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Out of place: Stories

Molly Beckwith

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Shackoul's Honors College
Mississippi State University

Out of Place: stories

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Undergraduate Honors Thesis in Creative Fiction

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21 April 2015

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Out of Place: (stories)

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Defamiliarizing the Normal and Normalizing the Strange:

Accommodation of the Humane Spirit in *A Wild Sheep Chase* and *The Illumination*

We often regard the fantasy genre as a space where readers can go to escape their mundane daily experiences, and no wonder—with its spired castles occupied by dragons and its magic spells and talking animals, fantasy seems as far away from daily experience as we could possibly travel. But there is a cousin to fantasy, better called magical realism, which intimates that the whole of the genre, rather than distancing its readers from their grounding in reality, elevates that experience of grounded reality so that it suddenly accommodates the kinds of strangenesses we find between the pages. Here, we don't separate ourselves from our experiences through speculative fiction; instead we widen our experiences of reality because of it. Two novels, Haruki Murakami's *A Wild Sheep Chase* and Kevin Brockmeier's *The Illumination*, demonstrate just this sort of narrative. Through their consistent use of defamiliarizing techniques like synecdoche and unusual form, each novel makes strange the normal reality their characters expect to experience, which then leaves space to normalize what would usually be seen as strange. This normalization of the strange experience distinguishes a world inside these novels that accommodates a more subjective reality, and that accommodation in turn characterizes a certain generous, humane spirit across these novels that doesn't seem as prevalent in other forms of narrative: a narrative accommodating toward other experiences of reality, a generous understanding of fellow humans that carries on far after the book closes.

I: Defamiliarizing the Normal

The first step in defamiliarizing the normal in narrative is to shake the foundations of what we regard as normal in the first place, or to lose the expected everyday experience. In *The Illumination*, that loss of the everyday experience comes abruptly and without mask: Carol Ann Page, the novel's first protagonist, notes that light "leaked out from around the wound" in her thumb incurred from an accident with a box cutter (7); startled, she asks "what's happening to me?" to her doctor (8), to find that this experience has travelled, suddenly and inexplicably, across the world. The illuminated pain, so distant from her expectations built on previous dealings with invisible pain, starts with Carol as an individual and builds to encompass the whole of the world's experience—this is not a "hallucination" as she thinks at first it might be, but a sudden difference in reality, a complete departure from the normal that everyone must now deal with. This grand-scale involvement with the loss of everyday expectations isn't present in *A Wild Sheep Chase*, where Murakami takes a subtler approach to this first jolt from reality. The (unnamed) narrator's loss of the everyday instead comes from something relatively normal in the scheme of experience: his wife leaves him in the cold kitchen of his uninspiring urban apartment, where suddenly he realizes that "the tomatoes and string beans were but chilled shadows. Tasteless shadows. Not was there any taste to the coffee or crackers. Maybe because of the morning sun? The morning sun decomposes everything" (19). His reality, catalyzed by something realistic (the loss of his spouse), begins literally decomposing around him—melting, turning to shadows. Suddenly the narrator finds himself in an alternate space, something critic Matthew Stretcher notes: "Murakami . . . shows his readers two 'worlds'—one conscious, the other unconscious—and permits seamless crossover between them" (Stretcher 268). Stretcher's two worlds are the reality the narrator expected for his mundane, urban Japanese daily life and

something new, a different space in which his expectations literally melt away. Note how Murakami's language of decomposition runs parallel to Brockmeier's first description of the light as "leaking" from Carol Ann's thumb: in both situations the everyday and expected experiences ebb and some new reality replaces them—in one case, the old reality melting away, and in the other, the new reality leaking uncontrollably out.

But the melting away of mundanity is only the first step; what's left are the ways in which new reality replaces the old and makes the reader's new experience unfamiliar. Victor Shklovsky, the first critic to use the term "defamiliarization" in the setting of literary analysis, describes it as "a method of seeing things out of their normal context" (781) and claims that his main subject, Tolstoy, defamiliarizes images by "not naming the object" (779), instead describing it as if the object has no name. Though Murakami does employ the technique in not naming his narrator, this isn't the only method for defamiliarization; one that shows up repeatedly in both Murakami's and Brockmeier's novels is synecdoche, or using small parts to characterize whole entities. Synecdoche, on a smaller scale, is common in many narratives, and in Murakami's novel it shows up in a routine way, just like *A Wild Sheep Chase* lost its everyday experience through the routine and realistic: "[I] found myself planted squarely in front of my doorknob" (16), the narrator says instead of mentioning the door. But the synecdoches get larger and larger, so that one character is described entirely by her ears—she shows up first in a photograph of a "giant close-up of an ear" (33), and when finally the narrator meets her she is hardly described outside of the ears in either appearance or function. Yet the most significant synecdoche, in terms of size and importance for defamiliarization of narrative, manifests in the bone from a whale penis:

There were, of course, no whales [there] . . . Instead, the aquarium kept a whale penis on display. As a token, if you will. So it was that my most impressionable

years of boyhood were spent gazing at not a whale but a whale's penis . . . It bore no resemblance to my penis, nor to any penis I'd ever seen. What was worse, the severed penis exuded a singular, somehow unspeakable aura of sadness. It came back to me, that giant whale's penis, after having intercourse for the very first time. What twists of fate, what torturous circumnavigations, had brought it to that cavernous exhibition room? My heart ached, thinking about it. (30)

Here the part has been violently ripped from the body it represents, unlike normal synecdoche in which the part remains attached to the whole—but more perplexing is the way in which its severance from the body of the whale permits the penis to stand as a synecdoche for multiple meanings beyond the whale. It exudes a sadness and serves as a source for contemplation; it reminds the narrator of intercourse, or rather intercourse reminds the narrator of it; it becomes a swelling ache in the narrator's consciousness. Even the way he phrases it, “my heart ached,” functions as a synecdoche using his heart as the whole of his emotional psyche. Similarly large in scale is the synecdoche that serves as the major premise of *The Illumination*: the newly visible physical pain becomes representative of the entire gamut of pain and human connection—or lack of connection—both physical and emotional. Synecdoche becomes a method for seeing things out of context, as Shklovsky describes, on a grand scale. Things are characterized by their small parts, which in turn makes all the small parts of the novel potentially meaningful. Synecdoche violently shakes both novels out of their familiar characterizations of their worlds, which accomplishes Shklovsky's purpose behind defamiliarization: “to remove the automonism of perception” (783) of the images and experiences that surround us.

Even these two novels' narrative form displays elements of defamiliarization. *A Wild Sheep Chase* is a pastiche of narrative styles imposed over the basic quest structure of this

narrator's hunt for the star-backed sheep: there's the page of question and answers screenplay-style between the narrator and the hotel owner, Murakami's own illustration of the Sheep Man, and the almost flash-fiction quickness of particular chapters that proceed one after the other in a rapid fire of connected titles ("Unblocked Ears," "The Further Adventures of Unblocked Ears" / "Before the Strange Man," "Now the Strange Man" / "The Strange Man's Tale," "The Strange Man's Tale Goes On"). In *The Illumination*, the strangeness of form is not so much a visual difference on the page but rather the way that we as readers receive it: six chapters span the whole 250 pages; each chapter presents the portrait of an entirely new person from the section before it. In fact, the narration departs from the previous person's storyline entirely, picking up and dropping off characters with seemingly reckless abandon and randomness, except that the story follows the journal, which each character owns at a different time. Each novel in some significant way upends our expectations of the novel form, both defamiliarizing the way the story is told and effectively defamiliarizing the way the story is read, since the strange form interrupts at times the tactile experience of reading each novel.

In addition to a defamiliarized form, even the language of these texts themselves defies expectations and exudes a sort of inefficiency that further jars the novels out of a sense of normalcy. *A Wild Sheep Chase*, among other instances of language inefficiency, presents an illustration of a sheep man immediately following a description of him. This inclusion of the illustration intimates that the narrator—or perhaps even Murakami himself—didn't trust his words enough to adequately convey the visual of the sheep man. More than just some strangeness in form for its alien placement in a literary novel, the illustration says in a photo what the novel couldn't have said otherwise about its own language; that language is a construct, that it is impossible to get fully correct, and that it is inefficient. Brockmeier's novel also deals

with a certain language failure. His third protagonist, Chuck, is a young boy with social disabilities and an obsession with the number ten, whose entire 43-page section contains only ten-word sentences. After pages of the syntax working so well that it's difficult to notice the similarity of each sentence's length, Chuck scuffles with his emotionally abusive father and starts counting the tens: "There were ten fingers squeezing Chuck's shoulder as he swallowed. There were ten pictures on the wall in the hallway . . . There were ten checkmarks by his name on the chalkboard. There were ten words in every sentence—yet another rule. There were ten soft beats in every moment of time" (97). This admission of ten-word sentences is like a secret, well-hidden until it explodes; under readers' noses for pages has been an obsessive measurement of standards to which the sentences had to comply, and once the admission is out it becomes hard—impossible—to read the remainder of the chapter without counting words. And more comprehensive than Chuck's compulsive sentences is the way that the entirety of *The Illumination* rides on the success or failures of the literal language which carries the narrative thread: the journals. This novel depends on the responses by the various protagonists to the journals that carry the fuel of the story, which suggests that the journals can succeed—that is, elicit an emotional response by its holders, the protagonists—but also that they can fail—that they might not move the characters, at which point the journals' role as the fuel for the movement of the novel will also have failed. Language is literally under threat, and the whole novel has stakes in the outcome. Critic Eugene Arva notes, too, a peculiarity of language in magical realism: "the magical realist metaphor seems, indeed, more real than the real . . . because it is both medium and referent at the same time. Its oxymoronic constitution, including magic and reality, creates a special kind of dual signification" (Arva 70). Its strains against language, like in Murakami's and Brockmeier's novels, pit reality against strangeness (the referent essentially as the base real

experience, and the medium altered by the inclusion of strange narrative elements) and thus accommodate both in a seemingly oxymoronic package of language. When paired with the strange form of both novels, the books themselves become just as defamiliarized in the experience of reading them as their characters' experiences are defamiliarized living through them.

This blanket of defamiliarization—of the language, of the form of the narratives, of the synecdoche that characterizes much of the novels' contents—contributes to a subjective reality wherein the experiences of each novel are so fragmented that they can only be a part of a whole, a synecdoche themselves, and that there must be multiple disparate experiences. In *A Wild Sheep Chase*, that subjective reality comes on a mostly syntactical level. The narrator wonders if anyone sees the star-backed sheep, or if anyone else notices the eccentricities of the Dolphin Hotel, and every time the answer back to him is *yes, other people experience it the same way*. But the only times he feels truly alone in his experience, the only times that he knows that multiple experiences of the world exist separately for other people, are when synecdoche crashes against the strangenesses of form and language, truly defamiliarizing his experience: in his first meeting with the girl with ears, they hold the following exchange:

“I’d like to ask you more about your ears, if I may,” I said.

“You want to ask whether or not my ears possess some special power?”

I nodded.

“That is something you’d have to check for yourself,” she said. (43)

The synecdoche of ears-for-whole-person comes to a head for the first time, and in this space language fails him—he doesn’t ask specifically what he wants to, and when she steals the words from him he falls mute and nods—and there the woman explains that he’ll have to experience

her ears first-hand to know them. It's not an experience she can describe to him, partially, it seems, because she doesn't know the answer herself, but also because they might possess unique powers for him; it's the experience of checking that tells him if it's true. The answer he finds, then, can only be an individual, one-time answer, as if the ears behave differently around different people. In *The Illumination*, that subjective experience blooms instead from the strangeness of narrative form, but as the story only exists along the synecdoche of pain for pain, this subjectivity stems, too, from the amalgamation of various defamiliarizing techniques. Brockmeier's world hops from protagonist to protagonist and proves that each person's experience with the journals is singular and subjective. Chuck and his obsession with tens sees the journal sensitively: "the book ached with the hard light of something broken" (93), he says, experiencing the journal as a thing that also glows in pain, which he knows is unique to his experience of it, and which no one else in the novel sees at any point throughout the narrative. Only Nina has the searing experience of sores in her mouth while she's trying to read her writing aloud, and so only for author Nina does the journal allow her a physical escape from pain as she reads the journal silently. Only widower Jason has any background with the journal—having written it himself—and so only he sees the pain of losing his wife, to whom it was written, freshly again and again each time he opens the pages. These experiences are defamiliarized through synecdoche, by strange form, by inefficient language, and in their combination they constitute an experience wholly singular to the person who lives it—thus defamiliarization lends directly to the creation of a subjective reality in both of these novels, a reality which is individually experienced yet universally different from the everyday norm which began both narratives.

II. Normalizing the Strange and Exhibiting the Humane Spirit

These novels have each stripped away normal expectations about how the world works, in favor of the subjective experience of the individual in contact with the strange, and so in the space left by defamiliarization, the new normal becomes that strange, individual experience. Critic Stephen M. Hart notes this normalizing of strangeness as the primary characteristic of magical realism, calling it a “novelistic technique in which the supernatural is presented in a natural, matter-of-fact manner” (Hart 260). The normal is gone, in these novels, and strange, magical imagery and situations rush in to take its place. *The Illumination*’s latter characters know nothing other than light pouring out from pain; the missionary Ryan Shifrin regards the shift immediately in terms of how it affects the mundane—church attendance—making quick mental calculations which normalize its existence by breaking it down into its tangible and grounded effects on his surroundings. The illumination of pain is unfamiliar, but since it brings with it an unfamiliarity to the normal expected world, this new, unfamiliar intruder becomes the norm which the protagonists seek to make sense of. Ryan considers it in terms of its effects on the church and thus normalizes it, and as his chapter covers the whole of his life, the other way that Brockmeier familiarizes the illumination is simply by letting it exist for so long that the novelty of it wears off. By the time his chapter ends, the illumination has gone on for half a century, and the new generation knows only light:

Now there were children who had come of age knowing nothing else, running to their mothers to have a Band-Aid put on their flickers, asking, *Why is the sky blue?* and, *Why does the sun hurt?*, and still they grew into their destructiveness, and still they learned whose hurt to assuage and whose to disregard, and still there were soldiers enough for all the armies of the world. And every war left behind the

shrapnel scars and shattered limbs of a hundred thousand ruined bodies. And every earthquake and every hurricane produced a holocaust of light. (164)

Adults have forgotten what unilluminated pain feels like. Children—Nina’s son, for instance—have been born knowing no other version of reality but it. Ryan seems to think he’s arguing that people have become more violent, but all he proves is that violence against each other hasn’t much been affected, or that it’s untouchable, even by something as magnificent as the illumination. But what he misses in his own words is the accommodation of a new experience as something positive: the children are sensitive to pain, even if it doesn’t stop their violence; they want to know about the pain of the sun, and they use visual pain as a tool with which to regard others. The illumination, for the new generation who grows up knowing it, is normal, and so it makes sense that it wouldn’t shatter the world’s proclivity to destruction. And just as that newly familiarized lightness of pain becomes unsurprising to the people whom it affects, so does the world of *A Wild Sheep Chase* accommodate strange experiences so that the Rat’s eventual appearance despite his death is completely unsurprising to the narrator. After a long conversation with his lost friend the Rat, the narrator asks him a question out of the blue, with no exposition beforehand to build emotion or dread: “You’re already dead, aren't you?” And the Rat answers equally without emotion: “‘That’s right,’ said the Rat finally, ‘I’m dead’” (330). Here, too, the strange experiences have accumulated so that nothing originally normal is left, and in effect the only normal thing the narrator can expect is strangeness, which has become the constant; thus the narrator is not surprised to find that he’s talking to his dead friend; if anything, the world of the book would make less sense if he were alive, and so of course his reality accommodates the possibility of talking to the dead Rat. The accommodation of the

world to accept the strange as the normal, in both novels, happens over time, and happens because all that the novels started out with has been defamiliarized.

But accommodation means more than just that the world has changed; in fact, accommodation is the most important element of either novel, and it happens after the normal becomes defamiliar and after the strange becomes normal. What the accommodation of multiple subjective realities, the accommodation of strange elements into a familiar world, accomplishes is a generous worldview where multiple experiences are acceptable and the strange is no longer strange. In accepting the strange elements of the world, both novels promote that nothing has to be the same on the outside as it is on the inside, or that the world has room for larger and more complex explanations—this is true for the illumination of pain, and it's true for the existence of a star-backed sheep or a woman with powerful ears or a conversation with a dead friend over beer. Yet more importantly, it's true for the characters themselves; each one, most of whom seem particularly cold or unaffected on the surface, exists in worlds that accommodate the space necessary to prove that external appearances don't matter much for motivation or real personality. Eugene Arva recognizes the character's—and the reader's—investment in this type of narrative: “Relying on characters and events deliberately meant to surprise readers, the magical realist text seems to appeal to us because it is *important* to us” (Arva 80). Magical realism—its defamiliarization of the normal, its accommodation of the strange—exhibits mainly and most importantly a humane generosity that appeals to its characters and readers. While the narrator of *A Wild Sheep Chase* seems unaffected by Rat's death, his mouth grows dry at the thought of losing his friend, and he remains for several minutes talking to him, relishing the last moments he'll spend with his friend, dead or not. Ryan, jaded by the spectrum of human suffering and its visibility which the illumination of pain permits, lives his entire life in

devotion to his sister. Nina, outwardly so cold because of the pain in her mouth, finds the illumination to be a mildly embarrassing way to explain away that fault in herself—suddenly the visual pain emanating from her mouth lends others an explanation for why she refuses to fraternize, and because others better understand her she begins to take down her own walls. This accommodation of the strange accommodates, too, a better understanding of character, and so the defamiliarization of elements in these novels reads directly to the generosity with which we can appraise its parts, namely character and human experience. And in addition to humanizing the characters, this accommodation humanizes the stories themselves—while so much of fiction, particularly in magical realism, sees the vast and subjective experience of our world and bend toward generosity. Brockmeier and Murakami are especially good examples of this generosity. The worlds of the novels, with their defamiliarization and interest in the inefficiencies of language, can accommodate so much varied experience. *The Illumination* closes with another man walking past the the last protagonist, whose beaten body shines with light:

The whole great press of men and women . . . believed their lives were like falling silver coins, flashing for merely an instant before returning to darkness. They were wrong . . . Take that gentleman lying against a brick wall in a heap of wet clothing, crying out so gravely and unintelligibly. Yes, his moans were awful, and yes, his wounds burned out of him like a fire, but his pain would cease, and his body would heal, and the light would last forever. (257)

Because of the defamiliarized pain, because of the strange and individual experience, suddenly these characters find themselves able to experience generosity of spirit toward others—strangers—they never could have understood before. Everything fills with purpose. Instead of seeing a multitude of experiences and shrinking away from them, these novels in their defamiliarizing the

normal, in their normalizing the strange, in their accommodation of multiple experiences, sees that multitude and wonders at how lucky we are to have it.

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God Maybe as the Lamp Post

So it's just turned dark outside, really dark, like navy-turned-black, okay?

Yeab.

And I'm out there, some fifteen-year-old in the middle of nowhere in some field because, well, of what happened.

Got it.

Right, and so it's dark and I'm there, and so is this...just this lamp post. Just there in the middle of nowhere with me, because I've just run there, to the middle of nowhere, since I wasn't thinking straight after what happened. It's not really even lighting much of anything, just sort of shining uselessly in this field in the middle of B. F. Egypt-certified nowhere. I mean, there was a wall there, in the field, but the wall wasn't really doing much and it had sort of crumbled, I think, with age. The wall was reddish stone, or at least looked like it. In the dark, I mean. And it stretched forever in both directions and I don't think I really even noticed it until I got to the lamp post. I was just running along the wall that was raised up like some long, ugly scar out of the grass, and I was just running and running and not thinking, you know, and I must have gone a ways, since I looked around after that and I couldn't really see anything familiar except this wall. Which wasn't really all that familiar, it's just that I'd been seeing it for the whole run and so it was the only thing I halfway recognized. It was falling apart, the wall, because I think it was really old, and it looked like there'd been big bites taken out of it. Big half circles like bites that had been blown off the top edge, and there were stones lying just like these giant bread crumbs in the grass.

There could have been a war there or something, I don't know, because of the wall and how it was so crumbly like bread and all. Or maybe it was just like that because it was old. I mean maybe not, and the wind had got to it over hundreds of years and the most action it'd seen was like herds of sheep or something. Can you imagine if that was your life, to just watch sheep grazing and sleeping and copulating and being herded, day in and day out, until one day the sheep leave and you're there, this wall, all alone again? Now that I think about it the war is a better story, so we'll go with that. But whatever, the wall was falling apart no matter what, and sometimes I'd have to run around those bits of breadcrumb stones that had fallen from it, because if I didn't, I'd trip and then I'd be more fucked up than I already was from what happened. And these fallen stones were big. Like, huge, big. Like stones that the giant would have used for his house, the one in the Jack's Beanstalk story that Ma still tells to Mary Lou but she stopped telling it to me because I'm trying to be a man about everything now. Really the only way I saw them, the rocks, was that they were so giant and so they stuck out over the grass in the moonlight, or else I would have run straight over them and been fucked even more than I already was.

And the field was huge. Stretched on both sides of the wall I think. I mean I couldn't see much of the other side, so there could have been buildings there or something, I dunno, but really it was just kind of me and the wall and this big stretch of grass. I mean I could see the woods from far away but I think I was pretty well outside city limits. And it was kind of tall, but not too much. The grass I mean. I don't know, ankle high or something, maybe shin. I mean I could see the big stone crumbles in it, but probably not if there had been snakes or anything, I wouldn't have seen those. Wasn't thinking about them, luckily. Or maybe unlucky, I don't know, but nothing bit me so I think I was fine. I mean, I wasn't fine obviously, I was out running in the

middle of God knows where in the dead of night after probably the biggest shock of my life and I was hugging myself like some weirdo and kinda breathing heavy and mumbling to myself, obviously I wasn't fine. But with the snakes or whatever, none bit me, so that was good because I wouldn't have known what to do if one had. You know, bit me. So these stones were huge and this field was huge and the grass stretched on like some big, black sea in the dark—and in the middle of all this, all this swollen and empty God knows where expanse of land, stands this lamp post.

I mean I almost didn't see it. I'd already been through a lot and I wasn't really thinking, and so all of a sudden there was all this light and I'd barely even noticed how dark it was outside until this bright thing was right in front of my face. Just standing there like it was the most natural thing in the world, for there to be this lamp in the middle of certified absolute nowhere.

And, you know, it's not some sketchy nineties lamp that burns blue-white and keeps humming like something bad's about to happen. No, it's one of the ones straight out of the movies, the ones in the movies with the men in fedoras behind the window blinds that stripe their faces, and the women with those curves and the feather boas and the cigarettes between their lips when they talk. Not talk, groan, you know the she-god gravelly fuck-me-voice from the movies. So the lamp's black, from the little bit I can see of it in its own light. Imagine this tall, slender pole, I mean I don't want to be gay about it but the thing is beautiful. It's scored up-and-down like one of those old Greek column things, but more American, you know, thinner and metal. The base at the bottom gets smaller and smaller in ringed steps as it climbs up the pole, and then the column-scoring starts. And about halfway up, this little piece—I couldn't see it perfectly because of the dark—it swoops in and out and it makes this lower case 't' because it has a bar stretching out from both sides. At one side of the arm of the 't' is this second bulb,

this upright bulb that makes a halo around itself just like you're imagining right now, I swear, this halo in the middle of the air and I could see this little yellow orb just hanging there around the bulb. And I saw the globe of light, the orb, around that bulb that was sitting there on its ornate little holder at the end of the crossbar, and I saw the edges of it, how it fizzled at its diameter ran out. But I knew that it was shedding more light than just the circle I could see in the darkness, because otherwise how could I have seen the other part of the crossbar? Because the light from the main bulb wasn't shining directly on it.

What I'm saying is that the light, whatever limits of it I could see, went farther than what it, I dunno, let on about. Get it? Like there was a secret about how much light it shed, like it'd let me know a little but not the whole amount because I didn't deserve all the information, like the apple on the tree of life that Eve ate when the snake talked. Or like how that man sold the magic beans in the Jack story but didn't tell him about the giant.

But what I'm saying is that at the end of this crossbar, in the light that I shouldn't be able to see because it seems like neither bulb should be able to reach it, is a weathervane shaped like an arrow. It spun around once or twice, that's how come I saw it, though most of the time it faced head-on because the wind was blowing in my face. Now that I think of it, that's probably symbolic or something, but I dunno I don't want to think about it. Anyway it's this solid black arrow and then it swings on this little stand that connects to the crossbar that holds the upright bulb at the other end, and then from there the main pole continues up, up, up in its etched little pencil lines—that's a better description than a Roman column, I think. Etched pencil lines. And then finally the pole just runs out at the top. It flares out and then back in, and there's a little ball at the very top of that, but the pole just ends where you'd expect the normal light to go. But no, this lamp out in the middle of God-knows-where is different, and so a little swoopy spiral of

metal crosses the top bit and then the lamp hangs and looks downward from that. You know what, the whole lamp was shaped less like a lowercase 't' and more like a capital 'F'. And so anyway it's like the lamp light that you see in the interrogation movies, some of them the same movies with the fedora men and the cigarette women. You know the light that comes down in a cone and makes a perfect circle of yellow on the ground or the table or whatever. I mean it was grass there, but in the movies it's usually a table.

I say all of that to say this: I'm running and not thinking and I'm coming along this wall and dodging crumbly giant stones, and then I see it. I mean I haven't been thinking for probably an hour and a half by this point and the sight of this lamp just makes me stop, thinking, there's no light anywhere else and so why the hell is this lamp here? And like immediately I'm brought back to myself, you know?

And it's this lamp right out of the movies, so much that I should be seeing it in my mind in black and white, right? Except it's more in shades of purple and navy and yellow. Maybe because those were the colors my eyes were seeing after what happened. And I haven't thought and I haven't stopped and I haven't breathed in probably an hour and a half by now, and so I kind of just collapse in front of this lamp. Not in the light, a little ways away. And I'm slumped on the ground and all I have the energy to do is to reach into my pocket for a smoke, and it takes me like a hundred tries to light it but finally I breathe it and it feels so *good*, you know, like I can feel my lungs again.

I don't know how long I sat there. Six cigarettes. All I know is that I'm half asleep and probably my head is bleeding onto the grass and it's close to morning and there's this shift of light from behind the light post. I wake all the way up, because, you know, what if it's somebody else and I'm about to go through what happened all over again. But no, it's these eyes, like the

creepy glowing animal eyes and for a split second my heart tries to jump out of my teeth but then it comes into the lamp light and lies down in the middle of the circle with a bone in its mouth. Honest to God the most beautiful dog I have ever seen. It's tan with this shaggy hair and it's got a short snout and these little black eyes and it's chewing some bone by holding it steady with its front paws. Well it sags down in the middle of the grass under the light, like it wants the sun to come back or like it wants to be seen by somebody. I mean it must have wanted to be seen, or else the other one must have followed it all the way from wherever the first dog came from, because otherwise how would two dogs have come to this same spot in the middle of nowhere at the exact same time.

So it must have been followed because a couple minutes later this other dog, meaner and thinner and with this sleek coat starts growling, and I didn't even know it was there because the brown fur blended in with the dark so well. And it steps into the circle of light to the back of the shaggy dog and it pulls its lips back and it growls, the teeth all sharp and its gums raw and pink. Its eyes reflect the light better than the shaggy dog's because I remember seeing that the mean one's eyes are green. I think parts of me are turning green, too, at that point, my skin swollen and bloody and it's a wonder they don't see me or smell me or else both dogs might be on me. Maybe it's the smoke that keeps them away, but I make sure to cram out the butt on the ground that there's nothing for them to see in my direction, you know, so they won't notice me.

And this other dog keeps growling, and the tan shaggy dog is up in an instant, the bone in its teeth, growling back. The mean dog wants it. The bone. I look a little closer and it's still got some brown and pink on it, like a steak bone thrown out from somewhere and then the tan dog found it and took it here, but the mean one wants it. I can tell in his eyes that he's going to try for it, I recognize that look. And then he does. He snaps forward and just catches the tan dog

on the snout. The tan one leaps up and over, tries to fling himself free, but the mean dog just shakes and shakes and shakes until the bone comes loose along with a chunk of the first one's nose. I mean there's blood everywhere.

And so the brown one starts to make off with the bone, but the tan dog with half a nose isn't giving up so easy. So he lunges for the brown one and clamps down on its back and tries to get his bone back but the brown one just spits the bone toward the edge of the circle and bends backward and shakes loose of the first dog, pissed like hell. He leaps again and lands at the tan dog's neck, and keeps shaking and shaking until I see the tan one just stop struggling. And he's still shaking it. Finally the brown one lets loose and the dog in his teeth just kind of slouches into the grass. And the brown one, the winner, it picks up its bone and trots out of the circle of light, away from me. Like nothing happened.

I mean it took like two minutes, maybe five, I don't know.

But the tan one, well, he's not so tan anymore, more like pink, just kind of stays there in the circle and breathes. It pants and pants and I don't know if it's dying or it'll heal but I imagine that it's just tired and wants to sleep off its shame. And so it either dies or goes to sleep or maybe both, I mean I could see little movements but sometimes things move after they die, some automatic physical reaction of the stuff in their body that has no purpose anymore, right?

It just stays there in the middle of the circle of light and just twitches, and the helpless bastard just can't do anything but twitch, unless it's like convulsing and dying, like I said I don't know. But all of a sudden I'm not sleepy and I don't feel anything anymore and I look into this circle, this lamp post that just sheds light on the dying creature what didn't do anything to deserve it and I think surely something other than just me has to have seen it, witnessed it, like surely the lamp post that lit the whole scene up saw it too, and that maybe it's God's spotlight to

watch the helpless thing get the life kicked out of it. I mean maybe that lamp post is God, or something, and it chooses to shine down this cone of light like in the movies, but onto this expanse of grass where any number of things can play out, and this time it's the dog's turn for the spotlight. I don't know. Am I off my head?

Dunno. Did you help it?

What?

The dog, did you help the dog?

I mean, that's what you'd expect, right? That the kid who'd just gotten the shit beat out of him for all of zero reasons by his older brother in secret, that the one who'd been there so fresh and recent would feel sympathy for the underdog, excuse the pun. But I mean at least he put up a fight, didn't he? At least the other dog was bloody. What did I do, I just cried and took it like I was a girl or a kid or something. Watched from the doorway as he came for me, smiling, said I was gonna pay for telling Ma about seeing him smoke the week before. Dragged me out by my shirt collar, threw me against the fireplace, banged my head against it a few times and kicked me for good measure, kept on like that til I couldn't breathe and then he sat on my chest, his body heavy on my lungs like there wasn't any air. He scratched my arms with his nails, with the fire poker, and then he put it up close to my neck like he'd jab it in and he smiled again and said he didn't care about me telling mom, just wanted to see what he could do, how far he could go, and that he'd decided not to kill me. I didn't struggle or anything, just drank in gulps of air when he finally got off of me and didn't know what to do. Took a walk. Dad calls it the Law of the Buffalo, says the biggest ones can push their way through and so the others have no choice but to let them do it because they're smaller and what are they gonna do. I mean that's what you

expect, what with the cosmic order of the universe and the survival of the fittest and all that shit. That tan dog wasn't the buffalo and I'm not.

But I mean that's the horrible part of it all. I didn't feel anything. Nada. I just got up and grabbed my backpack and lit another cigarette and limped home. I left the thing behind me, to die or wake up again, I don't know. That's the bad thing is that I don't care because I think that the world doesn't either, and maybe God if he's the lamp post or not, he doesn't care either because there I was, I was walking back and the sun starts to light up the wall and the grass, and the sky turns pink. Because the dawn comes up and the lamp shuts off and the world keeps spinning and no one gives a rat's ass about a dog bleeding in the grass, you know?

What Is and Isn't Said

The Morning Chronicle

March 8 2011

Page 8, Personals

Fifty-something woman with moderate circumstances ~~and new prosthetic foot~~ seeking man also with prosthetic or other defect not more severe, for company. ~~Am quite alone in silent house.~~ Would enjoy talking ~~to someone~~ with someone regularly ~~which would be preferable to keeping a~~ eat. Ellen.

The Morning Chronicle

March 10 2011

Page 8, Personals

TO ELLEN: You sound ~~desperate~~ lovely but did not include your email. Mine is mrgill@gmail.com. I would like to ~~express~~ learn more about you. Do you have children? What do you do? Could you see yourself in the company of a ~~god~~ man with an overactive ~~libido~~ imagination? F. Gill.

Ellen R. Spencer <sculpteverything07@aol.com>

To: mrgill@gmail.com

March 15 2011 6:50 a.m.

Subject: Hello

Mr. Gill,

~~Your email address is pretentious~~ It is nice to meet you. Sorry I failed to include my contact information but ~~I presumed no one would reply~~ I am glad you posted in the paper. I anticipate friendship.

As for me, I am widowed and living on Cluster Street. I can't say I miss my husband all that much. I have ~~two children~~ one child, Emily, in Saskatchewan. I enjoy cooking. ~~Explicitly I mean anything concerning tomatoes. I like when they squeeze and run in my hands.~~ I keep an immaculate herb garden on my windowsill, where I once grew pot but I don't anymore.

~~In a tank in my kitchen I keep a modest population of black moor goldfish, a collecting habit I acquired immediately before I stopped leaving my house altogether. An albino named Roger swims among the masses of black fins and tails. They each have names. The tank is blue with the clear rocks at the bottom and I think I'd be depressed if I were one of them. I mean the fish not the rocks. I sculpt.~~

~~I make it a point to not see other people. I leave money on the doorstep and a man comes by to drop off my groceries. A boy from the church mows my lawn~~ Others consider me reserved. I often sit in the chair in my living room between my Mexican rosewood table and a big potted fern, and I knit. Not the grandmotherly knitting with the afghans and the scarves and socks. I'm not old enough for that. I knit sweaters for fruit, and things like felted animals. ~~Once I knitted a large, pink intestine because I wanted to and had time.~~ You know, the miscellany with no use just for the fun of it. Others call it ~~strange~~ quirky.

As for the inquiry about your overactive imagination, ~~it's a little bizarre~~ I think we should get along just fine. Hope to hear from you soon ~~although I'd be okay if you didn't.~~

Thanks,

~~Yours Truly,~~

Sincerely,

Ellen Spencer

Foster Gill <mrgill@gmail.com>

To: Ellen R. Spencer <sculpteverything07@aol.com>

March 18 2011 7:23 p.m.

Subject: Re: Hello

Dear Ellen,

You seem ~~tutillating~~ stimulating. But what do you *do*?

Yours,

Foster

To Ms. Ellen R. Spencer

101 Cluster

Blake, SC 29956

Sweet Ellen,¹

~~Last time we spoke it was about our distaste for big dogs. Today while I was eating a kebab on break from my conference I saw a stray upon another stray. My mind couldn't help but drift to you. You haven't once invited me over, nor have you accepted my invitations. I often imagine your face and form, and in fact I would like a photograph, please. Your face will suffice for now.~~

¹ The note is written in slanted handwriting on the back of a postcard whose front reads, "Greetings from CLEVELAND" in red-and-blue cinematic lettering. The photograph, visible behind the outline of each letter, is of a skyline so grainy and generic as to be indistinguishable. The card is altogether tacky.

~~I find myself working too intently for you to have denied me for this long. I don't usually work this hard.~~

The conference is going well but the city is not ideal.

Foster ²

TELEGRAM FROM MR F GILL

28 MAY 3:40 PM EST

TO MS E SPENCER

101 CLUSTER STREET

BLAKE SC 29956 USA

FOUND A COMPANY THAT STILL SENDS TELEGRAMS AND THOUGHT THIS MIGHT BE FUN STOP I AM BACK INTO TOWN FROM CLEVELAND AND WOULD LIKE TO FINALLY MEET AND I HOPE THAT IT IS POSSIBLE FOR YOU TO COME TO DINNER AT MY HOUSE SOON STOP I THINK THAT LIKE A GALLANT KNIGHT I REQUIRE A TOKEN OF YOUR FAVOR STOP PERHAPS UNDERWEAR STOP

FROM FOSTER

To Mr. Foster Gill

17 Maple Road

Blake, SC 29956

² An absentminded doodle in the corner of the postcard, under the address, looks vaguely like a fire hydrant with a leak.

Dear Foster,³

Things have changed a little in the two weeks you were gone. Mainly I switched to decaffeinated coffee and I thought seriously about growing pot again. These things may or may not be related.

In other news, ~~Roger~~ my albino black moor died. ~~They're prone to constipation and so they will sometimes sink instead of float if dead. This has nothing to do with Roger, who floated; just most people don't know much about black moors.~~ It does not trouble me; I'm sure he was depressed already, and anyway if I had gotten a cat it would have eaten all the fish by now. Pretty sure cats do that. I hate cats like I hate big dogs.

Glad to hear that your conference went well, but I'm sorry that Cleveland wasn't wonderful. People say it's not a great place, though I've never been ~~and will never see it, which is fine by me.~~ Now tell me again what your conference was on?

The telegram was fun, though I'm afraid I must decline your invitation, as ~~I do not want to see anyone~~ I will be very busy this week with all my various duties. I am flattered, however, that you asked.

Concerning the underwear. ~~Are you not a grown man? Can you not buy it for yourself? How odd.~~ I have enclosed in this package one pair of knitted men's briefs, size small, and one pair size medium. I do hope ~~you are not large~~ they will fit you.

Regards,

Ellen

P.S. ~~Why would ask for underwear and then not include your size?~~⁴

³ A letter in an envelope is taped to the outside of a small UPS box. The stationary is thin and cream-colored with ES in brown block-type across the top. Her handwriting looks modest but elegant on the page.

⁴ Inside the UPS box are two pairs of knitted men's underwear, one smallish and blue and one burgundy and slightly bigger. The fly to each pair has a loop to fasten closed around a large, tan button.

Foster Gill <mrgill@gmail.com>

To: Ellen R. Spencer <sculpteverything07@aol.com>

June 3 2011 8:09 p.m.

Subject: Underwear

Dear Ellen,

Your package arrived yesterday and ~~I do not think you understood what I meant~~ I thank you kindly for the gift. The burgundy pair fits fine, and ~~it surprised me but~~ they are incredibly comfortable. ~~I wear these and only these as I write to you now.~~

~~The conference I attended was a series of lectures and study presentations about how the modern woman in the postfeminist era feels about men and sex and the world in general. So essentially you're stuck in this swirling vortex of wanting to be an upright woman but also knowing that if you choose to sleep around you can totally do so and are almost expected to, that is if your partner treats your relationship as important and is mutually responsible, blah, blah, et cetera. Which I think would be depressing if it were me. A woman, that is. But still I don't understand why you won't have me over to your house or why you won't come to mine and why we can't come together. I am trying too hard for this...Put out! Please.~~

I was sent to the conference by my office; it focused on new trends in coffee sales.

Yours,

Foster

P. S. Do you ~~sext~~ text?

Ellen R. Spencer <sculpteverything07@aol.com>

To: Foster Gill <mrgill@gmail.com>

June 4 2011 2:48 p.m.

Subject: Re: Underwear

Dear Foster,

Yes, I text though I rarely use my phone. Also you are very welcome for the briefs. I was glad to knit something of use (~~however strange your request was. Really. Who asks for underwear as a grown man~~).

All the best,

Ellen

P.S. ~~You are a suitable combination of ears to let me talk, a mouth to respond so I know I'm being heard, yet no body to cause me any grief. I also do not have to shave my legs for you. which is good because I stopped a few years back. Thank you for being a friend you.~~

“FOSTER” 10:04 am- <Hey hellion>
10:05 am- <Speech software’s fault, I said Ellen>
“ELLEN” 10:20 am- <Today is not a good dauy.>
10:21 am- <Oops. Day.>
10:22 am- <It is raining and I want to sculpt but am sick.>
10:22 am- **deleted <Partly never leave is so I won't get sick. I hate illness like I hate cats and big dogs. Another fish sunk to the bottom today.>*
“FOSTER” 10:25 am- <Can I come visit, bring you soup or something?>
10:25 am- **deleted <Or sex or something?>*

“ELLEN” 10:29 am- <No but thank you.>

“FOSTER” 10:40 am- <Ellen I am outside with soup.>

“ELLEN” 10:42 am- **deleted <You cannot come in. From the window you look very nice. I like your hair in your eyes. But I haven't let anyone inside in years.>*

10:42 am- <I am not dressed. Leave it on the doorstep please.>

10:44 am- <Please go away Foster. I'm not well enough for guests.>

“FOSTER” 10:45 am- <Ellen I see you through your window.>

“ELLEN” 10:45 am- <I see you, too.>

“FOSTER” 10:45 am- <Your body is lovely.>

“ELLEN” 10:45 am- <Your smile is nice.>

“FOSTER” 10:46 am- <Please let me in.>

“ELLEN” 10:47 am- <I can't, Foster.>

10:50 am- <But thank you for the soup.>

“ELLEN” 12:21 am- <Foster?>

“ELLEN” 7:09 pm- <Hello?>

Trio in Color

I. Time and Oranges

It's seven, after dinner, and the child has begun to peel herself an orange. This act of peeling seems improbable for someone her size, but there is its husk discarded at her bare feet, one long ribbon of orange skin. She pries a section loose from the fibers that hold the fruit whole as her father walks into the kitchen for a glass of water, and when he sees her with the orange he strides forward and thumps it from her hands.

Child, he says, bending to tuck a rogue strand of hair behind her brown ear, where did you find an orange?

In the fruit bowl below all the tangerines, she says.

He sighs. Fruit bowls of tangerines make perfect hiding spots for oranges, and he knows to inspect the tangerines each morning, but he's gotten too relaxed in his middling age. Franny, he says, you must know that all oranges are one big cosmic farce. Nothing good will ever come from eating them. When she asks him why, he answers that oranges are not the fruit they seem to be, and that they are a prank created by the Jokesters of the Multiverse. Sometimes the instant you peel its skin, an orange explodes into a thousand snakes like the nefarious version of the peanut-tin gag. Sometimes the fruit inside is blue, and if you eat it your throat will close the next afternoon as you're drinking your last coffee. Sure, sometimes the oranges lie dormant all the way through the digestion process, but those are the most sinister of all—somewhere, in some corner of the net of your life, something will twist into an unrecognizable mess, a horror and a tragedy and a comedy, and you'll wonder why on earth this awful thing happened, and all the

while the Jokesters of the Multiverse will be sniggering because you fell for the oldest trick in the book, the oldest trick in the book being oranges.

When the child asks how he knows all this, the father answers that he was once a victim of oranges. By now they are sitting cross-legged on the blue kitchen tile and the orange on the floor rolls around in soft circles beneath one of the cabinets. Franny's hand nests in his, the two of them dark and starry like bodies in the wide vacuum of space. My Franny, he says, before I knew the truth about oranges, I ate one so vile it ripped a hole in Time.

How could you tell?

I didn't, at first, he confesses. When I hadn't sleep in five days I felt a tugging in a corner of the net of my life that hadn't ever been pulled before, and then I knew that it was the whole of the Cosmos tugging, and that I must have torn a hole in Time. It was longer before I traced it back to the oranges and the prank of their existence.

I see, Franny says.

No, you don't, he says. He watches the orange turning circles under the cabinet from the corner of his eye. It seems docile for now, unlike the child clambering into his lap. He looks down at the top of her hair, as wild and lovely as her mother's. The story starts with stamps, he says, and ends with your eyes.

I see, Franny says, but how could she?

I was in the store on the corner, buying stamps for a letter to your uncle about how the parsley and basil were suffering that season. They were too small and turned limp the moment they sprouted, and I knew your uncle would have some advice for me. I turned around and there on a stand was the handsomest and most perfect orange I'd ever seen. I wasn't sure I'd ever eaten an orange before, but that one looked so delectable I had to have it. So I bought the

orange and the stamps, and I walked home with the peel in my jacket pocket, eating the orange in sections. It was tart and sweet, and the fibers stuck in my teeth until a new bite of orange set them loose again, and the juice filled my mouth with summer and I could taste the whole of the earth like the herbs we grew in the yard. By the time I walked inside there was only one piece left, and your mother had set you down for a nap and I gave it to her, and she looked as sweet as she had ever looked as she ate it. Her eyes were the bluest I'd ever seen them. They made Time itself stop so I could spend longer staring into them.

You cried through the night all the time, so we were used to breaking up our sleep, but that night was particularly rough. You screeched like the end of the world was coming, and while she napped between her shifts checking on you, I couldn't—not that I wasn't tired, just that my body wouldn't shut off. The clock felt slower than normal. I tried a book, and some television, and then I gave up and spent the night in the kitchen teaching myself to juggle tangerines. The next day I felt like I'd had a full night's rest even though I hadn't slept, and so the day passed normally except for the intensity of blue in your mother's eyes. And that night was the same as the one before it; your mother had a little trouble falling asleep and I couldn't sleep at all. I wanted to shut myself off, but I couldn't, and so I sat in your nursery humming while you slept in the dark under your mobile of stars.

My Franny, he says, stop that playing with the orange peel.

She drops the skin and it slithers away to join its comrade under the cabinet.

As I was saying, he says, the nights were awful. By the fourth one your mother had gotten sick of it, and she tried to stay awake with me. Her hand was soft on my face while we talked about you and the great foreverness of the night sky and how we wished our basil would carry its smell into the house better, and her eyes were watery moons so infinitely deep I longed

to bathe in them. But eventually they closed and she slept against my shirt. I wanted nothing but to doze like that, warm and understood with your beautiful mother right there against me, and child, the Multiverse just wouldn't let it happen. I sat there in the dark, awake and breathing, your mother's face tucked against my arm, and I wondered how cruel the world could be, that I couldn't sleep when the night dangled in my face the best sleep I could ever dream of having. I could see it but couldn't have it, and so I sat awake all night, watching your mother and the window's milky strip of stars across the sky.

Your mother had read that after so many nights of not sleeping, a body collapses inward on itself like an inadequate soufflé, and by the fifth night we were desperate to try anything. We left you with a sitter and ordered drinks at a bar called Moonribbon. Your mother had a glass of white wine and I a martini, and we sat and listened to the jazz music curling out of the piano in the corner. The smoky room was done up in dark wood and fabric, all brasses and browns and blues, like a bruise, or a galaxy. I was looking at the ink printed on the bar napkin, a slivered moon curled around a glass like a skin, and your mother had walked over to the piano to ask it to play her favorite song, when the bartender slid me a drink I hadn't asked for and spoke under his breath: *Douglass, I hope you never sleep again.* There was no way he could have known my name or my troubles. I knew then that something had twisted in the happening of things, that the world wasn't as it had been before I stopped sleeping. But even as it alarmed me that he knew about my trouble, his mentioning of the word sleep made me enormously drowsy, and I wanted more than ever to lie down right there at the bar. But do you think I slept, my Franny?

The child thinks for a moment and shakes her head.

That's right, he says. I took the drink the man offered me, we listened to your mother's favorite song on the piano, something about peppered tangerine and basil soup falling through

existence, and we walked home together so slowly. Your mother went to sleep and I sat with her, watching through the window a sky that looked ripped open, like the stars were slowly pouring into it through a small and milky gap in the blue.

In the morning, the rip hadn't closed even though the sky had turned to day. In the sunlight, it looked like a giant gash against the skin of the sky and I knew it had something to do with why I couldn't sleep. We took the day off and just watched it, sitting on a blanket spread in the garden. The basil had never smelled so fresh and peppery—it almost didn't even look like it was wilting. As I remember, you, child, kept grabbing at the sprigs and they would fall off their stems like autumn leaves. It was one big adventure, gazing through the jungle canopy of herbs at a sky so unfamiliar it was no longer ours. Your mother pointed at a flash of orange through the tear in the sky, and we watched intently until we saw it again—it was a hand, a giant orange hand, peeling at the edges of the hole to make it bigger. That was when I felt my life net pulling in an odd direction, twisting somewhere in my gut next to my cramp for sleep.

I stood and called to the hole in the sky with my hands cupped around my mouth: You there, rip in the sky, why aren't you letting me sleep?

If rocks could laugh, they would make the sound of the thunder that coursed through us. It was a boundless, jagged laugh that dropped my heart into my twisting net and made the parsley stand on end.

In a gravelly voice it called back: *I am not a rip in the sky, I am Time itself and you would do well to address me accordingly, Douglass!*

My apologies, I called. Great Time, what is it you want?

As if a cord was wrapped around her middle, your mother jerked into the air and floated over us for a heartbeat. *Douglass!* she said. *Franny!* And then the cord wrenched her into the rip,

and she was gone. You started crying. I felt the net of my life pull clear from my body. And then, little by little, the rip in Time mended itself, stuffing stars back into the night side of its skin, stitching itself up with what sunlight was left. It looked like nothing had happened, like the sun had finished its day and was waiting for the night to arrive for its shift. But I couldn't stop staring at the smooth stretch of blue sky for that hole that took your mother.

I went inside and called everyone, and I carried you to your nursery. You didn't want to sleep and strangely, neither did I, and you stared out of your crib at me with the brightest eyes I'd ever seen, and blue.

Franny burrows further into him. She asks, Did you sleep the night Mother ripped through the hole in Time?

I did, he says. I guess the Jokesters of the Multiverse didn't find me funny anymore.

The orange rolls out from under the cabinet, trailing its skin behind it like a tail. Douglass and his child place the whole of it into the blender, where citric laughter squeals into the air. The sink glows blue as the mess drains, and then the kitchen becomes dark and quiet. When she asks how he knows the oranges are at fault, Douglass says a letter of reply appeared from her uncle a week after her mother disappeared, detailing the intricacies of harvesting summer herbs, which took a certain finesse that Douglass didn't possess. Yet if read upside-down and in a hand mirror the letter explains the origin of the Jokesters of the Multiverse and their peculiar fascination with citrus fruit, and how in 1385 an indigenous tribe of people in what would become modern-day Brazil found a new fruit and named it for its color, and how by the following year all but one of the tribespeople had perished from a mysterious illness, the one left struck by something that left him quadriplegic and mute.

So we don't eat oranges? his child whispers into the pocket of his jacket that smells faintly of fruit.

You make your own decisions, he says, crouching again and placing her chin in his hand, but know this: we will hold onto each other with the blue intensity of dying stars. And he puts his other hand on his child's shoulder and they kneel there, celestial bodies in the night sky of kitchen tile.

II. Magenta

Once, there lived a woman wrapped in a magenta skin so brilliant she glowed.

But the story doesn't start like that. It starts with another woman, a woman so singular and hungry for anything that her stomach had gnawed a hole inside itself. The woman happened to have been me at one point, but that's of no matter to the story. People called her E for a number of reasons, least of which was Evelyn, the name our mother gave her. She'd been living in a flat above a club she frequented. It was always louder than you'd expect, the flat, always some song thumping against the floor, keeping you in the loop of activity and interaction even when you found yourself again in an empty room with a sleeping bag on a mattress on the floor. E also stood for the empty rooms. She took to sitting on the curb outside, the traffic rocking forward and backward out of the club doors in lurching ribbons of people.

Cross-legged, back flat against the bricks, E closed her eyes and pretended to fall asleep. Without sight, the noise around her could have been anywhere, nowhere in particular: in nowhere and in everywhere E was sure there would be the same sounds, the same pitches, the same drunken titters and shouted threats. In such volume, there wasn't a discernable language or

smell that could possibly have tied the noise to somewhere specific. The air was thick with cigarette smoke and perfume and the pinching squeak of polyester dresses against belt buckles. She found it calming. A rush of cool air washed her as more people churned in to the nowhere, and she exhaled, breathing to the tempo of heels clipping on the pavement.

“Do you have a light?” the nowhere asked E. Its sound was low and lovely, a woman’s voice. E opened her eyes and found someone standing over her.

“I don’t smoke,” E said, and then, “I see yours were the heels keeping time with my breathing.”

The woman nodded. She pressed her own back to the wall and slid down it, and when she was seated she turned to E and studied her. It then struck E what was remarkable about the woman.

“You’re pink,” E said.

“I am,” the woman said.

And she was—the woman was a decadent magenta, her skin glowing faintly in the haze of the smoky evening.

“Like raspberries.”

E wasn’t sure if it was rude to have spoken so bluntly. But the woman didn’t seem uncomfortable—quite the opposite. She studied E for a few more seconds, lifted an eyebrow, and reached a hand into her blouse, so thin it looked as if she had tied a scarf around her neck and worn it as a shirt. She emerged with a small flask, silver and engraved with filigree, which she unscrewed and sipped.

“Gin,” she said, and handed the flask to E.

E placed its lip against her own and tilted the flask back. It tasted like an evergreen smelled, and as cool as it was, it still warmed her throat as she swallowed it. After another sip, she handed the flask back to the woman.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’m E.”

“As in ecstasy?”

“Sometimes.”

“All right.” The woman drained what was left in the flask and tucked it back into her blouse. She wiped the corner of her mouth with her thumb, her nail the same dark and glowing pink as the rest of her. What a movement, that thumb to the edge of her lips, such a smooth, confident motion. E didn’t think she could emulate it if she tried.

The woman pressed her hands on her thighs and stood again, sticking out a glowing pink hand for E. “Are you hungry?” she asked.

“I could eat.”

“We’re robbing a bakery.”

“Why?”

“You need to eat.”

“Which bakery?”

“Whichever one shows up first,” she said, pulling E from the ground. She squinted and plucked a hair from E’s jacket.

They took off through a side street, and the club noise that could have come from anywhere but belonged nowhere specific drizzled out behind them. After a few turns, E only vaguely knew where she was, with no inkling where the next bakery might be.

You might wonder how the story can exist at all when no person would follow a stranger to a bakery robbery—which sounds very like but is very unlike a bank robbery—and you would be right to wonder. Would you believe me if I told you that E had been waiting for exactly this for her whole life, that she spent her childhood drawing pictures of women leading her by the hand through poorly lit city streets, and that when she ran out of skin-colored crayons she would always choose the pink ones? That once, when she owned a fake I.D. and she had been living with a carpenter named Stephen, she left their apartment one night in her thin, pink pajamas with a bloodied nose and never went back again? That a woman in an all-night diner had given her a slice of rhubarb pie and the color of it was so pure and beautiful she cried right there at the counter? Nothing is unrelated, and in E's everywhere, everything had always hinted that she would follow a magenta woman down four more streets to wind up in front of a great window with the words "Moons and Ribbons Bakery" stenciled in white paint onto the glass.

The woman pulled a pick from the waistband of her trousers and tricked the lock open. Her fingers looked like stalks of rhubarb wrapped around the doorknob, and as she pulled it a bell tinkled lightly. It was a day sound, out of place now, here. The woman crept to the back room as E looked around: this room felt warm, like bed in the morning, and she inhaled the sugar in the air and smiled. By the door was a display stand filled with pastries. She knew if they were on display then they must have been stale, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she wanted her teeth to rip through one of them. For now, she walked past it and farther into the bakery. On the walls hung photographs of a man wearing a tall white hat and covered in flour, of a woman peeling the wrapper off a frosted cupcake, of a towering croquembouche layered artfully in chocolate; these were well-composed, tasteful, things E would put in her own home when she got one, really. There were dainty chairs stacked upside down on matching tables, and

as E walked through them a light flipped on behind the counter. The woman had found the switch in the open kitchen, and with the light she knelt down behind the cash register to pry it open. E walked around the counter to find the woman casting soft pink glow onto the register and the cakes under the glass countertop. Her skin looked as bright as raw tuna, but more alive, as if it moved freely from the rest of her body and covered her in undulating swirls of deep magenta.

The woman made a soft grunting noise as she shoved the register open, and she wasted no time counting what was inside. “Ninety-six dollars,” the woman said, and while \$48 for each of them wasn’t much, it was more than E had in her wallet before the night began. She folded the bills into her pocket and glanced at the corners of the bakery once more. There didn’t seem to be any cameras. She realized she hadn’t said anything since they’d come inside.

“Are you hungry?” E asked the woman.

“I am,” she said, “and from the sounds of your stomach, you are, too.” E’s stomach churned like thunder in response, and so E switched the milkshake machine to life and found the mixing cups while the woman found milk and strawberry ice cream from the kitchen. Working, the machine sounded like a monster, and E had trouble imagining a time when this whirl hadn’t been in her ears, when anything had sounded calm or lovely in her life before this moment. She wasn’t sure she had a memory beyond this bakery.

The woman took the cup from the machine and the noise died slowly. The metal tumbler in her long fingers took the same warm glow she emitted, and in the magenta light E could see that even her eyes looked like perfect fruits. There had never been a more profound silence than when the woman tilted back her head to taste the milkshake, her neck the most meaningful arc any story could ever have. There was no air, no noise, no breath anywhere, and nowhere and

everywhere was only the silence of E watching this woman drink this cup that was almost as pink as she was.

This is the moment E had known would come all this time, she realized. There was never any moment that had ever existed except for this one she was in right now, and the magenta woman had to have expected it, too. She was pink like the skin of a dragonfruit, pink like strawberry jam, magenta like the most delicious and sinful of things she had ever eaten, and she needed to know what the woman looked like on the inside. E took the woman by the shoulder and kissed her, and her lips tasted like strawberry milkshake and jazz music and blood, there was so much blood in her mouth, and when she took a bite the woman's mouth tore away like the flesh of a red apple. But it wasn't red, even the blood wasn't red, but rather bubbling and magenta and sweet like the swell of her breasts under her shirt. She fished out the woman's flask and tucked it in her own pocket, where she carried the money she didn't want anymore. All she wanted was magenta, the soft curve of her magenta thighs and the bite in the center of her magenta palm and each delicious magenta finger. E blushed, and maybe, just for a minute, she might have glowed.

There is a body, policemen, a distraught baker with a tarnished reputation, and a woman wandering the back streets with \$96 and a flask in her pocket, wiping her mouth with her thumb the way an old friend used to do it. In the end she was full, but all it made me was hungry.

III. Little Green Men

A marked difference in the air, more of a rustle than a buzz, stirs among our huddle of people hunched at the edge of the camp, as if tonight—after all of our waiting—it will finally, *finally* happen. Some of us wear sweatshirts tied around our waists; others have our work plaids

rolled up past the elbows; still others feel our overlarge tees (some dyed in swirled colors, some from a former organization with *I Believe!* printed in garish lime across our chests) rippling in the frail breeze. One woman wears around her shoulders a kelly-colored afghan her mother crocheted for her. Someone cracks his knuckles toward the fire we have kindled in the dirt. We sit around it, an awkward amoeba of lawn chairs, flanked on one side by a modest cluster of tents and recreational vehicles and on the other by the vast, brown expanse of the American Southwestern desert at dusk.

We are waiting for conclusive confirmation. The kind that lucky others throughout history have certainly had; how possibly could Egypt have shaped such massive stones into as smooth and precise angles? From where did our first concept of numbers come? When first did a human being look at another and think, *Surely something has made and now governs over the two of us* unless something closer by far to the heavens paid a visit and planted the idea? The governing has always sought to shelter this from the governed—we are, however little you would like to admit it, so miniscule we would not even register on the map of all the brilliant infinity that surrounds us. The idea of infinity scares you. Certainly it terrifies the rank of us whose faces, half-lit by the bonfire, gaze westward across the flat of New Mexico. In this purple fog of almost-night our eyes stretch farther than they've ever stretched, past warm dirt and through the atmosphere, past the glow of the sun darkening as it dips its toe below the edge of the planet, and into the deep black of everything which suspends the stars on invisible cords and blows the galaxies glacially toward one another. One day, we know, the Milky Way will become its neighbor, the two swinging back and forth past each other like a mother dusting flour off her hands, and with every pass life will look a little less like how they know it to look. It's impossible to see the infinity of the night sky and not to see its inevitable waltz toward submergence, that

is, the end of it. If life isn't about what happens when they cease and the galaxies mesh together, and if it isn't about enjoying life while they *do* exist—we around the fire are those with callouses on their hands, those turned from their families, those who migrated here to work, those off-grid seeking peace without yet finding it—then why would it surprise you that we grope for anything, everything? This is why we cling heartily, why we (and we cringe at the word) *hope* for its existence. Something needs to be out there, doing anything as long as it isn't anything human. That empty infinity has to mean something outside of its end.

A boy among us, twelve or so, the youngest, wishes more heartily than anyone around him that the outside, the alien, would prove itself at last. A few scientists in the colony who conjured numbers for NASA but one day found themselves without work have figured that the planets and the galaxies and all of infinity is as perfectly lined-up tonight as it will ever be: tonight they have the clearest shot at the general direction from which humans believe most alien communication comes, in this particular corner of that particular galaxy, *look, see the starry strip? That's the Milky Way in cross-section, and see that really bright star near Mercury? To the left of that, right there, yes.* The boy looks hard at that section of the milky slash across the sky and waits to see the telltale pop of color. The others expect a conversation—some light, maybe sound—but the boy hopes that somehow they'll appear here, walk toward the fire in slow motion, extend a hand and take a cup of milk with coffee and talk in beeps and sign language until at last he understands them. He is not so afraid of that word, hope. He hopes his parents find better jobs so that their bodies don't hurt as much at night and that he—also a migrant, also a worker—never forgets the smell of a fresh-plucked grape savored in early-morning fog. He hopes that the aliens, and he knows at twelve how childish this sounds, are green. At night in the corner of their RV, the boy lines up five little green men he's collected from a toy machine at the grocer's,

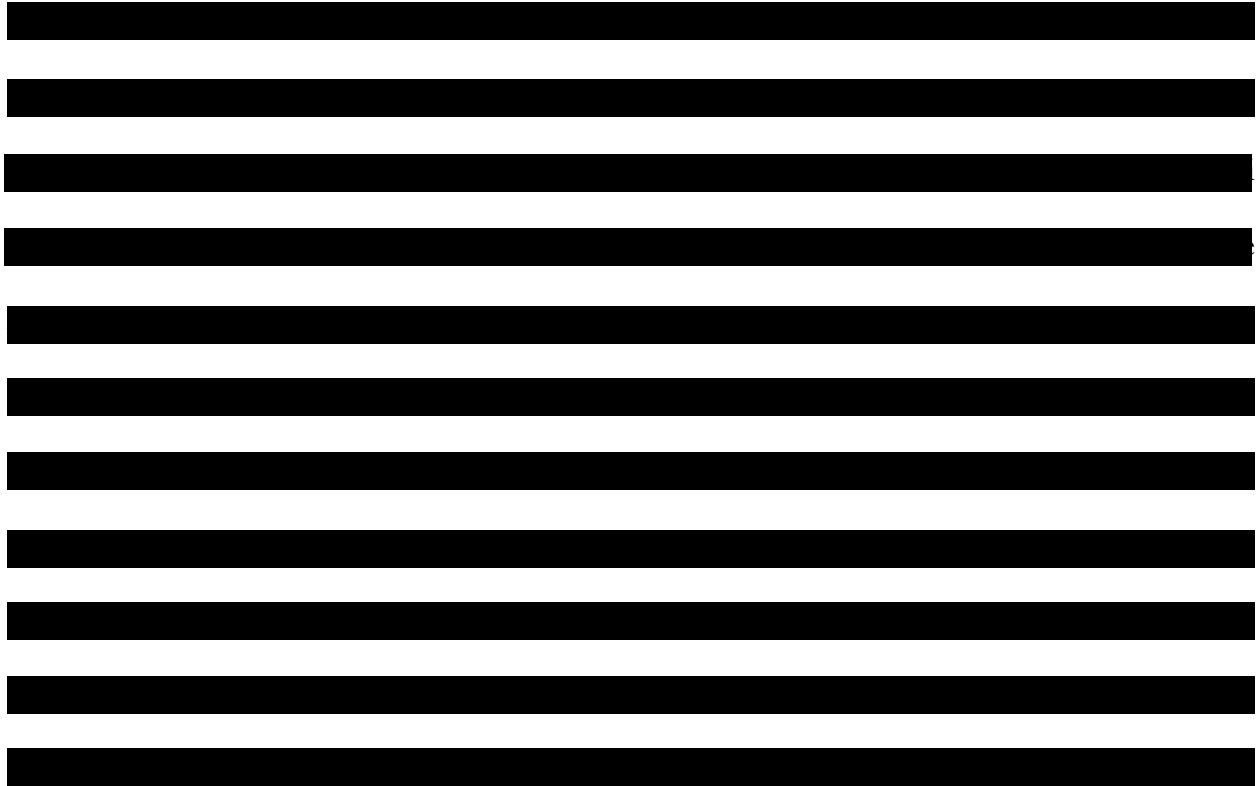
the tallest in the middle and the two twins, fat ones, at each end. He imagines them walking toward him in formation, shaking his hand, presenting him with the equivalent of an alien puppy, which looks to him like more of a gigantic green bacterium. He hopes no one hears about this childish hope of his.

At three in the morning, the boy is not the only one in the colony to stifle a yawn with a sleeve to the mouth. Mercury's position has shifted, but the band of the Milky Way has stayed much the same throughout the night; we can still see the bright corner of it winking at us, but by now most of us, without saying it, have understood that nothing is coming tonight. Even the boy is struggling to believe it. He has nodded off twice against his mother's shoulder, her loose and long hair brushing against his forehead when the breeze catches it, and now he leans his whole body against her.

But now, *feel that?* There's a breeze coming from directly in front of us, blowing hard onto their our and dancing in the fire, and something bright and white appears where the sun submerged hours ago. At first a dot, and then a splotch, and then a figure materializes and flickers. When he is still a mile away from us we see him at the same time as if he were standing between us and the fire; he is broad, with strong shoulders and smooth, bronze, sun-working arms. Over a white tee shirt he wears overalls, and one of the straps hangs down beside his hip. Except he has no body, only a face. His face has the beard not of a sage but of a logger, cut so that it fans like a mane across his jawline. By the time he gets within jumping distance to the fire we know he is not an alien. This is ■■■■. He looks neither pleased nor the opposite. *Of course it's you*, someone says, and the woman with the kelly-colored afghan asks why she never felt him when she was a little girl. He gives no answer. There are more questions, and again no answers. Instead he comes to one of us, a woman, and looks in her eyes. She has to look up for him to

do this because he feels so gargantuan. He does the same to the old man beside her. Again to the man beside him. ■■■■ walks in a circle past these people who exist only here, who belong only here, and he looks each of them in their eyes. Before he looks in the eyes of the boy he places a giant hand on the top of his head, atop his mother's. ■■■■ stands there for a full minute like this, and then he looks the boy's mother in her eyes, and she grows warm next to the boy. ■■■■ peers into the boy's eyes. His are green but beautifully, miraculously clear, and the boy knows that this is the green that has hibernated inside of his chest, and now it is stirring and he again tastes the morning grapes on his tongue and sees his mother smile at him and feels the warmth of the fire more terribly than he ever has before. ■■■■, the boy realizes as the colony throws more questions to ■■■■: *Why won't you answer us? Do they exist? Do they? Do they? Tell us they do!* Thirty minutes ago most of us had ■■■■ and ■■■■ now it was even worse. *For the love of ■■■■ tell us, please!* The boy has no more questions for ■■■■ who towers over the fire, over the RVs, over the planet and the Milky Way like a ribbon wrapped around the moon. And we don't care to ask anything more. There isn't anything to ask. The fire grows brighter and we stick our chairs in it, and we roar at it, and rain like tears starts falling but the fire gets hotter, bigger, and he backs away, afraid of us and our burning chairs that we hold above our heads and throw at him. The boy starts toward him and ceases to matter ■■■■

■■■■
■■■■
■■■■ We are ■■■■
■■■■
■■■■



Our voices ignite in the rain. Everything is red and brown and the dust comes up around us and our tee shirts chant in Spanish—*I Believe, Yo Creo, Yo Creo!*—as their wearers beat their chests and weep for our loss.

Of a Childhood Murder in Early March

There won't be any mail today because the postman is dead. There's a funeral starting soon (*three minutes*, her mother calls, hopping through the hallway pulling her stockings up, a toothbrush jammed firmly between her gums and cheek), but the child in the sitting room, the person who killed him, doesn't feel it's appropriate to attend. Instead she listens to the squelch of galoshes on wet sod and the voices, seriously quiet, of the neighbors who are already dressed and have just arrived on the other side of the front door, waiting for her parents.

They (the neighbors) are talking, of all things, about pots. Flower pots, to be exact; seems the man, whose name might be Mr. Dailey (Dalley?), thinks it would have been best to send to the church some lilies in a pleasant vase, but his wife failed to specify this at the shop, and her friend Vera just told her that the lilies had arrived in 'a terrible pot' which is simply unacceptable (they really said 'terra cotta,' but the child in the sitting room has never heard the term before and so her ears make do).

Well, there's no changing it now, Mrs. says.

Her husband snaps back that everyone will think I don't care about the man and next time *I* will buy the flowers thank-you-very-much, and where are Mark and Laura they said they'd be out at six fifteen.

The voices of the already dressed neighbors fall silent and stare expectantly at the door. It is a nice door, an expensive door engraved and varnished specifically for the house. Yet the neighbors do not look *at* it so much as they look *through* it, willing the child's parents to appear and disrupt the tension. Inside the house her mother, who is now fully stockinged and has

finished brushing her teeth, walks across the carpet on which the child sits to adjust her earrings and hair in the hall mirror. A man ambles after her, one hand at the knot of his tie, and he delivers to her the boots she'd left on the bed. She'd wear heels if the weather weren't dismal; maybe she should stow a pair in her purse? As he passes her the boots that she'd prefer be heels, his mouth is a thin, unswerving line under his heavy eyes. Perhaps this is from grief. Imagine the shock, he'd said to someone on the phone yesterday, when the last man on your mind, the one who's just always there and so you never need think about him, imagine if that man your whole town loves but never thinks about, what if that man dies, just up-and-dies...yes, fell and split his head in the washroom, I heard. Imagine how I felt.

Imagine how he'd feel, thinks the child whose name is Darla. She hadn't meant to do it, of course. The temptation to practice her cycling was simply too great, as the sun outside had called to her, dancing across the tops of great clouds in the sky.

She'd say to anyone who'd listen, I've been riding for almost two years without training wheels, you know, and now that I'm seven (and a half) I'm learning tricks. So far, I can Look Backwards Over My Shoulder While Moving Forward, and I can Raise My Hands Up For A While Until I Lose Balance And Replace Them On The Handlebars—my record for that last one is four whole seconds. The one I'm learning now is Tie The Dog's Leash To The Bike And Let Him Walk Beside It. Though sometimes I put him in my basket because he's little and gets tired...What? ...Well, it's Posy, because I thought he was a girl and when he wasn't I just kept the name.

Her parents are dressed and ready to leave, and so each squishes a kiss on the top of her hair and her father pulls on the door; the open wedge of wet air bestows to the child a view of Mr. and Mrs. Whoever, looking appropriately solemn, yet cross (at each other, or at her parents

for not dressing quickly enough). The adults exchange nods. The rain is thick; through the window the four bodies blend in a great black squiggle, barely separating again when they reach the car doors. From the front of the car two white columns burst out, illuminating only those stripes of rain which pass through either beam.

Darla watches through the foggy window as the adults drive away to the funeral of the man whom the town loves inexplicably, the man whose life ended at the hands of a child, though no one knows it. Some might say *well he was only a postman* and those people would be right in thinking so. But the town is small, and so he was the *only* postman—the only man to bring everyone’s bills, everyone’s letters from old school friends, everyone’s postcards from sisters who lived in London and cousins who visited Morocco. He made conversation out of return addresses and could learn neighbors’ histories and aspirations before they were aware he’d struck a friendship. *Morocco? Hmm. Pretty place, I’ve heard, had a buddy what went last fall, in October I think. ... What’s that, your cousin? You that close to all your cousins? ... Hmm. That’s nice, i’nmit? ... I’d love a cup. Just sugar for me if you don’t mind.*

This is the man people saw daily (barring Sundays) between noon and four o’clock, in his blue uniform that bared his twiggy knees and elbows. The man people remembered to invite to things at the last moment, the man who would materialize when others had arrived already, who dissolved into crowds, who refused to make small talk and instead asked thoughtful questions, who never made himself a nuisance.

They loved him as he blended in. And so he did last Wednesday, his dark clothes as much a part of the garden he tended as the herbs within it. Darla had resolved to ride her bicycle, tempted as she was by the great marshmallows in the sky and the dancing sun upon them, and since there were no streets too dangerous or neighbors too untrustworthy, her parents had long

ago told her she could ride anywhere in town. She had, as it were, decided to practice Trick no. 3 in her repertoire, Tie The Dog's Leash To The Bike And Let Him Walk Beside It, and so the beagle named Posy trotted alongside Darla as she pedaled. She hadn't ever been particularly breakneck on her bicycle, and with Posy she took special care to pedal slowly. They'd wandered without hiccup from Grace Street to Maple (the road on which lives the vast lady whose fingernails are too sharp and whose breath reeks of cabbage). And then from Maple to Cluster. And from Cluster to Sampson-Brewer, the lane where the postman's house is erected, two tiny floors stacked on each other like blocks, so that the house very much looks taller than it is wide. The house was old but the postman had repainted it yellow and white not two months previous, and so it looked small but lovely.

He was in his garden, bent between the parsley and dill, when he heard the tiny clicks of bicycle wheels turning (a little faster than ever, for they were on an incline; Posy ran to keep pace, his tongue between his teeth and his eyes wide in the ebullient grin a canine assumes when breeze meets snout). The postman twisted on his knees to wave to the child as she passed. His smile was warm. Her hand left its handlebar to wave back, but Posy in that moment detected a squirrel and his mildness vanished. He lunged for it, pulling his leash taut against the handle, so that it jerked enough to rake the front tire over a rock they would have otherwise avoided. The bicycle bumped sideways and dragged Darla by the leg across the pavement. The squirrel realized her mistake in location and darted up a tree.

It all happened very suddenly to Darla, and it took a moment even to realize that she had scraped most of her leg and part of her hand (or that at this point any normal child would be crying). Darla made to raise herself onto her elbows, but instead she felt a pair of arms lifting her to carry her inside. It was at this moment, in the arms of the postman as he stepped around

his herb garden, as her treasured pet barked at the end of its leash in carnivorous fury, as she looked back to see the bicycle forgotten against the curb; it was at this moment when she started to cry.

The postman, whose name Darla then realized she did not know, carried her through the doorway and around the corner, down a hallway in which hung a row of small landscape paintings, and into the bathroom, where he set her on the toilet lid. She sniffled and wiped her eyes with her fingers, and looked up at the man who busied himself in the cabinet above the bathroom sink. He set a box of bandages and a bottle of antiseptic beside the faucet, and when he had closed the cabinet he turned at last to Darla, whose injuries stung in the cold air. He took the antiseptic and knelt beside her injured knee, striped with red blotches.

You'll be alright, you know that? He said this to her carefully, as if she would break at the wrong words. Darla nodded, tears mostly dry on her face.

... Good, Good. You're a brave girl, I think, what with no sobbing. Most girls your age wouldn't have dried it up so quick, but then again it don't surprise me, since you're Mark's girl, ain'tcha? ... Yeah, that's what I thought—your parents are good people. Good people. This'll sting a little, sweetie. So you're the one who's got the uncle in Cali, right? So nice that he sends your mother letters, most people don't send letters lately, they just up-and-call someone or email or text, and you don't get none of those mementos that the special letters used to be—people'd keep 'em in boxes bought specially for this husband that's overseas or that friend studying in Paris. And anyway, it puts me near out of a job, lack of letters does. They don't think about what it does to the poor man whose job it is to take the things, let alone whether he might like to strike up conversation with the people getting letters. There we go, your leg's all clean. Here, hold out your hand for me, we'll get that one next. That's it. No, now it's mostly bills and notices

and coupons and magazines and what-have-you. Though it does give me a bit more information about the person gettin' the mail, I sp'ose. With letters you just knew what was going on with their loved ones. With the other stuff you learn more, more about the ones who get the Bill Past Due, Pay Now cards and more about the ones who have certain magazines come to their offices instead of their homes so their wives won't know. And then those wives with the catalogues they keep from their husbands. People ain't as lovable as they seem 'round here. There, your hand's done. You won't know what I mean, though, 'cause you're just a kid.

Darla peered up from her bandaged hand and furrowed her brow at the man.

I'm not a kid, she said flatly.

He poured more of the bottle onto the now-pinkish cloth, and pressed it to her knee. He'd been right earlier: it did sting, but Darla bit hard at her lip to fight the tears nudging at her eyes. He nodded to her knee.

... No, I guess you're not. Didn't cry for long earlier. And not worried about your dog—that's mature of you. I'm sure it's fine out there, right under that maple where we left it. No, you act pretty old for your age, I'd say. Maybe an old soul. It don't surprise me, not with a good daddy like the one you've got.

He removed the cloth, blew her knee dry, and the air tickled and left bumps where it brushed her skin. He smiled at her. Unwrapped a bandage, smoothed it over her knee, left his hand there for a long time. The air in the room grew a little stale.

He dropped his hand, offering it to help her stand onto the lid of the toilet, where she was almost as tall as he was. What does it mean, to be grown? The low voice offering the question hung in the air like thick steam, and in the sound lurked an edge that Darla should have noticed. But she had lost herself in the thought of what magazines the postman might have

meant, and so she was unprepared when he grabbed her face in both his hands and crushed his lips against hers. His lips were hot and dry, and they jerked back and forth over her mouth. She couldn't breathe.

She buckled her arms between their bodies and shoved, strangely forceful. The postman stumbled back a step and his hands left her face; his foot caught an edge of the wet cloth on the floor. Darla watched his face change as he slipped backward: first irate, then bewildered as the fall registered with his body, then, as his feet left the floor, fear.

The tub behind him, Darla would remember later, was a quaint thing, not terribly tall, with feet carved like scalloped shells and a porcelain lip that would have been too thin to grip comfortably. Almost sharp. It was cream-colored, and its hue blended with the bathroom walls until the postman's head fell upon it and crushed, leaking burgundy onto the rim of the tub. He bounced, just once, and landed with his shoulders against it, one arm in the tub where his head leant back as if someone had offered to wash his hair, his legs out on the floor as if sitting.

He breathed long and slow, his mouth open, his tongue flat and large against his teeth. His eyes looked upward, and when looked down from above him, they did not focus on her. All he did was breathe, the sound like wind squeezed to the back of a pipe and then out again, though once, his breath bubbled and blood dotted on his chin.

Darla's shoes were sticky. In the small, lacquered pool beside them lay two teeth. Her chest felt heavy. She took off her shoes and returned the antiseptic and bandages to the cabinet before walking out. The path from the house seemed quicker than the path into it. Her face burned in the open air, and at the sight of her the dog left its post beneath the tree.

She couldn't remember mounting her bicycle, yet somehow she was home, the dog and shoes in the basket. She threw her shoes away outside and washed her hands in the garden

before speeding inside to her bed behind a very locked bedroom door. There she sat, with her knees and elbows curled tightly, until the light outside grew dark and the image of unseeing eyes tinged in red subsided. At last she fell asleep.

She was sure the next day would arrive with detectives beating on the front door, but they never came. Nor did they the next day. When for two days the city still lacked its mail, Earnest Peale (which Darla learned was the postman's name, after all) was found in his home, dead of a head wound from a particularly unfavorable fall. Darla wonders if the person who found him noticed his eyes, the way they stared at nothing, or maybe if they'd shut.

And then the scrape of a key in the lock signals her parents' return. She hasn't stirred in the hours they've been gone and instead has watched the rain through the window, her legs (in tights to cover the scrapes) tucked firmly under her chin. It has grown dark. Her father enters, tuts, ruffles her hair. Don't be too upset, my little pumpkin, he says (she hates the name, but tonight it feels right, like a quilt in January). The postman was a good man, and yes, we'll miss him, but I promise things will be alright.

The adults shift to the kitchen, pour tea, mumble things like it's as though something was missing and I imagine he was one-of-a-kind and did you see the awful lilies the Dorseys donated to the church? They shuffle through the sitting room, kiss her on the forehead, retire to the bedroom.

It's as though something was missing. The sentence burns in Darla's ears—or, more accurately, in her pocket where sit the teeth she stole three days ago. She's not sure why she took them. Were they incriminating evidence? A memento, like the postman called the letters in the past? A memento of what? She had thought before now that keeping the teeth in her pocket would mean that she didn't have to worry about someone finding them in her room, that in this way

she could somehow keep a handle on what had happened. Yet if *something was missing*, then the something that is missing is certainly the teeth, and keeping them in her pocket has nothing to do with the control she has over the matter. She must return to the man his teeth.

Darla does not worry about disturbing her parents, as they are most likely already asleep and will surely not leave their room again until morning. For not the first time this week, her legs move seemingly of their own will; as she reaches the doorway, the dog sprawled on a pillow in the corner gets up to follow her. The ride to the cemetery doesn't take long by bicycle (this is no time for practicing tricks, so Posy sits in the basket alongside the teeth). Darla dismounts onto the wet grass and shivers in the dark night air. She should have brought a sweater.

His plot is conspicuous—there is no grass yet, and at the head of the mound stands a marker cleaner than those around it, and a wreath rests against the granite. Darla walks her bike to the headstone, and reaches for the teeth.

They are gone. Posy pants and gazes upward with his open mouth.

So the postman will not become whole again, tonight. The longer she sits on his grave beside the dog who consumed the last of him, the better she accepts this. She couldn't have unburied him to put the teeth in his mouth, anyway, more like tucked them a few inches down into the mud. She supposes that's not really a reunion after all. And it's not, now that she thinks about it, like he deserves to be whole. There is something about the way that the town loved him, the way that his death upset her parents, the way that everyone believed him to be wonderful. He deserved to be pushed. He'd been right about something. They're not as lovable as they seem 'round here.

Symphony

You are wearing mauve lipstick in the afterdinner evening. Someone in a red coat pulls open the door for you, and you smile at him, and the lover smiles at him, and you push into the lobby with the lover's hand held lightly at the small of your back. In the crowd you see long skirts swishing between ankles, dresses hemmed prettily at dainty knees. You are all meandering like tributaries toward two great sets of doors, gold-colored and inlaid with reliefs of Greek mythology, propped against the walls more causally than what seems fitting for its grandeur. You will not be the first inside, stuck behind these rivers of people with cologne like water up your nose—not to mention all the visitors beyond tonight, beyond what the folded square of paper handed to you by another red-coated man reminds you in bolded, serified letters: that this is the Amber Ellis Symphony Orchestra, and aren't you just so lucky to see it.

It is colorful, the program, and it lures you to ruffle through its pages, to find the order of the music and the biographies of tonight's musicians. One has hair that tumbles almost out of the frame of the little picture beside her name, the words beneath it spelling out her life in packages of letters—she comes from New York, played for traveling musicals through her twenties, takes her clarinet everywhere she goes. Another's name sounds foreign, but his picture looks familiar, until you realize he looks just like the lover, their straight noses and slender eyebrows and full, twisting lips. But the lover's eyes are greener, brighter than the man in the grayscale photograph. You look up and there they are, those eyes, the lips, the nose. He smiles at you and your ear twitches and you notice the draft from the two doors that lead inside.

The lover bought you these tickets, is the reason you're here in a dress and mauve lipstick, is the reason you're flipping through the program biographies and shuffling toward the

open doors into the theatre. He flourished them at you, all eyebrows and white teeth and woodsy eyes, last Saturday. *The symphony*, he said, drawing out the first syllable and landing on the *m* as if the sound tasted like something. He placed the tickets on the counter. A switch went on in your chest and light shot out of your mouth, it felt like, because culture was a thing you tasted and lived, the culinary dining and the ballets and this was exactly the kind of thing you'd been waiting for since you were a little girl reading Jane Austen, believing even then that you would always enjoy fine things. You think you love the *music*, your record player at home winding Wagner through the halls of your apartment as you cook or read or crochet or clip your toenails; you think it isn't just the idea of being cultured that appeals to you. No, it's an active enjoyment, and there in the lobby of the theatre, there in the light from your chest and in the forest of green eyes surrounding you, you give a nod to the man who reads your ticket—a man in another red coat but with thin eyebrows and full, twisting lips—and you and the lover follow the red-coated man's gesture toward your seats and into the grandest theatre you've ever stepped into.

The thing is alive itself, all filigree and gold and red pleated velvet. The air shimmers. The plush, folded seats waiting for you look like fingers steeped in prayer. The lobby's roar of voices has funneled inside to a holy hush, but the sound is somehow more concentrated in this whisper. The lover seats himself and you lower down beside him, and his arm comes around your back and rests against your ribs. You have been seeing each other for not so long that this simple resting of fingers on ribs makes you sit straighter and breath more shallowly. A program lies in the aisle beside a woman poised against a chairback, talking to an old man in a gray suit, and the lover's hand still rests against your ribs. Behind you, a program falls from the mezzanine and a man holding a small child picks it up and tears out a page and folds it into a crane for the child. Neither the man nor the boy have hands touching their ribs, though the man has the child

by the hip and the boy has the crane by the wing. There are programs in many hands as more people fill the seats and the space, but the whisper stays the same, and the first few strangled notes of an orchestra warming their instruments come resonant against you, open and ready.

You had forgotten, with the grandiose theatre and the hand on your ribs, that there were even people on stage yet. A half-moon of seated figures in black dresses and tuxedos scrape bows across violins and suck on their reeds. There is that unsettling and dissonant sound that can only be made by an orchestra before its symphony. There are green eyes you can see from even there, plenty of hands that look fit to rest on ribs, and you watch during a particularly low note the breath leave the chest of the woman with tumbling hair from the program. She closes her eyes as the last of that note leaves her chest, and her hair—two sections pinned back from her face, a cascading woods of brown down the back of her black dress—seems to shudder with the effort of it.

Because you have read of her life in the program, you are not surprised that she wears plain, flat shoes, that her wrists are slender and bare, or that her hair is down. That she holds the clarinet, trimmed gold instead of silver, like it is something that might slither from her fingers—like one would place a hand on ribs. You breathe out because she has fulfilled this little part of you, she has met your expectations, and as the last of the people file in and the lights dim and a little, squat man walks onto the stage holding a baton, the lover returns his hand to his lap and you wonder if it is, perhaps, the lure of *being* cultured that steered you here tonight for the story.

&

A woman, whose hair is not unlike how the forest would appear if it were liquid, whose hair and whose velvet dress fall like liquid as if they would reach straight to the floor and soak into the foundation beneath it, sits straight in a chair on a stage. She does not always sit this tall;

produce anything that she couldn't have made alone. Once she made a painting by herself; another time, she knows she made a child. These things are not so different from each other, or from a clarinet. The reed requires soaking, a process that takes something as ugly as saliva to make useful a small and tragic thing, a tiny piece of wood. A gross process so that a tiny detail works right on a larger body with a larger function—this is like cleaning paintbrushes in a slushy gray cup of water, like changing a diaper, like playing a single note for a measure and a half so that the orchestra can twirl above and below it, the whole thing melting so that eventually the individual processes recede for the whole. Or maybe there has never been a whole, there has only ever been the wine stain on her chin and lengths of time spent in bed without rising.

&

The clarinetist fears the sense of a prickling on her skin in the dark. Waking to a heart thrown backwards in the throat toward the pillow. Rolling over in bed in the deep and dizzy morning; sheets tangled like seaweed and carnage around her limbs; her hair wound around her neck; too much space for her legs to stretch awake; the click of the lamplight blinking hard on the absence of a second body.

&

One day twelve or so years past that, the clarinetist's son will suspect that the girl in front of him only ordered a salad because they're on their first date. He'll ask her if she wants anything else, a potato, a hamburger, and she'll smile at him and say *No, thank you, the salad is fine.* He thinks maybe she'll have cake later, that her mouth will wrap around the fork and the frosting will dot her nose and he can wipe it off and rescue her. But she won't need him to do any of that.

Enjoying the restaurant? he'll ask. He'll have chosen a café downtown where he'd seen her eating before. She'll be relieved he's picked a place she recognizes.

Mh-hm, she'll respond, but is that even a word? Does she speak if she doesn't say words?

&

The clarinetist's boyfriend had been chewing his nails, and she rolled toward him in bed and seized his wrist with her fingers. *It's an ugly habit*, she said, kissing a knuckle and releasing his hand again. He put his hand behind his pillow, his elbow angled out to the window, just the edge of it fixed in the umbra of the bedside lamp.

I don't think it's so wrong to chew nails, he said.

But it's ugly, she said.

Sometimes ugly is the right answer, he said, and leaned forward to kiss her chin, and rolled back to click the lamp off so that the bedroom was no image, just sounds.

&

People say that music swells, that the emotion builds up in a song, that it escalates in volume, in how listeners respond. This is a fallacy. Swelling insinuates containment, like a water balloon swells before it pops, like a mother swells before the baby comes. Music has no skiing and so rather than swelling it *erupts*—just like that song of warning that the orchestra plays as it thaws its instruments in various and dissonant keys. So, too, does the emotional peak of a song explode into a thousand variations along a scale, so magnificent it has been known to rent hearts open and sew them closed again.

The show has not yet erupted—not in the prelude, the thing that foreshadows the motifs to come. In the light of the stage the clarinetist feels her back start to warm under the heat of the dress and her hair, both long because she likes it that way, both long because the conductor,

whom the clarinet player happens to know as an obsessive nail-biter, rampantly dislikes long things on women, either hair or dresses, because they hide too much. She feels like her hair is on display tonight, like it looks disheveled, like she has met with the conductor in the closet of the greenroom backstage and made up quickly, very quickly, for a number of wrongs they had done each other. But of course, she reminds herself, they have stopped dating and the relationship is purely professional. Her hair is not disheveled and, even if it is, these lights on stage make everything look frizzy. Somehow in all this time they're halfway into the number, flying through the music. Some species of spiders jump, but there are none yet known that fly. The conductor's hands, each ending in a nail so worn it cheapens his authority as a conductor, jump manically around his head. There is a baton in his right hand that is less of a baton and more of a wand for magic: where it goes, so does the orchestra, and where the orchestra goes, so does the crowd. The wand pulses upward; the music builds; the crowd leans forward. It jets outward; the orchestra spikes; the crowd tilt their heads. It lowers, and they quiet, and in the crowd there is a stillness so whole that it must be holy. Only a God could make music pour from the tip of a wand and the mouths of so many instruments at once; only a God could make such a silence, and in such silence have a crowd not notice that the principal clarinet player has disheveled hair and surely must have slept with the conductor in a closet backstage. While her hand was in his hair she felt the bandage on his scalp, and for probably the first time she regretted hitting him. This is probably what has happened to the conductor, to the clarinet player, to the crowd that doesn't notice.

&

Other Things About This Crowd:

1. The children are probably bored.

2. The adults are probably bored, or else they're boring, or so vastly and explicitly interesting that looking directly at one of them garners the consequence your mother warned you about, when you were six and wanted to stare down the sun until it gave in.

3. An ex-husband and his young son sit below the mezzanine, where the boy holds a paper crane made out of a program and the ex-husband tries hard to find something kind he remembers in the frizzy hair of the ex-wife who is on the stage.

&

In school, the clarinetist learned that *Orchestra* comes from a Greek phrase that meant *a place of dancing*—the current word has lost that meaning and instead of dancing, listeners expect to pay money to hear music cultivated exactly for emotional response while they sit stoically in their plush seats. Years later, her son in school will learn the same thing and wonder similarly about it.

&

Years later her son will drive his date home, of course he will, who wouldn't? They'll sit in the car, both very aware of the extremities of their bodies and exactly how far away they are from any of them. The finale from *Fiddler On The Roof* will play quietly from his CD changer. It will be years before he realizes that he has never really been Jewish, but even there, in the car, he will be electrically aware of how a musical does not and cannot match the tone set at the end of a first real date between two highschoolers. He will try very, very hard not to stare at her breasts.

My parents won't be home for another hour or so, she'll say.

Okay, he'll say, and let her lead him by the hand inside.

&

In her early twenties, the clarinetist married a man, had a child, and played in the orchestra of a traveling *Fiddler* show. The husband hated her distance. She grew resentful and violent. She played, when she was home, the most screechingly high noises she could make on her clarinet to burrow spines into his ears. Once she boxed him with the corner of the case and it bruised his jaw.

So he sued for custody. So she moved away, found herself often walking aimlessly on the streets between her apartment and the theatre, in the arts district, so she saw some pretty low people in low places—these were artists we’re talking about. So one night there was a man shivering in the doorway of a closed bookstore, one of the men to whom she sometimes gave her change, and she walked to him to offer him a cup of coffee in the all-night café down the street. Except he wasn’t shivering.

The backs of hundreds of exoskeletons shimmered in his hair and his shoulders and his blue jeans. She’s still not sure what they were, but in the dark they were close enough to spiders. In the days following, all she could see was her child, the boy she didn’t have, and maybe it was the boy or maybe it was her scurrying, glistening, maybe she was scared for them both.

&

I think you said I was ugly, the clarinetist said to her conductor boyfriend in the bed they shared.

I could have meant I was, he said.

Did you?

I’m not sure.

I’m satisfied with that answer, she said. Actually, what she said involved some crying and a clarinet. Her case was a weapon again, and there was the familiar red growing like ink, growing like spilled wine in the carpet, on the side of his head. He clambered up from the floor and

stood glaring at her, panting, clutching his hair like he wanted to rip it out or keep it sewn on, it wasn't clear which.

It matches my birthmark, she said, pointing to the space below her lip.

&

You are still in the prelude, if you'll believe it. The clarinetist has a solo; four notes played low to high, one-two-three-four in a break in the rest of the instruments. It is a beautiful silence, beautiful in its frailty, the kind of beautiful you can only hope might be dashed quickly with more sound by other instruments. But what comes next is not an instrument, it is a wail by a boy behind you who has dropped his paper crane between some seats and can't reach it. He is crying, and everyone tries to ignore him but he keeps getting louder, until the orchestra can't drown him out anymore, and the woman with the tumbling hair is crying into her clarinet instead of breathing into it, and it makes the most compelling sound you have ever heard. The conductor is crying too, and the other instruments die down until it is just the clarinet, and the conductor starts to *dance*.

The two of them have the air of those who have watched the other brush their hair or chew their nails in private—but on stage, this one song and this one dance, it is not passion like that: the thing is silent, holy, like a spider web. Sometime when you weren't paying attention the boy stopped wailing. His father has taken him outside where they may or may not speak with the clarinetist like they had hoped to do tonight. They will have realized that she is no further changed than her ability to play that long, sad note, and maybe that is enough for the father. The boy will grow and date and perhaps he will fall—although the more appropriate word here must inevitably be to *scurry*—into love with a girl with long hair who eats a salad on her first date with

him and leads him inside her parents home to play for him a music so ethereal a story couldn't hold it. The clarinetist still has the rest of a symphony to play.

Tigers of the Altai Mountains

The morning sun was high and harsh on her mountain when the woman entered the shed for reasons that would have crushed her husband. What she expected to find was the same pile of haphazardly stacked feedbags, the bray of the red deer they herded floating through the slats in the walls from a kilometer or so farther down the mountain, the utility cabinet open and staring at her expectantly. What she did not expect to find was Manju, their soot-colored mountain goat, on her side in the middle of the dirt floor. Froth still spilled from her mouth, though she'd clearly been dead for at least a couple of hours. The woman wouldn't remember how she fell down onto her shins, how she cracked one knee open on a rock on her way down, though later she would wonder why it was bleeding as, half an hour later, she rose to deliver to her husband the story.

"Manju has died," she said, interrupting the sizzle that rose off the rice and peppers and the drone of the radio on the table. Her husband stopped pushing the food around with the large chopsticks he'd been using and stared past her, out the open door of their kitchen. She could smell something starting to burn.

"You're burning it," she said to him.

"It was the first year we'd been married when we bought her," he said, and idly twisted the knob down on the stove. He walked past her and out the door without turning his face. Lan stepped to the stove to move the sizzling rice off the burner and turned to follow him outside. If she was gone there would be nobody left to look after her absent-minded husband, who always did things like leave the rice to burn. But he wasn't all bad, her Qui; he was a strong man,

too, a solid man who could wrangle their red deer by the horns into the pens when she couldn't even catch them. In front of her as he managed the uneven path up to the shack, his shoulders moved like a panther's, the wide muscles tensing across the fabric of his shirt. He'd grown stronger with age. His hair was longer. He hoisted himself up the last step and vanished around the corner of the shed.

She was not long after, and from where she stood her husband's figure and the top of the doorway framed the woolen lump of Manju on the floor. On second inspection there was a puddle of pale blue almost entirely soaked into the dirt between the cabinet and Manju's body, but Lan didn't need to see the blue to know that it was her fault the goat was dead. All she'd needed was the open cabinet, and if that wasn't enough, the chemical smell of the coolant she'd been planning to swallow would have given it away. The night before, she'd slipped into the shed on her way back to the house, unlocked the cabinet, unscrewed the cap to the coolant, and inhaled. She liked the high that swam in her head, the danger of the chemicals in her body. She hadn't really considered suicide, not even years ago when her depression had been at its worst, but just this proximity to what could kill her made her feel different, powerful. She must not have closed the cabinet, and Manju must have chewed through what she'd found while Lan and Qui were still sleeping.

"An accident," her husband announced, who had by then knelt beside Manju, his knee in the dirt and his hands buried to the wrists in her wool. "Just an accident, couldn't have stopped it." He blew out a breath and lowered his head, touching his forehead to Manju's neck. When he looked up at Lan, she noticed Qui's face had folded itself in deep crevices along the tops of his cheeks and over his eyebrows. "Do you remember when she was ill as a kid, and she slept in our bed for a week, and she'd just started growing her horns and so they tore the sheet?"

Lan did. They'd fed her oranges from down the mountain, and rice in milk, and she'd healed so well that they woke the last morning to find her perched on the table beside their bed, a lamp and a few books fallen and scattered onto the floor. Her stomach grew heavy.

“What will we do for milk?” she asked.

*

A day earlier, Nikita Orlov was lying with his back against the leftmost couch cushion in his family room, a pillow jammed under his spine, trying to listen to what Anna was saying to him from the kitchen. She was putting away some dishes, and between the clangs of the ceramics and the metal pots her words were just barely scraping through to him. Something about the secrecy of things, about she-can't-stand *clang clink*. The noises stopped as a drawer rasped closed, and she appeared in the doorway, one hand against the wall, the other dangling a red mug off her index finger. She never looked less than her best, Anna, and today was no exception. Her blue skirt hugged her knees, her blouse covered in white flowers that scrambled upward so they could be closer to her face. She had more than a half hour's walk to get to the school, so she'd chosen flat shoes that could manage the uneven streets without twisting. It infuriated her that she couldn't make it outside in heels without falling, but Nikita always thought it was endearing, like the way her hair never stayed put or the puffs of red that bloomed high on her cheeks when she was frustrated.

“It's the American, isn't it?” she asked, the mug on her finger swinging precariously.

He wanted to say that she had it wrong, to breeze over to her and hold her around the shoulders and put his hand on her stomach that hadn't swelled yet, though it would start soon enough. But even opening his mouth to speak was too much movement, and a pain jumped

through his lower back so quickly that it dazed him all over again. *Uuurrrrg* was all he could manage.

“I saw you with her Wednesday when I was on lunch,” she said, carrying on like his groan had been the rolling noise of being found out. “She laughed and put her hand on your arm before I had to stop looking.”

She's a diplomat, Nikita tried to say, but another groan unfolded from his lips, instead. *There were six of us at the table. It was our job to entertain her for lunch.* But the pain in his back, like stripes of lightning, axed at his nerves and refused to stop throbbing. And besides, where he'd been last night wasn't with another woman, not ever, especially not now, with the baby they'd waited years for finally coming. He loved his Anna but he couldn't tell her everything, and yesterday was too big to blow. Nikita learned a long time ago not to ask questions, and Anna couldn't ask them, either. Flashes of lightning weighed across his vision like a heavy animal. Things were furry and wet and dark and it was hard to muddle through it back to the woman in front of him. “No,” he finally said, and the muscles that moved the air in his chest ached so his vision blurred at the edges. In the pocket of his jacket lying over the back of the couch were two syringes full of large-animal sedative, mementos from the night, and in his agony he entertained cruising the tip of one into his forearm to ease away for a while. Anna was talking over his pain, starting to cry *you're not listening* and *look at me* and *are you having an affair*, and beyond the window of their floor-level apartment he could see flowers and grasses outside bucking against the wind. It looked like rippling fur and he noticed the flowers were orange and white and his muscles gripped tighter and Anna's mug swayed like a metronome *tick, tick, tick, tick*. His eyes swung again to the pocket of his jacket along the spine of the couch above him. He saw the bulge there, waiting, still and crouching like before a strike.

*

They were standing in the kitchen, not touching the bowls in front of them on the counter. The rice had burned after all, and wide brown crisps of it jutted upwards like earthquaked sheetrock from what had stayed white. Strips of peppers had withered and glued themselves to the pan in the basin. Lan picked at it with her fingers, and Qui didn't even pretend to touch it. Neither of them was remotely hungry.

They hadn't yet thought to turn off the radio that had been on earlier that morning, and the regional news sliced between them—*clear skies for the next week or so, so anything left of the mountain snow should melt away*—so that for a while they didn't have to draw up anything to say. Qui didn't seem angry, just sad, though at every twitch of his neck or his arm Lan drew a breath in, sure that his next move would be the one where he turned toward her and put everything together. *Shan Ouyang, a terraced millet farmer in the foothills of our grand Altai Mountains, has left for Beijing to be recognized for the largest crop of millet grown by a single farmer this year.* Qui picked his bowl up from the counter and carried it to their small refrigerator, then rethought his decision and placed it near the door. He'd carry it out to the deer when he checked on them later. Lan remained standing at the counter, staring into the rice. In her vision the peppers mapped out the words *fault* and *fail*, and when she shook her head to clear the sight they swam into *goat child*. She took her bowl to the door to stow it away beside Qui's. *No fewer than eleven goats have been mauled and eaten by a tiger farther up the mountain than tigers normally trek in the spring.* Qui ticked his head toward Lan, his chest curving inward with his exhale as if the mention of a goat so soon after Manju's death had hit him there. *Officials are searching for the tiger and looking into new reports of missing goats for compensation. If you spot this animal or have other information, contact Animal Regulation.* He put

his hands flat on his head, his elbows the two ends of a diamond. Lan stepped backward from the rice bowls.

Should she comfort him in his mourning for their sweet Manju? She made toward him and extended a hand toward his side.

“Turn the radio off,” he said.

She didn’t move straightaway. They stood there, his hands on his head and her hand on his side with her arm outstretched, for what felt like an hour. The radio had finished its news and a song tinkled through the heavy kitchen—*Oh, my love, why did you have to trick me? Oh, my love, my love was here for free-e-e*. Lan rushed to turn it off. She thought about what the radio said, about compensation for missing goats. Perhaps. . . but the thought made her sick.

Qui beat her to the sentiment. He lowered his arms. “We need to do that.”

“Do what?” the woman asked her husband.

And so they found themselves back with Manju, imagining how to make her look tiger-eaten. Qui had proposed using tools, but he’d raised the pick above his head and held it there so long that he’d lost his nerve.

“Got to do it,” he muttered. The whole thing had been his idea. Solace, he’d called it, closure. He’d already called Animal Regulation, which was sending someone out to them this evening. Neither he nor Lan had expected that they’d come so soon, so together they carried Manju down a couple of kilometers to the sparse grove of trees in a large cleft in the mountainside. They’d nicknamed it the Forest years ago, their forest where they would retreat and lie between the trees and move over each other’s bodies until a briar stuck into someone’s skin and they would have to stop. Their forest where now they had to pull their goat child apart, lest an official arrive in a few hours to find an in-tact goat and a blushing pair of liars.

Qui pushed his hand down the cleft between Manju's eyes and trailed his thumb to the end of her nose. Lan combed her fingers through the soft belly fur. She used to feed Manju scraps from the table, would slink outside when Qui was with the deer and present her with a bowl of lichi or peppers, rubbing through the fur on her belly as she gingerly took each piece into her teeth and chewed until the dish was empty.

The husband dealt the first blow, a strike with the pick into the long rectangle of neck, a dragging motion outward. Another one right below it. Claw marks. A hatchet behind the skull carved out the U of the fatal bite, and blood spilled out onto the brush and onto his knees. For the struggle, he wrapped his hands around her short horns and pulled her about a body's length further into the trees, and that was when Lan excused herself to vomit.

When she returned, half of the goat's pelt had been peeled back and he was working to pull some of the entrails forward onto the ground.

He raised his head to her, wiped the back of his forearm against his forehead. His hand was purple. "You, too," he said to her, and so she knelt beside him, unsure of what to do. He handed her the hatchet and the bucket that she'd carried on the crook of her arm and she began to tear pieces of muscle from the ribs to fill the bucket, or the tiger's stomach. The muscle was cold and slipped around in her fingers, and she almost wretched again. The smell was the fruity, meaty stench of garbage, and under it she still detected the chemical odor from the shed. But it was mild, and the official wouldn't smell it. Her hands found a rhythm, and soon the bucket was heavy and there was a sizable crater from her work.

Qui stood back and so did Lan, and the pink mass in front of them became easier to bear. The goat was gone, replaced by streaks of red and gray and pink so mangled that it was unrecognizable from what they'd brought into the Forest. There was nothing left to do but

gather the supplies they'd brought and hike back up the mountain to the home they'd inherited, the small and sturdy house perched just above the base of their Golden Mountains. They would bury the bucket and wash their tools and change their clothes and Qui would check on the deer, and then the official would arrive and they would get closure, Qui insisted. For a while they were quiet, the slapping of their shoes on the dirt and rock the only sound that marked the time.

“When I bought her, she was so small she rode in a basket all the way back,” he said.

“I was there, Qui.”

“You were,” he said, and looped his arm around hers.

*

The day when Anna saw Nikita with the American woman at lunch—that was when it started. The woman, Susan, had flown in for a meeting with Nikita's boss, which had ended as promptly as it started, and around twelve she exited the conference room with the boss in tow, his chin back for authority's sake, as always. His gut extended in a balloon over his belt, his suit jacket straining at his armpits and exposing more of his silk shirt than a suit jacket ought to have shown.

“Let's take her to lunch,” he bellowed, and by *let's* he meant Nikita and the other four men who worked in the cluster of cells at the center of the office. Nikita thought about what he'd packed from home, rye bread and the onion jam that Anna made. He'd been looking forward to it, so he opened his mouth to protest when the boss shot at him wide, manic eyes that quieted him. The other men seemed eager to agree, and based on the shape of the American woman and the length of her skirt he figured he knew their motivation. One of them, Peter, had already walked up to her to start talking, but the American woman kept her hands

crossed over her chest as she talked and so Peter could not see what Nikita suspected was his purpose for conversing.

She was pretty, he'd give them that, but dull, and she thought too much of herself. Lunch passed too slowly for Nikita and as it ticked away the others started to feel it, too. Susan (she'd introduced herself immediately as they ventured down the stairs and Nikita had hung up his phone for the taxi) seemed interested in the lives of each of them only insofar as it reflected something she could explain about herself—*were you born here? Mm-hm. Oh, I was raised in Memphis but moved to D.C. at twenty; quite the change, quite the change*—and by the time she rolled around to asking Nikita anything, he was so far gone in his thoughts about onion jam that she could hardly pull him out of it. *I can't believe you're not getting anything, she said. You must have a lady at home—worried about that figure?* And she laughed out of her throat when it got a rise from the others. She laid her hand lightly on his elbow and started into her own romantic explanations: *I have a boyfriend back in D.C., named Marco, works at a nonprofit for young boys on the street.* And this must have been when Anna, on her own lunch break and just across the street, saw the two of them talking and saw the other men—Peter, Erik, Mikhail, Roman—stare with what could have easily been either lust or total disdain at the woman in the short blue suit. Anna had lost her appetite and returned early from her break to the grateful look of the woman who'd been managing the children single-handedly.

Nikita, however, had rarely been hungrier and so as soon as they returned he made directly for his desk drawer, in which sat the lunch he'd intended to eat. He was bent over his computer, a piece of rye dry in his mouth when his boss walked in stomach-first.

“I need you do something for me,” he said in a tone Nikita rarely heard, a deadly whisper very unlike the boisterous call he usually bounced off the walls of their office.

Hrrrg-unb, Nikita said, then swallowed the bread. “What is it?”

“No questions. This is bigger than you.” Threatening eyes. “Your house. Wife. Baby.”

Nikita understood and stayed quiet.

His boss sighed. The mission hadn’t started at him, then. “We’re transporting something, and I need carriers,” he said.

Nikita shook his head. “I can’t do that. We’re a government agency; I can’t risk drugs—”

“Who said anything about drugs?” The boss scratched at his head, his fingernails digging at his peppered hair. “No, this is bigger. We’re talking *tigers*.”

*

With a tiger loose and active in the area, Qui and Lan had asked the official upon his arrival if he would stay safe and reside with them over the night and leave the following morning, to which the man gratefully agreed. The official turned out to be Ki Yang, a young man whose torso was almost precisely the circumference of Qui’s thigh. But what he lacked in width he made up for in height, and he towered so magnificently over the two of them that he found he had to duck to enter their kitchen. Lan offered him tea and he dipped his head to her in thanks. He held the cup in his hands and spoke with them briefly about the compensation they would receive if confirmed that it was a tiger that killed Manju: the money it would cost to buy another goat plus a modest sum for some of the travel it would take to procure a new one. Qui nodded sagely and Lan sat still, and the man followed them down to where they said they’d found Manju.

“We’d been looking for her all day,” Qui said, and Lan wondered at how easily the words came from him. “We finally found her here.” He motioned toward the trees at the bottom of the hill they were descending. The sky was darkening, and sunlight only touched the top half of

the trees, coating the leaves in gold compared to the blue that shaded their unlit trunks. This time of year, the sun dipped in the last hours of the afternoon over the other face of the mountain, leaving China so that Russia could have another hour or so of evening.

Ki Yang made a noise of disgust when he finally saw inside the clearing, and it took him no more than three minutes to turn back to the couple who had waited on the rock just above the forest. They sat hip to hip, their legs hanging off of the drop, watching the man make his notes.

He nodded at them. “Yours was the luckiest of the goats I’ve seen. One was—well, I don’t want to disturb you—oh, halved. There was only half of it. The others are all piecemeal. This one is more whole than those, though nothing that could have torn it so should be up here this time of year, so it’s certainly the same beast. Looks like yours went quickly, though I wouldn’t wish what happened after it died on even the worst of my enemies. You say it was close to your family?”

“Close to us, yes.” This time it was Lan speaking, and she was surprised at her voice. She felt like there was a cavity in her own stomach like the one she’d carved in Manju, a grief and a guilt and another guilt and another. Qui was beside her wondering how a man like Ki Yang could possibly have enemies.

“It is just the two of you, yes?” Ki Yang asked.

“Just the two of us,” Qui answered, and the cavity inside Lan felt like a chemical burn.

*

The flight had been the easy part. Nikita and Peter sat in the back of a small cargo plane, each strapped into one of the four seats bolted to the interior, staring into the two cages at the back of the plane, each with a live but sleeping tiger. They’d been under for the whole flight,

which took hours, but despite its length or the fact that it had been the middle of the night neither Nikita nor Peter felt the least bit tired. Nikita at one point unbuckled himself to stretch his legs and to fold himself into the bathroom that occupied the front corner of the cargo area. Peter left himself mostly unfastened, laying across the three unoccupied chairs ticking his fingernails against his teeth and glancing at the tigers. They traded jokes, whispers at first and then as the novelty and some of the fear wore off, in their normal voices. The tigers never stirred.

One of them was exactly as Nikita had always envisioned a tiger—though his belly and the bottom part of his neck was white, the animal was mostly a burning coal orange, blazoned with jagged stripes that wrapped around him in just shy of a discernible pattern. The size surprised him a little, perhaps, the magnitude and fear that came with being in proximity to a known killer four or five times your mass. Again he wished he had the power to ask why they were taking these tigers someplace new. All his boss had said was that someone very important wanted it done—a big man and his big animals. And they were huge. Other than its size, that first tiger was exactly what he would have expected.

But the other was like nothing he'd ever imagined, like nothing he'd known existed. There was no base orange, only white, and such a pure white it was imperceptibly different from the color of the winter sky. Yes, he'd seen pictures of white tigers before, but those had black stripes. This one had stripes the color orange of the other one's base coat, a deep, glowing, burnt orange that was somehow brighter than the white parts of its fur. The orange was two-toned, a lighter orange the closer the stripes got to their ends, the thinner stripes almost unanimously light. But the thicker ones, the ones that raised close to the ridge on his back, those had the deep orange of the other cat, the bright and dark orange, the alive orange. It almost

didn't seem possible that a creature with this coloring could be lethal. It was too beautiful. Like Anna, her outside so perfect and distracting from what was going on inside her—not vicious as much as terrifying, captivating, that it could make a copy of itself. That it could make something small and so important, so fragile, so scary. Nikita had a hard time imagining how a baby and a tiger could exist in the same world as one another.

The copilot emerged from the cockpit and cleared his throat at Nikita and Peter. “There is no safe place to land where we’ve been told to drop the packages off, so we have a flat, long spot alongside one of the ridges where we should manage. We’ll help you carry them from there.” He was a compact man in a leather jacket and his lips barely moved when he talked. This, opposed to Anna, who smiled with her teeth whenever she could. He’d had to sneak away from Anna earlier that day, missing dinner without telling her why, and though he was sure he’d missed calls from her, this far up there was no way to check his phone. Early the next morning he’d see four calls and fifteen text messages ranging from terrified to livid, though he couldn’t blame her because he imagined he’d have a similar reaction if his wife were away on mysterious business under threat of losing home if she shared it with him. The thought of it twisted his stomach, and it occupied him until he felt the rattle of landing gear thudding out underneath him.

The landing was short and painful, but even Peter had strapped in, so nothing stirred. The pilot opened the back hatch of the plane, and the copilot, Peter, and Nikita pushed the crates down the ramp and into the ground. Both tigers were solidly out, neither one rousing as their cages bumped and moved. Every man had two syringes each filled with enough sedative to knock a tiger out for another half-day or so, just in case.

The copilot eased the first cage door open, then the second, and he crawled into the first tiger's cage to push it out. With each man helping each, they managed to swing a tiger over the shoulders of two men, so that the pilots had the black and orange one over their backs held by the front and back legs. Nikita and Peter had the white and orange one similarly, the fur of its belly drooping in the space between their heads and its massive legs curved over their shoulders and down their chests. The weight was unbelievable. They had about half a kilometer to walk down the mountain, to deposit them in a particular patch of brush that would allow them to wake peacefully and partially shielded from the sun. Because it was not the inclination of these particular tigers to be at such high elevation, the thinking was that the tigers would wander down the South side of the mountain as quickly as they could.

Ask him why, and Nikita wouldn't have been able to answer so easily. All he knew was that his boss seemed desperate for him to do it, and Nikita knew better than to press him when he was so clearly pressed already. But at the moment, the pilots had taken off with their tiger and Peter and Nikita didn't have time to think if they wanted to catch up. The weight threatened to crush them, but they took one step, and then another, and found it was manageable. Nikita took to counting his steps. At twelve they stepped down their first drop, at twenty three Peter had to stop to re-adjust the tiger's hip bone against his shoulder for comfort. At thirty he saw a small house and a shed, and with the adrenaline in his head he wondered if the people who lived there had ever carried a tiger on their backs. Probably not, he decided. At fifty six steps Nikita stepped sideways to avoid a rock and found himself flat on the ground, the full weight of an unconscious tiger pressing into his lower back. He'd remember a cracking sound. He'd remember the midnight-dark that swam over his vision against the full brightness of the pain

inside of him, and just as quickly as he'd fallen he was unconscious and being carried himself across the shoulders of two men, back into the plane to come home.

*

Dinner had been more rice and some chicken, and Lan had cooked it so that it would not burn. Ki Yang was thankful, complimenting the cooking after every other bite so that even Lan had told him to shut himself before the meal was through. Qui fished a few pillows from a back closet and Lan took a quilt out from the trunk at the foot of their bed, and Ki Yang made a nest for himself on the pallet they assembled for him in the sitting room.

In their own bed, Qui turned on his side toward Lan for the first time in years. The day still weighed on her so heavily that she turned away from him and didn't notice his advance until he wrapped his arm around her side and cupped his hand on her stomach like he used to do when they were younger. He hadn't done it since the four glorious months she'd been pregnant, and his hand tonight felt like all the support she could ever need and all the crushing weight she'd ever felt because of their marriage, because of her infertility, because of her age, because she'd killed Manju, because she'd mutilated Manju. It was a hand like a tool, like a digger that might carve her muscle off of her ribs. She stared at their plain blue wall and their white curtains that covered the window, and his breathing began to slow and hers went with it. They fell asleep like that, his front to her back, his hand on her stomach, him dreaming of goats and deer and travel and the sweet cool smell of fresh milk. She dreamed of children, of children inside goats, of clawing goats so that more goats would spill out like froth from a mouth.

*

On the flight back, Nikita had regained consciousness and lay across the seats as Peter had, except instead of absentmindedly scraping his nail across his teeth he was concentrating as hard as he could to continue breathing. His jaw wound so tight that the only air was filtering through his teeth, and even then it felt like too much oxygen, like the air was making him lightheaded.

He had not an inkling about how they got him into his house and against the couch, where he had remained and where Anna had found him as she left their bedroom later that morning. She'd taken a break from yelling at him and was using the toilet when he made up his mind, gritted his teeth against the weight and lightning in his back, and moved his shoulder just enough to sling his hand into his jacket pocket. He pried the cap off the syringe with his thumb, tipped the needle in—*ungggg*, he groaned as the wide thing poked hotly through the side of his arm—and depressed it the tiniest fraction of movement he could muster. It was animal sedative, after all, enough to knock a tiger out for hours, and there was no telling what the dosage was for humans. He used his fingers and wrist to tuck the syringe between the cushion and the back of the couch, still in reach but out of sight, and by the time Anna walked back into the room the ceiling was swaying above him. There was less pain, yes, but also less vision, and Nikita wasn't positive that if he stood he wouldn't fall right over again.

"I just need you to be here for me," Anna said, kneeling beside the couch, rubbing her hand on her knee because she wanted to rub his shoulder, but it was too close to what Susan the American had done in her memory. Anna was growing a baby, Anna needed to know that everything would be solid and good and stable and comfortable, Nikita understood that much.

"Anna," he said, and then lost his words. How could things be stable if his boss made threats against her baby's safety, if Nikita couldn't tell her what he was doing? How could they

know each other? How had they ever known each other? Nothing had ever been so woozy for Nikita, and as Anna's face swirled in front of him he had no idea what might next exit his mouth to comfort her.

Her lips moved and he caught some of what she said: *here . . . me, tell me, tell me even if it . . . the American . . .*

"The American," he repeated, and smiled. He was sure the American had done it all, had known he would be injured, had laughed out of her throat on her cargo plane back to D.C. and her boyfriend Marco with the nonprofit for young tigers on the street. "Yes, it was the American."

*

Dreams are fragile constructions prone to changing, and before the night had ended, Lan's dream had become so real that for the next few years she could do nothing to convince herself that she had not in fact seen it while awake. She was sitting on an outcrop farther up the mountain than the house, farther than the shed, with her knees tucked into her chest and Manju standing guard over her shoulder. Lan reached to scratch Manju on the chin, and she purred a primordial lullaby in approval. The sun was rising over the Altai Mountains, her Golden Mountains, and as it peeked the top of its head into view, the first brilliant gold fingers flecked their way across the rock, shining like jewelry. She was wearing the mountain. She wished that Qui could be here to see it, but that would come, he would be here, he was remembering her even when she thought he'd forgotten.

In the distance, in a low point below the ridge but above her own perch, she saw two towering shadows, giant stones set on thick legs, and as more light filtered through it blossomed open to her in brilliant whites and oranges—it was tigers, two tigers, carried by men who clearly

cared enough about these animals to carry them despite their danger, and looking at the golden sun off the tiger fur Lan was sure that she had never seen anything so brilliant. Manju hummed her interest. The woman and her goat child, they weren't so separate as the world liked to think they were, and these tigers and their men proved it. Look at them, how the one keeps going as if none of them will ever get tired, and how the other one lies down to further cross the border between them, and how the tiger lies down with him, oh how she understood it all now, oh Qui, oh Manju, oh child, oh Lan!

Painting with God

Arrah had become a gallery dozens of times on her way to or home from her dojo. Sometimes she walked into the little art store tucked in the brick between a tattoo parlor and a Quizno's, and the paintings stacked around her seemed to attach to her skin and shine outwards toward the walls. Sometimes one of the paintings would lock onto her face and it would be like her eyes were the eyes of the portrait, or the two birds in the landscape. Other times she didn't walk inside and instead stood under the little blue gallery sign above the window, her set of keys jangling loosely in her hand. Even then, some paintings would shimmer against the glass beyond her nose, would settle on her cheeks and her chin and she would, as always, feel like she was a part of the building—like she was the building—or, more accurately, like she was the jumbled array of rectangular paintings and the odd statue on a stand piled one on top of the other, which for her constituted the building.

One of these times, as her flats tapped into the concrete walkway and her mind was turning over the day she'd had, she almost walked straight past it. She'd been thinking about the way that her juniors class, full of rambunctious kindergarteners under scrutiny from their anxious parents, had dissolved like sugar in hot tea when Kingsley chose to take a break from practicing stances to see if his neighbor James would fall over if kicked in the crotch. He did. And the whole left corner of the room bubbled into laughter, which caused the others to turn around so that they could join the joke, and by then James' father had already rushed over to scoop James up by his armpits and carry him off the mat. Kingsley's mother, however, hadn't done one damn thing, and looked almost proud of the industrious way her child had found an advantage over the situation. It was always the mothers who were worst, who pushed their

children into karate for self defense instead of for confidence or meditation, who refused to see where their children needed discipline, who balked at the idea that a white woman in her fifties could possibly know enough karate to teach their children. This is where Arrah's mind stuck while she walked home past the gallery window, and why she almost missed the strangest thing she would ever again see in her lifetime.

Her mind on Kingsley's parents, Arrah didn't notice that her flat shoe was on a collision course with a divot in the sidewalk—she came tumbling forward, spilling onto her knees and palms. No one was around, and so she pressed up and dusted off, wiping pebbles from the raspberry blooming on her palm. She looked briefly through the window of the store in front of her. It was the art gallery. Stacked against a group of landscapes in the corner where paintings waiting to fill the walls was a small, blue scene. The painting was maybe fourteen inches by twelve, not big enough that her eyes should have been able to make it out in such detail. But she could, and in the scene a girl sat on her knees on the grass beside the trunk of a large tree, pulling a thread through the embroidery folded on her lap. The leaves seemed to rustle beside her. The sky behind her was cerulean, and even from outside the window and even without her glasses Arrah could see how the light shimmered on the thread the girl pulled away from her sewing. It seemed really to tremble in the light. The whole thing undulated, and at first Arrah wondered if there was light shining onto the painting from somewhere else, but there wasn't. This painting was shimmering, and she had to see more of it.

She pushed her way inside the gallery and as usual, she imagined all the paintings turning to greet her, their bright paints warm against her face. But this was no ordinary day, and so the gallery did no ordinary thing—in her mind half the paintings did swivel toward her, as she expected, but the other half remained pointedly glued to the far back corner, where the blue

portrait stood. Arrah must have been mistaken—the painted girl had her hands cupped together, a handful of mushrooms spilling out onto her knees. She was looking down at them and concentrating on something, her lips pursed together. Arrah crouched down in front of the painting and one of the mushrooms fell from the girl's lap onto the grass. Arrah tensed at the movement, at the way the sun, out of the frame, made the shadows of her knees dance on the grass, which waved back and forth slightly. The air around the girl felt alive, and the air around Arrah buzzed. The trunk of the tree in the painting hummed with activity.

She stood and walked to the desk at the edge of the room and laid her palms on either side of the guest log. The teenager behind the desk at first didn't realize that she'd approached. He was bent over a box against the wall in almost a bow, the ridge of his spine straining against the thin fabric of his shirt. He reminded Arrah of the mat, of the way you could feel every bone in your body the moment you stepped onto it. She cleared her throat and he jumped a little, then turned around—his eyebrow had a silver ring in it, and he raised it at her.

“What's the deal with the painting?” she asked, motioning vaguely back to the corner. He would know the one she meant.

“I don't know the one you mean,” he said.

“The one with the embroidery—I mean, the mushrooms—” Here, she turned around to point it out and in the painting the girl was reaching in front of her for a frog. “The girl and the frog, I mean. Excuse me.”

The boy looked like he had no idea what she was saying. He sucked at his gum and drummed his fingers on the counter. He shrugged.

“Listen,” she said, leaning over the counter. She wanted nothing so badly as to have the painting. “I need to know if it's for sale. Is it for sale?” Usually her relationship with paintings

was too visceral, and so she tried to keep her home and the dojo as plainly adorned as she could. A consistent presence of art was too intense for her, but this was different. She had to have the painting at home. She'd built a relationship with it.

The boy drummed his fingers some more on the counter, his eyebrows together like he was searching her for what she meant. Arrah knew that the boy had his own story, that he probably listened to music with his grandmother or his girlfriend or whatever, but she had never felt so strong an urge to roundhouse kick someone across the cheekbones. And she could do it, too—at fifty she could still break someone if she struck perfectly enough. She imagined the crack beneath her foot, the satisfying crunch of bone crumpling inward. The boy's nose would bleed, and just below his eye it would look like his cheek had deflated. She shook her head; karate knows not to use the body as a weapon until your life depends on it, something she repeated to her students daily. "What is the price?" she asked.

It was like he couldn't hear her. He stared out the window almost as if he'd forgotten there was even a customer in the store. She waved her hand in front of his face, but he didn't see her. He took out his cell phone, dialed a number, and pressed it to his ear as he walked to the back storeroom. She called after him but he made no notice of her.

She looked back at the painting. The girl in it had nothing in her hands but her palm pressed flatly against the tree trunk, her eyes closed, waiting as if she could hear the tree hum. There was a sort of buzz coming from the painting and Arrah felt it inside of her, too, an excitement rival to what she felt when she herself was on the mat, or when a parent who really got it brought their kid to practice. She was crossing back out of the door, its little bell tinkling against the glass, before she even realized she had the painting in her hands.

On the sidewalk, her feet again started her walk home by muscle memory. She looked at the painting she was holding—the girl had a fish by the tail, a huge bite taken out of the side of it. There was a little red on her lips. People streamed toward Arrah on the street, a typical afternoon’s traffic, but like a rock in a river people parted around her and she felt the swell of that girl in the painting. What youth in the picture, what brash violence—inside, Arrah’s organs mixed like the painting, everything pressing outward against her skin like she was bigger than she was, and she puffed her chest and tilted her chin up. With this painting she was not the older woman struggling to hold authority over a class of children who want to practice their strikes more than their stances. She was not the woman who started over after four decades of an individual life, and who moved to the city, and who paid exorbitant rent to maintain the location of her business. She was not even the savvy woman who turned a small pocketful of cash into a thriving dojo, although Arrah supposed that this part of her was the closest to how she felt at the moment. She thought of Kingsley’s mother, the way she griped about everything Arrah imposed on her son, the way the boy’s father, Danny, never questioned that the boy needed more structure. He was one of the few parents who listened to Arrah as a peer when she spoke, instead of as an employee. He had written a note on the back of the envelope last time he paid for Kingsley’s lessons, a scrawled proposition and his address and the hours when he would be there alone. That had been about four days ago, and she’d thought at first that she couldn’t possibly accept his offer. There was Kingsley to consider, and even his mother, but that morning both of them had been just terrible and now there was this painting of the girl taking her youth as an advantage over this fish, teething its flesh away in a bloody victory over her sense of propriety, and Arrah found herself turning down a new street from the route she normally took. Danny’s house was surprisingly close, and according to the note on the check the boy and his

mother would be running around with errands for the next couple of hours still. *Catching up on that desperate daily shopping*, Danny had written, and at first Arrah had found it a little harsh. But now it felt right, just spiteful enough, like a girl eating a fish raw, and as Arrah raised her fist to knock on the door it swung open, Danny there in jeans and a gray teeshirt. He was forty, ten years her junior, and there were no lines on his face. His feet were bare.

“You want a drink?” he asked, stepping aside to let her in. The hallway was dim but nicely decorated, a low bench pressed to one wall and a piano sitting like a sentry in the living room.

“Whiskey sour,” she said.

He laughed and led her into the kitchen. “I was thinking more like a Pepsi, but coming right up.” He stooped into one of the cabinets and straightened again, his hand around the neck of a bottle of Jameson. He made two drinks, and handed one to her. He sipped at his own, the backs of his thighs resting against the counter, and sighed. He looked up at her without raising his face, so the gaze was filtered through his eyebrows. “Thanks for coming,” he said.

Mm-hm, she answered, the edge of the glass against her lips. She felt the cool weight of the painting leaning against her calf where she’d put it when he handed her the drink. She set the glass down again on the table and moved toward him, the painting still against the leg of kitchen table. Fish bite at what they’re given, so that people can bite into fish, the sweet meat pulling from those tremendously thin bones. Everything felt electric.

The solidness of his collarbone under the teeshirt was a steady, rational solidness, and when she placed her palm against it, she felt it like a throwing rock in the indent of her hand where she’d skinned it in the fall outside the gallery. Even through his shirt he was warm. He was rational, that’s part of what made her accept his offer—he was rational when so many

weren't. He understood that the draw of karate is not the violence of it but its restraint, that deadliness which is simultaneously art, that it is contained and logical and spiritual all at once, that it requires dedication and discipline. He understood that his child was a little shit. He understood that in practice no one person or kindergartener gets preference over any other and he understood that Arrah was a person, too, a person stretched in too many directions over something that should be rational and meditative and rejuvenative. Danny understood that sex was a kind of rejuvenation.

She slid his shirt over his head right there in the kitchen, and for good measure she shrugged out of hers, and she remembered what a body felt like. She was beautiful, and she knew this even more ferociously than she knew that he was beautiful, and she felt it in her skin, and in his warmth, that she was taking something back, even though she didn't know what it was and she didn't realize that she'd lost it. The painting cheered them on, leaning against the table. They were leaning against the table, and what did it matter if she'd started her life over a second time when she was no longer young? This was youth, this animal instinct, this seizing of opportunity, this electric exchange of impulsivities. She was painting with God out here, right now, one body moving over the other with grace and authority. The girl in the painting was looking straight out of it, the fishblood now smeared over her cheek, struck dumb in awe.