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Triple Double Diamond: Nevada Stories

Kylie Michelle Westerlind

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TRIPLE DOUBLE DIAMOND

By

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Thesis

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Triple Double Diamond Abstract

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In a collection of fictional short stories, *Triple Double Diamond* explores the relationships and grit of people who dwell in the Nevadan landscape. The stories roam from neon cities like Reno and Las Vegas to small high-desert towns like Wells and Gerlach, focusing on the people who live within these places. The people in this collection are restaurant servers, fur trappers, part-time gold miners, gamblers, park rangers, and veterans, and the stories look at the inner lives of these characters.

TRIPLE DOUBLE DIAMOND

Nevada stories

Kylie Westerlind

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YE MUST BE BORN AGAIN

Before Tacklebox was Tacklebox, he was just Casey Cobb. And he decided he would propose to Blair at the Feather River, a few hours past the Nevada-California border. He put down a few month's salary from the post office on a ring with more Nevada turquoise than diamond, and he tucked the ring away in his father's old wooden watch case.

She packed up the car that morning with their camping gear, then she watched as he threw in what he needed for his gold panning, a sifter and a small bottle that acted like a dropper, and all this he kept in a bluish, rusty metal tacklebox. "My father's," he told her when she opened it and looked at it like a music box, waiting for it to do something. He took out another dropper-bottle, empty but for a couple of flakes that'd been scraped out of riverbeds, sucked out of mud and silt. He tapped them out onto her palm.

She moved her hand up and down. "It's heavy for being so little," she said.

"Pure gold," he told her.

He drove them north on 395. She put in a CD that played scratchy songs from either being burned illegally or repeated tosses into a pile of other CDs in the glovebox. She held his hand as he drove, and it still struck him how small her hands were in his, how she probably never thought her hands were small, they were just there.

It took a few hours, but they arrived in Quincy, California, and in the middle of town they stopped for quarter-pound cheeseburgers and a cake batter milkshake for her. It was August, and they enjoyed the shade. Her skin burned easily, and they'd forgotten to bring sunscreen. But they would be in the thick of the forest soon.

They crumpled their wrappers and went to the car. He went around and opened the back for the first aid kit, patting the side pocket for the watch case.

“Bring me a water?”

She had turned around in her seat and perched her chin on the headrest. He kept getting nervous jolts about when to do it, and this was one of those moments. He could do it right then, over the open mouth of the cooler filled with sweating water bottles and a cold pack of bacon. But he found himself swiping up a water bottle. His skin prickled, and he patted again for the watch case. He got back in the car.

They drove a dirt road past houses tucked behind trees until they were on a single-track road that wound them down into the forest, twisting along switchbacks. Every now and then they passed aggressive signs: NO TRESPASSING. KEEP OUT., but soon they stopped seeing cabins, stopped seeing signs at all. She squeezed his hand and told him about a memory she had of riding a horse along the side of a hill and how she kept leaning away, terrified that the horse would slip, or that as she looked down that she would follow her gaze and fall over, and her small body would slide down, catching pine needles in her hair and dirt in her mouth, under her nails.

“Did you fall?” he asked her. No, she did not.

The sun shone through the window and she pulled a cap low over her eyes to block it. It felt like a long time, thought it wasn't a far drive, and it was that way only because he had to drive slow. The rough dirt road rocked the car, making his keys jangle from the ignition, and he held onto them when the noise was too much, but eventually they leveled out, and soon they were driving along the Feather River. He drove them another mile out. It was not a marked campground but rocks distinguished fire pits and the areas of tamped-down ground were for tents. He backed the car up and they began to set up camp in their usual way, propping the tent up, both of them quiet, their bodies heating up in the splotches of sun catching them.

After they set up camp, she was the one who pulled him into their tent, and they kissed on top of their sleeping bags. It was too hot to be in them during the day. She rested her head on his chest and he felt the sweat from her cheek.

“How did you even find this place?”

“Came out here fishing with my dad once,” he told her.

“Just once,” she said back. “I can’t remember things like you do.”

It was the last time he’d seen his father, and he thought about telling her this, but he was worried about what his face would look like as he said it, worried about how she would try to make him feel better. He didn’t want this weekend to be about him, about his father.

They pulled on their swimsuits out of habit and went down along the river. The dirt road led to a bridge and he climbed over. The water below was a mixture of colors all at once as the sun shimmered over it. Again, another jolt. He could turn around right then and ask her, tell her to look at the ring later. Not that he didn’t feel great about doing it that way, but it was what he thought she’d love. Instead, he stood and jumped out over the ledge and into the water. He heard her shriek, but then considered that it could have been him when he hit the water. The sun had made his blood itch and for a second the water brought instant relief from the burn until the chill of the water went through him. The river was pure snow melt, even in August, and he came out of the water, heaving and laughing. She ran down to meet him.

“You didn’t jump,” he said. “Come on! It’s hot,” he said, pointing at her pinkening shoulders.

“But not that hot. Look at you!” she said and pointed at his goosebumps.

“It’s so cold it feels good,” he said. “It feels good.”

He trudged out, and they walked across the bridge, and he pretended to jump again but she ran ahead of him. The river dropped, and they had to slide down a hill along tree roots before reaching the slate by the river. She sat down in the sun and dipped her feet into the water. He skirted along rocks up to a pool and gazed down into it. He couldn't see the bottom. He jumped in—the water pierced him. The water was clear, and he pushed his body down farther into the pool, using the rocks to keep him from floating back up. Something glinted at him across the pool. A bubble of air came out of him, and he squinted through the water.

When he came above the surface and pulled himself out, she was standing, waving at him.

“I should have brought my wetsuit,” he said. “There’s an old mining cart down there.”

They both stared into the pool, a ghost seeming to come out of it once he called its history into being. The pool shimmered, a teal ring around a darker, colder inside, and they waited but nothing rose out of it.

Soon the sun went past the trees and the shade cooled their bodies. They walked back to their camp, and they heard the rumbling of an engine. Walking back over the bridge, he saw the truck, a red mess of metal and rust.

“This whole damn river,” he said.

And there were four of them, he saw, and the men set up camp not even a hundred yards away. There was the whole damn river.

That night, Cobb woke to the sound of dogs barking. He pulled on his headlamp and crawled out of the tent. The other camp’s fire glowed but was on its way to dying out. A cable was strung up between two trees, and he saw two shepherds with their leashes on this cable. They ran from one end to the other, barking at the dark.

He crawled back into his tent and clicked the headlamp off. He wrapped his arms around her. He knew she was awake, but she didn't say anything. He hated that silence. If he spoke, he knew he might call something out of the dark, and she would resent him for that. He willed her to speak so that he could tell her it would be all right, call their fear out between them and then vanquish it. The thing was: he couldn't guarantee anything for her.

The next morning, she went to the river with her book, and he cooked up bacon on the camping stove. He wanted to know what was in her head, wanted to know if they could stay another night. He saw her quick glances over to the camp. The truck remained parked there, but the dogs were gone, the men too.

After they ate breakfast, she went back to her spot along the river. He'd asked her if she wanted to swim while he panned what he could from the river south of their camp, but she shook her head and didn't say anything. He knew she wanted to stay by the car. They would only be staying one more night.

He went to the car and grabbed his pan and sifter, putting the small dropper-bottle in his pocket. He pulled goggles over his head and around his neck, and he went along the river the opposite way than they did the day before for nearly a mile out. He set down his gear and went into the brush, away from the river, to relieve himself. He walked toward the trees, and a voice stopped him.

“Settin' up a spot?”

Cobb searched for the voice, and he found a man leaning against a tree. The man had a womanly sunhat on, too tight on the skull but a waving brim, and it covered his face in shade. It so unsuited the man that Cobb tried to place if it was actually Blair's, a hat she'd maybe lost on

their walk yesterday. Cobb took a step back, turning his face. He resisted the urge to look over at his gear, didn't want the man to see he was panning for gold.

"Just out," was all he could say. He wanted to ask the man if he was with the others near their camp.

The man laughed, and Cobb sensed that he wanted to do more, but he turned and walked towards the river. Cobb watched him, and he saw the man glance over at Cobb's gear. The man turned back to look at him, and the man held up a hand. Cobb wanted to see his face—the sun glaring, the man's hat hovering just over his eyes.

Sometime after the man left, once Cobb could feel the muscles in his legs were no longer shaking, he waded into the water. When his feet went numb, he'd wade back out and sift through what he could. He let time get away from him, his minutes marked by the chill of the water and the sun overhead. His body shook at odd moments, and he wanted to believe it was from the cold.

The river didn't turn up much of anything and he collected his pan and sifter. He yanked the goggles off from their steady place around his eyes. He walked back the mile, and the sun went down past the trees. As he walked closer, he heard the dogs again.

She was not by the river. He turned up toward their camp and someone was sitting before a fire, but it was not her. Something in him told him not to run, but the pan and sifter slipped from his hands. He kept moving forward. She was not in the car, unless she was down against the backseat.

The fire spit as it ate at another log. He came up, and the figure stood, turning. He was a tall man, not the man from earlier, but Cobb's eyes went to his hat as the man tipped it forward. *Ye must be born again*, in white stitching, ran across the front of the hat. The man threw a hand

out and said many things at once, “Hey, friend, name’s John. John the Baptist,” but maybe Cobb made that up in the moment. John sat him down around the fire, an invitation to his own camp, and Cobb fought to focus, fought down the anger at himself for not bringing a gun, that he didn’t even have his knife on him. His eyes darted for her among the trees, but John was saying, “Don’t worry, friend, she’s with my friends,” and Cobb couldn’t keep up with his adrenaline. John was pointing back toward the pan and sifter, saying, “No one comes out this far for just a night in the woods, friend.” John was saying, “We’re wondering what you found out there, what you’ll be giving us.” Cobb found himself stepping out of his own mind, handing over the bottle of river silt, and maybe a fleck or two of gold, and John was saying, “That all you got?” and Cobb was nodding, yes, it was all he had, but in his mind he saw turquoise, the ring in the old wooden watchcase, but he didn’t tell the man this, and he was only punched once but it was enough to burst his vision. He didn’t remember the sky going dark, but the fire flickered light up around him. John stared down at him, and Cobb stared right back. “Thank you, friend,” and he tipped his hat.

The light went out and back again, and a headlamp shined him awake, and he heard her telling him to get up and help her, they had to leave, and he tried to help her, but he was throwing up on the dirt and then she was leaning him against the car door, moving him into the car. He worried he was driving them off the road, but when he looked, she was gripping the wheel, bony white knuckles, and the trees on his right flashed by, branches catching the side of the car, screeching out their contact. He sat there, holding a hand against his mouth, tonguing the tiny cuts on his lips.

“I gave them your tacklebox,” she was saying. “I don’t know how they knew about your gold.”

He watched the trees, heard her soft breath leaving her nose in heightened puffs, and the trees went by and by.

The next few months of their lives went just the same, this constant watching each other. Their report went out with no leads, and he gave up gold panning before the year was out. He tried to talk to her about that night. It's over, she was always telling him. That horrible night's over. But in his mind, he couldn't get out the images of the dogs running along the cable, then he saw flashes of those men, what they might have done to her. He pictured himself vanishing into the river, looking for what wasn't there. How one of the men had seen him, known what he was after. Since that night, he'd left the ring in the watch case, zipped up in that pocket of the first aid kit in his car.

Months drifted by, a constant restlessness, a local haunting. He threw his panning gear into a box in the garage. He began to draw again, something he hadn't done since his father left. It took time, but eventually he started the apprenticeship to become a tattoo artist. He drew and designed and eventually committed them to his skin, the memories he had of his father when he was sober and the times he spent with her, too; when they turned twenty-one and all she could hit on slot machines were cherries, and the weekends they spent at the lake, drinking black tea out of thermoses and letting minnows kiss the sunscreen off their feet. He wanted to practice more lettering on himself, and he inked the line over the top of his knee. He showed her, and she didn't say anything, just staring for a while, moving his leg to let the ink catch the light.

"Ye must be born again," she said, finally. "I don't know why you would want to remember this."

"It's just words," he said and immediately knew she didn't believe that at all.

“Nothing happened to me,” she said. “That night.” And when she said that, heard herself say it, he wondered if she knew that he didn’t believe that either.

They fell apart soon after that. But just before the end, she did ask for a tattoo from him. She held her hand out, and he tattooed her wrist. He chose a turquoise gem, the shape of a moon, a planet. He looked up at her when it was finished, and she wiped her eyes.

“I got a name for you,” she said. “When you get your own studio.”

“Oh yeah,” he said.

“Yes. Tacklebox.”

FUR

Last I hear from my sister Jorie, the poet is unwell and back in Iowa with his children and ex-wife, on dialysis twenty-four-seven. The new kidney failed, and you think, well I thought at least, did he really want it in the first place? But so he's hooked back into the dialysis machine, and I'm standing outside when she called to tell me, a smoked-out night falling still east from California, something the poet could not have seen.

Where have you been, she goes, I've been calling you for days.

Been in Wells till yesterday. Scouting the line.

And so he was not taking his blood thinners, Jorie goes on. She's all, he had a stroke—and my sister cries against my ear. It's hard to picture her face even though when you think about it, when I think about it, she's known me her entire life and how long have I known her? Does she still do that, wipe the meat of her palm against her eyes, and what if she pushes against them too hard? It hurts to watch it, hurts my eyes to think of her doing it anytime, and so I don't, don't think of her much at all, really.

Minutes of this, and then, blood patch.

The fuck like I know what that is, Jorie.

The phone line crackles, something or other.

Using your own blood to patch up over the blood you've been losing, she says.

I opened my mouth to taste the smoke. He's in surgery. It's not good, is what they're telling her. Again, her eyes. I heard them rolling under her lids from her palm pressing and pressing. Someone next to me glowed from his mouth and cupped hands, and I shivered because soon it would be November and I would be out in the desert.

Why are you crying about him, I say.

She's all, it's not about him. I called because I thought you would want to know. Her voice back and her hand I'm sure off to other old habits, threading fingers through her hair and over her scalp.

All you care about are those cats, Jorie says. Why did you even ask me to call you?

If I could find him inside the dialysis machine, what would I say? Don't speak to me again.

Fur's worth over three-hundred this year, is what my mouth does.

Nice to know. When will I see you?

If even to say it to Jorie, she's known me her entire life.

I always come back, I say.

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It's miles north and gray toward Jarbidge, setting the trap line along west 93. Hang right to Jackpot and a lot of jackrabbit mush on the road. Drive far out, hike the rest. What quiet the desert is. I could forget the sound of myself. I'm out looking for edges with burn and fence lines. Washes, creeks, the steep banks that border them. A lone tree. Boulder fields. Thick bands of vegetation, sage and willow patches for nesting in a set, #2 Bridgers and Montgomery dogless. I test for thick juniper and sage for anchors. Always eight to ten feet of cable attached to the chain—avoiding winters of chasing cats across the basin, following tracks that were never there. No drags. Somewhere around Antelope Peak and rain, I heave forty-pound rocks up and drop them for shatter and this sound I can hear and wrap them up with fourteen-gauge wire, bow-tied. Pan tension, five pounds, not for pika or black-tailed jacks.

Along the trap line anything I see, a cat sees, remembering that. Rimrock. Cattle ponds, rocky jumbles. The sun blazes but does not burn me. I cannot force the cat to do what I want.

Look for choke points. I move through sagebrush, my fingers itching with blood, itching to move the wilderness with my hands. Bobcats choose the path of least resistance. My hands are cold, and I set another trap's tension. A cat's foot must be fully committed to its step before it fires, and it's this all the time, hearing these words from someone else's throat. I will always come back.

Driving out on the road when the game warden comes up in his truck. He flashes his lights and we roll our windows down.

Ninety-six hours, he says, pointing back the way I came.

Getting the last of the trail cams set up, then, I say, half-joking.

You don't want to know how many nights I've spent on that bedroll.

Think I saw you on top of your caravan with a pair of binos. Just near Angel Lake.

Always watching. He holds up a pair, the binos catching the light, and rolls forward in his truck. Maybe you'll win fur handling this year.

Maybe, I say.

Piss off some of the guys.

That's how it goes.

Ninety-six. On the dot.

I will.

South to Ely, chasing bitterbrush, snow, and fur. Due west, toward home, through Eureka and Austin. Away from the road, strict blind sets. Lures catch dogs and flags catch people. I crouch to the dirt, placing the trap directly on two pieces of wax paper, hovering it over the earth. I could sing to it and would the bobcat come out from the dark? Would it give me its skin, its teeth and skull? But I hardly ever have words, and the wild out there knows this in me. Do what

they want and not what you want them to do. Crack open the jaws and leave them out where they wander.

From sick black November to March, it will be seven-hundred miles every four days to check the traps. Snow pack crunching down already. The trap line mapped, the truck lightened of the metal chops. It's night as I roll the truck up the driveway. Garage, lights off, night stars bleeding their weak glow and the moon a lure to me against the oily sky. I walk into the chill of fans and a dozen coyote furs, brushing by them in the dark sway and, eyes closed, it's like I'm with them as they walked among the pines.

/

Snow falls so quiet you can hear the world murmur. Tableside this morning with the ceramic cup missing its handle, I thumb over the edges. Out the window the land before me white and fuzzy like radio crackles. My sister calls and leaves no message. If I could just think of her face, then I could stop thinking what did her face look like. The same goes with him.

95 north to Lovelock, day one. The coffee's cooled in the truck but can drink it, still. The cd player clicks, rotating through the tens she abandoned in a closet. Jorie my kid sister, thinking of her every day now she's called, not wanting to. Locked down now with some guy Griff who said he stood ground against a brown bear once, but it was hardly anything. It was a black bear, I knew, not a grizzly, and I told him this and we went back and forth, and was one of the few moments that I came to know Jorie was embarrassed of me. They've been steady for years, I don't keep count for them. Radiology, as if she could see what's broken around her and fix it. But bad rock and worse gangster music. Over and over in my head. A bootlegged indie song— And you're listening to Rock 104.5, Reno's Rock Station. Cattle on the right. Antelope jetting across the highway and could shoot them but can't, don't.

Coast through Elko. The poet and I dancing to—was it rock at the infirmary? And it takes a lot to remember if I was happy. Deep in drink, boots slick on the liquored floor but could have been blood from mine. Afternoons of wet, sticky furs. And Jorie claws her hand into my arm.

What are you doing here?

Early spring, the start of what's dying now. I'd caught the most cats of anyone.

Rifle through for binos, glass my line outside Wells. Sagebrush tapping against snowfall. The cat's usually awake and pissed off by the time I get there. The guts gone once in my truck.

He's my professor. Jorie had a way of hissing at you without anyone else noticing. And over the music, too.

Who?

The poet, not poet yet to me. He was in deep, ginger sours while I threw back whatever.

You's a thing?

No. Jorie nearly turned to leave but didn't. Explained herself in a rush of breath. There was a reading after our class and we all came out.

We all? I made a show of looking around her.

It's late. Some have gone home. Jorie was looking for the poet.

I told her, yeah, well the last shot we took was for his ex-wife's new book. She stole a line straight out from him. I said, Isn't that fucking hilarious!

Things had actual feeling when I got like this.

Jorie pulled me out into the night. What are you on?

As if she could fix me.

Lots of things.

Looking at the cat's eyes they are mirrors. Loosen the choke pole and it's done. I can be so fast now, not like I used to. Slit, slough, skin. The coyotes sense when I'm near, that I leave for them meat. Back to the truck and my vision is all spots. Fur in my eyes.

And it happens with the poet. I woke up in sheets on the ground and wished he would gut me right there. He could end it, this nothing that is nothing. Touch my lips, and did he give me his skin, his teeth and skull?

He asks, how do you do it?

The men don't like it when I tell them that I do it. That's it. I do. It's not even a consideration.

Like throwing a fish against a rock. A rock down upon a fish. This I tell the poet and he doesn't leave.

Can I see them?

The fur is worth nothing if it's messy. Unclean. You spill the body, slip off the skin and watch for blood. Get the chills when you come right back and the muscles and insides are gone, all bones. The coyotes always take and take. I drive for Jarbidge. Rabbits across the road.

Took him to Fallon. He walked through the fans, hands reaching up to touch the skins.

They're soft.

It's fur.

I was expecting them to be warm. Hands upon mine.

You're warm. I'm cold. I'm always cold.

And slowly he drugged me in that way, leeching out my loneliness. I woke up each day and reached for that gasping breath after a deep dive, but I finally wasn't alone. He was the one

who pulled me through the water. Asking Jorie about him before going back to Fallon and she turns from her books. Dark as a lake.

Hundred miles northwest of Ely, hiking through snow and crunching through snow and breathing in snow. Sundown and the snow glitters orange against the rocks and dying bitterbrush.

Rush of wet dirt under the quad as the poet and I drove through backcountry, over sand dunes and bleached playas, way west. Cut back from the bar. Slipped books from his shelves and thumbed through them, and if he could read it out loud, would I come out from this? Water I could see through.

Coming down the hill, snow taking my steps, and there against the juniper the mountain lion waits for me. Up on back legs and its free paw over a branch, massive. I have a .22 only for coyotes and badgers. Hissing like rising air. Out of range for the game warden. The dark comes for us, and I stand there still with water and snow soaking me. Its tail going, and it never looks away from me, those mirrors, and my breaths settling and my heart moving back into place. Set off the other traps, I knew, no need to catch it again and they were empty anyway. Headlamp presses into my skin. The light shining up the lion's orbs and snow goes slant between us, falling thicker and even quieter.

You're Jorie's sister, he said. On the floor in his studio above the river, and he saw it, us, while I never can. She writes about you. Not every time, but in a few of them.

The lion opens its mouth, screaming without noise.

What it was like to grow up with you.

I looked out over the river.

How you found your father's old muskrat traps in the garage.

The four-foot choke pole is too short. It could catch me with its claws.

Then skunks and coyotes eventually, hanging the bodies in the garage.

Skins, I said. Just skins.

She was afraid of you—should I even be telling you this. He laughed but it wasn't a laugh.

The water rushing below, the lion struggling as I move closer, claws shredding bark that shot up like shrapnel.

As you both got older, she hoped things could be normal. She could hear you cut lines on the work desk, you know, he said.

It made me a slow skinner, I said. I'd hike the hides back and drape them over the truck bed, do a line and open the door and turn on a cd up so loud I couldn't hear the desert anymore, and sometimes I'd forget I was skinning and instead I'd be dancing, just going crazy, obliterated, the music was all I wanted because I could feel something like I was happy just for a moment and if I could just keep it forever, just forever, what if. I had my hand against the glass. Were there rocks below, under the current?

Coming up behind the lion at the end of the cable and my heart back in my throat, and I'm alone.

I think she needs you, he said. She's going through a lot on her own.

She's told you this.

No.

So you have a feeling.

A guess, he said.

I turned and pressed my back against the window, Can I say, would you get it if I told you that when I'm not with her, I can't picture her face and really if it wasn't for this she

wouldn't be a thought in my mind, and what I would like to think, what I want to say is, would you want to go swimming? But we sat there.

You're cruel.

He said this, and the noose tightens around its neck as the lion pulls away from me.

I'm not.

How do you do it.

It's necessary, I said.

Do what it wants and not what you want it to do. Slowly, don't jerk it. It will go down much quicker.

I think you need to take care of some things, he said. And that laugh that wasn't because anything was funny. I don't quite know what we're doing, I'm doing, and he moved for the door and I was falling in slow water but somehow I got up and followed him, past him, felt my truck beneath me, was he up there watching me go, and the lion fights against the line until it settles, floating down like leaves stirred up by winds, and just a few seconds, loosening the noose and throwing my jacket over its head and going for its paw, and how yes I called him, the line ringing as I walked through the coyote furs, trying to feel what it was like to be warm, and no answer, and how I actually called Jorie but she hadn't heard from him, it was summer, it was one class, but she had heard he wasn't feeling well, he might not be there the next year because there were health issues, things I had never known, a transplant, acute rejection, and yes, he was hospitalized and Jorie asking what was going on, but I went to the hospital to see him, I had to tell him that I felt out of body when I was with him, there was something there, nothing was just nothing, but he turned his head and he looked tired, or scared, and he said, I don't want to talk to you.

He said, Don't speak to me again.

Before I can release it, the lion startles, hissing for breath. It hurls itself up and over the branch and breaking it as it falls in a burst of snow, and I snap open the trap and run as the lion swipes at me, catching my leg, and I hear water rushing, the sound of my name screaming out across the desert, my sister, and if she called for me would I come out from the dark? The soft patter of wet snow against the rocks. Stars above, the moon. The light from my headlamp flashes in slow beats. I sit up in the snow and run a hand over my damp leg. Near the tree the lion waits, watching. Don't speak to me again. It returns to the desert dark, the quiet.

/

I drive to Reno near the end of December and meet her at the casino buffet, tradition. An ice city, the parking garages full of melting snow under the sun and hardening into patchy discs by nightfall. Six months I last saw her, and her face a blur all the time, but I find her amongst the booths of families and loners playing keno, and I feel like a sister again. She slides out from the booth and we grab plates together, pushing them along the counter, along the line of hot trays and bowls.

I have to leave by early morning.

I know, she says. Have you heard from—

No.

Plates full, we go back to the booth. Jorie hates how fast I eat, so I eat faster to get it over with. She doesn't even pick up a fork.

Well, how's Griff, I offer, but nothing. Seconds? As a joke, since she just sits there, but I go get more.

Caught a mountain lion in one of my traps, when I sit down.

Jesus. Finally she comes back to me. Really.

It got my leg. Had stitches in Ely after Randy cussed me out about it.

The warden?

Yeah, but I told him no service out there. Had to do it myself. It happens.

She puts the fork down again.

Worse than the time I went after that bobcat in the cave.

God, she says.

Don't know what's worse, getting stuck crawling through a tunnel or a mountain lion trying to kill you.

Both are awful.

It happens.

It doesn't just happen. She smacks her hand on the table and a knife falls off her plate. The things you do, she says. The things you do. Do you think about anything when you're out there?

Jorie.

Do you think maybe that I'm still here, that I'd still be here? She turns away and moves her hand against her eyes. You tell me this and expect me not to think about it. When you are gone for days at a time. Picks up her fork and stabs her food but doesn't eat it. But I do, she says.

I'm always careful. And I always come back.

I just, she starts. I need to understand, to know why you cared about him. Did you, at all?

I put the fork down.

You don't ask about anything, anyone. You don't seem to care. Why him?

I've got almost forty cats.

I'm wrong then. You weren't seeing him, each other. So when I called you about him.

It was, sort of. We were. Doesn't matter now. He ended it.

He did.

Yes.

Oh. She sits back. Are you happy? You seemed happy.

Why were you taking a poetry class?

She takes a napkin up and covers her eyes. And I see a small smile when she brings it down, her eyes and cheeks red from crying. I needed credits.

Credits.

It was good for me. He probably told you.

The traps in Dad's garage.

That can't have been all.

Yeah, the coke, I say.

Sure, that too. She looks at me for a long time, and I see that lake again, where my sister should be. Sure, that too. She eats her food.

Done with that now, you know, I say.

We leave the buffet and walk through the pit. Jorie sits down and I give her some cash and watch her play through a shoe. I run my fingers through her hair, wondering if I had ever braided it as a child for her. If she braided mine. When she loses all the money she takes me arm in arm and we go to the slots and sit in studded chairs, pulling the black levers for nothing, no reason at all.

We walk out to the parking garage together, slipping a little on the ice and oil from cars. The resorts glitter green and blue around us and for once I'm outside and it's not snowing.

People crowd downtown in red coats and hats for the bar crawl and I think of the infirmary, how far away that is already in my mind. I can think now and know I was not happy then, not now either, but I feel clear, subdued to soft radio static.

I tell Jorie I'll see her soon, but I won't. It will be weeks again, months. She hugs me, pulls back and then just looks at me, holding my arms. And then she goes.

/

February and it's dark all of the time. Snow falls and falls, the land can't seem to get back up. The drifts soft and white as I walk through them. What quiet this is, and I forget the sound of myself. I've been here before. I've been here. My head has been clear, but times when I miss that rush. Imagining my sister awake in her room, and the snuffing of myself away from her, from me. Passing sagebrush and juniper trees, alone. A bobcat twists away from the trap but it is held fast. I end it, take its skin.

Back in my truck near 93 is when she calls. Someone has reached out to her, she tells me, about the poet. All right, I say, pulling off to the side. And I close my eyes so I can see her. And she's there.

I thought you would want to know, she says.

You're right. I did.

Pull the truck back on the highway and drive and drive. Most of my line pulled now, traveling along 50, west, chasing the sun. I have more cats than I did last year. Three hundred a fur. Outside Middlegate and checking in with the game warden. I hand him the lower jaws of cats and get the seals for the furs.

Trapping's up for legislation next year, he says, turning the jaw in his hand.

Running us out.

It won't happen, he says. How many traps you got left.

Just a few outside Fallon.

What are you at now?

Should be at ninety.

Ninety cats. The warden holds one of the jaws up. You know most are lucky to catch seven. Ten in a good season. How do you do it?

How do I do it. The endless miles, the trails I walk. Do what they want and not what you want them to do. Carrying on and then one day the clouds part for relief. The sun lighting up the snow fields and it hurts to see it shine so far.

Hiking out to one of the last traps and I am tired. I've been gone, and I need to tell Jorie this. Gone for a while now. But I'm coming back.

A bobcat on its side, its body moving with slow breaths. I crouch to the earth. Spotted pelt, thick tufts of white. Will it come out from the dark? And it's this fur. This fur I want and will pull over my shoulders, around my neck, this fur. This fur, and maybe then I won't feel so cold.

BRISTLECONE

Into the desert west of us, about six miles up the road and over hills covered in sage so tall and wide their brush-fingers reach out to scritch car windows, there is a grove of bristlecone pines. A rough tree line of pinyon pines rims around the glacial moraine. In the middle of the grove rests Prometheus' stump, and next to it, the fallen, twisted dead branches and desiccated roots, sprawled out over the quartzite boulders. The bristlecone pines live there, around Prometheus' grave.

Tet found the place again while we were snowshoeing to get as close to the summit of Wheeler Peak, huffing and pouting for hours as he convinced us to wrap around the mountain. He stumbled into a clearing where the pines had been worn by vicious winds so that stumps dotted the side of the mountain like bottle caps. Rock wrens picked their way over the sage, attentive and showy as young lovers at the old pines' necks and trunks. When I came stomping out of the woods, I forgot to touch Tet, startled at the way the world opened up at the grove, out of the cover of the pinyon pines and chokecherries, the way the land looked wrong. There was too much blue up there. The quartzite shimmering in the light and the breeze cutting over the grove. A snowmobile crunched out of the shadow in a gap of the woods, which I figured had to be driven by a ranger, and a raven called overhead. An older man stepped off the snowmobile when it parked, waving away the powder of snowflakes they'd kicked up. There was something I was supposed to be witnessing, as his gaze moved beyond me, maybe toward a bristlecone's ghost. I couldn't see it yet. Off in the distance, we heard a marmot's song.

MAKE TENDER THE DRESSING

No one came asking after the girl until winter was through and the spring snow was pulled into the ground.

Ford watched the father arrive at the ranger station in early morning, the man's boots clicking echoes on the lobby floor. Ford knew it was him from the way he wandered through the room, reading over the informational boards on the wildlife hidden in the salt of the Black Rock Desert. Ford saw it in his searching, what could pull a young girl in, start a vanishing into this high desert. The man stood before the panel on desert animal survival, his arms crossed and his transition lenses going clear. The boards were faded, going on about the rattlesnake and the salt tolerance of sagebrush. In winter, snow melt floods the desert until summer heat dries it into the hardpan alkaline playa. Who could dare to roam this wilderness? But that girl had passed through here. *The car was useless*, she wrote. *Or maybe I am useless*. Ford had read that she couldn't drive stick well, and the little car hardly could have crunched over the snow packed onto the playa. She had to have crashed or abandoned the car near High Rock Canyon, but no car had been reported or recovered yet, to Ford's knowledge. None of the other rangers were alerted to its absence. If she had known to keep on south, she would have hit the road eventually, making her way to the railroad or even to Gerlach. But the sea of snow across the desert moved her north, towards the sagebrush wilderness, seeking high ground and shelter.

The man reached into his pocket and removed a photograph, a 5x6—Ford saw this and reached a hand to his throat, pressing a thumb to the skin. His heart beat back.

The man inspected the photograph, looking back and forth between the wildlife panels and the picture in his hands. When he walked to the front desk, he set the photograph before the other ranger, Rogalski. Ford stood.

“Do you know this place?”

Rogalski tucked his thumb through a belt loop. He took the photograph, looked it over, and then held it out for Ford.

Ford took it quickly and held it with both hands, to keep the man from seeing his hands shaking. “Stevens Camp,” Ford said, keeping his voice level. “About seventy miles out north of here, give or take.”

The photograph was worn, a spine creasing down its middle from being folded in half. A diamond was painted on the large bricked wall, and a pile of firewood sat dry under the awning. The snow, heavy and wet, coated the bitterbrush and roof. The way Ford had left it.

“Anyone ever out there?” the man asked.

“It’s a primitive cabin. Lots of hunters and campers stay there,” Rogalski said.

“You seen a girl there?”

Rogalski removed his cap and ran a hand through his hair. “A girl?”

The man—the father, then, braced his hands against the desk. “Alone, or with a friend?”

“Not during my checks.”

The father stood straight, slipping the photograph into his shirt pocket.

“There’s a public record out there.” Rogalski replaced his cap. “Like a journal. You could see if she wrote an entry or left a date.”

The father reached back into his shirt pocket, this time sliding out a white envelope. “It’s been months. I can’t say if she’s missing or still running away.” He smoothed out the creases in the envelope. “She mailed the photo from this station. She was here.” He tapped his finger against the address. “She was here.”

“This is your daughter?” Rogalski picked up the phone.

“She was.” The father waved his hand. “Don’t bother.”

“You’ve called the police.” Rogalski lowered his hand. “They’re on their way then?”

“I’m tired of talking to them.” The father ran his fingers over the envelope. “I want you to take me to the cabin.”

Rogalski turned, flipping through folders of records on cabin and trail maintenance.

“It’s strange though,” the father said, tapping the address again, saying this more to himself, but Ford heard him, “Why would she go back?”

“Hey, Ford.” Rogalski tossed the folder onto the desk. “Looks like it was your beat.”

The father turned. “Did you see her? Did you see a girl there?” He did not look away.

You brought back firewood and cleared the front porch of snow, she wrote. I hope that you will keep this promise for me.

And so Calder Ford lied to him. “There was no one.”

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Ford found her after the eve of the last snowfall in March. The morning was bitter but clear. No hawks dotted the sky and for once the world seemed dead, suffocated finally by the cold. The heads of rabbit brush poked through the snow, which helped him keep on 8A. The tires pushed through the snow, rocking the truck and swinging the hanging keys from the ignition. Ford reached out, held them. Kept them still.

The route was to Denio that day, with a stop at the primitive cabins scattered outside the Sheldon. Winter had been especially harsh, and Ford guessed that few would be staying in the desolate places except for the hardened trappers and campers. A curl of smoke whisked into the sky as he drove out toward Massacre Ranch. The way was rough and took longer than he wanted, but soon he came upon the green gate leading to the cabin. Another truck was parked

there, coated in the night's snowfall, but Ford's gaze came upon an animal, upside down, a still body. A deer, hung and suspended over the gambrel. Ford parked his truck and stayed in his seat. Hunting season had ended in January. As he walked near the carcass, the world quieted even more. He knocked on the cabin door, moving a hand back toward his gun, revealing it, and then propped his hand on his hip. The man staying in the cabin cracked open the door and, seeing Ford, seemed irresolute—caught. The man led Ford in. He had the fireplace going and it threw off some good heat. Ford stood by it. The man sat at the table, his elbows on his knees, bearded chin in his hands.

“Name's Canfield.” His voice was gruff as if he stayed up all night talking.

Ford stared out the small window at the deer's carcass. “It's March.”

Canfield sat up, rubbing his face with his hands. “I wouldn't bullshit you,” he said. “The deer was good as dead when I found it.”

Canfield reminded Ford of his father: a gentle way of speaking, his eyes doing more of the work than his mouth. Ford looked outside. The deer was freshly split and hung. The blood hadn't frozen yet.

“Been a tag holder?”

“Deer, elk, antelope.”

“Then you know it's a felony to hunt out of season.”

“I see how it looks.” Canfield rubbed a hand over his stubble. “I was caught out in the storm checking my trap line. Making my way back I lost the path I had taken. Came around a hillside and startled a mountain lion. It had the muley half eaten and still alive. They were both making the most horrible noises.” He nodded his head toward the gambrel. “The lion was young. Not strong enough to kill it. I'm thinking its paw's broken. I must have almost caught that one

about a week ago.” The man nodded. “My trap sprung and was empty but there was lots of blood.”

Ford let the story fill him, picturing these fighting animals, these glimmers of violence. “Got your trapping license?”

He nodded and stood. He dug around in a tattered pack, pulling out the license. Ford noticed that Canfield’s palms were dark from rusted trap metal, looking as if he dipped them in oil. This, too, caught Ford. His father had been an artist, fingers curled around a block of charcoal. Paint flecked onto his unshaven cheeks—Ford remembered this. The license for trapping cats checked out, but Ford still held it. He looked out at the deer’s body.

“And does its spirit know where it goes after the harvest.”

“I’m sorry?”

Ford cleared his throat, handed back the license. A jolt moved through him, lighting up his skin from the top of his head to his fingertips. He needed to leave. Canfield seemed to sense Ford’s agitation, and he stood, started pacing by the door.

“I couldn’t leave the thing,” the man said. “If you’d seen it—” He held a hand to his mouth. “I had to help it. Like I said, it was making this noise.”

Ford was shaking his head. “You did what you had to do.”

“Yes, you could say that.”

Ford took in a breath, released it slowly. The skin of his arms itched, but he stepped off to check the rest of the cabin. The room was cold, and the bedsheets crumpled. Ford saw the butt of a small handgun tucked by the pillow. There was a duty, he supposed, that men held toward the wilderness. They can’t keep their hands off it. He returned to the room. Ford thanked Canfield, closed the door behind him. He passed the deer, couldn’t bring himself to look at its body again.

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He backtracked out the way he came and headed for Stevens Camp. He was bothered by Canfield, how much the man reminded him of his father, who had died shortly after Ford moved to Gerlach.

When Ford was a child, winding down after dinner, his mother would warm up milk in a kettle as his father scooped rich grounds into the paper filters. It seemed normal to Ford, as a kid, to then watch him empty the whiskey bottle into his cup. This was what a father did. He would talk fast and move his hands clumsily the more he drank, but his eyes gave away the most. They shined as he got drunker, and as the night grew he would make a fist and rub the top of Ford's skull with his knuckles. "You're a good kid," he'd say. "But will you be a good man?"

The last time Ford drank with him, the night the old man would die, his father poured the whiskey for Ford. "No cream," he said. All they talked about was his father's past. His father walked through memories of playing football in high school and college later on. "That sort of thing was never really for you, was it," he said. "Maybe you would've been the one to not tear his knee." Ford wanted to say, "I'm not like you." But his father went on and smiled as he spoke of picking up drawing, painting. "Not a class in my life," he said, and yet they were collected for a gallery. "I didn't need a degree." Ford wanted to say, again, "I'm not like you." But he knew his father already knew this, just didn't care. He wanted Ford to be something, be something that he wasn't. Ford poured himself a second cup and tried to tell himself his father was just scared, was saying things like this to make himself feel okay. His father asked what would happen to his drawings—where do they go, what do they do with them? He wondered if they would be stuck in museum backlog, forgotten. Ford couldn't tell him.

Ford helped him to his room and lowered him onto the bed. He was in pain, Ford knew that. He felt that he could even smell it, this coppery bleed stuck inside him. He didn't smell like Ford remembered him, like coffee and freshly pulled canvas. "You're a good kid." His father knuckled his temple. "Helping your old man." The room was cold and dim. "Bring me my papers," his father said, gesturing to the old wooden desk. Ford pulled open drawers, took out worn pages covered in his father's scrawl. His father thumbed through them in his bed, coughing in the silence between them. Ford sat back, his mug of coffee and whiskey warm in his palm. Ford asked if he wanted a fire started, but his father shook his head and asked that Ford keep sitting there with him, making him feel like that young kid he'd been, obedient and plain and worth nothing. Ford stood when his father's eyes closed and heavy breaths whistled out of his mouth. Ford removed the papers from his father's hands, folded them in half. In the kitchen Ford cleaned out the grounds from their cups, downed the rest of the whiskey bottle. He sat by the window, feeling that heavy worry he'd carried with him a long time, that his father didn't deserve him. Ford read over the pages that his father wrote, lines something like poetry, and Ford felt crushed by this lack of understanding between them. Ford wasn't seeing the world this way, and he felt sure he never would. He shut the drapes, went to bed. His father never woke up.

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Ford parked by the cabin at Stevens Camp. He sat in the car, the deer's body still silhouetted against his mind. He wasn't sure why this was bothering him. He was used to the wilderness, the natural violence found within it. He'd passed a young deer by the side of the road in Gerlach just the other morning, its throat torn out, crows hopping across the cords of muscle on the asphalt. Muskrats drowned and frozen under icy ponds, hunters passing through with truck beds full of coyote pelts, bobcat jaws. He stared at the cabin, its quiet weighing on him. He leaned over and

pulled open the glovebox. He removed the truck's manuals and reports from game wardens and conservation groups. The papers were at the bottom, worn more so, becoming thin. His father had written in pencil, and the graphite was soft. Ford had thought about writing in the lines clearer with pen ink, but he liked the idea of his father's words lasting as long as they had, vanishing too. They'd be gone one day, just like his father feared. Ford opened the pages at their spine he'd creased in them. Moved his fingers over the words, trying to imagine his father at the desk, looking out at a high desert like this. He found the page that had the line, the one he'd remembered at Massacre Ranch. He left the pages on the seat and grabbed his beanie off the dashboard.

He started to patrol the trail at High Rock Canyon, the snow thick and wet. The creek moved over icy rocks and leftover dead leaves from fall. He hiked about a half mile into the canyon. It was when he looked down, closer towards the creek, that he saw the tracks. The toe pads like teardrops, a rounded trapezoidal footpad, a mountain lion. They padded evenly off into the canyon. Ford moved toward his gun, instinct, and he thought of Canfield in his jolt of fear. He searched above on the rim rock but there was nothing.

He turned back for the cabin, willing his heart to slow, shoving away the snow that had blown over the front door. There was no firewood, and so he grabbed some from the truck, piling them up on the porch. Inside, it was the same as it had been a week ago. He checked the fireplace for embers or kindling but it was empty. He loved the smell of the cabins, smoky and rich. He went to the sink and window. The sun lit up the snow. It would begin melting soon.

The table next to him was covered in plastic, floral and cracked. On it was the blue, lined notebook for the transient inhabitants. Out of habit, the weeks and months he'd been out to check on the cabins, Ford picked it up and opened it. He flipped back the pages, seeing there were

multiple entries. People who stayed here usually wrote their names, the dates, what they killed, what they ate. Ford found the first of these new entries and began to read.

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At Stevens Camp the father stood in the same place as Ford had. Opening the book, he placed his hand on the page, moving his fingers over the words of recent entries left by strangers, turning the pages back. His hand stopped. “This is her handwriting,” he said to Ford. “She always loops her L’s, even if it’s a capital letter.” He held his hand against the notebook. But Ford knew her warmth was no longer there.

Ford turned and faced the sink, gazing out the window. The snow was gone. Sagebrush had grown thicker. The gambrel stood tall and empty. If the door were open, he knew he would hear the creek nearby.

“How often do you come here? Patrol the area?”

“The cabin has a fourteen-day limit. We try for every week, if the weather allows.”

“You never saw her?”

“Some days in winter there’s no access to the cabin.” Ford rubbed his hands over his face. It was hot, and he felt sick. “I can show you the dates I checked in.”

“Yes, thank you.”

But the dates would mean nothing to him, Ford knew. She never wrote hers down.

“Incredible.” The father shook his head. “She had to have walked miles to get here.”

“No car?”

“She wrote that she had to leave it.”

“Have you called the police?”

“Weeks ago. They think she left with a friend we didn’t know about. No phone, no car of her own. Someone old enough to rent a car. She doesn’t have a debit card for the police to track. No cash because she didn’t get tips at her job.” He looked at Ford in the eye. “She didn’t steal from me.”

“How old is she?”

“She’s sixteen. Cops said this happens all the time in Vegas. Girls go gone.” Her father coughed but Ford knew he was crying. “My God, where is she going?”

Ford held a thumb to his neck again, rubbed his forehead through the beanie with his other hand. Her father began to read.

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March ?

The car was useless. Or maybe I am useless. I might have done something to the clutch but the snow was pretty bad or it was a combination of both. Possible! Had to leave it somewhere on the Black Rock. Maybe they’ll turn it into an art car for Burning Man this year, ha, ha. Here, at the cabin now. What is this place? I can’t tell if this is someone’s house. It’s too cold if it is. Wood outside but it snowed all over them. There are some matches here—thanks, whoever you are! Also a couple of sports drinks. Beans, some minute rice. Campbell’s! I think the snow is over for the year, thank God.

Next day

No power because no generator. It got fucking cold at night but I got some fire going. I hope someone sees the smoke but there are clouds again. Light dusting but I’m no weatherman. I want to keep walking but my boots are soaked, and my toes look like they got a rock dropped on them. I wonder what Marcy is doing, wherever she is. I hope she’s all right. I’m sorry, Marcy. I was

happy to be getting away from serving pizza to tourists at the New York New York in Vegas. (Pizza sounds so good right now!) Happy to get away from my family, from my mother though I do really miss her right now. Caliente was fun, and I liked how much the guys talked to us. But then one of them wouldn't stop looking at me, and it was gross how his shirt was cut to his armpits and slit open so you could see his ribs and the little pooch around his hips. I'm sorry I made us leave the ranch early, but we got to see so much! There it goes. It's snowing again.

Day Three

Ate the beans and so now all I have is uncooked rice and the soup. Hope I don't have to hunt anything, ha. Missing my dad right now. Remembering how I went on a hunting trip with him once. When Mom wasn't doing well and was in rehab so we got to have a little vacation even though I would rather have been in California on the beach than watching my father field dress a deer. But it wasn't the worst thing ever. I got to learn a lot. It's kind of sad how easy it was, for him to tear it apart and make it not a deer anymore. But he said something that I'll never forget. He told me, "Make tender the dressing." We took its life, the least we could do was care for it in death. I wonder a lot about animals being in different places at the same time. Do animals have souls? Do they know where the parts of them go in life? I hope they know that the parts of them are never forgotten. We took the whole deer.

4

Did something stupid. Laced up my boots and went outside even though my feet are raw. Saw a canyon out to the right where I could see one of those trailheads. I thought it might lead to a park. The canyon kept going and going. I tried climbing the rocks to get a better view but slipped quite a ways. Pretty sure I broke something. There's a pain just shooting up my ankle. Took me

till dark to hop and crawl back to the cabin. Finally got the boots off and my whole leg is swollen. At least I have snow to ice it but I'm frozen enough as it is.

5

Not much to report. My ankle is stiff and turning purple. No sun out to melt the snow because the storm is still going on. Cold, cold, cold. I am a cold girl. Also, hungry. Emptied the fireplace because the Code of the West is to keep it clean, remember, Dad? Missing my mother today which is something. Thinking back to when I met Marcy at the New York New York. She was bartending at the Times Square bar across from my pizza joint, letting me sneak shots I could swig in the bathroom. Crazy to think that she even talked to me. Trying to think if she even asked me to go with her or if I said yes or maybe or let me think about it. It was just a week ago but it feels like years. This cabin is like home now. Just me and me. Who was I, who was that girl? Did she really go into that ranch with Marcy? She left Caliente, but the ranches in Ely, what was that? How far was she willing to go? Drink after drink at the bar, guys touching your knees and moving your hair from your face and saying, hey, you look pretty, you smell nice, I like you. Marcy was all the way. They'll look after us, she said. She moved in there. But the girl—where did she go? She had her suitcase and she watched Marcy walk through that door and she grabbed the suitcase and ran to the car. She wasn't great at driving stick, or driving really at all, but fucking drove away from there. The sun was behind her and that was all she needed. Austin, sure. Winnemucca, sure. Marcy didn't think the girl knew where the spare cash was. Glovebox, dummy! Too fucked up to be careful. And you bet that girl filled up in Winne and kept on going. She would get back home, she could, and pretend this never happened. None of this ever happened. She just had to get there. And then the snow came. And she was scared. She didn't

really know who she was after all. And so they wept for it, the ruined animal, strewn upon the arch. Was it a gunshot or an arrow? And does her spirit know where it goes after the harvest?

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The father sat at the table. He read slowly, and aloud, as if hearing himself say it made the journal more real but if anything it made it seem like a sick, made-up story. Ford didn't know whether he should leave and let her father be or to not move at all.

But when he heard it, he turned to look at the father in the chair. The father stopped reading. He'd forgotten that she had written it down. Did she write down his name, too—had she said there was a ranger, and who that man was, and that he did not save her? But the father did not continue. He stared at the page, and Ford was sure he could hear his heart, the wild pang of it, giving him away.

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Ford read her entries and dropped the notebook onto the table, thinking about this cold girl, a chill going through him. He moved to look out the window, a rush going through him, hurting his blood. He didn't know why he did it, but he shut his eyes hard, willing the blood in his ears to quiet, this worry that a girl could be dead in here and what to do about it, and he said the first thing in his mind, the words from his father's pages. He stood there with his eyes closed, repeating these lines, and then a door opened and her voice came to him. "A butcher's house?" she asked. "The meat market? Maybe stored in a grocery?"

He turned to face this ghost. She leaned on the doorframe, and her face was worn and smudged. She looked blurry, as if Ford's vision were clouding her, but her lips were blue and her hair was tangled about her face. If he'd found her asleep, he would have thought her dead. She

held her leg up from the floor, and he saw that it was possible she had broken more than the ankle she wrote about.

He waited until his heartbeat slowed, when a pain in his clenched jaw released. He didn't want to alarm her, make her think she was in danger, but she'd forgotten he was even there. He could hear her breaths, sharp and wheezing, and he began to think she'd slipped into sleep. He spoke quietly. "What's your name?"

The girl opened her eyes, blinking them a few times. She took in a long, heavy breath. She exhaled, and it hurt Ford to listen to it leave her body. "Marcy," she said eventually, when she caught her breath.

Her lethargy was making his own panic and concern spiral. What could he do for this girl? He couldn't even think—was there food in his truck? No, he planned for lunch in Denio. But there was the radio.

He took a step forward. "You're not Marcy."

Another deep breath. "No," she said with her exhale, turning it into a pained moan.

"Who are you?" he asked again.

She scrunched her eyes closed and pushed herself straight off the doorframe. She seemed to be rising up from the earth, a slow, anesthetized thing. "What's your name?"

"Calder." Ford took another step, seeing her grip the doorframe. "Calder Ford."

"Calder," she repeated. "Were you sent here to get me?"

Ford frowned. "Sent?" But he shouldn't have said anything. He saw the girl gain some strength, some upper hand he didn't know about.

She said, "What did you mean? Before. About the spirit?" Her words were slow, her breaths heaving the sounds out of her mouth.

“That was nothing. Just some lines in my head.”

“From a song?”

“No.”

“Can I write them down?”

“Sure,” he said. “But while you do that, I’m going to have a look at your leg.”

She nodded, content with this deal, and he held his hand out. She took it and braced, hopping over to the table where he had the blue notebook open.

“Were you sleeping?” he asked her as she withdrew a pencil from her jacket.

“What word did you use? Strewn—that was it. Yes, I sleep a lot. Not much else to do.”

Her leg had contusions and swelling. It was probably a shaft fracture, maybe the tibia.

The skin was broken long the shin.

“Can you wiggle your foot?”

“I can’t feel it.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Today is day five. I’m changing ‘its’ to ‘her.’”

Ford was here a week ago, then, and she must have stumbled upon this place soon after he left, just when the storms hit.

“Are you lost?” Ford asked her, but she laughed and hit him with the notebook.

“You just read this. You know who I am.”

He felt around her shin for bones about to tent. She winced. The skin was blue but smelled rotten. It was infected. He felt along her arm. Her pulse was high, her breath quicker now than before with all their talking.

“Do you have to do that?”

“I’m going to get you in the truck. Something is broken in there.”

She turned her head sharply away from him, so abruptly that it made him freeze, made him question his own judgment. He watched her mouth, how she pulled her lips in, the skin starting to crack. He was afraid she might crumble in front of him.

“Let’s go.” He reached for her.

She started to cry. “No, wait,” she said. “Have you ever felt like you’re being split? Parts of you get split up, and they go different places?”

“Come on.” He reached for her again, but she bat his hand away.

“Just think about it for a second.” He watched the corners of her eyes. She gazed at the ceiling, her breath getting hollower. “Like, when we eat animals? We’re eating parts of them. Where are the other parts?”

“Hey,” Calder said. “You need to breathe. Just take a second.”

“You’re sitting in a diner, forking up ham into your mouth and think, is each piece of this ham from the same pig? Where are the other parts of this pig? Are they all in this diner? Or did a piece go to California, another in a furnace?” She leaned back and held her stomach. “I know that parts of me have died. I can feel it.” She hid her face behind her hands. “I’m afraid they won’t go to the same place.”

“You don’t have to be afraid of anything now.” Ford stood up. “Come on.”

But she didn’t try to stand. She brought her hands away from her face. “Tell me. Who are you? What are you? An angel? A poet?” She looked up at him.

“I’m none of those things,” Calder said. “But you’re okay now, we can leave.”

“I can’t leave yet. I don’t want to. I feel safer in here. Away from the cold.”

“I’ll carry you.” Ford reached for her again, but this time she shrieked.

“No! Don’t touch me.” She shook her head. “I don’t want to go out there.”

Gerlach was only an hour away, but with the snow would take longer. “I have a radio. Help can be here in a few hours.” Calder felt his hands move into fists. He wanted to rip this girl out of here, just take care of it. He watched her pull into herself. She pulled her lips in, moved her arms around in a tight little hug.

“Don’t. Please, don’t. I’m not going back there.”

He hated that he had to say it. “You’re going to die if you stay here. Let me get help for you.”

She jumped up, bracing herself. “Don’t call anyone. If you call someone, they’ll call my dad. All right? You can’t do it.”

Her breath quickened and Ford worried she would hyperventilate. He tried to make her sit. “Calm down.”

“No! You can’t call anyone. He’ll come here and see me. He can’t come here.”

Ford held her shoulders and she put her hand on his face. He lost his breath from the cold.

“Mr. Ford, please, don’t call me in.” The tears dripped from her sticky eyes but in them Ford couldn’t see fear. “Please try to understand. Just come back for me, all right? I want you to go now. But you can come back.”

He stared back at the girl, this lost girl, and he wanted to shake her.

“I can’t leave you. Not with how you are right now.”

“You’re not leaving.” She moved her thumb across his cheek. “Are you crying?” She laughed a little. “You’re coming back. Okay? You’ll come right back. Just you. But I want to be here a little longer. Say goodbye to my little home. Is that all right?”

He was quiet for a long time. They stared at each other. He wanted to know what was going on in her head. He wanted to call it in, as soon as he got to his truck, and she knew he wanted to. She kept shaking her head. As they sat there, he felt it. She already knew what he would do for her. She was waiting for him to trust it.

He conceded. "I'll come back. I'll get a fire going first."

She seemed to come apart, her shoulders moving down along her back, her head loosening from her neck. "Thank you."

He set a fire in the hearth and helped her move closer to it. As he went to stand, she reached out and hugged him. He held her back, surprised by her strength. "You're all right," he said.

"Can you do something for me?" She drew away.

She had him take a picture of the camp. That was all she had brought with her from her car, her camera bag. She had one of those older, manual cameras that still took film. When he came back in, she was writing on a new page of the notebook. She ripped it out and folded it in half. "I need you to read this and follow it for me, please?"

He took the paper and she held his hand. "Don't read it yet. Not till you're gone. I'll see you soon?"

She stared at him, hard, her eyes lighting up and holding him there. He felt bewitched, nodding his head and taking the paper. He crumpled it in his palm. Outside, a light snow came from the sky. Ford looked out the small window, considered just hauling the girl over his shoulder. But he looked back and saw her—thought of his father asking him to stay there by the bed, and yes, he would do this one small thing.

He pulled off his beanie and pushed it over her hair. She laughed when it covered her eyes.

In the truck, he reached over, grabbed the radio. He nearly depressed the button to call out, but then he stopped. He turned the truck on, pulled away from the cabin. He held the radio in his hand as he drove back to the service road but didn't use it. He couldn't shake off the feeling that she could see him holding the radio. He eventually tossed it back onto the seat, gripped the steering wheel. Soon in his mirror he could see the whispers of smoke.

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In the note, she asked that he bring a poem back with him, this crazy girl, thinking he was something he's not. He made it to a main road, turning and speeding the truck towards the station. Once there, he gathered blankets, some meal bars, and water. He didn't care if anyone saw, asked what he was doing. He would have told them. But no one was in. He left as quickly as he could. It took a few hours, the leaving and coming back, and he nearly forgot to bring it for her, the poem, hopping out of the truck to rush inside. But he turned, opened the door and saw his father's pages on the seat. He thumbed through them messily, clumsily, flustered and agitated by this stubborn girl's demands. He found his favorite one, removed it from the others. He rushed up to the door, but when he entered it, the cabin was empty. The notebook was open and on the table, with a torn page waiting for him.

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Forever

You brought back firewood and cleared the front porch of snow. I hope that you will keep this promise for me. Please develop the film and take the picture of the camp and send it to my father. I had been sending him postcards on my trip, postcards from the desert, I've been calling

them. I know he is out there, looking for me, following my tracks like I am a doe and he is my hunter. I know you're thinking that you didn't help me, but you did. You saved me in a different way. Please don't tell him anything. You never knew me, you never saw me. You never read the notebook. You never knew anyone was here. Leave the poem for him. I know he will understand. If you never knew me, then you will let this happen.

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Ford threw the door open and ran out into the snow, following her tracks into the canyon. He ran harder, felt his eyes burn from the cold air and something else. The sagebrush quivered under the snow. He stopped, feeling that familiar quiet. Soon, her footprints would melt and be forgotten, and the girl would truly disappear. He stood there until the cold seeped into him, pushing him back to the cabin. He took out his father's page, read it again, the words coming out just under his breath. He tucked the folded poem into the notebook and took her last entry for him and burned it in the fireplace. When the fire died, he got back onto the road to Denio as he had planned that morning but what felt like years ago, already. On his next patrols he went out, checked the rooms, dropped off firewood. Snow fell and melted. The rabbit brush grew. Deer were hit by cars, birds ate them clean off the pavement. Blue skies for days straight, a week. Everything fell back into place.

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Ford drove the father back to the station. The father cried, his fingers pinching the bridge of his nose, the folded paper in his open palm.

Back at the station, Rogalski nodded at Ford. Ford wondered if he had really seen the girl or if she had been a ghost. Make tender the dressing. Her life so quickly slipped away, but that

was what she had wanted. Ford almost asked her father for her name, but instead he watched him start his car and drive away across the salt. No one came asking after the girl again.

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A new winter, Ford found himself at his father's grave. He stood there for a long time before knowing what to do. He then said aloud a memory he had of them, where they were walking along a dock at the lake. At the end of it, his father sat them down. The stars were above. He pointed and whispered, "What do you see out there?" And Ford looked up. The sky blinked back, sightless. And he lied to his father. "Nothing."

STRAYS

On the fourth level of the Circus Circus parking garage, the security guard pedaled his bicycle in smooth, easy revolutions, guiding it over the parking lines. He rode around the columns, leaning into the turns enough to etch zeroes around them from the rubber of his tires. One arm he kept close to his body, buried against his waist under a work-issued parka. The winter chill flowed through the gaps between levels, and icy branches scratched at the thin sweep of snow on the ledges when the wind gasped through the garage, a quiet and dull night. Muted buzzing of fluorescent lights in the stairways gave the garage a yellow glow. Outside, the neon lights from the casinos and motel vacancy signs shined over the snow-choked streets and splintered through the east side of the garage, lighting and dimming in slow beats, like a near-anesthetized glimmer. The guard coasted along the wall of the ledge; his face flashed in this light, cheeks raw and blistery red.

His name was Bode Monroe. A man who nearly a decade ago had been selling, or at least bartering, handcrafted jewelry—welded out of used silverware and cutlery he'd stolen out of university cafés—on Telegraph Avenue to stoned students and intoxicated tourists, on a day almost as cold as this one, back when the record store had loomed behind him, Rasta tunes trickling through the outdoor speakers, and wisps of pot and lavender had stung the air as he pinched a cigarette between the fingers of his right hand, his left jammed into his pocket.

From the third step on the stairway, I watched him bike through the garage, the wheels gliding over the slick floor. I found him, and he was where I'd left him. My hands gripped the railing, the cheap cotton of my gloves that I'd bought from the pharmacy sticking to the freezing metal in balled-up clumps. He rolled over the lines, passing the stairway without seeing me.

I knew him as the portrait of perpetual boyhood. Youth that had sprouted first on a chicken farm in northern Connecticut, then bused to southern Massachusetts and stowed away on the ferry to Martha's Vineyard to work at an ice cream parlor, his dream, but hitchhiked across the country instead—fed up with East Coast condescension—to find good company and plenty of beer at Upper Haight, in the bushed hideaways of Golden Gate Park, and later his squat on Telegraph, where he torqued a ring, which he had melted and rolled out of a vintage spoon that he had claimed was used by Berkeley's namesake, past the second knuckle of a girl's forefinger; this was before they lost their minds to indulgence, before they woke up and cried at the days they'd slept through, before they ran away to Reno to get married—not divorced, and his life was left to an endless carousel in a casino parking garage. All of this Bodie did.

I wanted and didn't want him to see me. It'd been a few years since I'd last seen him, and still his life shudders through me when I buy paper plates, cut out coupons, and drink water out of the kitchen sink faucet: he ate food dropped on the sidewalk, used newspaper as toilet paper, and drank warm water from the public fountains. These lives sometimes blur together for me: I remember when I read all the cartoons first, and now I wake up from half-dreams of his skinny legs by the stove, a hot gust of frying potatoes billowing up at our faces.

He skidded from the brakes, popping out a hop over a parking line. A boyish jump, one he might have done at his home in Connecticut over a clump of raked long grass. This was what I had loved about him: his boundless youth found in his strange kleptomania for silverware, the way his skin was perfumed with scents of earth, his enthusiasm for travel. Always, he was moving. Stagnancy had repulsed him; he was made anxious by the static yoga like side planks or a bridge stretch I did in the mornings only when I was high and thought that the tight bubble I felt in my chest moved along my body with my breaths. He had preferred light jogging.

I moved up the last few stairs and waited by the column that was painted with the floor level in a mint green. Bodie cycled along on the other side of the garage. The casino lights burned in their red haze. Snow would fall again, soon. His shift had probably just begun. He would be circling for hours, the spokes glittering from the ceiling lights. Cars would leave as students and visitors trekked down Virginia Street from late classes or cheap pizza and beer at the Little Waldorf Saloon across from the university. He steered away from the ramp and the cars parked on the south end. My breath was visible and puffed out in front of my face. He cycled toward me. I wondered if he would recognize me, if he would see that I still wore discounted jeans from Ross, that my jacket was a rip-off, that my boots were still the first pair that I'd bought when we had moved here, when I had been shocked by the first snows in November that had reminded me of winters in northern Idaho—the thick inches of it that froze my legs if I didn't wear socks high enough over my pants. How much do we really change when we lose each other?

He stopped pedaling, and the bike glided with momentum until he jerked the wheel to keep his balance. The bike tilted but he planted his foot against the ground. His arm was tucked against his chest. I wondered if the people who'd hired him knew about his arm.

Telegraph Avenue was where I first met Bodie, and back then his arm hadn't been paralyzed yet. Though, I hadn't known him yet as Bodie. The rickety table he had set up on the sidewalk was covered in a dirty linen, and a piece of printer paper was inked by a thick, permanent marker: "Monroe Vintage Jewlry." I had been in Berkeley with friends for that weekend as a mini vacation from our midterms. My roommates hadn't known that it would be my first and last semester as a student of fashion design at the Art Institute in San Francisco. The tuition made my parents laugh. The fact that it was in the city made them scoff. They hadn't

thought that a girl from Coeur d'Alene would want to live like this: renting a house in Oakland because it was less expensive, learning the Bart service like it was another system of time, spending weekends walking along Telegraph, looking at records, books, trading drugs with the vagrants if you were brave enough to talk to them. And at first, I hadn't been. Sometimes they reached out for me, tugging on my scarves that I'd knit myself in my room when I couldn't sleep. Bodie had been one of them. But I wasn't scared as I walked away: he'd reached out, didn't tug, but rubbed the fabric between his fingers for a moment before letting it fall back against me. "You got a craft there," he'd said and nodded. He didn't look at me. If he hadn't said anything, I probably wouldn't have noticed his touch, and I loved how easily he could have slipped out of my life. He reminded me of a wild animal, a hawk or a coyote, the tough ones that don't startle or run when you look at them in the eyes. I watched him turn back to his table, one of his rings around the tip of his finger and he spun it round and round. His table, the misspelled paper: "Monroe Vintage Jewelry." The record store played Rasta beats and the drifters around him smelled like lavender and weed. My friends hooked their arms around mine and guided me away.

I would have forgotten about Monroe had I not met him again a few months later, when my money had ran out. I didn't pay rent for the last two months of the term. I'd walked from the Bart station to find my sketch pads, yarn, and my clothes out in the grass. I'd barely been at the house, afraid to have my roommates look at me. My parents had told me they were only paying for one year. I'd told them they could fuck off if they wouldn't support me, and that was just what they did; they didn't call. The money stopped coming into my account. Nothing for rent. My next semester at the AI had vanished before I could even sign up for classes. I kept going to

class because that semester was all paid for. Eventually I didn't even have the few dollars to take the Bart back to Oakland, to Berkeley even.

I'd asked to stay with some students from my classes at their dorms in the city. I slept on their couch, tried to not use their television. I tried to teach myself a memory: of what it was like to feel warm water in my hands, in my hair. I couldn't stand the way they'd looked at me, either. They had pretended that they were those cool San Franciscans, who could park a stick shift on Russian Hill in one try, truly weren't shocked when a naked person walked by on the street, and never went to Fisherman's Wharf. That they could be those people who'd let me smoke their pot, take acid with them, and sleep on their couch for the weeks after the semester ended and be fine with it. I had stayed there until the spring term started. They were gone during most of the day and I found myself scouting for their drugs, itching to watch them set up their bong in the mornings so that I wouldn't have to think for the rest of the day. They let me drink their beer, eat leftovers they'd bring back from North Beach and I would get sick on pasta and garlic. But my life had become a haze, blurry and distorted. I felt like I couldn't look at them. The couch had become too comfortable—I'd use one pillow to keep my neck from getting stiff; it was a routine. When they were all out, I'd left their apartment with my backpack full of clothes. I don't remember my first few nights on the street: January was a cold month: I'd taken their stash of pot and acid, and I'd consumed them blindly. The days went by in waves. I'd slept on the beach, once. Another time, I'd hidden myself behind a ledge of bushes in front of a historical building. The acid made me shaky, paranoid. I was afraid of everyone. I wanted to call my parents, but I thought of them hanging up on me. The drive back to Idaho would be long; the drugs there are harsher, intravenous. I couldn't go back to that. I'd liked how my tongue felt as it dissolved the

acid, the smoke. I found myself walking along Russian Hill, squatting once in an abandoned restaurant in Chinatown, duck carcasses still swinging in the window.

In Chinatown, I saw Monroe again. Dusk coated the buildings like melting wax. I was outside another building I believed to be empty, hoping to knock a lock loose and slip inside. I leaned against the doorway, pulling my jacket over my lips. He had been watching me for a while; I'd had my eyes closed. His hands were on his hips. "You're the Berkeley girl," he'd said. I lowered the jacket from my mouth, trying to place him. My eyes hurt constantly after I finally came off my last trip of acid. The pot had been gone long before that. The acid took longer, mostly because I was afraid of taking too much, of having the days slide by too quickly. "What are you doing here?" he asked. I shrugged. He started to walk away when I called to him, "You spelled 'jewelry' wrong." He pulled his beanie lower over his head, smiling. "I'm still there. You come fix it for me."

It took a few days, but eventually I lifted a Clipper Card and the Bart rolled me to Berkeley. I walked around the city for the majority of the day. I ate the food that people left on their plates outside; most of the time I was caught, but some days I was lucky. I slept in the park next to the public services building. The next day I went back to Telegraph.

"It's the stray."

He grabbed my shoulder when I tried to walk away.

"Sorry," he'd said. "I felt like I was owed it." He lifted his left arm that was in his pocket.

"What?"

"You wouldn't believe what happened after I saw you dozing in Chi-town." He pinched a joint between his fingers. The record store behind him was playing Rasta, like always.

"Don't you get sick of that?"

“Helps the day go. And it really does make weed feel better.”

He held it out toward me. My mouth slackened, and spit pooled under my tongue. I dragged a few puffs before I pulled the joint from my mouth. My head went light, and the back of my eyes twisted like the joints of balloon animals. “Wow.” Smoke fell out of my mouth.

“Friend of mine rolls with lavender.”

“So, what happened to your arm?”

“Partied too hard, guess.”

“You partied too hard?”

“Don’t remember. Friend said I was out in the street, after rolling dice for the tab, you know.” He picked up a ring from his table. People stormed around us. Tourists spilled into the street. Everyone was sporting Cal. He had this strange way of speaking; it wasn’t slow, but he dropped words whenever he wanted, it seemed like.

“Okay. What happened in the street?”

“Well, I fell. And hit my head. Still have a bump.” He rubbed his head with his right hand, then dropped it and shrugged. “Fucked for welding now.” He nodded his head at his table of jewelry.

“Oh, yeah. It has another ‘e’ before the ‘l.’” I picked up his sign.

“Doesn’t matter, much, guess.”

“Oh. Yeah, your arm. So, that’s it?”

The ring he had in his hand glinted in the light from the sun that split through the clouds. He lifted one of my hands and I spread my fingers like a flower. He moved the ring, twisting it up along my skin.

“Woke up, right? And my arm wouldn’t move with me.” He tilted his head. The ring squeezed onto my finger. From my lavender high, it felt absurdly sexual. I jerked my hand away, afraid of what I would do if he kept on. “Can’t even shrug. So now I have to barter hard with people.”

I laughed; he was making no sense. “Shrugging was a strategy?”

“Makes people want more when I don’t give a shit.” He pointed at the ring. “Bishop Berkeley ate off that spoon.”

“Did you know it’s pronounced Barkley?”

“I don’t know much. I know he ate off it, so.”

“How much?”

He shook my shoulder. “Saw you sleeping in Chi-town. You can’t buy this. Hundred dollars.”

“No.”

“No, not really. Guess.”

“Well, I bet it could go for a hundred. If the Bishop really did eat off it.”

He laughed. “Keep it. It’s just a spoon. No matter who touched it.” He crushed the butt of the joint beneath his shoe. His arm slipped out of his pocket. He put it back, jostling his elbow, looking like he’d done that a hundred times already. “Fucking pissing me off.”

“You need a bigger jacket pocket.”

He grabbed for my hand, bringing it closer to his face. “Looks good. You’re a girl who goes for jewelry, bet.”

“I’m a girl who goes for food and good pot.”

He laughed. “Appetite’s similar.”

“Monroe, you need to set up shop where the music doesn’t make you want even more pot.”

“Bode, like road. And they don’t mind me. I’m quiet. Don’t talk about crazy stuff to freak out tourists. Actually, Bodie.”

He revealed himself to me, reducing his name, ushering me into his life. How pathetic I felt—to need something like this, to carry him with me.

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“Bodie.” My voice shook as I called to him in the parking garage. My jaw hurt from the cold, too, but his name did something to me when I said it aloud. Called our pasts into being.

He stepped away from his bike and it fell to the floor, the chain clanking and the spokes spinning in quiet clicks. I stayed by the column.

“You’re really here?”

I hated that I cried before we could even talk. “Yes.”

“How’re you?”

“I’m fine.” I wiped at my face. “You?”

“I miss you.”

“Bodie, please.”

He pressed at the fastener to his helmet and tossed it to the ground. His beanie was lopsided. His ears were red like strawberries.

“You still live there?” He nodded his head to where the night was chilled to black, the snow falling in soft specks. He nodded as if he had no idea, but I knew he just wanted me to say it. The motel light flickered, a few of its letters burnt out.

“No. I live by the mall now.”

“That’s great.”

We had lived together for the first time in Reno for close to six months. We’d hated it. We couldn’t stand how close we were to each other. We were suffocating in each other’s breath. The motel room was a queen bed, a yellowed kitchenette, and a door for a bathroom that was a toilet attached to a shower stall.

For almost a year in the Bay, we’d lived boundless from walls, ceilings, windows. The nights were cold, the mornings stifling from ocean mists. Bodie had sold off his rings and necklaces at a lower cost to get the table off the street. He had a lot of friends on Telegraph; our year was a tape on fast-forward. We were high all the time. We spoke meaningful words to each other in the dark when we didn’t think we could look each other in the eye. We said we would stick together forever. We couldn’t imagine our lives without each other. I had been cold and alone. He was there, warm, and always talking even when the lights went out in the parks, and the drugs made me think the animals were going to eat me. During the day we trotted down Shattuck and University, Oxford and Hearst. We looked at the food in the windows, the cinnamon buns, the scrambled eggs, the seasoned burgers. We always got back to Upper Haight. His friends gave us drugs that we fed to each other like a feast. My tongue was swollen, and my eyes felt like they would burst full of sticky water. The tingling in our skin felt amazing; we couldn’t believe that we’d never felt like this before. After a week, we said we loved each other. In a month we got away from his friends. We stumbled to the bushes. He pressed against me, our breaths like small clouds but we couldn’t feel how cold it was. Our bodies were on fire. He held his paralyzed arm up, trailing it along my naked chest. “I think I can feel you.” I watched him cry, wrapping my fingers around the hand on my skin. We slept through days; the others watched over us. Our trips were long and they hurt our bodies when we came down. I couldn’t stop

sniffing. My nose was always dripping. My cheeks itched for the kiss of a bong. Bodie held both of my hands in one of his. He laughed at his arm when he was high, holding it up and then letting it fall. "I have a dead arm," he'd said over and over. Before he fell asleep he'd grab onto me, afraid. He would say that sleep always scared him. He hated that feeling of slipping away. Drugs were different. You were taken. When the acid was too strong we'd hold onto each other. Bodie whispered in my ear, "Couldn't this just last forever?" I thought of my last shower in a real bathroom, not the ocean, not the water fountains at the park. The warmth that heated my skull. "Couldn't this last forever?" I did want it to last forever. We laughed all the time. The beer made our stomachs bubbly and I loved feeling my teeth with my tongue. When we were back with all his friends, we dared each other in kissing games. Sometimes we did more. Most of it I don't remember. I told Bodie I would only do it if I was completely gone. Bodie said he would too. "We're each other's. This doesn't count." We'd wanted it for the fun. We thought it was fun. "Could this last forever?" I began to cry and talk about home. Bodie said he'd want to see Idaho someday. I told him it was beautiful. I asked if he had ever seen a moose. "A moose, no. A moose doesn't exist here." We didn't make sense anymore. We got angry when we blurted out sentences. "I don't want the spoon choking me anymore. It's choking me." I couldn't get the ring off. "I'll buy a real ring one day. A real ring. One day, see." "Buying doesn't exist." I didn't know if I could talk anymore. I'd wake up, and my mouth was shut, locked, stuck like Bodie's arm. "You don't talk anymore. It's like you're thinking all the time." I couldn't open my mouth to take more drugs, to take more. My body was hot and cold at the same time. My bones hurt, and it felt good to feel it. I sat for hours. The bridge reached across the ocean. When the fog was thick, I couldn't see the end of it. The bridge went around the whole world. "Could we last forever?" Here, like this? We could, suppose. But the mornings were bright. The grass poked at

our naked skin. The others were always watching us. We couldn't whisper to each other anymore. "I feel like I could lose you. And I don't know what I would do if I lost you." The others laughed, watching. "You're not losing me." We were losing our minds. When he was inside me, I thought that he was far away. But his face was above mine and his tears dripped onto my forehead. All of it was frightening, horrifying. We were drunk, stoned, obliterated. We were overdosing on indulgence. "Can this ever stop?" All of us were mindless. Youth had eaten us alive. "We can't go back. We can't ever go back." We threw up, we smoked, coughed, choked, we lied, we scratched the trees, spit on the bushes. We slept, tried to. We fucked each other. I didn't know if it was ever Bodie. I shut my eyes. I imagined that two hands were over me, touching my skin, igniting me. It couldn't be just one. Two hands, with a man who wasn't Bodie. A man who could spell jewelry. A man who didn't let me do this. But, couldn't this stop? "I think I feel you." We woke up. Our eyes hurt. The sun was bright. The Golden Gate Bridge was red like blood. The ocean crashed. The world, it was back. Bodie and I cried. We sat in the sand, gripping handfuls of it in our hands. We were awake.

We'd lived in the park for months. Almost a year had gone by since I had been evicted from the house in Oakland. I sat on the beach, watching the waves crawl up in its tide. If I looked up at the bridge, I would throw up.

"We need to leave this place."

Bodie stood there, looking out at the motel. It was starting to snow again.

"I need to leave this place," he said.

"I'm sorry."

"What?"

"I'm sorry."

“What for?”

“I kept you here.”

Cars, sirens, neon lights humming. Trolleys, horns, ocean winds. These sounds carried from the Bay.

“What do you mean?”

I shrugged. “What do you think? I left you here. I wanted to get away.”

“We both wanted to get. That was foolish.”

“You’re talking weird.”

“What now?”

I wiped at my mouth. My nose was running. My eyes hurt. I thought of the bridge.

“Sorry, okay? I’m just sorry. I wanted to apologize.”

“You aren’t keeping me here. I’m here.”

“But I left you.”

“You’re here right now.”

I was shaking my head. “No, I’m not back.”

We’d left the Bay Area within days. We hitched rides to Reno. The motels made us laugh again for the first time, truly. The motels were miniature houses. We thought they’d be a relief. And for the first few weeks they were. Bodie and I collapsed on the bed each time we came home; and we thought of it as home. We slept together, waking up to other rooms’ televisions blaring the morning news. Couples frying up food at their kitchenettes. Many of them fought. Bodie and I watched each other. We liked to think we weren’t like them. We weren’t like any of them. “Have I ever told you about Connecticut?”

“I would like to see Connecticut someday.”

The motel was across the street from the Circus Circus. Bodie and I walked through the casino. The lights dazzled us. The noises made the slots sound like animals, talkative little machines, encouraging. The cigarette smell was thick and comforting: I thought of my grandmother and Bodie said it reminded him of his father's cigars. The smoke wasn't sickly sweet like pot. We liked how the smoke stayed with us, in our clothes, our hair. We tasted it on each other's skin. We tried to get jobs at the casino. I was hired as a cocktail waitress. Bodie, a slot attendant. But I loved watching the dealers at blackjack, the cards gliding across the felt tables like magic carpets. The dealers knew the numbers, the hands, the winners and losers, as if they didn't have to think about it; it was like magic. I knew the tip money from serving cocktails would be great, but I bought a pack of cards from the gift store and started practicing in our room. My hands were steady from years of knitting, I liked to think. I flicked the cards out on our sheets and Bodie would try to play against me, the house. He always lost; he didn't know how to play. I'd been memorizing the charts on odds. "Hit me."

"You should stay."

"I'll take odds."

"It doesn't work like that."

"How, what? I want a fucking 'hit me.'"

"People will get pissed at you. You shouldn't hit."

I convinced the pit boss to let me show him I could deal. He sat at the table, eyes steeled on the cards. He tapped, waved his hand over the cards. Tossed chips. Cut them with his fingers as I shuffled.

"Remember to burn the top card. And you'll have to work on that. Cutting the chips. Get used to cutting the ones in tens."

Back in our room I jumped on the bed. I was good at something again. Bodie watched me from his post at the stove. He held his left arm against his waist.

“I can deal.”

“What?”

“I can do that.”

He tried to practice with me, but he couldn't keep the deck in his left hand. He threw the cards on the bed, cursing. He told me that he was already let off for the slot attendant job; they'd hired on multiple people and were only keeping one.

The next day he'd gone to security. He'd positioned his arm on the handle when the manager wasn't looking. He was wobbly at first, but all he had to prove so far was that he could ride a bike. We both worked graveyard. During the days we were too tired to speak. We slept. All we could do was sleep.

“I left. That's what I mean. I'm sorry.”

I'd left him in the garage, where we were now. I'd walked back to our motel, grabbed my clothes, didn't turn back.

“But you're here now.”

“I'm not back. I'm apologizing.” I stood up straight. He was staring at me like he had those first few days in the park. I thought of the words he couldn't say right. The words he misspelled. The movement he'd lost from his arm. I'd gotten sick of him. I was frightened to think that I latched onto him. But it was more sickening to think that I had been taking care of him, really, the entire time. We'd been homeless together. I was homeless: college dropout. Bodie—who was Bodie? Did I even know him? We'd never celebrated our birthdays. Holidays. We stayed in our room when we moved to Reno. I liked to think that I was happy. But the

happiness dimmed; I felt like anytime I'd look up and see the bridge. Bodie reminded me of it. How could he not? He was there; he would always know our secret.

"I'm going to school now."

"You are?" He smiled.

"A few classes. Accounting. I've grown on math, from dealing, you know. I moved to poker."

"Classes are a lot of money."

"Yeah, I've been making a bit more, though. From the tips in poker. Five dollars a turn."

"I've been saving, late."

"For what?"

"That ring I'd get you."

The motel light flickered. A car started on the other side of the garage.

"A ring?"

"I made a promise to you about a ring. Not a spoon one."

We'd married in the wedding chapel next to the motel the morning after we'd moved. We had no rings except for our spoon rings. He didn't wear his: he worried the ring would be too tight and he wouldn't feel it on the ring finger of his left hand.

"That's nice."

"Yeah, it will be."

I thought of us in the dark, pressed against each other. Our brains boiling from the acid. That was a few years ago. But I was beyond that. I had to be. I'd gone to college—one semester, but I was at school. And now I was taking classes at the university. I was in accounting, dabbling in a writing class. I missed art, the sketches of design that worked my mind for patterns.

He pulled at his beanie, moving it over his forehead like he had an itch. My stomach felt pinched. I was ashamed of us. Looking at him I was reminded of how lost I'd been. But I also thought about how I took him with me. I was different from him; it was easy for me to fall into that life, easier to crawl back out. But Bodie was still back in there. I hadn't brought him out with me.

"Maybe you should buy yourself something."

"But I said I'd get it for you." It was that boyishness again. The childlike determination. That hadn't been melted away, burned out of his mind. But—I couldn't help but think something had. "You don't need to get anything for me."

"I've been saving, late." He tapped his head with his fingers.

"Anyway, I wanted to say I was sorry."

He shut his eyes, and his face wrinkled. We were older now, I was sure of it. I was older. I was over the bullshit of being in my twenties and not remembering it. Bodie could be, too. But he stood there. His boots squeaked against the floor. The spokes on his bike hadn't stopped spinning. I should have left him here in his quiet carousel of the casino. I was watching an animal pace in a cage.

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My apartment was warm; the curling steam of heated cider flowed through the rooms. I had multiple bedrooms. A bathroom. A kitchen. This was my first real home. Foler came out of the bedroom. He pinched the knot of his tie down from his collar. He was a fitter at the designer stores in the mall. He kissed me on the cheek. I moved in with him three months ago.

"How was class?" He watched me through the mirror in our living room.

I don't know why I couldn't answer him. I felt myself go through the motions of crying. Foler pulled the tie over his head. I wiped at my eyes, looked at him in the mirror. There were two versions of me. I used to think of myself as Before and After.

Before: Bode Monroe pushed a ring he welded out of old spoons along a girl's finger. He'd found her in Chinatown, and she helped him spell the words for his table on Telegraph, words that buzzed in the mouth: vintage, jewelry. His table glittered with tarnished silverware. His arm rested in his jacket. In a few days they would go to Golden Gate Park. They would trip on acid. His body would burn, blood flushing the skin. His breaths like a dog's panting. His arm sometimes turning purple. Hands looked like flowers. People bloomed, wilted. He kissed her and she closed her eyes. This could last forever.

Bodie and I, we were both strays. I left the garage, my heels slipping on the metal stairs. In my car, I shook. I thought of the bridge, how when I was tripping hard I imagined what the wind would feel like on my face. I'd wanted to leave the city. I hadn't known that it was Bodie who I'd wanted to leave behind. He was there, a floor below me, still staring. He would probably mount his bike, adjust his arm. Snap the helmet back on his head. He would keep biking around the garage, guarding it. Get back on the carousel.

And there was After: I stood up from the couch. Foler unbuttoned his shirt with quick slips of his thumb. Sometimes, he held my face in his hands after we kissed and I wasn't afraid to look back at him. I wanted him to see all of this and see what he'd do with it. Foler pulled on a t-shirt and moved into the kitchen. Clicks from the gas range. The blue ring lighting up. A pot filled with tap water.

I want to go back and tell Bodie I'm a wild animal too. I looked at Foler, wondered how little he knew me. I am a drifter, a stray. Bodie held out a hand, and I made us jump.

ROADKILL

I was in what my parents have always called the “playroom” in our house, sprawled rather rudely over the couch with a bowl of ice cream perched atop my breastbone with the lip of the bowl chilling the underside of my jaw; this was to provide for quick and clean access of the dessert from the bowl straight to my mouth. On the television the glow of *Ice Cold Gold* (which met its untimely end of production in 2015) flickered straight into a drawl of medicinal commercials. As I usually do, I muted the commercials to silence the yammering of actors and their unpleasant lists of side effects (one of which is always death), and this opportune moment of quiet allowed me to hear a rumbling and banging occurring right outside the playroom window, where my work truck was.

I should mention: before my recline on the couch I hit a deer with my truck on the Mount Rose Highway. Having been on the road for nearly eight hours from a fur trapping convention in Wells, and it being after midnight, I reserved I could maybe harvest this thing, so I hoisted the deer into my truck bed by its legs. (My father was not pleased: “It’s poaching whether you hit it with your truck or not!” “*Fine*,” I said back, conceding to call animal control in the morning.)

But back to the rumble: I threw open the blinds to see out on the driveway a black bear dragging the deer out of the truck bed. I don’t know why I felt the need to do this, but I pulled on my boots over my naked feet and legs and burst from the house into the garage to grab my gun. I had no intention to kill the bear, so don’t ask me why I bothered to lug my gun over my shoulder, but I chased that bear halfway down Callahan Road. It’s hard to tell sometimes why life throws what it does at you, but one thing I’ll say is that you let that bear take what’s yours away if it wants.

BIGGEST LITTLE

Eldorado

New year brings you to the usual spot on a Saturday night. Brew Brothers filled up with leftovers from the Sands and guys fresh out from their Tesla and Amazon factories in Fernley. Warming up with vodka sodas, you're there in your tee-shirt dress and thigh-high suedes waiting for everyone you dragged out here to show up for good company. God forbid any man actually comes up and talks to you; you're only here to piss off Fernando. Not that the market is open, but a free drink is compliment to the wallet and that thirtieth birthday you checked off two months ago, don't forget. And hassled by the bouncer still: the usual test on your address and birthday. You should be flattered, others tell you, for looking so young, but you're not flattered: it is not flattering to look like you don't belong.

John, Selena, Seth, and Cassie Jo decide to show up and apologize—sorry, sorry, side work dumped on them at the restaurant, and managers going off on app sales and servers ringing up kids' chocolate milks for themselves, then the traffic downtown for the eve's crawl, no parking on Center or Virginia, detour to the Puff-n-Stuff, and so on. Mostly everyone's here now and spiraling fast, those goddamn fishbowl frozen daiquiris, and all's gone to bitching about fry-fills and running out of the draft Sam Adam's seasonal and the shitheads who leave pocket change on a fifty-dollar tab, the tweakers who cry vegetarian and a comped meal after doubling up on pig tavern burgers. You and the crew laugh and try to throw in the annoyances of the night, but the laughter always dies out. It's the same customers, the same stories.

John and Selena get that messy drunk, which is fun until they start with the close faces and that hand on the inside of the elbow, what with John's girlfriend at home—and didn't they

have a newborn? A boy or girl, who knew, but that's how it goes. Seth buys a round for everyone, and Cassie Jo déjà vu's out of the bathroom but she steals Selena away from John and everything feels okay again.

And there you go, lightened up with drink, cheeks tropic red under the neon and finally they've turned off that country shit you love and are on to the club tracks that get even louder after midnight. Seth throws back an ounce of amber and takes you out there for the countdown in this biggest little, as he likes to call it.

Here we are, in this biggest little.

After twelve, new year, and who could you have kissed? Fernando buzzing up your bag with *I'm sorry, baby*, and *Will you come home?*

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Silver Legacy

It's after one now, and down in the pit you're throwing away what feels like everything. Roll of twenties tipped out from a thousand in sales. The house hitting twenty-one is a magic trick you saw coming. You consider moving everyone along to roulette or those themed celebrity slots, but Seth is making a fool of himself on insurance and Cassie Jo hangs back, sipping on the gin and tonic Seth ordered, and is it her hand on his shoulder? The guy next to you snicks the felt table with his nail and leans on your chair, curls of smoke leaving his mouth. You wanted to piss off Fernando, and so now what? You're here, and he's won't stop calling you. You won't answer. And this isn't the first time.

John and Selena wasted, and carried through their close and sexual dancing at the bar, now joining the others at the blackjack table. John wants a go at the shoe, but everyone knows that's just setting chips on a table so the dealer can stack them in red, green, and white towers on

her side. Selena hugs you and strokes your hair and provides a nice escape from the guy smoking next to you. You take up your chips after going bust on the last round, and Seth turns from the table, reaching his arm out, the black ink of bristlecone pine trunked at his elbow, and it's like fresh air, you taking his hand.

It's always Seth.

He won't change, he says.

You've known this, and still.

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Virginia Street

The taxi driver lets it slide that you cram into the car and sit on Seth's lap. Cassie Jo sits between John and Selena, and everyone shivers but all feel warm, biting. Cassie Jo can't let her night go, she's all on and on about the cooks letting her times blow and that it must be something personal, but Seth calls her out on this bullshit, and you laugh with them and Seth talks about Cassie Jo stealing bites of fries by the ice machine like she always does and the constant slips outside into nipping wind for cigarette breaks with the bus boys near the dumpster, but mostly it's the lingering by the bar while Seth scoops ice cream into the milkshake machine—no drinks for you CJ, he always says right as she comes up the two steps.

Fuck you, Seth, she says now, hiding behind her hand, elbow smudging the window.

And Selena's laugh shoots over the taxi driver's head.

Oh, fuck you! Fuck you!

But everyone is smiling. Even Cassie Jo. Even Seth. And you.

/

Peppermill

Selena melts into a chair in the terrace lounge and John stays close, and there's a hand on the arm again. You put your name down for a table at Café Milano's, and Seth taps away at a game of video poker, the bartender floating down a glass of vodka soda, the glass sweating already. Seth hands it back to you without looking and just like that the fresh air is gone. Cassie Jo sits next to him but swivels in her chair, looking at him, looking at you.

Give me your drink, she says.

/

Booth

John departs after a cup of coffee and a helping of a garden omelet that he shared with Selena, and she begs him for a ride. No one can do anything but wince; their sudden distance from each other as they walk away saying so much about what they want to do, will do. Cassie Jo only could do so much it seemed. She picks at a beignet with her fork and goes for her water glass but it's empty, and Seth hands her his own.

How's Fernando? Cassie Jo gulps the water.

He needed a night in, you tell them.

Needs the shit kicked out of him, Seth says, taking his glass back.

Cassie Jo elbows Seth, and you hate that he laughs.

And Cassie Jo asks, who was it this time?

So, everyone knows, you say. You feel on display, there across from them, and Cassie Jo's hands go under the table.

Yeah, everyone knows. Seth leans to the side to edge out his wallet, throwing his card out at the checkbook.

Did you see who it was? Cassie Jo puts the card in its placeholder.

Didn't know her. The keno screen above you reveals another number.

Does it matter, CJ? Seth is the only one to ever call her this.

Technically, we aren't together, you say.

I fucking hate this guy, Seth says.

How can you stay with him? Cassie Jo says this without looking at you. The glare of the café lights reveal the tiny contact discs circling her irises.

And now it hits that you've never liked Cassie Jo.

Technically, we aren't together. At the moment.

You'll go back, though. Cassie Jo takes up Seth's glass again. Is what you're saying.

He's not the only bad guy in this.

He wants you when he needs you, Seth says.

He won't change, you're right, you say. You shrug on your parka.

Seth reaches out but his glass is empty.

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Tuscany Tower

Cassie Jo gives up. She dumps herself into a cab after she cheered Seth for New Year's and not you. Lunch shift, she told him when he asked when he'd see her at the restaurant.

And you're inside, cigarette smoke folding into your clothes and finally the people are dwindling. Sunrise and the windows glow orange like smoke lighting the world but it still feels like night all the time.

I hate that I'm always asking you about him, he says. Where you're at.

You take off your parka again, warmth buzzing you, and you're not sure if it's from being alone with Seth or the casino heat.

So you are broken up?

I don't know. You honestly don't.

I'm getting a room, he says.

This isn't the first time. You run your fingers over the faux fur of your parka hood. I need to be alone, you tell him.

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Café Milano

You go back to the cafe and sit at the counter for coffee. Older men swivel in the chairs next to you, fingers itching for cigarettes at sunrise and newspapers fresh enough their ink is still wet. The busser slides a mug down the line and the waitress asks regular or decaf. Above you the keno screen splices with replays of the ball drop. Servers pass by with platters of fruit fantasies, scrambled eggs, prime rib, mimosas. The café is quiet but full of morning murmurs and kitchen hisses. The casinos never sleep.

And Seth comes through, calling you. Then, his room number.

Sure, you think, you're here to piss off Fernando. But you're here, too, for yourself.

Here, Seth says, in this biggest little.

Seth, you say. It's nearly morning.

The line crackles. It's an icy one out there, he says. At least sleep on the couch, then, until the roads are melted.

Let me finish my cup of coffee. Your confidence is annoying, you say.

I can hear you smiling, he says. I can just hear it.

/

Suite

The room is all dimmed lights and drawn curtains. Your phone is on silent but its screen lights up the ceiling.

Turn it over, Seth says. He's on his side, hands together by his face.

You do but glance at the notifications first. The usual messages, a voicemail or two. And yes, you feel guilty.

Is this how it's going to play out, you say.

Seth flips to his other side, away from you.

Is this it?

What? He shifts again.

You'll sleep the day away and it will be dinner shift, again. Waking up, checking out, returning the messages and phone calls and then lunch at the sports bar with him, and back to watching the fallout between friends from last night play at the restaurant. Then, days later, something like this: downtown, following the neon, close enough to feel something, but to make it last, that's always getting further away. Wanting something because you need it. And will it make you happy? Probably.

Seth on his way out, his breathing quieter, his legs restless, kicking away the dark, and you're left there. You come out from the tangle of sheets and step to the curtains, pulling back the pleated canvas. Light is coming up over the Virginia Hills, the modest peak of Rattlesnake Mountain. Down below the tower you see the fake glacial blue of pool water, the heated chemical wisps coming out from the hot tubs. So easily you trick yourself into thinking this is the way it goes. Today, it could be different. It will be different. This can last, and it's all here in the biggest little.

IDLEWILD

The dog's barking was what woke her. The greyhound never barked, but the day was new, and they were still getting to know each other. His bark had snipped at the air, nearly hoarse from underuse—meanwhile she had been in some dream, some car that was not her own, not quite, and twisting the key for the engine start, cables and ends squealing and almost barking, it seemed. The barking tore open her dream that way, the unfamiliarity of hearing this sound yanking her out of that quickly disintegrating loop, coming to in a dark morning, rain patting against the window, and the greyhound next to the mattress, making sure she was looking before he vomited on the floor.

She didn't sit up right away, still warming up to wakefulness. The dog panted next to the bed, his eyes a little glossy from the effort of expulsion, but overall regaining the simple happiness that she admired about dogs. He walked over, keeping much distance from his spill, and set his muzzle upon her pillow.

And so, her morning began earlier than it normally did. But she didn't blame the dog while scooping the warm mess in a glove of paper towels spritzed with cleaner. She tossed the soaked towels in the trash, and the dog moved his head against one of her palms like *I'm sorry*. She patted him and got a good spot near his ear.

Let's go out, she said and moved to the kitchen, flipping the light, and heating water for her tea. It was that morning dark, when the temperature dropped while the world went dewy pink. The greyhound trotted into the kitchen, in its mouth a fleece from her room, and put it by the door. He turned back around, making sure she was watching, and he slumped to the ground, slowly, sprawling his long legs out in front of him, and put his head down between his paws,

pleading but also waiting sort of patiently while she let the water boil. It was all part of the routine. She smiled. It was times like these she was sure this dog had always been hers.

She drank some of her tea and put the kettle on the stovetop, its mouth still steaming. They went down the three flights from her apartment, enduring the usual interaction with the yappy terriers up on the second-floor balcony. She reached the bottom of the stairs and the dog pulled her left, toward the A and B buildings of the complex, an area that she usually avoided because of the greyhound's constant low, threatening snarls at the old man who lived in the corner apartment. She felt bad that the greyhound expressed his dislike at this old man, and she dreaded having to walk by and pull and yank at the dog to follow—which is why she always went the other way, down the stairs and to the right, toward the north entrance, a longer route to the river park. But the greyhound pulled her this way, eagerly, and she hoped that there was some distraction pulling him that way, a squirrel or another dog's scent, that would take them by the corner apartment without conflict. They walked toward the corner apartment, turning toward the south gate, and in a sideways glance she could see him—the old man who seemed to sit out on his porch for all hours of the day. It occurred to her in this moment that he might not be an old man, not a person, at all, that he might be fake—actually, he had to be, now that she thought about it, because he always sat there when she took the greyhound out at noon, the time she got up and took the dog out, and now here he was at dawn, and he never acknowledged that she walked by him every day, and this made her dog seem to want to kill him, and so he must be like a prop that sat there and made people think they were being watched, but it was just a spooky trick that the people in that apartment never thought to put away after Halloween ended and then months go by and the year too and then it's here all over again, and so he stayed out there, like Christmas lights. She walked by the porch, keeping an eye fixed on this prop, on this joke

beyond seasons, and the longer she stared the more she convinced herself that her eyes had been fooling her, like how she always thought she saw a man in the corner of her room, but it was just the floor fan with a hair towel draped over it. She stared at this thing, which was pressed back against the wall, shaded, but then it moved. The man—it was a man, he waved at her—and the greyhound let out one shrill bark, and she pulled at his leash, hissing his name, but the man waved again, stood, and turned to go inside, pulling his robe over the skin of his chest. Her shoes slipped on the ice that hardened over the sidewalks. He was not a fake, and she was startled. What a fucked-up thought to have, that he wasn't a real person. A hot hurt filled her cheeks, stunned by this error of her mind. She looped the red leash over her hand to guide the greyhound closer and he brushed up against her side, cat-like, as if he was saying, *I'm here*. She shivered. It must be that looped dream still hovering over her brain like steam over hot water, a groggy reentering into the world. A lack of sleep was catching up to her. She was not used to being up this early.

She punched in the code for the gate and they crossed the street over to the river park. The coffee shop off West 1st Street was probably open now, she considered, but remembered she didn't bring her wallet. She could go anyway; the walking trail along the river was nice and she could get water in a heavy, metal bowl for the greyhound, stand outside in the chill but feel the warmth of the sun on her back, and read the gazette journal for the movie reviews. But the dog pulled her along to the river instead and she let him have this sense of purpose, direction. The trees shivered with the dawn wind and even though the sun was coming up, the air stung her cheeks. Thick puffs of breath came out of the greyhound's mouth. He kept close by her side, which surprised her, because he was always pulling away, leaning into his collar, and letting his breath choke on the pressure. They came down along the rocks, and she paused and the dog

waited right next to her. He sat, his back straight, and he looked up at her, as if waiting for permission. So she tried something new: she unclasped the leash from the greyhound. She'd believed they had established the usual trust between dog and owner. *Stay with me, watch over me.* He'd brought her the fleece like always. She could give him this short bout of freedom to be a dog.

The greyhound wandered, picking up sticks and eventually logs to drop at her feet. She heaved them into the river and he bounded in after them, water flying up over his body. She stood there, obliging this dog that was bred for more exciting things than fetch with her on a riverbank. She knew he was bred and born in Arizona, that he was one of the best in racing, but greyhounds were retired early and often forgotten about. She considered that this would be a perfect match because she'd been forgotten, too.

The greyhound brought back a log, and she threw it again. He went after it but didn't bring it back right away. He trotted off into a cluster of trees.

She stood there, waiting for the dog to do its business. She pulled her fleece over her throat and inched it over her chin. She turned away from the river, leading her gaze southwest along the valley. New snow glittered atop the Sierra Nevada. Winter was settling in earlier, it seemed. She thought back through the year, the unnatural course of the seasons from what she'd remembered growing up: how rains had come through in March and flooded watersheds and rose the Truckee up so that its current snaked over bridges and streets. When June came the sun was out and baked the valley through August and it felt like one-hundred degrees twenty-four-seven for ninety days. Everyone, she thought, was on edge. Casinos were packed, with people loitering in lobbies for convenient chilled air and abusing free samples of gelato. Smoke from California cleared out the beaches at the lake. Lightning stormed through Virginia Hills. Then October

came, and the heat was snuffed out by snow through the mountains. It all felt like whiplash, but it would only get worse from here.

She faced the river again. The dog, or the absence of him, interrupted her thoughts. The greyhound was away for a while now that she thought about it. She called out his name.

He was overall a lazy dog, hardly stirring when she called his name to come eat his kibble. He was a creature that fit in all too well with the works and days of her life. As a cocktail waitress, she worked past midnight at the Silver Legacy downtown, serving drinks to poker players during high-stake, but not quite pro, tournaments. She liked to think the greyhound knew this about her and could relate in some way, a sense of similar work ethic. They both raced, she considered, the greyhound after that damn stuffed-bone hooked to a bar that dragged along endlessly around a track, and she from those curt sunglasses-players to the bar for Manhattans, Crown on the rocks, a cup of water with a napkin, and the one guy who always asked for two toothpicks, that way he didn't have to ask her twice. The faster she was, the better her tip, the sooner the pros pressed a five-dollar chip into her hand. And it was a rush, the silence of the felted room, the little noises that broke it all up. Chips clicking into towers, the way they sounded like a room full of fingers snapping as they're pushed into the pot for an all-in. Ice cracking in soda and rum and everything was a little slick from sweaty, chilled glasses. The sunglasses catching the light from neon tubes curving around the ceiling. There was so much money in that room, all hued into little red, blue, green plastic discs. Knuckles tapping against the green, and dealers shuffling cards, floating out the deck one by one over the table. It was all a race.

And she'd come home at three, four in the morning, stepping out of her pumps, peeling off the stockings, stumbling for bed, and the greyhound would sit up on the couch, panting like he'd just dreamed about race day. He'd follow her into the room for round two of sleep, curling

up on the ground and sleeping harder than her till mid-morning. And there were the times when he let her pull him onto the bed and wrap an arm around him in the dark—this was rare, this closeness he allowed her, when he let her love him—until he would wake from his twitching and move away from her, almost melting off the bed. *Not yet.* But he came to know so much about her in the little time they'd spent together. How he knew she'd take him outside once her feet untangled from the sheets, once she let the water boil and sipped from her tea. Dogs remembered these things, these patterns, and she loved this. They know how the light looks in the room when it's time to get on with the day. The way she rubbed her face and eyes and stretched to just one side, and he tilted his head the other way. Sliding feet into sneakers and pulling on a fleece that used to smell like someone other than her.

She moved along the river now, just outside Idlewild Park, kicking rocks with her shoe. She said his name again. Nothing but the sound of the river. Turning around, she looked for the path that she had followed and saw that they had moved down from the path and over the exposed rock, down below the banks, away from the riverfront houses and lodges.

She didn't want to panic—she was sure the dog was just off smelling a tree or marking bushes—but she began to walk farther along the river. She said his name. She came upon a bend in the river. Up the banks, she searched for the dog among the bushes and trees, but she saw nothing and so she found herself sitting down where she was, holding her uncovered knees against her jacket, trying to calm her breathing, her anger—she felt like a child, helpless, stunned. She pushed her hands in the pockets of the fleece, her hands getting stiff from the cold air. Then, rocks moved beside her, and she imagined the paws she had heard padding through the kitchen this morning, and she turned to start scolding.

But it was not the greyhound.

Good morning, she said, and she turned to the river.

From her glimpse of the man, he seemed tall, but she was sitting down so anyone was tall. He had a beanie pulled down over his eyebrows and ears. His boots were wet. She couldn't tell if he was walking along the river and she happened to be in his way, or worse, if he walked out of the river toward her, like something out of a swamp.

Morning, he said. He sat down on the rocks, swiping away at the small pebbles and moving dirt into the air.

She was cold, but her body also burned from it, from her alarm at being found, not by her dog, but by this stranger, this man. She felt paralyzed, threatened at once with instinct telling her to run and knowing that she couldn't, wouldn't, because she also felt flickers of anger—she didn't want to leave, she'd been here. She was waiting for her dog. These thoughts raced in her mind. She was made uneasy by him, and she worried that he could sense this fear.

Lose someone? he said.

Just enjoying the morning, she said.

It's beautiful out.

She nodded but didn't look at him, and she wondered if he would know that she'd given him a response. These little panics about the right thing to do in front of a stranger, a man.

The name of her dog rose in her throat but stayed there. She wished her dog would run out right at that moment, and how she would follow. She willed for him to come out. To stop sniffing the dirt and run out among the rocks. It could be a race, she thought. She willed out to him this challenge: the fastest back to the gate. He would love that. But the dog was not coming out, and he could not hear her thoughts. And so, she was thinking she must ask this man if he saw her dog. She was panicking now, between the thought of showing her hand but also of the

dog getting farther away from her. Forgetting the sound of her voice, forgetting what she called him.

I don't remember the last time it was cold this early in the season, he said. And after the summer we had.

She reached down and moved rocks between her fingers. She was not scared. She would not be scared.

It's strange, she allowed herself to say.

What's that? He leaned forward but she didn't look at him.

I was thinking the same thing this morning, she said.

He laughed, but maybe it was a cough or both.

It's on everyone's mind, he said. What this planet is doing. Maybe it's trying to shake us off it.

He was drunk. Cigarettes and whisky, she knew those scents, they beat through her like she imagined the smells of the world beat through her greyhound's blood. The felt lining of blackjack tables in her head. Cocktails? How many times she said that in the minutes before midnight, the hours after. And it hit her then, she was very tired. It seemed that her heart should be pounding, blood in her ears and face, but she sat there, muted. The blood itched in her fingers and the skin of her legs rippled with gooseflesh. Something like defeat was pulsing along her blood. A strange resolve settled in her deep like silt in a riverbed. The dog would have come back by now.

I could leave this fucking planet right about now, he said.

She gave him nothing.

I was up in Tahoe last weekend, he said. On the beach, and this lightning storm. The water was purple, no shit.

No shit, she said.

No shit. He was nodding.

She finally looked at him.

Scariest shit I'd seen in a long time. The flashes so bright. I could see the bottom of the lake.

She'd been around drunk men before. They just want to talk and talk and talk.

What did you see down there?

Fuck, he said. He rubbed a hand over his forehead. Can't lie to you, but I don't remember your name.

You don't need to know it, she said.

Yeah. Guess not.

She straightened her legs and moved her hands over them for warmth.

The bottom of the lake, I'll tell you. He laughed again. Shit, it's something you need to see.

Yeah?

Yeah. He unzipped his jacket. You see yourself, you do.

She'd spent a lot of her life trying not to see herself. She'd adopted the greyhound during a special weekend at a pet store for rescued and retired racing dogs. His tail had wagged when she came up to him, and his tongue was warm on her hand when he licked her. Are they active? She had asked the volunteers. No, they would sleep all day if you let them. She took the greyhound home and he sat in the backseat like a child. He seemed to know where they were

going, where they had been. In the apartment, he was skittish of her. The smell of her was everywhere, the couch, the chairs. There seemed to be no room for him. He trotted into the closet and came out with a fleece in his mouth. He left it at the end of the bed. It was a fleece that didn't smell like her, and she held it up. I didn't see he'd left this, she said to no one, to the dog. But after that she wore it each morning that she took the greyhound outside, to the river. Soon, it began to smell like her too. How things are slowly forgotten.

Like a mirror? She managed to say these words.

A mirror, yeah. He held his jacket out to her. I'm fucking hot, man. You can put this on if you want.

A fleece and a jacket. She just wanted her dog back.

Thank you, she said. But I don't need it.

He shrugged it back on and kicked stones over. It is a mirror, like you said. See yourself. Little snapshots of what you're like, what you're going to be.

She stared out over the river, the current catching the sun's light. Words came back to her: the women had told her to never take him off the leash. They had told her that.

Did something shitty last night, he said. I took money from my girlfriend. Money I gave her the other night from a little jackpot I won. Took her half. Took it back, I guess. Took it because fuck it, I could make more. But, lost it all. In the fucking pit, blackjack, blackjack.

Is that true?

He threw a rock into the river. How do I go home to her?

You do, she said.

Yeah, he said, I feel as lost as you.

But she hadn't said anything.

He stood, then she stood. From above, a light snow fell and melted on their skin. But the sun shined on them.

To tell you something the truth here, this weather is making me kinda bonkers. He laughed, then he said, I didn't mean to make you cry. He stumbled over a rock as he stepped back. I have to get home. Watch out for that lake.

She waited for him to go, watching his clumsy steps up the bank. The soft dirt turning to mud. She waited, seeing if in his place the greyhound would return. Nothing moved. She said her dog's name aloud. The leaves on the trees shook with wind. She wiped her hands with her face. She screamed out his name across the water, and for some time she couldn't open her eyes to see he wasn't there, that he wasn't coming back.

She waited there. She would look for him, along the river trail, asking bikers if they had seen the greyhound, the sleek, tiger-furred creature that loped rather than ran. She would move her hands through her hair and shake her head, telling them that she was right there, had been right there, telling the couples who looked at her sadly and hear them say that there was no dog they'd seen, there was nothing at all. He was right there, he must have wandered off, she would say. She would run west along the river. She would run as far as the river would lead her, all the way back to its beginnings from the lake. She would think about him for days and then the year, and of course any time she saw a dog after that, any time she opened the door and found the couch, the bed empty, the food bowl no longer there. She would think back to the beginning, about the day she decided to go to the adoption center in the first place. How the man who left her opened something within her that she needed to fill, instantly, and she found herself in the car driving home with this panting dog that gazed out the window like it had seen so much already but was ready for more. She would think how the volunteers warned her to never let him

off the leash, that racing hounds will run forever if they are loose. How she didn't make room for the dog in her home and he seemed to know it, how it was filled with memories of someone else she didn't want him to know about. She would always picture the moment when the leash unclasped. She didn't remember it exactly, it was so meaningless, sometimes it was before the gate, back in the apartment, or it was at the river, by the rocks, but she would imagine how the dog might have nuzzled her palm like, *Are you sure? And I'm sorry*. How his paws might have trembled against the earth, this sudden freedom. He would see so much for her. He would. She would go home today, passing the corner apartment, where the man would wave again to her, stand, and turn to go inside, pulling his robe over the skin of his chest. She would find that the kettle was just as warm as when she had left it, and she would take off the fleece and put it away in the closet, the way back, behind old coats and pairs of jeans. She would forget about the fleece. Like all things, slowly they are forgotten. She would go to the river in the early dawn and maybe one year the snow would be early or it maybe would not, but she would go there, where she stood now, and believe that he could come back, that he would remember her, her little whistle to invite him up next to her pillow, the three scoops of kibble she dipped into his bowl, the way she found that good spot on his ear, and come right back.

But for now, she waited, and her eyes were closed, and the sun warmed her back, and the air was cold against her face, and she said his name again and again and again. Words returned to her, *Stay with me. Watch over me*. And she would not open her eyes.

TRIPLE DOUBLE DIAMOND

They all want the jackpot. This one earned one hundred dollars in free play after losing his tax refund to Blazing 7's Fever and watches me in the chair next to him, hitting Max Bet on Coyote Moon, while his screen glitters. He asks me questions—you from here? got a husband?—answering for me when I grow unresponsive. I notice the hems of my jeans are dirty, but I don't know how they got so dirty. I've been on my bender a few nights, padding around solely on casino carpet, which is kept very clean, swiping my card for loyalty points and watching football highlights on the big screen televisions above the bars, smoking cigarettes and taking a drink or two from the cocktail waitress. I don't think I've seen the outside this whole week.

“Do you think either of us will win it?”

I look into my screen and say, “No fucking chance,” and after that he's irritated because I've messed up our connection and this one was on target to being a friendly one, one that might end up with a just-before-midnight pool swim, exchanged room keys, and a morning-after first date at the steakhouse. I'd done everything right, acted just like a woman by herself should, no wedding ring and he saw me see him looking for it.

The machine eating my money is taking forever so I hit Cash Out and wait there until the machine spits out what's left of my money on a white slip, then stand up and watch him roll through his bonus spins, really fucking jealous that I wasn't dealt shit like that.

“That's a lot of Wilds,” I say. Gambling males like to hear things like this. I hand him my slip of not even ten dollars, but ten dollars is at least five max bets, and he wipes his betting hand on his jeans, reaches out to shake my hand, but I've already got a cigarette going and I'm not for shaking lefts. I say something like “Too-da-loo” and move along. On to the next one.

JUGGERNAUT

When the rain came, they waited in the wet pocks of dirt and rock, and the city glowed at them orange and dull. The younger men startled, sliding down the hill with washes of mud. The glimmers blinked back, sedated, quiet, and as the rain gave way, dawn bled across the granite sky. Gunships thundered above, sloughing tracers off their bellies, and the men watched the blue tails scream into the city and puff buildings into billows of smoke. Palm fronds slimmed into candlewicks. Mortars shrieked upward and arced south in fear, retaliation. The men let out their own cries, cheering and laughing and cursing. Got 'em. Got 'em. Buildings fell in plumes of stony dust, silhouetting the untouched but ghost-thin mosques in the desert. A murderous air tore open the fortress into a pulpy rubble and the men trotted down from their foxholes toward Fallujah. The dust settled, the planes having moved on without them, and the men were truly alone. They had to sweep the city, sweep the houses. They stacked against the courtyard walls. A kick to breach the door. Storm through—rifles raised—straight into the fatal funnel and clear it. Next house, next door. Breach, storm. Clear, they cried. Empty. Next one, he said. Empty, empty. It was the black door against the black wall that flickered in Lance Corporal Toller's dreams in the days, and years of course, after they were pulled from the city, and he knew the door would open to him in the dreams but it would not yield death to him as he had seen for his brothers, not yet, but always when creaking open, finally, the room—it was still and he couldn't see beyond that dark.

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Toller steps up to the barbell. He knocks the tip of his shoes on the platform, once, twice, for both feet. Left, then right. His grip on the bar is wide, and as he bends at the waist, he shoves his knees against the insides of his arms. The knurling roughs the skin of his hands. Muscles in his

back tighten as he rolls the bar to his shins and pulls the slack out of it, the plates shifting on the bar with metallic clangs. Movement from other lifters slows as they turn to watch, their chatter quieting to let the rock radio station echo through the gym.

“Eyes forward. Sternum to the wall. Get your butt higher but don’t let your back go.”

Toller adjusts. The white wall in front of him gleams under the harsh lights.

“Now push away from the floor.”

The bar comes up quickly and his forearms bend too soon. The bar bumps his knees and Toller extends his hips violently to throw the weight up. He falls into a squat, swinging his elbows under the bar, but the hundred kilos of plates bounce on top of his rack position. His left knee burns as if struck on the bone with a rubber band’s snap. The weight falls forward off him and he hops back, dropping to the ground. The old-school metal plates clang and the weight of them crashing on the plywood sounds impressive.

“That was pathetic.”

“I know. I felt it.”

He sits there, thumbing around his kneecap and trying to think back, as the bar rolls away from him, to when Olympic lifts were all he did. A hundred kilos for a clean had been nothing back then—warm-up weight. And now it nearly crushes him. His knee hurts, a little. The scar that fetals around his kneecap is a thick eclipse, bone-white after he picked at it some weeks out of surgery.

“Hate to say it, but you’re not going to get back what you had.” Lon Sorenson, the gym owner, rolls the bar back to the platform. He waits a moment, hands on the hips, staring up at the pictures of a younger Toller frozen into slow motion stills from lifts during Nationals when he swept records in his junior weight class for both the clean and jerk and the snatch. Sorenson

crosses his arms, swivels on a heel, his voice lowering. “Don’t get me wrong. You’re a strong motherfucker, but Oly lifts are out. But you know that already.” He points to Toller’s knee. “You fucked it all up when you went there.”

The young guys shake their heads and mutter to each other. Toller thinks he hears laughter.

“He had that,” one of the guys says.

The youngest leans against his squat rack. He does a salute, and it isn’t sarcastic, but Toller thinks of bending the kid’s hand until the wrist breaks. He wishes for that distraction, a few moments of anger at anything beside himself.

Toller brushes his hands free of the chalk that cakes his palms. He pulls at his weightlifting belt and loosens it to hang around his hips, wanting everything slack after the tightness of ballistic vests.

“It’s been a year,” Toller says, as if something should give.

Lon turns to watch another of his guys lift. The guy, younger than Toller, squats with one hundred kilos on his back. Down, and back up. And down. Toller turns. He doesn’t want to count them.

“Too soon,” Lon says so only Toller can hear. “Also, too much.”

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The waiting was too much. The fire teams hopped like schoolchildren, restless. The tanks went in first, leveling buildings that were full of Chechen snipers who piped off lines of bullets at the armored tanks. Platter charges rocked the dozers, but they drove through, carrying on undeterred and elephantine. The men laughed, jittery and crazed. But Toller, he was lost in the sky above. No clouds. It seemed like there were never clouds here. What’s gotcha, Jugg? But Toller could

only shrug. The explosions in the city were constant. You jealous? The men punched him in the arm to bring him back down to them. We'll get our turn, and your time to shine, they said. Toller felt like nothing would happen, even though his guys amped him up day after day. His first op, any moment now, a mission to kill the bombmaker. He was sick of the waiting, of the empty rooms, but then he came upon a room of them. He smashed into another den with force and surprise, but they sat there, nearly anesthetized, those many bombmakers, folding parts from old Russian land mines into cavities of bodies. Toller moved backwards out of the room, in his shock his fingers holding the trigger, lighting up the room in orange packs of dust and sparks. The stuff flew up like paint spatter. A round hit a body bomb, and the room erupted in frag and smoke. Toller burst from the house. The rest of his fire team clapped him on the back, knocked his helmet with their knuckles. Leveled it, they said. Fucking leveled it. Jugg, they started calling him. They chanted for him like a mantra. Jugg's gotcha! Jugg's gotcha! He tried to smile for them, but what was the point? They couldn't see. He let his eyes keep doing what they were doing. He followed his men, his heart already slowing. He hated how this place was changing him. No, he hated how much he was changing this place.

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Toller comes to in someone's arms. He's down on the ground of the living room, the door behind him open and the cold chill of dawn edging inside. A warm hand wipes his face and tells him that he's okay, she's there now, and Toller sits up to look at Nell.

"Please don't close the blinds," he says. He hasn't dreamt of the door in weeks, but he returned to the house from the gym and the windows were shut and drawn, the door dark and locked. He fumbled for his keys, his pulse mouthing at his ears. He leaned into the door, heaving, weeping, his shoulder braced against it, the ghosts of his brothers and those civilians behind him,

whispering. The door punched open and swinging. He waited for them to come, their guns trained at their faces, but it was just the darkness of the room billowing up at him, his friends vanished, and soon his face against the floor, cool and numbing as ice.

Nell holds out a washcloth. “Who were you dreaming about?” she asks.

Toller wipes his face. “What do you mean?”

“Who is Fallujah?”

She doesn’t know where he’d been, where any of them had been. A loss floods him, the resolve that he will never be noticed for what he did. She can’t—isn’t the only one, and this feeling, he knows, can only become another dreadful loneliness.

He asks her, “Can you stay with me?”

She leads him up to his room, taking him past her own. This isn’t the first time. They stay on top of the sheets. She’s done this before, now and again since she became his roommate, holding him as he wakes up from the dark.

“Did you just get back?” He thinks he can hear the men whooping when they saw her and her hair reflecting in the mirrored floors on the stage of the nightclub. He flashes to that first time he saw her, back in Vegas, as he stood near the doors as the club’s bouncer. He wonders if she gave the men earlier tonight that look that he first saw, severe but reluctant, the one that reaches beyond the men, past him, even; Toller doesn’t know how she does that. He’s only seen that look—that thousand-yard stare—in his brothers’ eyes on the flight back to the states. Most of them slung up in stretchers, gauze crisscrossing on their bodies: they stared beyond the walls of the plane that harbored them. There was history there—a leaky trauma.

“I got out of there early,” she says. She turns on her side, keeping a hand on his arm. He can hear a slight whistle coming from one of her nostrils, an allergy to sagebrush that she’s played down since moving here. She clears her throat. “I’ve noticed it’s happening again.”

“Do you remember the name of that restaurant I took you to before we left Vegas?”

She lets the question hang there, letting him feel the pull of his diversion, his desperation. “You’re doing a lot. You’re at the gym six days a week.”

His head takes on a pulse of its own, a strange beat that’s faster but heavier. “I can’t think of the name. It was the only place I could think of when you told me about that motherfucker. I could have killed him.”

She taps a finger against his skin. “I remember the sudoku.”

“Ah.” Toller smiles in the dark. “Where did I put that?” The flight was a near painless hour in the sky, from Las Vegas to Reno, but Toller pulled out a tattered sudoku book, the one he had started when he first was deployed to Iraq. How he and Cruz had tried to do the hardest ones first, working backwards, on the plane to Kuwait. He told Nell on the plane he and Cruz had failed miserably at it, leaving the white boxes bare. She laughed and pulled out a ballpoint pen as he cradled a pile of peanuts in his palm. She didn’t mess up once. “I’m sorry about your friend,” she said, but he hadn’t told her that Cruz had died. It made him go quiet the rest of the flight, wondering how he gave it away, how the grief was leaking out of him.

“You always smell like peppermint,” he says now, moving his head to touch his nose against her hair. “Crushed up mints. That’s what I think of. It reminds me that I’m here.”

“Elliot,” she whispers, her tone might as well saying, *Are you okay?*

“I’m tired,” he says. But he can stay up all night talking to her. He wants to know what it means that she’s been leaving her door open, staying in his room, times when he asks, times

when he doesn't. How they kiss, not always, and he isn't sure who's more scared, and scared of what, then?

He grabs her hand and holds it against his face, her fingers brushing up against his eyelashes.

"Elliot," she says again, but he keeps his eyes closed, feeling her searching him in their quiet. She always knows when to quit.

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Nothing happened during the first sweep. The houses in the north were empty. The beds were made, sheets tucked taut and firm. The men loped through the rooms. Clear, all of them clear. Holte and Cruz and Toller were restless. Fuck this, they said. Boredom seeped into them. The adrenaline of opening the doors depleted, lighting a deeper, anxious anger. Let's smoke the motherfuckers. But Toller hardly ever joined the cheers, couldn't help but think there were all these invaders in a city that wanted none of them. Their squad cleared hundreds of houses. The courtyards, too, abandoned. Once here and there they found the white clay bowls with bits of rice, someone surviving, someone *going on* here, going on despite everything. In the beginning, all this had felt righteous and heroic and purposeful. And now Toller felt a persistent nausea, a numbing of organs, a numbing in the blood. What all this violent meant, he didn't know anymore. He knew there were doors he had to open. But behind doors were empty rooms. The first sweep revealed to them nothing.

/

The competition is in three months. His technical skill with the Olympic movements deteriorated to a desperate reliance on power. Sorenson convinced him of this, but Toller tried everything: weightlifting straps, the belt, knee wraps, chalk, ammonia salts. But his knee falters during the

second pull in the clean. Instead of an easy sweep into his hips, his pull is too slow. His knee fights to turn inward from the bullets that blasted it open in Iraq. His jump is hardly anything. The weight constantly crushes him. The bar slams to the ground, plates clanging together in a loud announcement of failure.

“Your knee is going to blow if you keep it up. You won’t even have powerlifting left.”

“Fuck you, Lon.”

Sorenson stands before the bar. Toller used to look up to the man. A weightlifting champion who sees the tiniest faults in positioning and corrects them, drilling cues into the mind until the body relents. Every failure, every catch, Sorenson asking, “What did you learn?” His athletes are refined and technical, just as Toller had been. Toller looked to him as a father, a constant guardian. He seems washed up now and tired, ready for closure, but Toller knows Sorenson won’t forgive him for joining the Marines. It was not heroic or anything close to it. Sorenson saw glory in Olympic medals; Toller yearned for purpose that didn’t gather dust on gym shelves. There had to be something more for him. Didn’t Sorenson understand that?

“You would have made it at the trials.” Sorenson pulls the clip off and unloads the plates, throwing them onto the floor, ringing metal on metal. “You left and got fucked over, and now you want to come back right where you left off. Doesn’t work that way.”

Toller unloads the other side. “I wasn’t doing it for anyone. Not the lifting. Not the Marines, either.” The plates swivel like heavy coins, and Toller drives his heel down to stop it. “I wanted to see if I could do it.”

“Prove it to yourself.”

“I don’t need to prove anything.”

“You’re a genetic freak, to be fucking honest.” Sorenson loads the bar up for Toller’s deadlift weight. He steps up to the bar and clomps his feet. The weightlifting shoes make satisfying thuds with the thick heels. “I won’t ever understand it,” he says, and Toller waits for him to say, *And I will never forgive you for what you gave up*. He breathes out, hard, with his arms in front of him, one palm upward as if in deliverance. He bends and grabs the bar, pulling fast. Even without proper warmup, the old man easily deadlifts three hundred and twenty-five pounds. His face lights up like a match, his veins snaking along his bald head. He drops the bar, and, from the sound, it should have shattered the ground. Sorenson loosens his belt with a snap. “You could have been something great.”

Ten weeks out, Toller changes his registration to powerlifting. Sorenson’s words clear in his mind. He only has raw strength now. His bench press is solid. He can open with two hundred and fifty pounds, easily. The deadlift, too, will climb back up to five hundred pounds now that the physical therapy for his knee is over. His squat will suffer the most. He will be lucky to get four hundred. The competition is in three months. He applies chalk to his hands, thick layers of it that gather in the lines of his palms like blood.

/

The city glittered before them in the desert sun. Palm fronds swayed. The civilians were gone, they were told. But they couldn’t level the city. The men had to feint, drawing the enemy south. Their assault would come from the north. They needed to take Jolan. Soon the mortars came. The fire team stormed through the streets, tripping over rubble and torn laundry. When Toller looked up, the few powerlines reminded him of the wires that ran over his parents’ house in Fernley, Nevada. The bushes were the same dead gray and dull green. But the dirt was richer here. He tricked himself into seeing wild mustangs dash through the city, pictured himself as a

young boy again, experiencing something he used to know as wonder. Busted brick and stone crumbled from shaking buildings, breaking the men out of their heads. The apartments were quiet. The squads separated. They were beginning to find the weapon caches now. You clear that fucking house? Cruz ushered them across the dirt. Carts and piles rested in the street. An IED exploded on the other side of the house. Frag! They scattered from the door. It blew, and they ambushed, covering their sectors, high, low, rear, and the fatal front. I hear a motherfucker running around! They wanted to scout and clear from the rooftop down, but the buildings were too tall in this desert fortress. They climbed the stairs, angling their guns. The air was quiet. They heard mortars from afar. The other squad yelled, startling the fire team. Holte flinched, and a door opened before he could kick it. The man in the room sat on his haunches, his legs splayed before him, the AK pointed at Holte's face. Shoot him! Shoot! Cruz sprayed him but the man would not go alone. He opened Holte's face with a hollow point. The Marine fell, and Toller reached for him. Cruz marched forward. He shot twice, three more. Five, again. The man sat there, his gun pointed at Cruz but did not fire. Cruz kicked it away. Die, motherfucker! The man slumped to the side. Toller stepped away from Holte. He stood next to Cruz and they looked at the ground. They moved needles around the man with their boots. Adrenaline, cocaine. These men weren't going out alone. Toller felt a constant ringing in his ears and wondered if it would ever end. The Marines carried their fallen out of the house. There were a thousand more doors to open.

/

He meets Nell at the museum of art. She likes to go on the first Saturdays of the month when admission is waived. They usually go to the museum together, but Toller woke up alone. He wandered through the empty house, pushing open cracked doors. When he read her message on

his phone, he learned that she will meet him there, heading to the museum straight from the nightclub.

In the museum lobby, she hands him a cup of coffee, black. “No lattes here, sorry. And we have to drink it before going upstairs.”

“Missed you last night.” He sips his coffee. “And this morning.”

She lifts a shoulder. “It’s that new club owner. Holding us later and later. Last week it was seven. Eight today. Can’t get enough of us, I guess.”

A sting of jealousy goes through him—new owner? But he pushes it away. There was no reason for it.

“That was a joke,” she says.

His laugh is more like a bark, and he hates that he feels uneasy. His guard’s going up, and he doesn’t know why. He tries to will it away, force instead to be a different man for her.

“Come on,” she says. She drinks from her cup, meandering toward the gift shop. She holds up a pricey rock from the desert, smooth from the salt of ancient lakes, and swivels it in her palm. “How was your training?”

“Rough.” He takes the rock and moves it over the top of her hand, tracing it along her fingers. He often does this when she stays in his room, placing his book down and tracing the end of a pen on her outstretched hand, but she hasn’t been with him for a week now. “Did five by five today with squats.” She gives him her other hand, so he can trace that one—it has to be equal, she always says. “Can’t stand up the last rep.”

She drinks and holds the cup just below her mouth. “Are you sure you’re going to be ready?”

Toller smiles. "Going to have to be." He stops tracing her hand and tosses the rock in the air and catches it.

"Or lower your opening numbers," she says. She reaches out for the rock. "Just in case."

"You don't think I got this?"

She holds her hand up. "Sorry, Jugg." She laughs.

He puts the rock back. "Where did you hear that?"

"Didn't you say that was your nickname in the Marines?"

"I did?"

Nell pushes him playfully. "Semper fi!"

He looks down at where she touched him. "When?"

"Shit, I don't know, Elliot. I forgot to put it in my journal." She leaves the gift shop and tosses the cup into the trashcan. "Does it bother you?"

Toller walks by her to dump his coffee in the trash. He took a sip or two, but the liquid was flat on his tongue, bitter.

"You seem a little irked," she says.

"No," he says too quickly. "I just—" He lets out an exasperated breath. "I don't think you should call me that."

"Just your buddies then," she says. "Now I know."

"Buddies," he says, his jaw clenching at the end of the word.

She isn't looking at him though and turns on her feet, her hair bobbing a bit in the bun she twisted up on her head. "All right," she says. "Upstairs, grunt. Roll out!"

"Are you trying to piss me off?"

She whips around, alarmed and unsure of him. He sees it in the way she holds her head, as if he'll come out and say he was joking. But he doesn't. She straightens and holds her arms, and a flash goes through him, the rush of knowing he's ruining this for her, their time together outside his haunted room, his night terrors, the moments that have brought her closer. The skin of his fingertips prickling.

“You're afraid of me.” He doesn't feel himself say this—the heat in his face and the pull in his stomach turning over to numbness, the same numbness he felt earlier today when he tried to squat four hundred pounds, the weight sitting on him in the hole, and Sorenson screaming at him to stand back up. The ascent was slow and agonizing. His knee burned but the wraps numbed it a little. “Shit,” he said when he racked the bar. His vision blurred. His black lifters shined with white dots as he stared at them. His head felt crushed and he closed his eyes. The blood was too much and the mess of it leaked into his boots, through the boot blouse to his skin as the enemy crawled under the city. The men thought they could feel the ground shifting under their feet. The mouse holes were everywhere; the re-clearing turned over more of them. Doors, doors, more doors. He couldn't find his squad. The radio was clogged with his blood, maybe someone else's. He'd breached the door and an AK nuzzled its barrel into a lieutenant's neck, it was White's neck, splintering cords of muscle across the room like fleshy shrapnel. It was hard to believe that the raw gore could belong to any of them. He wanted to put them back together, his brothers, but the men raged at him like wild, undying animals—and weren't they the same in that way? He littered the men with spray from his M4. Fuck you. Fuck you! Bullets wracked their bodies and their clothes powdered behind them but still they stood, still they came for him, because they were surviving, and the men were sent there to win, and he realized this desperation of will, this feral call to live, he understood it. He retreated, his rifle thrust in front of him,

popping bursts. The rooms were white and empty, misty from implosions and blood constellations. Behind him, a door. And when he opened it, there in the heavy dark was nothing.

“Elliot! Elliot, come on, son.”

Sorenson slapped his face and his eyes opened on lights and guys standing over him. He pushed at them with his hands. “Fuck you! Fuck you!” his mouth was saying. He rolled over and vomited. Sorenson patted him on the back.

“That’s it. You’re all right.” Sorenson wrung a wet towel over the back of his neck. “I think you’re good for the day.”

Now, Toller comes back down, his limbs trembling but he’s still standing, and Nell is in front of him, her face seeming blurry, pained—a ghost.

“I’m sorry.” He presses his thumb and forefinger over his closed eyes. Heat floods back into him. “Forget I said that.” He takes a deep breath. “I know you’re not.” She steps forward and grasps his arm. He pulls her to him, needing her to ground him, hoping she can’t feel his body shaking.

“Elliot,” she says, placing her hand against his stomach and putting space between them. He closes his eyes, but she grabs his hand. “Hey.” He opens his eyes. “Let’s go look at the art now.”

Nell leads him up the stairs, his hand in hers limp and numb. His head hurts now, but he can hear it in his head all of the time, *Are you okay?* He rubs his face with one hand, trying to move the heat from it, and stands before the walls tiled with canvases. But he doesn’t look at any of it, only her. Nell wanders across the floor. Her arms are crossed, and she takes small steps, gliding across the ground. He thinks of the past few weeks. Ever since he signed up for the competition, Nell brushed him off. He could hear her in his head asking what he was trying to

prove, what he needed out of doing something like that. Something like that. What was there for her to see in a squat, a press, a pull? It isn't that she's asked about these things. She doesn't have to. What does he have to prove? The thought haunts him. She sees who he really is. He cries at night. Thrashings that hit her and there are his yells, but mostly crying. She began working later into the morning. When she didn't work, there was a night, even, that she crept into her old room. She works later because she's safer there, away from him. She knows what he is.

"This one's kind of sexy, isn't it?" she asks him. She tilts her head but doesn't look back at him. The word throws him. He can't look at the painting she's talking about. In his head, he hears pops.

"You fuck them, don't you?"

He's turned, facing the wall, remotely feeling that Nell's leaving him in a rush that stings his nose and eyes. In his mind, a door burns its edges with blackness. He hears a thunderous rolling. Rocks give way, and dirt is pushed aside. Has he heard this before? He recalls a staff sergeant pacing before his grunts. If you think in combat, you will die. He screamed at them, demanded of them their blood, their secrets. You will kill everything in front of you. Do not fear death for once it comes, you don't feel it. The Corps is you, and you are the Corps. The grunts clapped and looked at each other as brothers. The redemption smolders and burns in the wake of the juggernaut.

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They were left to take Fallujah, and that's what they were going to do. Cruz and Toller merged with another fire team of the first platoon, having lost their own. The assault was a week in now, and it was supposed to have only lasted a few days. The back clearing was a blistering paranoia of already opened doors. In the cool of the night, the Marines huddled together for warmth. One

phone call. Fathers and sisters, they were saying the city was liberated, that their sons and brothers could come home. Was it secure? No, the Marines replied. No, it was not. They were not done. Cruz called up his girl and Toller did not hear him say he would be coming back. When he hung up, Toller grabbed him by the vest. You're not fucking dying. Cruz smiled. Jugg's got me! The sun rose again, and the city still smoked. We should have dusted this place, he said, but he didn't mean it. The Marines piled into the trucks and rolled toward the wolves of Islam, they were told, these Chechen fighters of Grozny. These men tucked themselves into the bunkers and torture rooms that used to be warm houses and bright mosques. It's impressive, Cruz said, kneeling into the dirt, digging it up with his fingers. They know they are going to die, but they will wait the seconds it takes for us to open the door so they can get a shot at our faces. Cruz smiled at Toller. They aren't going alone. Cruz buried the ring under the soft, upturned dirt. The house was white and made of stone. The courtyard was empty. The men entered the foyer, and the doors led straight back into the dark. They moved forward, stepping over bits of rock and worn cloth. The noise from outside softened. The house was like a fortress. And then, they came upon it. The black door on the black wall. Cruz and Toller stopped. There it is, Cruz said. Tell her I loved her. The fire team aimed their rifles. Toller will never forget this door. It seemed to open on its own, this mythic gate, yawning wide and the wolves stirred behind it. But the men could see nothing. Motherfuckers! Cruz charged and lit up the room before a Chechen's round catches and takes the back of his head with it. The body dropped to the knees and the men yelled. Toller watched the busted stuff leak onto the ground. Brother? Is that you? He marched forward, past the body, and into the room. The rifle kicked bruises into his shoulder. Rounds whizzed by his face, somehow, their screeching already a death cry. He didn't know how he wasn't killed and how they weren't dead. The fight was primitive, a desperation of murder. Toller's knee blew

open, but he hardly felt anything. The rifle kept on going, the guts and gore flying up from the bodies. The men pulled on his shoulder. It's done, it's done. His rifle was dry and making empty clicks. The room was rank with death and Toller fell to a knee. Cruz was behind him in many places. Toller grabbed at them and tried to put them back. Is that Cruz? It's not fucking Cruz! Don't you die on me! A grunt grabbed Toller from behind. He lunged for Cruz's rifle and held it to his chest. I can't leave him. I can't. The corpsman hoisted Toller over his back. They're coming back to get Cruz, they said. Toller did not feel the gristle of his leg twisting around the knee. The black door was closed again, bumping against Cruz. Toller watched it as he drew farther away. Don't you fucking die. You're coming back home. You can tell her yourself.

/

Sorenson comes up to him and motions. He's next. Sorenson holds out the smelling salts but Toller declines. His opening weight for the back squat is four hundred and ten pounds.

The training went the best as it could. Sorenson wanted Toller to take more rest days, but he refused. His knee is feeling good. It doesn't ache as much anymore although his head throbs more than he's used to. The night he returned from the museum, Nell was not there. Her door was closed. He did not open it, but he knew it was empty.

He tries to imagine the weight on his back and that all he must do is stand it up. With the meet at a local high school gym, Toller sees young guys from the football team acting as the spotters beside him. Families and clusters of friends gather in the bleachers, but their faces are a hurried blur before Toller's eyes.

He walks up to the bar in its rack, twisting the knurling. He stamps his feet, once, twice, for both feet. Left, then right. He shoves the meat of his shoulders up into the bar. One step back, then the other foot. The bar wobbles with the weight. The spotters stand next to them, their hands

facing up as if in prayer. Toller breathes, the air sucked down deep into his belly. He thrusts his stomach out and into the belt. You need a solid trunk, Sorenson has always said. He braces, the bar shaking on his traps. He lowers, pushing his knees out, out, out. The left one burns. He's done this weight before, he can suffer this, too. He hits the bottom of the hole and feels a good rebound, but his ascent is slow, and then he stops moving up. He lingers there, his muscles rapidly expending energy. His breath slides out of his mouth in a small gasp. The crowd, distantly, screams at him. But the weight is too much. He goes down and the spotters catch the weight so it doesn't hit the ground. The gymnasium is silent. The spotters stand it up together, the two of them, and Toller racks it, rushing the bar forward to smack against the stand. It makes a mighty sound, and he stands there for a moment, letting that sound beat out the ringing.

“Good effort, man.” A kid claps him on the back.

Toller moves out from under the bar. He will get two more attempts, but he knows the weight will not be withstood. He brings his hands up behind his head. Sorenson smiles at him. It won't happen today or tomorrow, Sorenson knows this, probably has known this whole time. Toller lets his belt go slack, lets his body fill back into that space.

The gymnasium buzzes with chatter and half-hearted clapping. Toller wants to go home and sleep. He turns to head off the stage, but he hears something like his name. When he looks out into the crowd, he sees her. Nell, on the hard metal bleachers. Toller holds up a hand, feels something in him reaching out again, opening. He steps off from the platform, going to the stands, and he brushes the chalk from his palms, the white dust hanging behind him, waiting to fall.

HIGHWAYS IN THE BLOOD

US NV-305

No one could tell him what made Bobbi do it.

She woke up early in the mornings to walk along the creek that ran by the trailer park where she lived. Some mornings she could tell when the black bird on a powerline above was a raven and when it was a crow. The way you could tell, she told the postman, was by its beak or perhaps by the shape of its tail if it flew overhead. But then one day she lost it, they said. She was mistaking a crow for a raven, a raven for a crow, bird after bird. Then she stopped taking her walks. The air, she'd tell visitors through her screen door, dried her out. And then someone else said there came a day she spilled gas station hot breakfast tea on her lap, and she didn't scream, didn't even feel it.

This lack, then, was how Bobbi tried killing his dog. Her not feeling anything as she eased a loop of cord around his dog's neck and tightening it with a snap. But this did not explain to him why.

Dane reclines the seat a notch farther, a jaw wide open so it looks as though he is on a doctor's exam table. River-blue sky careens and also inches by outside the window. The seatbelt strap tremors like a guitar string over him.

Lena, Bobbi's daughter, his girlfriend, is in the seat next to him, driving them south and away from her mother, from Battle Mountain.

"What would you do if the sky ripped open," he says, "like in cartoons."

The radio is turned down low, crackling.

"When you realize the sky is just a sheet over your face," he says.

Her face doesn't move. There are no crows or ravens out along the powerlines.

He asks, "What color is the tear?"

In the rearview mirror, the dog leans against the seat, his head low, his eyes cast to the floor of the car.

"What would you do if the sky ripped open?"

"I don't know," she says. "My sky is ripped open, too."

The seatbelt shakes and what it could do to them if it made a sound.

"How did she get that choke pole?"

The car lurches as the daughter pulls it over onto the dirt of the 305, dust flying up all around. The force of the brakes angles the car east, and more of the desert shows itself in view of the window. Nothing moves out there.

She's crying and smacking her palm against the steering wheel.

The seat won't recline any farther.

It was her uncle's. The choke pole, is what she's saying. He made it with PVC pipe and parachute cord. He used it for trapping. To get raccoons, bobcats, coyotes.

"Coyotes are like dogs," he says.

"Stop."

"I'm just trying to rationalize why. How."

"Stop talking."

When she's done, she pulls the car back out on the road.

"Would we get sucked out into the sky or would it fall through and crush us?"

She's quiet, but then she turns and looks at him. "The color would be like sand. What's behind the sky is just the ground again coming up to meet you."

He rolls the window down, and the desert air rushes in.

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US NV-208

Mike pulls his truck out of the supercenter parking lot and back onto the highway. The cd changer clicks in its rotation. He veers left, pulling the truck up over the dirt hills into the Smith Valley. His first stop he goes to the back of the truck and starts to thread the parachute cord through the pipe and the hole he drilled into it, looping and knotting it. When he finishes, he puts it over his shoulder and hikes out into desert.

He comes back with bits of sage on his jeans and four rusted traps in his hands. He throws them over into a sack in the back of the truck, walks to his seat, and he drives farther along the road. Dust puffs up behind him, and the keys clink together. He stops again, leans the pole over his shoulder, and hikes out.

He returns holding a coyote's outside by the scruff, and there are more metal traps in his other hand with the choke pole tucked up under his arm against his side.

The traps clack as they hit each other inside the burlap sack, and he opens the blue cooler and spreads the coyote skin over ice packs and parchment paper. He wipes the blood on the side of his pants, starting the count, that red sweep making one.

Mike does four more stops. There are seven coyote skins in the cooler. He returns west toward Topaz Lake. He sips out of his thermos as the truck rocks from going off pocked dirt trails back to the road. The fifty pounds of traps rattle in the back of his truck. He turns up the radio static louder. A voice underneath, as if submerged in water. In the rearview mirror, a gathering of crows.

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US NV I-80

It's twenty years earlier, before Battle Mountain, before the dog, and Bobbi slows her car and rolls down the window with the lever and angles her wrist to let the cigarette burn and wisp into open air. The slim watch on her arm reads nearly six in the morning. The sun blinks over Star Peak in the rearview mirror and she grabs large, cat-eye sunglasses from the glovebox. Before she slips them over her eyes, she studies the ring on her left hand. She twists it off, licks her right thumb and rubs the stone clean. She tosses it into the glovebox.

She hushes her baby, Lena, who cries from the backseat. "Your daddy doesn't want it back anyway," she says and shushes. She turns and grabs the baby's foot. "I'm sick of people asking where he's at all the time. Why he's not driving us. No ring, no man. Just us, babe." She wiggles her baby's other foot. "There, there. That's that."

And the radio hisses as it picks up signals.

Bobbi wipes at her face and pushes the sunglasses onto her forehead. There are clouds covering the sun.

"Another mother's breaking heart is taking over," she sings.

Her daughter quiets, sleeps.

In Lovelock, Bobbi takes a twenty dollar bill out of her pocket and goes inside the convenience store. She returns with sixty-five cents and fills her car up to fifteen gallons. She waggles her fingers at her daughter.

"Another mother," she sings again.

She smokes a second cigarette and stares at the highway. The morning air is like a cold sheet before there is a body.

She crushes the cigarette once it's down to the filter and gets back in the car. As she drives on the freeway, she leans her head against the seat. They've passed mountain ranges,

lakes, the salt flats. The road pulls them forward, a road reaching toward the sky but never reaching it. She and the baby have been quiet for hundreds of miles.

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US NV-95

“She’ll get on without you,” Mike says.

He sets the cruise control once they are on the highway. The backseat is empty. The week before it had been filled with an end table, a dresser, two boxes of books, two compressed bags of clothes, and a college-bound Lena, squeezed to the side of it all.

Bobbi grabs her brother’s hand, squeezes it, lets go.

“She’s doing so much more than I ever could,” she says. “I spent all my time running away from it all. Here’s my little girl running *to*.”

The air conditioner rattles and blows out cool air. The temperature on the dashboard of the car reads over a hundred degrees in green numbers.

“I hate August,” she says.

Mike nods. “It’s stifling.”

She turns her head. There’s a pillow on the backseat. She takes it from the back and folds it against the door and leans against it. Out the window behind her the windows of Vegas hotels shimmer in the heat.

“Almost his birthday,” she says. “Do you think it was the lights? All this neon. And all the buzzing it makes. Just noise all the time. *Bing bing bing*.” She raises her hand, yanks it back, like she’s pulling a lever on a slot machine. “*Bing bing bing*.”

“Bobs—you all right?” Mike leans on the center console, glancing over at her. His mustache quivers like he wants to say more.

“It’s never quiet.” She drops her hand. “That’s what did it to him.”

“We have to keep talking to each other,” Mike says. “Cal pulled away. That’s on me. I knew it but didn’t want to see it.” He reaches out and gives her shoulder a shake. “Got me, Bobs?”

She’s quiet for a while, holding his hand that’s on her shoulder. “I can’t believe my baby wants to go to college here,” she says. “She’ll never sleep.”

“She’ll get on without you,” he says again.

“Where does that leave me?”

“Hey,” he says. “I can stay with you. Give you some company.”

She puts the pillow back and moves the vent so that the air blows her hair out of her face.

“It’s so hot.”

“This is a big change.” Mike checks the rearview mirror. “This is like when you split out of Utah, big change. Let me stay with you. It’ll be like the old times.”

“I’ll be fine. I can handle it. But I can also be sad for a while, Mike,” she says.

“Can’t fool me, Bobs. I know something flares up in us.” He hits the brakes to release the cruise control. A car chugs along the freeway ahead of them, much slower than the speed limit. Mike changes lanes and speeds by. Bobbi presses her head against the glass, stares at the other driver as they pass. “There’s something in us that shakes us up,” he says. “But if you hang on long enough, it goes away. Just like Utah, right?”

Bobbi just looks ahead.

“We’re no strangers to that.”

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Mike jerks awake. The headlights reveal miles of highway and black outlines of mountains knifed against the granite of night sky. He throws the last beer can out the window, and he grips the steering wheel, leaning his body forward. His nose nearly touches the wheel.

“There’s no fucking way,” he says to no one.

He brakes and the truck veers into the turnout, turning along the dirt. He sleeps against the wheel for three minutes and jerks awake again. He throws the door open and slips out of the truck, nearly hitting the ground. He stumbles back against his truck.

“I am,” he says. “I am.”

He walks around the truck and out into the sagebrush.

The truck door stays open. The lights in the truck dim but don’t turn off.

Night turns over and he comes back. He sits in the truck and shuts the door, and the lights turn off, and early morning light creeps over the seats.

It’s when it reaches him that he starts up and pulls away.

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US NV-227

Lena presses her lips to the back of Dane’s hand when the car pushes over the hill into Lamoille Canyon. He puts on the blinker and pulls over to the side of the road. She leans out of the window and angles her phone to get a picture of the Ruby Mountains.

He doesn’t pull off the side of the road right away. He turns in his seat, twisting to reach a hand out to pat the dog’s scruffy head. She takes a drink from her travel mug and calls her mother.

“Your favorite song is on right now and I’m looking at the Ruby Mountains,” she says. She hangs up and looks at him. “Voicemail.”

“This is her favorite song?”

“She says it reminds her of me.”

“It’s a sad song,” he says. He’s scratching the dog’s chin. The dog’s hot breath puffs out at them.

“My mom couldn’t tell you the lyrics.”

“Are you going to let me meet her?”

“Never,” she says. Then she says, “Yes.”

She takes another picture of the Rubies.

/

US NV-93

Cal uses the payphone at the gas station to call his older brother. He looks out toward I-15 into Las Vegas. There are cars that are going seventy miles an hour but from where he stands they are barely moving at all, distant flickering lights moving along in the dark. His own car is beeping at him, keys in the ignition, door open. The air conditioner rasps, always trying to cool him.

“Mike,” he says when the line picks up.

Mike tells him “happy birthday” and Cal says, “You’re early.” Then he says, “But thank you.”

He hangs up the line and then calls his sister. Her voice crackles over the line, and in the background, distant whining of a child. Bobbi is saying, “Hello? Hello?” but he stays silent, doesn’t say a thing.

Back on the road, he doesn’t let up on the accelerator. He begins to pull the car to the right and the windows are down, and sweat goes down the side of his face, and in the mirror there are lights and on the side of him, lights, and before him the road pulling away faster until

the car just turns over, metal flaring up the asphalt, wheels still going and the radio on full volume. It was playing that loudly the whole time.

/

US NV-305

“Pull over,” Dane says to her. “I need to get out of this car.”

The dog is crying softly in the back. Every now and then the dog twinges, pulling at the gauze covering the scruff of his neck.

“Pull over,” he says again. “Stop the car.”

They are still driving away from Battle Mountain, trying to. She brakes hard, pulls the car over, and he throws the door open before the car stops rolling. He vomits into the dirt. He stands with the back of his hand against his mouth. The dog pants at the window, fogging the glass. The window rolls down, and the dog barks at him.

“Don’t look at me.” He lowers his hand. “Keep the car running,” he says.

/

US NV-395

The three of them are laughing and passing along a bottle, and the miles pass and the minutes pass too. Wind whips through the rolled down windows, and Bobbi yells at the night. Cal yells too.

The road is reaching toward dark, but it never quite reaches it. Their headlamps lighting up the way, and then—they hit things in the road. They pull over and the brothers get out.

It was a deer.

“Oh god,” she says with her head out the window. In the reach of the headlights, another, moving animal.

“Coyote,” Cal says then laughs. “Road-killed to get roadkill.”

The animal can be heard thumping against the dirt, scratching it, puffing breath into it.

Cal starts to walk over to it.

“Wait,” Mike says. “Get out.” He opens the door and gives Bobbi the bottle.

“Why do you need me to get out,” she asks.

“You’re going to do it,” he says.

“I am?”

“You have to handle your own, Bobs. We’re not always going to be around for you.”

She looks at Cal, but he turns away toward the sounds.

“I don’t want to.”

“You’re always saying you can handle yourself like us.” Mike taps the bottom of the bottle, hitting it until she drinks. “That you won’t let it go too far.” He motions for her to drink again. “Here’s your chance. Next time I’m gone and Dad starts slapping you around, maybe you’ll hit him back.”

She looks at the ground. Cal walks toward her, touches her elbow, but Mike takes her hand and they walk through the headlight’s glare.

Cal leans against the car. He turns and puts his head down across the hood. He covers his face with his arm.

It’s not long, and they walk back. She passes Cal and gets in the backseat and winds the window back up halfway and rests her face against the glass.

“It’s lighting up out here,” she says.

Mike is smoking a cigarette and Cal presses away from the hood of the car. He goes to the passenger side but stops and looks at his sister.

“I don’t remember that,” he says.

“Get me a cigarette,” she says. When he’s back, the glow lights up her face. “You don’t remember what,” she says.

“What you were saying,” he says. “That we had to drive her friends home.”

“You were eight. Of course you don’t remember. *We* drove them home,” she says, nodding her head toward Mike. “You stayed behind.”

“Everyone drank too much back then,” Mike says. He’s finished his cigarette and is wiping the window with the edge of his sleeve.

“She wasn’t always drunk, you know,” she says, tapping the cigarette. The ashes float in front of her and Cal’s face. “Mom lost it,” she says, twirling her finger around the side of her head.

Cal takes the cigarette and smokes the rest of it. “Did you do it,” he asks. “I heard it bark at you.”

“You’re in my sun,” she says. The light shines on her arm.

“Get in. I see lights,” Mike says. He takes the bottle back. Eyes meeting in the mirror.

/

US NV-229

Lena passes by the sign for Oasis and the seat next to her has been empty for the last four hundred miles. Ice cubes swirl in her water bottle. She had music on when she dropped Dane off at the apartment, and he’d gathered his bag from the backseat, calling his dog to come out. The dog shook and shook, and he grabbed at the fur of the dog’s chest, but the dog pulled back. Dane looked at her, and he turned to leave. She waited in the car with the door open, the dog sitting in the backseat, and watched him go up the stairs. The dog shook but eventually took off, bolting

out of the car, claws scratching at asphalt, going straight to their—his apartment door. She got out and slammed the door closed, and she turned the volume up as high as it could go.

It's hours and miles to Lamoille Canyon, the car trembling from the stereo speakers. The mountains are encased in snow packs. Now, she mutes the stereo, lighting up the car with silence. Other cars are parked along the side of the road. She drives by people with binoculars held up to their eyes for the mountain goats on the thin sliced ridges. If one ever did fall.

Soon the mountains are behind her. She drives across the desert, stereo muted. After West Wendover there will be salt. A desert filled with it.

/

US NV I-80

"I can't stay in one place," Bobbi tells Mike.

She holds the payphone to her ear and faces her car. She's left the door open. Through the gap of the seat and the car door, her daughter sleeps. The sun is setting beyond the Sierras.

"It's in our blood," he says.

/

US NV-95

Toulon Lake shines on her right. Mike points at it and she smiles.

"That's it," he says.

The radio is turned on low and it crackles and spits. Lena turns it up, but her uncle reaches out and turns the dial back.

"I can't listen to music," he says.

"Mom used to blast music when she drove me around," she says.

"Oh, I remember," he says.

“Did she ever go fishing with you,” she asks.

“After today you can take her,” he says.

The fishing poles bob in the back.

“She hasn’t been getting out as much,” she says. “Ever since she moved.”

“It’s the summer. We hate the summer.”

“It’s stifling,” they say at the same time, and he laughs.

“Yes, it is,” he says.

“She got it from you,” she says. “I hear her say that all the time.”

The lake shimmers under the sun.

“She got a lot of things from me,” her uncle says.

/

US NV I-15

“It should have been me first,” Mike says.

They sit in the parked car of the hospital parking lot. He’s parked in a space, but his left blinker lights up the dash, signal and click, signal and click.

“Who drives himself off the road?” Mike shakes his head. “Should have been me,” he says.

Bobbi wipes her face. “It doesn’t work like that,” she says. “How can you think that it would be that way,” she says.

/

US NV-376

“I didn’t know what to do,” Lena says to her uncle on her phone.

She moves her hand over the dog's paw and looks out the open door. Dane told her to keep the car running. He is just standing there, looking out at the mountain range. The highway split between two mountain ranges. He turns from east to west, west to east.

"I didn't know what to do," she says again, her breath crackling, throaty.

Mike says, "I'm sorry."

"I couldn't stay there," she says. "Mom's not herself. I'm worried about her. But I left."

He says again, "I'm sorry. I am."

/

US NV I-80

Mother and daughter drive along the interstate. They sing along to a song playing off a cd.

Bobbi looks over her daughter's face. "You're so content. I can just see it."

"Mom?"

Bobbi smiles and smiles. "You're going to have a good life. You'll have so much more than I ever did."

"You know I don't want you to move," Lena says.

"Reno is too much," Bobbi says. "Too much light, too much noise."

"I'll visit you."

"It's too far to drive alone."

"I met a boy. It's been a few months, now. He'll drive with me."

"Sure," Bobbi says. "Fine. You can visit me. This boy treating you right? Don't answer that. I just want you to think about it."

Bobbi sings along to the song again. Lena turns the volume on the stereo up even higher.

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US NV-35

Bobbi has the volume up so high the speakers spit and cloud the sound. She drives fast over the dirt road north and away from Battle Mountain. There are crows or maybe ravens overhead on a powerline. But there's no powerline stretching along this desert highway. She rolls the window down and wind meets her face, and she looks out over the mirror of the car, over the hood of it. Was it a crow or was it a raven, and she drives after them.

/

US NV-93

"The air is hot and the wind is hot," Lena says. "At least we have cold water in cold thermoses." She looks over at Dane. "It's weird to think I haven't seen my mom in a year," she says. She holds his hand, presses her lips to the back of it. He lets go and changes the music, turning the dial low.

"She and my uncle have this thing they always say. *It's stifling*. They'll say this a million times to you, I swear, even when you've acknowledged and agree with them that it's hot out."

He says, "Should I beat them to it?"

"Definitely. It'll be hilarious."

"I didn't know your uncle was coming," he says.

She shrugs. "I mean, I assume he'll be there. He checks up on my mom a lot, ever since she moved."

"Battle Mountain isn't my vision of retirement."

"I can't defend that. She's told me she hates the city," she says.

"Let me guess, stifling."

She laughs. “Sure. But I’ve told you. We moved around a lot, when I was a kid. My mom’s always been on the road.”

She reaches and turns the music down even lower. “Do you remember running through Cathedral Gorge at sunset?”

“That was so long ago,” he says.

“Not really. It wasn’t that long ago.”

She looks in the rearview mirror.

“I remember parking right as it was getting dusk. And we had to run to get to the edge of the gorge, run through these nature trails. And we probably cut through them, since the desert and trails all looks the same. But we got to the edge of it. Just in time. There was so much sand, and it was all a different color, but it was just meeting the color of the sky, the sunset, like blinds closing. Do you remember that?”

She looks in the rearview mirror again and she rolls the backseat window down, and in the side mirror there is the image of their dog meeting the wind, meeting the wind and looking as though he sees the way.

FINELY RENDERED BEASTS

It's a wonder of the small trapper to look in the tumbling barrel of uniform spotted-pelt bobs and see individuals, to apprehend the tired yellow-toothed adults from the tufted kittens, or one 30-pound animal as the sister of another, father of a fifth.

My father's cats were not prized but he knew them well, ten sleek adults, the slight of them sloughed out from the desert. Each November, cats skulk up along the rocks at the first sign of snow and ice, hissing to be free of the winter crush.

"Goddamn brilliant cats," my father would grumble as he checked his traps and set them off, all the metal mouths empty, the snow around them patted down by paw prints that went around or turned back, as soft as if they were pressed instead with beans or small pebbles.

It was good business to catch as many as five or six per line, cleanly, he would say, lest anyone accuse him of sloppiness. He knew of too many furs ruined by trappers who didn't peel the tail, the meat instead turned over to plushy mold. It had to be clean. A person takes care of what's hers, my father tells me, bopping me on the nose with his finger.

But his furs were far more than property, his ties to them more complex than the desire for money or showmanship. Their experience at the ends of their lives was a measure of his own future, their ease of suffering a source of pride. Bobs that held his brand had spent those hours in the winter caught but not broken, their furs glistening with snowmelt in the sun, panting at the desert before them. They stared at him along the length of the choke pole, their souls visible and acknowledging of the dark as any finely rendered beast.

SLATELAND

When she started her journey, the world was in a dark month, December—or, perhaps, February. There were sudden moments of light, and of warmth too, so that dark could turn quickly, strangely, into something like a summer night and back over to the crisp air of winter's day. Far out among the pines that young woman pushed her hair under a gray thick band that came down over her forehead. Her name was Ouro. She was not too young but quiet on her feet, and she walked slowly under the shadows, moving a little from side to side, her loose clothes rippling like water does in a deep basin long after a disturbance, stubbornly returning to rest. She carried a stick taken from the ground and with this she kept tapping the warming earth in front of her. The tapping filled the pines with this meditative sound in the absence of birds and small, flying insects.

She wore pants that brushed along the dirt, and over her back was an empty pack, the pockets flattened, void. She looked straight ahead. Her skin was clear, unmarked, as though she were a sheet stretched over a bed, and a bluish color ran underneath where it seemed that burning light had never touched her. Under the gray band, shiny hair came down on her neck, still damp, with a shine like salt.

Now and then there was a rush among the pines. Ouro said, "Watch out, all you wild beasts! Keep out from under these feet, little bobcats, coyotes. And the bears, keep out of my path. I've got a long way." The trees moved again. Her stick, limber as a whip, snapped out at the fallen branches as if to scuttle away any hiding creatures. But there was nothing up here.

On she went.

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To get to Slateland it's miles up the mountain, he said. Slateland, he said, is a land filled with slate.

Who puts the slate there, she said.

No one, he said. The slate falls on top of slate.

How does slate fall if no one is there to drop it? she asked.

There's no drop, he said. It falls.

From where?

One place, he said. that's why it builds up to a mountain.

How high up does it go, she said.

Miles, he said.

How many miles?

No one knows, he said. No one's ever come back down.

Then how do you know it's a mountain?

I suppose someone's found the top, he said. Stood on it and looked out and said, I am on a mountain.

You said the slate is always falling on top of slate, she said.

I did, he said.

How does that work?

It builds itself out of itself, he said.

But if no one has seen the top then how do we know that's what happens? How did it get its name? This makes no sense, she said.

It made a lot of sense. Before you started asking about it, he said, taking up his glass of beer and moving to the other end of the bar.

/

The air among the pines was deep and still. The light from the sun made the pine needles look like thin columns of glass that trembled like windchimes, but they made no sound, no shimmer. The pinecones dropped and hit the ground silently, like they could keep falling if they had room.

The path went up and up. It went up towards pine and more pine. “Seems like there’s only ever the pines,” she said. Something took hold of her on the path, whispering that she should stay.

As she moved through shadows and light, the air was both searing and chilled in its opposites. The shadows a warm dark like oil, and the light a chilling burn. Her skin reared in goosebumps as the rays glowed over her bluish, translucent form. She passed pine after pine, walking over soft bunches of pine needles that uttered no crunch. When she was sure it was a month somewhere between summer and autumn, the air slashed at her with bitter winds. The path through the pines took her all the way through winter. Ice cut over her exposed arms with red lines. Time lost itself, and it was days before night came, when full dark was pulled over the endless stretch of the pines. And finally, the snow ended. Ouro had been holding her breath to save her lungs from the bite, and now as she drew in the air, the shadows were muggy in her mouth. The hems of her pants dried from the inches and clumps of snow stuck to them. The night opened, and the pines fed on that warmth, their needle-shards glistening in the moon glow.

And another year gone. Night ended when she emerged from the pines, pale and shaking. Her eyes, blue and bluer from the days on the path.

Now, a sight without pines. She turned and gave a full, severe look behind her where she had come. “Straight through pines,” she said. “Now up through this.”

Towards another night, into the blue of day beyond if she could ever reach it. She kept on, pressing her hands down on her thighs to help her push off the ground. The way was up. She had to watch her step. For before her was the slate.

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Something happened to you when you reached Slateland.

No one could say what, but just that something would happen. No one could even say that there was slate at the end of it all, at the top of it all, but they knew it was called Slateland. No one could say anything about it except, “follow the path.” For there was a path. And when she asked if it was the right one, if there were more paths that she might mistakenly take, she was told, “No, there is one path.” When she asked who had made the one path, she was met with stares and looks and all of them filled with judgment. They would say, “We made it.”

Slateland was thought to give you what you desired most. And so, one must wonder if Slateland gave you that desire on Slateland. That the desire within you was to always be with Slateland, on Slateland. And what was it Ouro desired most? What would she find there on the top, if there was a peak, a summit? Well, she would say that she desired to *know* Slateland. Yes, you could say that it was Slateland that she wanted. The resolve to know that once she reached Slateland she would not return.

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Her fingers were busy and full of intent, but her long dark pants were full and billowing, so that before she could pull them free in one place they were caught in another. It was not possible to let the pants tear. “Here I am in the thorny bush,” she said. But there was no bush. There was no vegetation for miles around her, and she had just left the pines. She turned. Behind her there was nothing but slate, and before her, slate. Below her feet wobbled on the pieces and slabs of it, the

bits and angles of it crumbling and slipping over others, all of them making nothing but silence.

“Thorns,” she said, “you’re doing your natural work.” She pulled at her pants legs to free them of the thorns, but there was no bush there. “Ha,” she said, “you will let me pass now.”

Finally, trembling all over, she stood straight, wiping her hands against her thighs. She could feel her skin, but there were no holes in her pants.

“Sun so high!” she said, leaning back and looking, while the thick tears went over her eyes. But it was night again. “The time passes me.”

Before her, more slate. It went on for miles, it seemed, and it probably did, but with the glare of the moon, it did seem like she could step over the rocky jumble, and she would be there, it could be the very top! But she looked again: the piece before her long like a bridge. The night bled around it, and it looked like there was nothing on either side. If she fell, she would fall forever.

“This is my trial,” said Ouro.

Putting her foot out, she stepped along the slab of slate the width and length of a ladder. She shut her eyes. Lifting one of her pant legs, leveling her walking stick before her, she stepped across the slate. With her eyes shut, the slate seemed to wobble, tipping her, not to one side, but forward. She opened her eyes and she had made it, walked across the piece of slate.

“There is not nothing. There is me,” she said. “I crossed.”

But she decided to rest, and when she sat, the piece tipped over with her weight. The sound of it rushed up at her. She had gone so long with hearing nothing, and now the sound of the slate shook her, its screeching, its screaming, its screaming, and she pressed her hands against her ears and scrunched herself into a ball to keep the noise out, from it barreling into her ears, into her body, into her.

The sound lasted seasons.

/

She couldn't tell you where it happened, what day it was, if the sun was out, if there had been snow, if she had talked to him for a decade or not even seen him at all, but she believed she met a man on the path. He was on his way to Slateland, like her. But he had been resting for a thousand years.

He asked, how long have you been on the path?

She said, I do not know. How can I tell?

The man turned away from her. She thought she had moved on. She envisioned herself walking along the slate, the sun cooling her body to the bone. But she stood there, facing the man who did not face her.

How can I tell, she asked again.

The man turned back. I thought I wanted to get to Slateland, he said. But I feel like something is telling me I am better off here. And so I am waiting for this feeling to pass.

How can I tell how long it's been, she said. That I've been here.

Have you had the feeling? He said, At first it feels like someone's tapped you on the shoulder. And you turn and no one is there. And you keep on the path. Then someone's tapped you again. When you turn, there is nothing there. Not even what you've just passed. There's no trees anymore. When you turn back, there's the slate, and the sky is the color of it because that's all there is. You're in a place without oceans—have you ever seen the ocean? There are no oceans here, and so you keep moving. No one is tapping you anymore, for awhile but then, it's like someone has her hand out, bracing against you. And you move right into it, though you are stopped by it. There is a palm against your stomach, and it is so close it feels like it's inside your

stomach. And if you go any farther, you know that the hand will enclose around something inside of you, and if you step forward along the path, the hand will stay. You know if you move forward, the hand will still be behind you, curled into a fist. There will be something in its fist. That something was from you. The hand will take something from you, and you can't get it back. You know this, and so you don't move. You don't go forward. This feeling makes you stop. I have stopped. I will not go forward. The hand is there now, against my stomach, flat against it. It wants something from me, and I am not willing to give it. I am waiting for this feeling to go away, he said.

I have not had this feeling, she said. I no longer am in the trees. But the sky is still blue above me. She looked up. See, she said, the sky is still blue above us.

The man looked up. The sky is not blue, he said. The sky is the color of the slate I am sitting on. I can't hear the oceans anymore. I used to know their sounds, and now I could not tell you what to listen for.

The man turned again. They could have stayed like this for a thousand more years. She never got the feeling. No one tapped her on the shoulder. There was no invisible hand before her, telling her to halt. She could go forward.

What does Slateland give us? he said. And why do we want what it has to give? The man faced the path. This feeling is the feeling of Slateland wanting something from me. Why does it want what I don't want to give?

She looked up. The sky was blue.

She said goodbye to the man.

On she went.

/

The sound of slate falling never let up. She sat there, hands against her ears, eyes squeezed shut. First it was the piece she was on. It tipped, and then the shrieking started. It was possible that she was hearing the echo of this first falling, but the screaming was different each time, a different echo. The man at the bar had said that in Slateland slate falls on top of slate. He also said that there is no new slate. There is only the slate that is here. What is on the bottom gets moved to the top, one could suppose. So, one could suppose, the piece of slate she was on would be moved. In order to be at the bottom, it had to be covered by slate from above. The sound rooted her there, but she knew she had to move. The slate would be falling on her, crushing her to the very bottom. Would she know it when her piece fell to the top? But, she mused, there was no slate on her now. Was she on the top of Slateland already? She opened her eyes. She was facing the path. The path. She had never asked the man at the bar: what does a path look like over slate? She was facing the way, she believed. She sat down and was facing the way she had to go. Before her was slate. Was it going up? It was hard to tell, it looked like it went straight out forever, like how one looks out over a desert. Was the sound she heard slate screeching over pieces, their adjustment over each other? But there was nothing but slate. It sat there. There was no more up. She wanted the sounds to stop. She wanted silence, wanted grounding. She could not keep going up.

And then it was there. The feeling. Just like her hands pressed against her ears, there was something like a hand pressed against her. It was against the flat of her back, almost holding her up if she leaned back against it. Slateland wanted something from her. She wanted something from Slateland. She wanted to get to the top of Slateland. To get to the top she had to fall to it, she knew this and wanted this. Slate on top of slate. She leaned back against the hand. She watched her stomach. Nothing came through it.

She leaned her head against the slate. And air came out of her mouth in a sharp whistle. Above her, the color of slate. Is that the sky? she wondered. And it came up to meet her.

/

When she opened her eyes, she saw the blue.

“It is done,” she said. “I am on a mountain.” She sat up and pushed off the ground. Hair slipped out of her gray band. She stood and brushed her hands of the slate dust from her palms. As she looked out, she saw below her a mountain of slate. The pieces sliding down off each other. A slab of it crashed nearby. She didn’t see its fall. There was a haze in the distance. “Well, once you are on a mountain,” she said, “at some point you must come down off of it.”

She had lost her stick along the way, she realized. But she gathered herself and began to descend.

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Slateland built itself out of itself. Slate fell onto slate. As young Ouro descended, her eyes cleared of its cloudiness. She went down the slate, some pieces of it sliding underneath her. At the top of Slateland, there was something not the color of slate on one of the slabs of slate. She did not see this non-slate. It was white, whiter than bleached sand. It had smooth angles and was hollowed out in some places. A piece of pelvis. Through it, one could see the sky, its blue, blue reach.