the yard; the world still fitted to our shape, still fragrant and wondrous. I want to drink as deeply as they do – long-tongued at the bowl, on my knees beside them. I want to wake always surrounded, a heart beating faintly at my left, another at my right. I want, like them, to move outward through unknowing to a place I suddenly recognize as mine. I want to wake into that place and run for days.

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In various other idiomatic expressions involving an unpleasant thing, circumstance, or event (usually in negative constructions), as ***not fit for a dog, not to wish (something) on a dog***, etc.

December 24. Overnight pet-sit w/ Dexter & Kinsey. 7903 Zimpel St.

Christmas. Not nearly cold enough for Christmas. I wish for snow. The owner leaves instructions that I'm to leave all the taps running should the temperature dip below freezing. I walk dogs in forty-eight degree weather without zipping up my jacket.

My sister comes with unwrapped presents – a Cat Stevens album, a Calvin and Hobbes book – tender and nostalgic things. The owners of the pet-sitting company have gifted all the employees a box of Christmas cookies, and my sister and I nibble them unenthusiastically while watching *Bad Santa* on cable. My sister is repulsed by one scene in which a kid wipes his nose on Billy Bob Thornton's Santa suit.

"I hate booger stuff," she says, changing the channel.



We drive into the French Quarter to eat dinner at an overpriced Brazilian restaurant. The waitress brings us free cocktails because we look weary and a little sad – this isn't Christmas, this sleeping in strangers' beds.

“They didn't even put up a tree,” my sister said when she arrived at Dexter's house.

We walk around the Quarter. Outside the cathedral, a choir sings carols, hands deep in sweatshirt pockets. We listen, tipsy and exhausted, and don't even bother to play Christmas music on the drive back to home.

Getting back, Dexter is dazed and sluggish and has peed in his bed. We see the empty box of cookies – all crumbs.

“Oh Fuck.”

His soft gray muzzle is all crusted with pink frosting. He trembles in my sister's lap, sick and blind and confused. We find a glucose monitor and test strips in one of the cabinets. All the pet emergency hotlines are going straight to answering machines because – it's midnight on Christmas Eve.

“Well,” my sister says, throwing off her coat. “It can't be that different from treating a person.” She has been working as a registered nurse for the past eight years, so her hands are steady while she turns his ear inside-out, looking for a vein. I'm shaking even more than Dexter. He strains away from her hands, whimpering faintly. Everything we can do to calm him, we do: hands moving gentle over his back, singing, singing very softly: *O Come all ye Dexters*.

The syringe fills, empties. Measure the blood, the over-sweet blood. “Just thought you’d help yourself to Christmas feast, didn’t you, Dex?” And over and over: “good boy,” “good boy,” “good boy.”

There were moments he seemed almost on the verge of speaking, smacking his dry and heavy tongue around inside his mouth. We held a bowl of water beneath his chin and he drank as if his life depended on it, as if to fill and keep filling.

“Remember,” we said to each other. “Remember on Christmas Eve how we used to stay up so we could hear Coco talk?”

The story went like this: on the night of Christ’s birth, all the animals in the stable were given the gift of speech so they could sing the savior’s praises. And so – still, every midnight on Christmas Eve, animals are able to open their mouths and speak just once, before fading back into dumbness. Silence.

A myth. Of course, of course we remembered. Sneaking out of bed and down the hall to where the dog slept curled beneath the piano. We woke him. Cupped his face in our hands. Stared into his mouth. We knew what voice he’d use, though he never used it: deep and proper, somehow with traces of a British accent. Dexter’s would be goofier, southern. A Foghorn Leghorn twang.

We want to believe, still. We want to believe that this small life matters, quivering between us, his heart beating in strange, small rhythms. We want to save him and believe we are saving something else – the good parts of old and forgotten things.

All through the night, the hours marked by the beeps of the glucose monitor, Dexter slowly returns to himself, curling toward a wakeful peace. I am overcome, my head dropping to my sister’s shoulder. I tip over into sleep and the last thought I have

before getting lost inside the bluish weight of Christmas is: “*And heaven and Dexter sing.*”