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Our Cosmogonies: Creation Myth in Everyday Moments

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Our Cosmogonies: Creation Myth in Everyday Moments

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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I am here. Those three words contain all that can be said—you begin with those words and you return to them. Here means on earth, on this continent and in no other, in this city and no other, in this epoch I call mine, this century, this year I was given no other place, no other time, and I touch my desk to defend myself against the feeling that my own body is transient. This is all very fundamental, but, after all, the science of life depends on the gradual discovery of fundamental truths.

Czeslaw Milosz

Gone Home
after the world-parent myth

Civilization ends in layers. First pass the gas stations attached to country stores and the tractor depots, the homes set far back from the highway, the village huddling around a two-mile stretch. At some point, the city stops and all of life stoops low to the swamp. Now come the shorn sugarcane fields—he's practically home.

Cushioned by a half-mile of razed field, the old landfill humps out on the wide, otherwise unobstructed horizon, just as it had when he was a boy, just as it had that last Christmas he came down, still without the cartoonish cloud of flies he expects. Turning off the highway, there's the husk of old high school, scrapped after Rita tore through in '05, mere months after his graduation, and the empty grass lot where he ran practice drills and permanently jammed his left middle finger on Quinn Touchet's spiral pass. Black powdery flecks of burnt sugarcane float down onto the windshield and collect on the wipers. Drab trailers, their skirting missing panels like teeth, stare blankly back at him. Dread stretches in his chest like a man at work too early, cracks its knuckles.

He fumbles for his phone when it chirps in his pocket, his eyes flicking from road to screen and back, but there are no messages waiting and no signal, anyway. The whole long day of travelling—cab to plane to rental car—he's imagined that anticipatory sound and checked, but who would need to reach him? Nobody except one of the coffee shop managers he left his resume with last week or his landlord Christopher, as Catholic as anyone back home and with just as thick an accent. Boston time glares at him from the seat where he tosses it, and he misses his street, his apartment, his job at a young, ambitious publishing house, now defunct. Should his father or Abilene, his sister, ask about it, he doesn't know what he'll say.

The driveway, laced now with browning creepers, almost goes by unnoticed. As he completes the turn, he instinctively flips the visor down to guard against the setting sun. The driveway is now more dirt than shell, rippled by the passage of big, cutting tires, its mounds and ditches sending the cheap rental veering into the grass on either side. Once the path levels out, he looks up to catch the first view of his childhood home in three years—and finds nothing, only a concrete slab. As he flips up the visor, the second spliced precise as an atom, he thinks maybe he took the wrong turn onto the wrong driveway, perhaps on a service road. But there, high in the air, blocking the sun, the house levitates, a fever dream. He grinds the car to a halt before noticing the notched wooden pillars, like crates stacked dozens high, propping it up.

There the house is, so high he has to crane his neck at an unnatural angle to see it, sitting atop these stilts broad and serious as henchmen. The house itself has a stately air now, its siding whole and newly painted, its roof eclipsing the sun, glowing red at the edges. Its shadow overtakes the car too soon, dousing him in cold. He parks the car next to his father's pickup and leans his head out of the window for a moment, taking it all in, then he gets out and paces along the length of the house.

The cracked cement steps that used to lead to the front door sit forgotten to one side, just out of the shadow. Pipes run down on the far side, disappearing into the ground. The beams underneath the house are knit together with a disconcerting resolve the wooden pillars share. The house upstages the twisted oaks and slim pines lining the property, standing tall as a water tower. He is thinking wildly about math problems from high school geometry, with cars stacked up in unreal numbers to reach the moon, when he hears his name.

“Robbie!” It’s his sister at the front door, directly above, using her whole body to point to the right side of the house, where he finds a three flights of stairs, in new, unvarnished wood, zigzagging up to the utility room door. He trudges up, hands on the rails and eyes on his shoes.

“You got here just in time for dinner,” Abilene says when he reaches the top, thighs burning and sweat collecting in a film under his clothes, more suited to fall in Massachusetts than here. She’s the same as ever, but the bob is new, curling under her jaw, and the sense of the manicured woman about her—thick mascara and deliberate jewelry. They hug, her thin sweater scratching him.

“What is this? How did this happen?” he whispers in her ear. *How long having you been hiding this from me*, he wants to ask, but she yells, “Set the table, Daddy! Robbie’s here!” over her shoulder. To him, she whispers, “He got his old contractor buddies to help. Supposed to be a simple leveling job, but he got a little carried away.” She crosses her arms. “See why I wanted you here?”

Robert feels the emptiness beneath his feet and remembers boarding the tallest, most fearsome ride at the fairgrounds when he was 13 and screaming to get off before it started. His toes go numb in his shoes; he sways a little. Abilene takes his elbow to lead him inside, but he rocks back on his heels.

“I’m not sure this is stable—this structure, anymore—if I should be in there, you know, right now,” he says, his voice coming through like a needle, feeling anew the shame of being left leaning on the metal barriers, watching his friends scream in their somersaulting seats, legs extending and flattening like flags.

“Oh, it’s stable.” She sighs and pulls him in, shutting the door so he can lean on it with his eyes closed. “Just very stupid.”

“This can’t just be retirement jitters, Abilene. He’s getting worse. Is he drinking again?”

“Not drinking, but yeah. It’s a lot to take in right now, I know. I’m glad you’re here.” She hugs him again, for a long moment, then asks him to leave his shoes at the door.

As she leads him through the house, talking about the changes, the new combination washer-dryer with the chute in-between, but Robert only catches on to snippets, focused instead on how much of the house hasn’t changed. There’s the wood paneling separating the house into top and bottom halves, the division that defined being grown-up, at some far-off point in the future, when he grew tall enough to be eye-level with the marbled tan wallpaper. The family pictures in their cheap gold-painted frames hang on the walls where their mother left them, and the china in the cabinet with frosted designs of wines and grapes on the glass stands in its old place next to the kitchen door. There’s new recliner in the living room, but it’s functionally identical to the old one, only missing the sag in its seat. Everything, down to the napkins set on the table, folded like sailor hats, seems the same, so much so Robert can almost see her collecting the ashtrays in the house, stashing them under the couch so, according to her, the ashes won’t somehow take to the air and make the food taste like cigarettes.

But that vision dissipates when his father, Franklin to Robert since a rebellious phase, comes in with mitts on both hands, hauling a pot to the table. Franklin’s not the same, not really, although his ropey arms are still purpled by veins floating so close under the surface they bob like apples in a tub when the skin moves and there’s still that scar on his neck, long and white, from where a wild boar tried to gore him as a young man defending his father’s rice fields. But his eyes are clearer, his movements more precise. His sobriety never factors into Robert’s image of him, but here it is, lighting him up. By the time Franklin hugs Robert briefly and runs back to

the kitchen for the foggy-lidded rice cooker, the five years since his mother's death have settled on the room like sand tracked in from the beach.

"He missed you," Abilene says, beaming. "He made the roast special."

She sits Robert at the table, in his usual place with a view out of the glass sliding doors, where the open porch used to be. He's got no idea if it's set up on wooden stilts like the house's, or sitting half-dismantled at the tree line, or hanging there, miraculously, perilously, like the weak conjoined twin. But dusk is setting in, the darkened view of the trees feigning normal height, and he can trick himself into forgetting his chair is sitting so many feet in the air—why would it be?

"Joy?" Franklin yells from the kitchen. "Do you know where the forks are?"

They freeze. It's Robert who finally calls back, "Mom says they're in the drawer by the sink." Abilene pinches his arm. "What?" he whispers. "They are."

"Where?" The sound of drawers opening and closing comes in from the kitchen, and Abilene goes to help him.

Franklin sits at the head of the table, on Robert's left, and Abilene in the seat across. They reach their hands out to him at the same time. "What d'you think, boy? Say grace for us tonight?" He makes it sound like Robert's a part of the usual rotation.

"I'm out of practice, Fr—Dad, or I would," he says. Franklin doesn't challenge him, just nods and starts in on "Heavenly Father." Robert closes his eyes, feeling the heaviness of his father's hand in his. The last time he was home, two Christmases ago, they fought, and over more than just the routine tension, that nagging reminder to call him Dad, damn it. Robert's visits were already slowing, his job in Boston picking up, although maybe a bit less than he led his family to believe. Franklin threw his weight into disapproval, saying that Robert was too

young to be that far from home. So he left and pleaded busy at every invitation. He's let the excuse stand all this time, and even Abilene, who calls every week, doesn't know he's spending his days on his couch, waiting for calls from potential bosses and watching Law & Order re-runs.

"Amen," they say in unison. Dinner practically serves itself, their plates filling up before their eyes. Their father digs in immediately, his face close to the plate, and Abilene's long, acrylic nails, painted orange, tear into the flesh of an airy dinner roll.

"I did them up for fall early," she says, noticing his attention. "Gotta do them over soon, though. All that typing at work wears them out."

"Oh," Robert says.

She coaxes him with her eyes, gesturing at Franklin with little nods.

"Roast's tender," he says in their father's direction. He grunts, and the new cubes in the icemaker settle with a dull, crumbling sound. Abilene sips her water and watches Robert over the rim. She expects him to say something, do something, but what? She summoned him with vague warnings of how strange Franklin had been acting since retirement, but, from inside the house, where the height already seems like an unreality, he doesn't give off any vibe but one of calm and contentment. From this side of three connecting flights, the dip into Robert's meager savings strikes him suddenly as a waste.

"So, Robbie, how was your flight?" Abilene sets her glass down and eyes him like a dog waiting for the hidden ball to be really thrown. Robert shrugs, still unsure what she expects out of him. "Isn't it nice to have Robbie home, Daddy? After all this time?"

Their father drops his fork to his plate and leans back from his empty plate, using his napkin to wipe his mouth. "'Course, baby. It's wonderful." He smiles at Robert without showing

his teeth, the bags under his eyes deflating into hard-pressed folds. “Wonderful,” he repeats, cleaning his teeth with his tongue.

With a sigh, Abilene excuses herself to get dessert from the kitchen, a batch of cupcakes made from scratch with diet soda instead of oil or butter. From there, she explains their father’s new diet, cholesterol-lite. He cocks an ear to her restrictions then swipes his finger though the icing on the plastic lid. Robert follows suit, but Abilene stops him and places a cupcake in his hand. Their father refuses one, pats his stomach.

“That’s not the only thing different around here, huh?” Robert says around a crumbly bite, ignoring his stomach shrinking a little at the returning thought of the house’s state. Franklin taps a finger on his lips and shakes his head, just like Mom used to do. “Sorry.” Robert takes his time swallowing. Abilene watches him expectantly. “Well, Dad doesn’t eat cake... and the house hit a growth spurt.”

Commented [S1]: His wife?

Their father laughs so hard the china in the cabinet shakes, his eyes and mouth agape, all whites. Robert jumps and laughs, too. He props himself up on an elbow, leaning back and picking at his teeth with a toothpick. “Well, it floods bad-bad out here, and, uh, your momma always after me ‘bout getting them foundations up, leveling it and all that. Me and the boys took care of it—” He waves a hand. “A couple weeks.”

“More like months,” Abilene chimes in. “But pretty fast. He only had to stay at my apartment in town a week at a time.”

“You still have that?” Robert asks.

She shakes her head. “Let it go when I moved back in here.” She returns to her cupcake, peeking the paper cup slowly away, as their father describes the logistics of jacking the house up, propping it up step by step. Feeling nausea creep up again, Robert tries focusing on his voice

instead of the words, swallowed up just as he spits them out, typical of the Cajun accent Robert unlearned in his time away.

“We the only people in all Henry who for sure won’t flood next storm.” Grinning, pink in the face, he knocks on the table with his knuckles like gnarls of wood themselves. “Your momma don’t worry ‘bout that no more.”

Robert’s too caught up in Franklin’s enthusiasm to call him on it, but Abilene pipes up, tenting her fingers. “Yeah, I bet Momma would’ve been happy to see you get to it.”

He blinks rapidly, then scoops another lick of icing out of the lid. His face drains of color, his smiles sucked into his resting scowl. “Right,” he says, not looking at either of them. “Ole house ain’t going nowhere.” He pushes his chair out and excuses himself. Abilene gathers dishes and goes to the kitchen, leaving Robert sitting there at the table feeling as though everything in the room had come crashing down from where it previously floated, at some great height. After he checks on their father, peeking through a crack in the door to find him sitting mute on the bed, fingers motionless on his shoelaces, Robert goes to the kitchen, where Abilene is washing dishes.

“Why’d you have to say that?” He talks through his teeth, remembering how sound carries in this place.

“What? About Momma?” She withdraws a hand from the suds and tosses him a towel. He just stands there and holds it. “I’m sorry,” she says, not looking at him. “I’m just frustrated. It’s just—it’s not easy all the time. When you walked in here, you told *me* he’s getting worse. What happened to that?”

“I hadn’t seen him yet.” He starts rubbing a plate dry. “I mean, maybe he’s not doing too hot, but would it hurt to let him be happy for a minute?”

Abilene sighs, trying to get suds out of her eye by rubbing it with her wrist. Robert pushes her hand away and wipes at it with a towel. They return to a familiar exchange at the sink, Abilene washing so fast Robert has to fan the silverware between his fingers and cradle plates in the crook of his elbow. Once the dishes are cleared, she shows him to his old room. The twin bed is lifted off the floor by a new bed frame, but the rest is the same, his trophies on the dresser and the hole in the wall where he threw a baseball too hard in a game of one-man catch. He undresses and lies down, and his phone beeps in his pants pocket, going dead. Closing his eyes, he tries not to think about it. Light streams in from the window above his bed, the moon feeling close.

In the middle of the night, he gets up to use the bathroom. It's harder this time to forget how high the bed feels and go to sleep. He tells himself there's no reason to be so nervous about heights, and this chant circulates in his head like a trapped wind.

When he wakes up in the morning, he's stretched out on the floor, carpet imprints stinging his cheeks.

The house feels empty when he emerges and sits at the dining table. A fork, crusted with bits of last night's dinner, rests in the shadow of the fake floral centerpiece. A bleary-eyed Abilene comes in from the kitchen in a familiar pair of sweatpants patterned with the Pepsi logo, steaming mug in hand.

"Oh, you're up early," she murmurs. She sets the mug down and pushes it towards him. "You do drink it black, right? I'll get another."

Just as Abilene disappears through the doorway, their father walks out of the bathroom in an old work shirt with *Franklin* embroidered on the pocket, wet hair flicking up around his head.

His stomps echo through the floorboards, a new sound to Robert, who sips his coffee with his toes gripping the floor. In his dreams, the house had pulsed like a living thing, feeding on the trees and growing high into the sky, until it was like the giant's house atop Jack's beanstalk and they—Abilene and Robert, their mother and father—couldn't breathe or escape, instead dying. The coffee burns his tongue, but he's grateful to have a distraction, however small, from the swimmy feeling between his ears.

Abilene reappears with two more mugs, a bowl of sugar, and a cardboard can of powdered creamer. Their father scoops both into his mug, while Abilene doesn't touch the stuff. They sip quietly together, their father's coffee half-gone when he asks Robert, "You wanna help me with some housework today?"

Under a spare chair in the corner, someone's piled old AutoTraders. The fork from last night's dinner lurks, yet unnoticed. "Sure," he says. "What needs doing in here?"

"Naw, naw," their father says, standing up. "Let's let the girls handle all that. You can help outside." He rinses his mug out in the kitchen. Abilene catches Robert's eye and smirks.

"Go," she says, curtailing his words. "He'll be gentle."

"Does he ever make you help?"

"Us girls generally stay put."

Under the house, Robert is cowed quiet. He surveys the landscape, its tall trees and far-off skies, like someone newly shrunk. The lip of the fresh concrete slab is sharp, forming a ledge just tall enough to make him jumpy when he wanders too far in the house's shadow. The driveway unrolls bumpily to the road.

Commented [S2]: Worry? Apology? Questions?

The wooden pillars, he determines with his arms locked behind his back, as if he's viewing an exhibit at an art gallery, are as secure as anything his father's ever built. Franklin comes up behind him and claps him on the shoulder.

"Look good, don't it? Joe Pearce wants to build me a shed and lift that, too, but this good enough for now."

Talking low and slow, an arm still slung over Robert's shoulder, Franklin demystifies the crosshatched joists and beams above, the sheer power involved in lifting the house a dozen times over to get it like this. They creep between the pillars, Franklin pointing to where in the pillars old wood from the back porch was repurposed. Robert suddenly recalls a memory from his third grade trip to the aquarium, how his class left early because he had panicked over the dark shape of the octopus, its awful boneless limbs brushing the glass. Franklin, then *Daddy*, took off work the next Saturday and drove him out there again, sitting for a while around the corner from the octopus exhibit and reading from a book about deep sea life. Daddy's thick finger followed each word on the page. Something about the octopus having a beak made it ridiculous in Robert's eyes, like it wore Groucho glasses to blend into a crowd. Word around the exhibit was that the octopus was hidden away somewhere, possibly sleeping, but they waited out every other patron, staring silent into the rippling blue of the tank. Robert examined every rock for the sac of its head until it rose like a hovercraft out of the sand where it had buried itself, its limbs flattened and curled around in a disc, and passed over the rocks. More than the creeping fear that the creature would charge the glass and attack him, Robert felt conscious of the three whole hearts beating away inside it.

“You did a real good job, Dad. Nicer than it’s looked in years,” he finally says. **It’s true, the house looks great.** Last time he was here, the shutters was missing most of their ribbing, the windows were glazed with scum, the siding had curled and peeled at the ends like old toenails.

Franklin smothers a grin with his hand and shows Robert how to check for signs of wear, detailing a plan for a complex system of girders. **The** pride is enough to reassure Robert of his safety there, but he’s still relieved when Franklin assigns him to the stairs, starting at the bottom, checking the nails and replacing any sloppily hammered in. Robert’s on a landing eye-level with the treetops, inspecting a rickety step, when Franklin climbs up, lifting one leg at a time like a cowboy stomping into a saloon.

“I better get to seasoning that deer meat if we gonna eat it tonight. Can you get the toolbox for me when you done here?”

Robert weasels out an errant nail then makes his way down with his eyes trained to his toes. On the way back up, two arms wielding the toolbox, he has such a hard time breathing he doesn’t have to distract himself. He stops to catch his breath at the top, leaning on the outside rail. Beyond the confines of their land, he sees plots of land carved out of the woods, boggy strips remaining in between. There, a manmade lake, the size of a quarter from up here, dug out for the dirt when Robert was small, dirt used to build up foundations on the trailers and houses tucked close to the ground as if in the fetal position. The grey canopy of sky stretches over everything. He takes a stabilizing breath and peeks through his feet at the gravel down below.

Robert has seen this property flood. Come hurricane season, his father would be out fixing houses elsewhere all day, repairing the small injuries their house suffered when he could. He and his contractor friends would rotate on jobs, doing a paid gig one day and a house owned by one in the circle another. When Rita’s storm surge came through and wrecked the next town

Commented [S3]: His father’s

over—sending three feet of water into every building, floating cars, churning graveyard soil so that caskets and free corpses were displaced to ditches—this house was lucky. There’s enough of a downward slope away from the house that water crept within inches of it, but not closer. Other people weren’t so lucky: their homes were wiped off the map.

Such a close call made their mother nervous, and Franklin promised her he would level the house, give it a few feet from the ground. But she died before he got a chance, and Robert thought he would never bother.

Robert imagines water gathering below him like a mob, rain pounding down and pouring out of the gutters. No matter how far he pushes the image, though, the water gets no closer than a single flight of stairs. The flood that could reach this house and cause any discernible damage would have to be biblical in scale. It would have to be a once-in-a-century flood, destined to wipe Louisiana off the map, tossing houses, churches, whole cities, into the air and grinding them up like little peppercorns. Once the water from a flood like that drained, there would only be the concrete slab to mark where the house had been, maybe a few sections of pillar, leaning against one another like dominos or grave markers.

He walks slowly up the rest of the stairs and drops the toolbox by the door. Thighs burning and face slick with sweat, he goes straight to the freezer, sticking his head in. Franklin, rubbing a slab of meat with garlic, smiles at him when he surfaces.

“Them stairs high, huh?”

Robert goes to reply and stops, thinking about how close the sky appeared out there.

“What kind of diet dessert does Abilene have for us tonight?”

“Berry crumble,” she says from behind him. She looks polished again, hair smoothed and lips glossed. “And you’ll like it. It’s like it’s not even diet.”

“So there’s butter in it?” Robert puts on an innocent face and looks at Franklin, who is pointedly staring at the meat he’s dousing in pepper.

“No,” she says, annoyed, taking strawberries out of the fridge. “Applesauce.”

The men start to laugh softly, not looking at each other. Robert begins washing the strawberries in the sink.

“What? It’s a great butter substitute. They use it in dog treats.”

They laugh harder, and she grumbles about cholesterol. The dinner’s more talkative than the last one, more gossip and banter. At one point, Abilene asks what project he’s on at work. He doesn’t hesitate to say it’s a secret, something big and promising in development.

Sunday at the local supermarket, Robert holds the list, written on the back of an old envelope, and Abilene pushes the cart. Dad follows quietly, arguing here and there for Ranch dressing, no-bake cheesecake, frozen chicken pot pie—foods Abilene has banned from the house. Robert dutifully crosses items of the list, trying not to think about his phone, which he left at home. All morning, Robert lay in bed, blankets pulled up to his chin, watching the phone on his chest for signs of life. Abilene poked her head in once, but he closed his eyes and breathed deeply until she left. He got up only when an old girlfriend replied to his text, asking if she wanted to get coffee and catch up, with *Who is this?*

While Abilene is picking out tomatoes, John Barras noses his cart up to theirs. He’s a drinking buddy of Franklin’s from when he still drank. His eyebrows and ear hair are spiky and overgrown.

“Franklin,” he says. “I was out in Henry the other day... and, cousin, what kind of project you working on out there?”

Franklin straightens his shoulders, puffs his chest out. “Me and Joe Pearce and them levelled the house, gave it some flood protection.”

“Some? That’s one tall ass house, cousin.” He laughs hard.

Franklin laughs, too, but his eyes are nervous, reserved. “You like it?”

“Like it?” John looks to Abilene. “You like it?”

She looks from John to Franklin and says nothing, twirling the bag of tomatoes closed. Robert pipes up instead.

“It’s a neat job. Solid. I checked the stairs for bad nails yesterday and came up with almost nothing.” His cheeks burn when he realizes how juvenile he sounds, grandstanding like *Look at me, helping my daddy.*

John blinks and cracks a big smile like he just noticed Robert. “Boy, you know I barely recognize you? How you doing? What you doing here, big shot?”

“Robbie’s got a good thing going in Boston,” Abilene says. “Too busy to come down here, but we got him. We finally got him.” She pokes him in the rib, and John shakes Robert’s hand.

“That’s just like you,” he says. “You gonna be able to get away for Christmas? Or they got you working like a dog?”

“Like a dog,” Robert says, knuckles cracking in John’s grip.

Franklin has gone off to the car center, looking for rim cleaner, once Mrs. David, Robert’s ninth grade homeroom teacher, and her young son stop them in the snack section.

“Daddy got tired of me putting back the food he wants,” Abilene tells them, and they all laugh. After getting the routine from Abilene and Robert, Mrs. David reminds them how she had to punish Robert for reading when he was supposed to be completing math exercises.

“This one wouldn’t be caught dead reading,” she says, poking the boy’s skinny shoulder. He’s an awkward kid, all angles with hair hanging in his face. “Look at what it did for him, baby.”

The boy visibly rankles at being called *baby* in front of two adult strangers. He looks around as if for a way out.

“You know, you don’t have to do what I do. But being a good reader is helpful in any line of work,” Robert says, thinking about the giant lettering on the menu board behind the counter at a coffee shop he put his application into weeks ago.

The boy nods, avoiding eye contact. Robert knows he’s being one of those aggressively patronizing adults he used to hate, and he feels big compared to the boy, and important compared to Mrs. David, teaching homeroom geometry to another group of apathetic, distracted kids.

“Just think about it,” he adds. Mrs. David winks at him. The boy nods again.

When time comes to pay and leave, they can’t find Franklin. They search the car center, the home improvement section, even double back to grocery aisles where he fought and lost battles for Hungry Man meals or pecan shortbread cookies. He is nowhere. They wheel the cart around the store, looking into each aisle, Robert **imagining** a monotone declaring *lost father at register three* over the P.A. They spot him at last, standing in the aisle with Christmas decorations. He has a small plastic Christmas tree over his shoulder, watching dancing Santa and Rudolph toys. The music blares, versions of “Jingle Bell Rock” and “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” while Franklin stares at the wiggling hips under Santa’s red felt suit. His face is slack, his eyes unfocused and dreamy.

“Look,” he says to Abilene without looking at her. “For your brother.”

Commented [S4]: dreading

The Rudolph goes silent and still, and Franklin reaches out to restart it. Robert steps forward and clears his throat. “Dad?”

His head snaps up, and his face doesn’t fall so much as it tightens, solidifies. The Santa stops, too, before he speaks. “Easy to get lost in this place,” he mumbles. He fumbles the tree and drops it onto its stand.

“Couldn’t find the car center?” Robert can’t see Abilene’s face, but her voice sounds tight, stressed.

“No, I didn’t find that.” Avoiding their eyes, he pats the tree’s plastic needles sadly. “I guess we don’t need a fake tree with all the real ones Joe got.”

“Yeah, but how would you get a real tree up the stairs?” Robert offers. He grabs the treetop and lifts it with one hand. “This one’s light.”

“Christmas is still a while off, though.” Abilene’s eyebrows tense up into her hairline.

“True,” Robert says. “But what if I can’t make it home? Besides, I like Christmas trees.”

Smiling a little now, Franklin steps aside. “Look at this, boy.” He pushes the button on the Santa toy. “You love—used to love things like this.”

The little joints in Santa’s swiveling legs makes loud whirring noises barely covered by the music. Franklin brings his arm around Robert and, breathing hard, watches the Santa with him until the end of the song. **In a way, this feels good, like they are sharing something untouched by the years.** Franklin plays the Rudolph next. They laugh together about the reindeer’s nose blinking at the right parts of the song, and Robert hums the tune. Robert feels something like knuckles rubbing softly on his left arm. He jumps and turns, expecting his mother, but finding Abilene, spray bottle in her other hand.

“Found the rim cleaner, y’all. Let’s go home.”

The next morning, Robert gets up and into the shower without checking his phone or even thinking about it. Under the icy spray, he briskly rubs the sleep from his body, not wondering anymore about the distance the water travels through the pipes like pneumatic tubes. Then he shaves, up one side of his face and down the other—because that’s how he did it the first time—and combs his hair back. He takes care dressing: the nice, thick jeans he flew in, his favorite green merino sweater, the silver Seiko he bought himself as a birthday gift a few years back. He feels like himself today.

There’s no one around when he ventures into the kitchen. The coffee filters are squirrelled away in a cookie jar on the counter. Kitchen filling with the gurgles of a fresh pot brewing, he leans against the counter with a bowl of the Raisin Bran they bought the day before. Abilene comes in, done up in a dress, tights, and knee-high boots.

“You look nice,” Robert says. “You going in today?”

“Closed on Mondays. I’m going in tomorrow.” She clicks her nails on the counter, waiting for the coffee. Robert notices a ghost and pumpkin on either thumbnail.

“When did you do that?”

“One of my errands this morning. If you didn’t sleep so late, you could’ve got yours done, too.”

“Ha.” Robert scoops up a bite with more raisins than cereal.

The coffee stops brewing, and Abilene pours two cups. “So,” she says, sliding a cup over to his elbow. “About Daddy.”

Robert slurps milk out of the bowl, secretly glad to delay the conversation he's felt coming since last night, when they set up the tree by the television. Abilene hands him a paper towel. "You got something," she says, swiping at her own mouth with her fingers.

Robert cleans up slowly, then crumples the towel in his hand. "What about him?"

"Well, it's been a few days. You know what he's like."

Robert cocks his head to one side. "Happy?"

"You said yourself Daddy's doing worse the moment you showed up here, Robert. I know you see what I mean."

"I think," he says, even as spreading butter, "that Dad's doing fine." Abilene scoffs. "He got carried away with the house, I admit that. But he's not hurting anybody. He's keeping his hands busy, connecting with his old buddies."

"What happens when he's too old and stiff to truck it up them stairs? What if he tries some more construction bullshit when his friends aren't around and falls to his death? Would he be hurting anybody enough for you then?"

"You don't know that's gonna happen. He's careful."

Abilene rocks back on her heels, rotating her jaw to one side. Then she folds her arms and rocks forward again, pointing a long finger in his face like a weapon. "Tell me, Robbie: when you first saw the house, built up three stories like this, did the word *careful* pop into your head?"

"You told me when I got here that the house is safe!"

"You idiot—" She stops herself, nails interlocking like gears on a zipper as she folds her hands together tightly in front of her. "I *meant* that the structure is sound." She emphasizes each word with a bob of her clenched hands. "Joe Pearce was there every step."

“Okay. Then what? What’s the problem?” Robert slams open the cabinet door under the sink and tosses the paper towel into the trashcan. “I thought this is what you wanted for him. What did you call it? A *productive retirement*.”

Commented [55]: italics

“Yesterday.” She slams her hand decisively on the counter.

“Yesterday what?” Robert mimics her, hitting too hard and stinging his hand.

“That shit with the tree, those toys. You don’t think he’s acting strange? You don’t think nothing of the way he talking like Momma—”

The utility room door slams open and, by the sound of it, bounces off the dryer. Franklin’s scuffing footsteps and his labored breath break Robert and Abilene apart and send them running to the door. Franklin, bowled over on the doormat, leaning against the doorframe, cradles his bloody hand to his stomach.

Abilene bats Robert out of the way, inspecting the hand. She commands Robert to put pressure on it before running back to the kitchen. Robert kneels down, tugging gently on Franklin’s arm.

“Give me your hand. Hey.” Robert snaps his fingers in front of his father’s face. “Franklin.” He looks up at Robert with a puzzled blankness. “Let me see it.”

“Young man, could you help me?” He holds his hand out. A nail runs through the webbing between his thumb and pointer finger. “I got myself good.” A new stream of blood bubbles around the nail and runs down his forearm, smoothing down the hair like a flood smooths the landscape down to the dirt. Robert recoils and blood sloshes in his head. Pastel flakes float across his vision, giving him the short-lived impression he’s trapped in a snow globe. When he can see again, Abilene is there, wrapping a towel around the hand.

“What the hell? I asked you to put pressure on it.”

“Don’t say hell, baby,” Franklin says softly, watching her work.

In the ER waiting room, Franklin peeks under the towel, mildly surprised, and tells them he hasn’t had an accident like this in all the time he’s used a hammer. In the row of plastic seats across from theirs, a little girl with a cough like steel wool stares at his hand until her mother barks at her to stop.

Then, in the tiny processing room, while Abilene talks the nurse through the insurance paperwork, Franklin starts chuckling. Robert gives him a quizzical look, but he doesn’t say anything. When he grows loud enough that the nurse is momentarily distracted from Abilene, he leans in close to Robert. “Your momma woulda had a fit if she was there. Don’t you think she woulda had a fit?”

It’s as if Robert can feel her in the room, arms crossed, refusing to look at either of them. “A big old fit,” he says. Franklin quiets and clears his throat.

“Do you remember when you found that snake in the bathtub?” No response. “And Mom was sure you’d chase her through the house with it when you caught it, so she locked herself up in the bedroom all night?” He elbows Franklin, who hisses at his hurt hand being jostled in his lap. “Sorry. But you remember that?”

“What?” Franklin snaps to attention like Robert had just said his name in his ear.

“You slept on the couch in your work clothes. Remember?”

Franklin grunts an affirmative, his eyebrows tethered together over his nose. The nurse taps her stack of papers straight on the desk and says, “Okay, Mr. Cormier, I’m going to patch you up in the next room, then we’ll send you on to Dr. Chimmalgi for a work-up. It shouldn’t take more than a couple of hours.”

Robert opens his mouth with a question on his lips, but Abilene cuts in, shaking her head so slightly at Robert he might have imagined it. “Daddy, you’re overdue for your check-up. And you’re gonna need a tetanus shot for that nail, anyway. I think, and this nice nurse thinks, we should do an overall assessment. Just to make sure you’re okay.”

“Oh. No, I don’t know.” Franklin says, tucking his hand gingerly into his armpit. “I don’t need all that.”

“Well, why don’t we just patch you up and then we’ll see how you feel about it?” The nurse is leading him out of the room before he can say another word.

Back in the waiting room, Abilene flips through a celebrity gossip magazine with an air of accomplishment. The nurse doesn’t come out to tell them he’s agreed to it, so Robert assumes he never had a chance at all. He remembers how close Abilene and the nurse’s heads were, how low their voices. They arranged it all right in front of him.

“What are they doing to him in there?”

“Blood tests, mostly. For hormonal and other—” She struggles, finger on a fashion spread, to find the right word—“*conditions* that might be affecting his memory. An MRI for evidence of strokes. Nothing that might alarm him.” Robert stares at her. “He’s had an MRI before, Robbie.”

“But after he’s lost a bucket of blood?”

She snorts. “He’ll be fine. He’s had worse.”

Robert stares back at the little girl, still hacking her lungs out next to her mother, and follows her gaze to his arm, which he hasn’t noticed is flecked with his father’s blood. He goes to the restroom to wash it off. When he comes back, he says, “So what, exactly, do you think is wrong with him?”

In a voice she uses on her clients, Abilene explains. “Alzheimer’s, obviously. Then vascular dementia or Lewy Bodies Disease. There’s lots of possibilities.”

“All that from him being forgetful?”

“That’s the first sign,” she says, skipping past a story about some reality star’s alleged marriage problems. “And the therapy they offer works best the earlier it starts.”

“Is that when they tell him his wife’s dead? Just *forget about Joy* on a loop?” He doesn’t realize how his voice has risen in volume until the mother across the room clears her throat. He holds her gaze until she looks down to adjust her purse on her lap. More softly, he asks, “Is that it?”

“Don’t be so dramatic.”

How present his mother seems to him right now, how real. She could be snoozing in the chair next to him, legs crossed at the ankle, chin resting on her chest. Five years after finding her collapsed at the road, on her way to check the mail when her heart seized up, and he can’t shake her off their lives quite yet. Robert can never know how she would’ve reacted to the house or to anything else. But if Franklin feels that he’s doing better by his wife now than he did when she was alive, why remind him how futile it all is? “It’s cruel,” he replies.

Abilene turns over the finished magazine and pitches it back onto the pile. “He didn’t remember you earlier. You realize that? He didn’t know you.”

They pointedly avoid each other’s eyes.

“I saw the way he was looking at you.” She picks up another magazine and adds, “He’s forgotten me, too.”

The girl coughs like a train coming through town, blaring warnings that Doppler their way louder then softer as it passes. The silence between bouts makes you forget it ever passed through or can again.

Abilene lurches the car to a stop for a possum flopped limp on the road.

“Okay back there, Dad?” Robert says, too loudly, into the dark backseat. Franklin hasn’t said a word the whole way home. When he came back into the waiting room, the nurse told them he would have to come back for blood tests another day, and two weeks after that for the results. Robert imagines Abilene will be sitting on the edge of her seat, checking down her list of possible diagnoses.

“You’re *unbelievable*,” Abilene hisses at him, or maybe the glassy-eyed possum, which finally gives up the ruse and slinks into the ditch under her gaze.

“I am? I’m unbelievable?” Robert forces his voice down. “You know what’s unbelievable? Forcing a grown man—”

“Into getting medical treatment?”

“Into doing whatever you think is—You know what? Not here.” Franklin’s hearing isn’t great, but he’s not deaf.

The car rolls forward again, and, before long, the driveway appears on their right. Abilene peers over the steering wheel, slowly maneuvering the car around potholes. Her eyes, reflecting blue light from the dashboard, are watery.

“He’s an old man,” Robert murmurs over the console, once they’re closer to the house. “You lose your memory when you get old. That’s what happens. That doesn’t mean he needs to be jerked around from doctor to doctor.”

She slams the brakes and turns to him, shaking. “How the *fuck* would you know what he needs?” Her voice reverberates in the car. “You haven’t bothered visiting for three years. And yeah, I know, you’re up there in Boston, and you’re *so* busy.”

“Oh, fuck you.” Robert’s voice cracks.

“You don’t know anything about what it’s like here anymore. Would you give up your life to come back here and take of Daddy? Huh? We could barely get you out here for Momma’s funeral.”

In the moment of charged silence, there’s a rapid clicking sound in the backseat. Robert and Abilene turn to find Franklin pulling frantically at the door handle, flicking the lock back and forth.

“Oh, Daddy. I’ll get it.” Abilene gets out and runs around the car to his door. Franklin breathes hard, looking out of the window. When the door opens, he runs off like a released animal, disappearing out of range of the headlights. Abilene slides back into the driver’s seat, closes the door, and leans her arms on the steering wheel. Tears well in Abilene’s eyes, catching on the lights from the dashboard again, bulbs of blue, before springing free. “He needs help, Robbie.”

Robert’s anger slips—she looks so pitiful, hunched over the steering column. “Doctors like to act like they have a magic solution, but what is there, really? Memory exercises? Medication? They use those medications to diagnose people, not to treat them. You know better than I do that there’s no real treatment for dementia.”

“But it’s something I can do. You don’t know, really, you don’t know what it’s like to be here with him all the time. I love Daddy, I do, but he’s not the same anymore. He forgets who I am. He thinks I’m Momma sometimes. He gets dressed in the middle of the night thinking its

morning already. And, on real bad days, he thinks he sees little chickens outside, like his daddy raised, and he chases them around.” She stops and cries briefly, shoulder shaking. “I’m afraid, I’m so afraid to leave him by himself. So I moved in, gave up that nice apartment close to work and all my friends, but that isn’t enough, either, you know? I mean, I gotta have a job.”

Her mascara is smeared in half-circles under her eyes. Her lips have the same halo effect of worn-off lipstick their mother used to have after work.

“And he’s got no job, no routine, nothing but this house. And everybody, all those guys, Joe Pearce and them, they encouraged him! They humored him. You know Joe Pearce crushed his hand working with Daddy on this?” She gestures to the house above them. “He ain’t talked to Daddy in weeks, says he’s busy on the phone, but I know he just couldn’t do this anymore. Listening to how *Joy loves it*, then a few weeks later, he’s talking ‘bout *shouldn’t they go a few feet higher?*”

She pulls the headlight switch towards her and the house, pillars and stairs, all disappear. She cries for a long time, nose pressed to the car horn, and, when she seems done, Robert hands her a napkin from the glove department. “Why didn’t you just tell me how bad it was?”

“I thought it would be obvious when you got here, finally.”

Robert unbuckles his seatbelt and draws her head into his shoulder, patting her hair. “I’m sorry I haven’t been around.” He wants to tell her about the job. He wants to say he’s been sitting around in a dumpy apartment, job-hunting when he can muster the energy, but mostly scrolling through the contacts on his phone, breezing past hers and Franklin’s, lingering on that girl he met at his last publication party, for a memoir he vetted that tanked. He knows that he’s being more selfish than Abilene could understand. He still can’t tell her.

She pulls away, hiccupping. “I know you took Momma’s passing hard. Daddy does, t-too.”

Robert opens his mouth and closes it again. He tries to practice soundlessly in the dark. *I had no reason to stay away.*

“And that’s okay. It’s okay if you g-g-gotta fly back at the end of the week. You have responsibilities. But I need you to keep in touch, okay? If you don’t think I’m doing this right, fine, but I c-can’t do this alone.”

“Abilene?”

“Y-yeah?”

He can’t do it. Not tonight. “It’s late. Let’s go to bed. We can talk about it in the morning.”

The stairs are something out of a dream, unending. Robert follows Abilene’s cell phone light, one step at a time. Inside, she goes to check on Dad, and Robert waits outside the door nervously. The door creaks, so she closes it quick. “Fast asleep.”

Robert shucks his clothes off and climbs into bed. Right after he closes his eyes, there are sounds like upstairs neighbors, like boots beating down his ceiling. He bolts upright. There’s faint light coming in through the window, and it takes him a second to recognize his childhood bedroom. Still, that noise comes through the ceiling. What is that?

Abilene bursts into the room in nothing but her underwear and a robe clumsily pulled around her.

“Daddy’s on the roof.”

He kicks the sheets back, throws his pants on, and follows her onto the landing. They look up to the apex of the roof, but the sun blasts them in the eyes. Barefooted, they bound down the stairs. Robert is at the bottom before he can think about the height he just came down from.

The house looks calm as a sleepy mother, holding Dad up on her shoulders while the morning rises around her. He's dark against the robin's egg blue of the sky, straddling the peak, arms and neck stretched skyward, making sounds that could be words at that height but only float down, unintelligible to Robert. Abilene calls "Daddy," then "Franklin" to get his attention, but he's lost, bellowing to the sky, eyes screwed shut and mouth wide.

Just as Robert's thinking, sorrow or joy, what is that, a single word reaches them on the ground, whole and unmistakable. Abilene falls silent. Robert holds his breath back, straining his ears.

"Joy!" He cries, hands unfurled and grabbing at the rising sun.

"Joy!"

"Joy!"

Real Trouble
after the chaos and the cosmic egg myth

The road snakes through Nana's neighborhood thick as a highway, the medians miniature gardens of crape myrtles, rosemary and rose bushes. There's room enough on each lawn to hold the whole Summerwood trailer park—instead there are sprinklers popping up here and there like lone flowers, the indecent green sprawling around them.

Sun hot on her back and the roof of her mouth itching from all the pollen in the air, Olivia walks in the middle of the road, against the flow of traffic so she can see a car coming and move. Not that a car will come. Not at this time of day. Her first round through the cul-de-sac, and she already feels weak in the ankles. Her feet bulge out the sides of her new clunky white tennies, some brandless shit that falls apart as soon as you slip them on your feet. She keeps walking, watching her feet move mindlessly, rhythmically. At least it's not as humid here in north Louisiana, south Arkansas.

“Excuse me? Do you live in Norma Laviolette's house?”

She jerks her head up to see a woman Nana's age—silver hair sneaking in at her roots—in trim Bermuda shorts and a loose white blouse standing at her bright blue mailbox. Olivia's seen her before, out in her slippers to get the mail or bent over her hedges with stupidly large gardening shears. The woman repeats herself in a crisp, demanding voice.

“Yes,” Olivia says. In the three weeks she's been here, this is the first time a neighbor has addressed her, or even acknowledged seeing her walk up and down, up and down the center road. Her first instinct is to tell the woman to fuck off, it's none of her business, but she doesn't. She can't muster the energy. “I'm Olivia.”

“And I'm Mrs. Mormont.” One hand shielding her eyes from the sun, the other on her hip, and legs spread wide, Mrs. Mormont looks like she's discovered a new world, an

undisturbed corner of jungle, not a twelve-year-old girl with a short, spiky ponytail and sweat forming half-moons on the fabric underneath her tender new breasts. “How old are you?”

“Twelve.” Olivia assumes that she’ll be asked what grade’s she in next, what her favorite subject is. She yawns, at first insincerely, to convey her disdain with the woman, then she gives in to the lethargy of summer heat.

“This is the hottest part of the day,” Mrs. Mormont says instead. “You should be wearing sun lotion to protect your pretty skin.” Her tone toes the line between entrusting Olivia with the valued information of an adult and ordering her to clean behind her ears. Olivia can feel the energy and urge to be nasty bubbling up inside her slowly, not enough to make a soda explode upon opening but enough for a sinister, sustained fizz.

“Olivia!” There’s Nana, on her porch across the street, as if on cue. In the shade, in her plain blue house dress, she’s dignified compared to Mrs. Mormont squinting stupidly in the sun. “Your momma’s on the phone for you!”

Olivia hurtles over the median, scratching her ankles on a rose bush, and runs across the street and up the stairs. Nana holds out the home phone and Olivia grabs it. She hears the tinny ring of an outgoing call. “Nana, it’s ringing. You said Momma was on the phone for me.”

“She will be,” Nana says quietly, watching Mrs. Mormont stand by her mailbox. Olivia listens to the ringing and stares at the back of Nana’s head, where her wild blonde hair is still damp from her afternoon bath.

“Momma? That you?”

“No, it’s Olivia.” She ducks inside and closes the door, leaving Nana on the porch.

“Hey, baby. I was just about to take a break. You should see this lady’s toilet. Got rings like a raccoon’s tail.” Olivia briefly imagines her momma kneeling on somebody else’s

bathroom floor in her cleaning clothes—a ratty white shirt from before Olivia was born, spray-painted with her name at the state fair, a yellow rubber glove on the hand not holding the phone.

“Nana called you to get me away from her neighbor. She—the neighbor lady, she telling me what to do and shit.”

“C’mon, don’t say shit to your mother. And what’d she do?”

“Her name is Mrs. Mormont.” She puts an accent on it, a hoity-toity, five-fork-dinner kind of accent. “She says I should wear sun lotion to protect my skin.”

“Sounds like a tight-ass.”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t repeat that.”

“Yeah.” Olivia creeps just off the doormat, careful not to scuff the floor with her shoes.

“You been acting right with your Nana, ain’t you?” Olivia nods before she remembers to say yes, ma’am. “Good. You listen to her. Your Nana is plenty smarter than me or you. You know, she almost went to college.”

“Yeah.” Olivia has gotten a cursory education in the downfall of the women in her family. Nana had promise, she hears again and again, usually when her momma hears about some kids in the trailer park getting caught bare-assed on a couch by someone come home early. *Don’t be like them. Don’t mess with them boys. Don’t be like your Nana or your momma.* So many things she shouldn’t be, shouldn’t do.

Just then, Nana comes in from outside. “Your momma still on the phone?”

Olivia nods.

“Let me talk to her.” She takes the phone. “Wendy? Hey. You’re what? Oh, honey, I wish you would get a better job... No, I’m not picking on you. I’m just saying you don’t have to pick other peoples’ hair out of the shower drain.”

Olivia can hear her momma’s voice through the receiver, enough to make out her anger but not her words. Nana rolls her eyes hard. “Okay, bye. Call us later.” She hands the phone off for Olivia to put it on the dock and goes upstairs.

Olivia uses the toes of each foot to pry off her shoes, heel-first, and leaves them on the mat. She moves through the living room quickly, intuitively knowing the dock isn’t hidden here, not behind a fluffed couch pillow or on a spotless side table. Through the dining room, she walks on the pads of her feet, her best impression of walking *en pointe* like her cousin Hannah at the ballet classes Olivia’s momma said are too expensive. A glance at the dining table, plus a *plié* (what Hannah’s instructor called a bending at the knees) to check the seats of the chairs, and she knows the dock must be in the kitchen. She attempts a pirouette, more of a wobbly turn, across the kitchen threshold.

In the orderly, spare kitchen, instruments hang on the walls on evenly spaced hooks, and the counters are clean and bare. On one of these, next to the cutting board, the phone dock waits for its prize. **Olivia feels stupidly disappointed that she found it so fast.** She didn’t have trouble doing this when she first came either—finding the useful, transient things: the phone dock, the bottle opener for Mexican Cokes in glass bottles Nana buys at her nice supermarket, Nana’s car keys—the house is far too clean for that. But the thrill of a new place, however slight in a place like this, has faded. Olivia misses home, Summerwood and the cohort of kids she got in so much trouble with in the months before her momma sent her here. That trouble, from this distance barely registers. Her trouble was nothing, just being alive in that place, just like everybody else.

She feels a swelling anger again, like an old friend, at the thought of her momma dropping her off like a bad dog on the side of the road, trusting she'll find her way back, obedient and cowed.

Nana shuffles in, catching Olivia in a moment of fury.

"You don't back-talk your momma, do you?" She doesn't wait for an answer, continuing as she grabs a bowl from the shelf and three eggs from the carton in the refrigerator. Olivia's face composes itself quickly. "If her granddaddy could hear what she just said to me on the phone, he would've smacked her upside her head."

Olivia nods automatically. She's heard about her momma's granddaddy, and about her own, although she doesn't remember him. And her daddy? Well, her momma doesn't talk about him much, but Olivia knows there's no use fantasizing—he "hightailed it," her momma said, when Olivia was little, and that was that. Nana starts beating the eggs, whipping the spoon around the bowl so fast Olivia wonders why the yolks don't go splattering on the wall.

"What you making?"

"Why? You want to help me bake?" Nana's eyes crease up when she's poking fun.

"No," Olivia says, scrunching her nose up and tweaking her bare foot on the floor so it squeaks. "I don't bake."

"How do you know if you don't bake?" She sets aside the bowl and shakes the paper package of flour.

"Cause I don't bake."

"Just because you don't bake, doesn't mean you won't *ever* bake. You're only twelve."

“I know what I do and don’t do.” She flicks her eyes to Nana’s face, expecting a change, but Nana only regards her thoughtfully for a minute, shaking flour into a measuring cup. Then Nana says, “Will you have any of this cake?”

“So it’s a cake.”

“It will be.”

Olivia groans and walks out into the living room, throwing herself into the armchair sideways, so her knees bend around the arm on one side.

“Red velvet, with cream cheese frosting,” Nana calls after her. Her voice has no reprimand in it, yet Olivia feels scolded. Swinging her legs down to sit upright in the chair, Olivia knocks the chair’s arm-sleeve off. She smooths it back on with the care of sliding on a toddler’s shoe after he pops it off. Then she leans back, looking out the window at the street, and listens over the music to Nana’s cooking sounds, running water and scraping spoons. The ceiling fan beats the air like a fork beats an egg yolk. The mixture of lemon furniture polish and the dry musk of old paper makes Olivia sneeze. Nana blesses her from the kitchen.

It’s maddening, the sense of calm in this house. Olivia has wanted to rip this room apart, for one, since she got here. What she wouldn’t give to kick the coffee table, tear the coffee table books—both cookbooks with full page spreads of the food—into streamers? Or pull a record out of the row stored in the entertainment center and shatter it on her knee. She eyes the record wobbling a little as it turns.

In Momma’s trailer, there’s the kind of mess that accumulates with every move a person makes. Old Happy Meal toys and fortune cookies on top of the television. Dishes on all the kitchen counters, either drying or waiting to be washed. Outside, lawn chairs flung all over

because Olivia used them, on a particularly boring Sunday, to play a game of musical chairs that devolved into a game of tag—last in a chair was It.

Nana's house, in comparison, lives constantly in an unveiling moment, like sheets covered the furniture and were whisked off the moment before you entered the room. Early mornings, Nana cleans quicker than seems possible. By midday, even with her waiting for Olivia to wake up before moving upstairs, the house is spotless and undisturbed. It's her greatest pride, this house.

"I've been cleaning this house since I was a young mother," Nana said once. "That room of yours used to be your mamma's nursery."

Olivia tries not to think about that, late at night. In her room, there's little more than a twin bed with an old, thin flowery quilt and a matching chest of drawers, all of them empty. She has pushed aside the quilt in favor of her own blanket, a cheap fleece depicting characters in her favorite cartoon, and placed on the dresser seashells she collected at Holly Beach last summer and a picture of herself and Hannah at a birthday party two years before, wearing matching earrings they both lost. She doesn't know if Nana's room is more of the same. Once, when Nana was out running an errand at the bank, she came close to sneaking a peek, but she soon lost all interest, preferring instead to go out. Behind that door is probably the most boring room of them all, deathly still and clean.

Olivia slumps lower in the chair and wills the trees outside the front window to move. They do not. Behind her, the oven doors screech open and closed.

"Don't jump or run around while that cake's in the oven," Nana whispers conspiratorially as she passes the armchair. "We don't want to ruin it." She goes back out onto the porch.

Olivia doesn't understand how running or jumping would ruin a cake—it's not a warning she's ever gotten. Her momma doesn't bake. Once her feet are tapping on the floor in front of the oven, which radiates an awful heat like a sleeping dragon's, the risk feels high. She uses an oven mitt, and she takes a peek at the cake, red and gelatinous.

"Olivia."

She starts. Nana stands in the doorway, arms folded.

"I was just looking." The crinkly corners of her mouth are sucked in. "I used a mitt!"

Nana snatches the mitt and uses it to peek in, too. "It looks good," she finally says. "Now go play until we can frost it."

"Like outside?"

"Wherever. Stay out of trouble," she says, out of routine, without any feeling behind it.

The high of undetected near-disobedience carries Olivia through the cul-de-sac, searching for a way to buoy that feeling. She goes immediately to a house at the other end of the lane, beyond a curve, where she's seen a man smoking on his steps. Maybe he flicks his butts into the yard or onto the walk. That's how she got cigarettes at Summerwood, although it was much easier there. This neighborhood protects its yards like it would protect children.

She quickly combs through the grass near the steps, watching in case someone comes along, and finds one of good length, probably dropped accidentally. Up close, she notes that the neighbors have a filled ashtray by their porch swing. But she can't risk that—at least if she were caught in the lawn she could say she's searching for roly-poly bugs. Besides, that would be stealing, real trouble, and with any more real trouble her momma might ship her off to somewhere worse than Nana's, out here in the middle of nowhere. The bushes on the side of their house are opaque but not dense on the inside, so she burrows into them, tucking her legs out

of sight, and lights the stub with a Bic she smuggled into her suitcase from back home. It's not long before she stamps it out in the dirt.

Olivia leans against the house, feeling her pumping heart and her throat murky with nicotine, and wonders if Nana ever smoked. By the time Olivia is Nana's age, she'll have smoker's lines deep as ones on the Indian statue guarding the entrance to the cigar shop one of momma's boyfriends dragged them into when they spent the weekend in New Orleans. There's comfort in the thought, that she can reasonably project how she'll look decades into the future. Beautiful like her momma, tough like an Indian. She flicks the Bic on and watches the blue flame before remembering she's got no way of replacing the fluid out here.

What finally did it, what got her sent away for the summer, is they got their hands on some fireworks and shot them off in the field behind Summerwood.

"Left-overs," Jimmy Romero said to the gathering group, the trailer park kids and the kids from the neighboring subdivision, shaking the big brown paper bag in two arms. "You believe nobody bought these Black Cats? Just sitting in his house, said he don't need them, don't wanna sell for the fourth no more." He shrugged and started passing them out like Halloween candy. Hannah and Olivia compared theirs in the moonlight, quickly judging that Olivia's was superior, with a short fuse so you had to run away quick after lighting it.

One of the smaller kids, a cousin of somebody from the subdivision, asked how they would light them.

"With one of these handy things here, dumbass," Olivia said, digging in her pocket and coming up with the same white Bic she's now flicking inside the neighbor's bushes. They all laughed, the lucky ones pulling out their cigarette packs like testimony. When all the good stuff

was out and in someone's hands, Jimmy dug to the bottom of the bag and handed the kid some sparklers.

"You make sure to keep that away from your eyes, now," Olivia said in a baby-ish voice. Then they laughed again, Olivia most of all.

That was the best part of Summerwood, the crowd of bored and vicious children her momma didn't like. Olivia had a place in it, in which she knew who she is and what's expected of her. Being one of the few girls had its limitations and unavoidable humiliations—like the bean dip game, when a boy would run up to a girl and swipe underhanded at her crotch, screaming "*bean dip*" and running, cackling, away. But she's at just the right age—no matter what her momma says about her getting too big to wrestle in the dirt anymore—a neutral one between kids thinking she's a no-use baby or she's somebody to wolf-whistle at walking down the center street. And she's funny, quicker than a lot of the other Summerwood kids, and she follows through on the schemes they cook up with a bravery that she herself can't believe, sometimes.

That night out in the field, she lit the first firecracker, a whispery one that popped in the sky into a burst of gold and pink flakes. The kids all whooped, eyes trained to the sky, some balancing on their tip-toes. Olivia, feeling powerful, picked another and lit it, too. There was a whizz-bang, three-headed explosion. Mrs. Gautreaux came out on her back steps and yelled at them, but Olivia lit another, a screaming Black Cat. Then Jimmy took over, and Olivia was free to gawk and yell with the rest of them.

The good fireworks all went first, which wouldn't have ruined the night altogether except some older boys went and got a cooler full of beer and started in with their mess, getting themselves and the girls drunk, sometimes the smaller kids for a laugh. Olivia tried one, hating the taste. Things got too quiet, and the older boys balanced the girls on their knees. Hannah

paired up with some pimply boy with an Adam's apple rivalling the size of his head, but Olivia refused to give in to their little teasing pinches and awkward eyeballing, out of both nerves and defiance. After a while, they gave up on her, turning on a small radio playing make-out music, lazy, dirty pop songs. Then Jimmy paired up with a girl from the subdivision down the road, and the fireworks stopped. Before long, it was Olivia and a few others slightly separate from a scattering of young couples, talking low and grinding hip to hip, even ass to groin, the kind of dancing that's forbidden at school dances. A small boy vomited his second beer. Cigarettes went through the crowd like candy. Unsure of how to proceed and hoping the couples would get bored of each other, Olivia dawdled by the main group, faking nonchalance, flicking her lighter on and off, until she saw Hannah sneaking off with the pimpled boy, toward a row of trees on the border of the field. Olivia made space for a new secret between them, turning away as though she never saw a thing.

Hot beer tastes worse. The last thing Olivia remembers clearly is spelling her name, or Hannah's, or words of no significance except how many loops they had in cursive, in the air with a sparkler, letting the ghostly trajectory of the letters hang briefly before erasing them with a flick of the wrist. The couples had been at it for long enough that the radio station switched to Spanish-speaking dance music. Then the forgotten pile of fireworks exploded all at once, shooting off in every direction. Everyone looked up, expecting another lightshow; Olivia didn't realize what had happened until one shot past her horizontally, trailing heat across her torso. The couples separated and a frenzy took over. All around was sparks and light and a burning smell assaulting them, sudden and wool-heavy, wherever they turned.

When the smoke cleared, there were several burns, many scrapes, and a few broken bones, including among the couples hidden in the trees. Hannah reappeared, unblemished except

for an ugly, raised love bite on her neck and a swollen mouth; her partner stood apart from her, sporting a busted lip. Two cops and every concerned adult in the trailer park came out. Olivia's momma held Hannah and Olivia by the shoulders, squeezing a little hard. Two older boys admitted to bringing the beer and even serving to the younger kids. But neither of them, nor anyone else, would admit to throwing a lit cigarette into the pile, as evidence had it. Later, once the cops had rounded the boys into their cars and given a speech about how lucky they were that the ground had been wet and the grass and leaves weren't dry enough to burn, Olivia's momma demanded to know whether it was her cigarette.

"I don't have cigarettes," Olivia replied, which wasn't necessarily a lie. She hadn't had any on her that night.

They were sitting at the kitchen table, Olivia and her momma, and she could see her shoes through the glass top. One of them had a burn mark with a tiny hole in the middle, right where her pinky toe was. She could move it through the hole, its rough edges catching on her tiny toenail.

"I know you fucking smoke," her momma said, taking a long, angry drag on her own. "I fucking see you do it. I know when I've got some missing, and I can see you picking up stubs in the yard like a little goddamn motherfucking urchin, and I *know*, Olivia Marie Laviolette, that you're not careful with that shit. Now don't lie to me: was that your cigarette?"

Olivia kept staring at her shoes and said, "No, I didn't have none."

Her momma's hands slammed down on the table, sending her ashtray bouncing on the floor. A tongue of ashes flicked out toward Olivia's shoe. By that time, it must have been three in the morning. Hannah was probably home getting it, too.

“Your cousin got a love bite so big I wonder how many mouths she had on her and *she* tried to pass it off like it was a burn.” Her false eyelashes hung on by one dot of glue, fluttering like bugs when she blinked. “You’re a liar. And you’re piss-drunk, too.” Her face comes close to Olivia’s then, sniffing the air in front of her mouth. Olivia clamps her mouth shut. “Thinks I won’t notice.”

Momma left the table to pace back and forth. “Somebody could’ve got really hurt, you know that? You realize how stupid that was?”

“Momma, it wasn’t my cigarette.”

The slap wasn’t like on television, when the momma slaps the daughter and then she stares at her hand, horrified, and immediately takes it back.

“Little girl, don’t you backtalk me. You not so old I can’t beat your skinny ass.”

No, Olivia had been slapped by her momma before. She has a smart mouth, and she knows it. But this slap was somehow different. Maybe because it didn’t hurt. She almost wanted another, to test whether she could feel anything. But her momma didn’t hit her again. The weight of the night on her, Olivia remembers sitting there, thinking numbly about the fireworks, while her momma cried.

“Why you so bad?” she asked Olivia, once the rage wore off completely and the tears took over. “Did I do something to make you like this?”

The next morning, she told Olivia that she would be spending the rest of her summer up in Bienville Parish with her Nana. And Hannah stayed behind. Georgia, Nana’s niece, put her under house arrest instead, not even letting her use the phone. Olivia called once and gave some bullshit message to her, expecting Hannah to get some fun out of her momma trying to relay nonsense back to her, but Georgia cut her off.

“I don’t want you calling here, you hear? You got my girl in enough trouble.”

Olivia’s momma bitched Georgia out, but what was done was done. Hannah won’t have a chance to apologize, if she wanted to, until school starts.

Legs prickling with sleep, Olivia crawls out of the bushes and finds herself in someone’s shadow—a young woman, sweaty in his jogging shorts, panting and waiting for an explanation. Olivia stands and pats the itchy blades of grass off of her legs. “I was looking for roly-poly bugs,” Olivia says, affecting a lisp. The woman softens and smiles.

“Bored?”

Olivia nods.

“The Mormons have, like, seven grandkids, all coming here for their anniversary tomorrow. You can play with them.”

Olivia smiles back toothily, milking it.

When Olivia runs up the steps, Nana’s sitting in one of the porch’s rocking chairs with a slice of cake in her lap. “You missed out,” she says to Olivia, poking at the cake with her fork and using her foot to make the chair rock gently. “I frosted it myself. Use the butter knife I have out.”

The cake appears normal; the frosting is all stiff peaks, creamy and pale yellow. Where Nana’s slice once was, the inside of the cake is red-brown and moist. She examines the texture, tiny bubbly divisions like cork. Olivia cuts herself a thin slice. It’s richly chocolate, nothing ashen to it. She sighs with relief, but the bite hits her stomach like a falling piano. She thinks about how her momma sounded that early morning in Summerwood, crying and wondering

aloud why Olivia is so bad? And why is she? Why does she ruin everything? Her place in Summerwood always ballooned her up with pride—when did that change?

Late in the night, long after the cake has been put away, Olivia lies in bed, sleep small and far-off. She puzzles over the night of the fireworks, trying her hardest to remember what happened right before the fireworks accident. There's Hannah disappearing into the tree line, then there's writing with the sparkler, but was that right before? Had she bummed a cigarette? Mikey Trahan was there, putting away a six-pack by himself, giving cigs away for favors or a favorite flavor of Jolly Rancher. She didn't really remember smoking, but... No, she waved that sparkler right up until the first pop from the pile igniting. Momma can say what she wants—it's not her fault.

Not that she tells her momma this. They talk often almost every day, but they don't touch on what brought Olivia here. Instead they talk about the weather, the tropical storms brewing and dying in the Gulf, or how the neighbors in Summerwood are doing. Sometimes her momma shares, in a small tender voice, how terribly she feels at the end of the day, coming home to an empty trailer. In these moments of weakness, Olivia can see the opportunity to get back at her momma for this exile, but her momma wouldn't let her get away with that kind of smart mouth, not after everything.

Sleep doesn't come, and the culprit takes form before her eyes in the dark like a shadow puppet, miming the fateful toss of a cigarette, coming forward out of the dark to reveal Hannah's face, Olivia's, a boy's, a kid's, another boy's, older, then Olivia's again.

So she closes her eyes and retells that night with the fireworks, this time wiggling on some boy's lap, one that doesn't douse himself in cheap cologne, one with steadying hands. They sneak off into the tree line along with the others, bodies strewn under the boughs like dropped

fruit. Olivia can sense Hannah somewhere off to her right, and those steadying hands on her waist, her neck, her legs, everywhere at once. She's sliding her own hand over her body, massaging her lower stomach, when it seems like the fireworks go off: bright light presses on her eyelids. When they snap open, the house quivers through a clap of thunder. She feels so still all of a sudden, as if her body just hurled itself through time, bridging the gap between Summerwood and now in a minute. Which telling of that night feels truer? All of them. The guilt of boys in the dirt, the guilt of fireworks singeing the hair off her arm.

“Ball!”

Olivia leans forward in the rocking chair on the porch, toying with her laces, so long that the blood rushes to her head. She snaps up quick when the basketball hits the house just to the right of her chair, bouncing back onto the porch floor. In the street, in front of the Mormons' house, a group of four boys in loose button-ups and jeans bounce on their toes. The boy who called the warning—the oldest in the group, maybe 14—has a hand still cupping his mouth. Olivia palms the ball and throws it in a smooth arc to the base of their basketball hoop, set up on the curb.

“Hey, you wanna play?” The two younger boys groan.

“Yeah,” Olivia says. “Let me tie my shoe.” She sits down again and whips the laces into a knot without hesitation. The air is thick and muggy, the sky overcast and the ground still slick with the night's rain. The forecast predicts a bigger storm sweeping in from the Gulf. She and Nana watched the morning news in the kitchen's small portable television, and the storm, moving through Olivia's home parish and up through the four between there and here, looked like a bruise, too, green on the outside and ripening to a tropic orange in the middle.

“I’m Jonathan,” the oldest says, throwing the ball from hand to hand. They all have short-cropped hair except him. His is gelled up in the front. “And this is Troy, Gavin, and Matt.”

“Olivia. Horse?” They all nod. She saw them arrive, so she knows it’s only the four boys, not seven, but she unconsciously watches out of the corner of her eye for more children to pop up, like they always seem to in Summerwood.

Troy, the next oldest, about Olivia’s age, takes a shot from an angle, up so close Olivia thinks the ball will go through the net the wrong way. It goes over and swishes down. Jonathan takes it and makes the same shot. Then Gavin, then Matt. Olivia plants her feet where Jonathan shows her and steadies herself. She’s not used to hoops so tall and straight. There’s one at Summerwood, but it’s about ten years old and leans forward like it’s walking against a stiff wind. She takes the shot and makes it. Troy laughs and points. The younger boys glower.

“Let’s do a nice and hard one,” Matt says, untucking his shirt.

Jonathan assumes the position, ball in hand, and shuffles back into the median, positioning his legs carefully between a rose bush and a crepe myrtle. He shoots and makes it off the rim. Matt catches the ball and throws it to Olivia. Somehow, she makes it—and without using the rim. They keep playing, devising stranger angles and weirder rules, like threatening elimination for the wrong foot put forward on the pavement. Mrs. Mormont comes out on the porch with her husband and the boy’s parents, and they all watch and talk among themselves. Mrs. Mormont doesn’t say anything about sunscreen, but she does yell hello to Olivia, who flutters her hand in some sort of wave. In one turn, when the shot involves a kiss to the backboard, Matt and Troy are eliminated. They sit on the curb, watching the game bitterly, chins on their knees.

Jonathan tosses her the ball. “You choose the shot.”

She chews her lip, going over tricks in her head, then toes the yellow dotted line in the road. All eyes on her, she turns slowly, like a pageant queen showing off her dress, and stops with her back to the goal.

“Granny shot!” Jonathan yells as she dips her arms ape-low in front of her. She swings her arms between her stiffened legs and out a couple times, feeling for the right arc. When she flings the ball over her head, she aims for the basket with the same muscle memory as tying her shoelaces. Unable to stand it, she whirls around to watch it fly. It narrowly misses the goal altogether, sailing in the air and bouncing high on the road. The boys explode.

“You’re out!” they squeal, pumping their fists. The ball rolls away, out of sight down a slight decline. “You’re out!”

“Get the ball,” their daddy calls from the porch. “I’m not getting you boys another one this year.” The adults laugh and sip their tea.

Dazed, Olivia turns to Jonathan. He shrugs, smirking like his brothers, and jogs after the ball. Matt tries to climb the goal by wrapping his skinny legs around the pole. His momma yells at him. Olivia takes off after Jonathan, her shoes twisting around on her feet, until he catches up with the ball, about three blocks down.

“You missed a shot earlier,” she says. He palms the ball and laughs. “You just took another shot. I want one, too.”

He tucks the ball under his arm and pats his rigid flick of hair. “You missed the first shot. That’s rules.”

Olivia’s arms and legs weigh a metric ton each, pumped full of hot blood. She feels tired and says so, turning back. Flexing too hard against the road, her shoes squeak with each slow step. His shoes are silent, but she hears the ball bounce one, two times, then she feels it bounce

hard off her butt, almost buckling her. She turns around. Jonathan quickly scoops the ball back to his chest.

“Oops,” he says. She walks again. “You’re cute, you know.”

“Leave me alone.”

Jonathan throws the ball again, again it hits her butt and falls to the ground. She ignores it and walks faster. But, when he does it again, she swivels and snatches the ball up.

“Give it back.”

With energy from some source outside her body, Olivia dances on her feet, dribbling between her legs. He lunges for it and almost falls. “Is this yours?” Their steps quicken at the same rate, Olivia skipping backwards, Jonathan power-walking. Then they’re running up the incline in the road. Jonathan throws a hand out and grabs at her shirt.

“Bitch,” he whispers, closer than she thought, panting. They come up on the Mormons’ house, but, forgetting the ball held fast under her arm, Olivia leaps over a low-lying bush in the median and runs onto Nana’s porch. Conscious of Jonathan’s steps just behind hers, Olivia bursts through the door and streaks through the living room. His hand yanks the back of her shirt collar, and they go down together, Olivia landing belly-first on the ball. It rolls away. Something topples and glass shatters, tiny shards pricking her ankle. Jonathan’s hand still holds her collar, pulling the front into her neck, the hem riding up to expose her lower back. She cries out and pushes him away.

Over the clamor of her blood pumping in her ears, Olivia hears far-off voices. Jonathan stands over her, blood dripping from one of his legs, hair standing like the bristles of an old broom. The record player has been smashed to bits, the needle torn away but the record still snug in it, cracked down the center. Its glass cover lies in pieces the size of sand. The room seems

dark, the air tinged the green of little military men. Jonathan takes the ball up, his legs still on either side of hers.

“Bitch,” he says, his face all in shadow. “Look what you did.”

Behind him, a figure comes through the door.

“What did you just say, boy?” Nana’s voice is forbidding, icier than Olivia’s ever heard. Jonathan opens his mouth and closes it again.

“That’s your ass,” Olivia says to him. The raucous sound of the Mormons closes in.

It takes a while for everyone to calm down enough to get the story out. Jonathan accuses her of trying to steal the ball, and Olivia tells them about him bouncing it off her butt—a lame excuse, even to her own ears. But Nana keeps an arm around her, defending her story to the word. After, she cleans Olivia’s ankle out with peroxide and bandages it with **steady**, soft hands. Then she commands Olivia to stay on the couch while she sweeps up the glass.

“He’s lucky he was hurt more than you,” Nana says before bringing out a dustpan full of glass. She comes back in, already saying before she crosses the threshold, “I would’ve whooped his bad ass.”

Once her family leaves, Mrs. Mormont comes to the door and talks to Nana in hushed tones on the porch. A friend calls Nana, and Olivia comes out with the phone.

“Well I just think it’s fair to—” Mrs. Mormont notices her first.

“Phone for me?” Nana holds out her hand and puts the phone to her ear, walking away from them.

Mrs. Mormont folds her arms over her chest, avoiding more than a glance Olivia’s way. Olivia is silent, the wind batting her loose hair around like a cat. Down the street, a trashcan tips

over and spills its black plastic bags halfway across the road. The wind chime on Mrs. Mormont's porch rings madly. Nana says her goodbyes and hangs up, handing the phone back to Olivia. She turns back to Mrs. Mormont like their conversation was never interrupted.

"I can assure you, Joanne, that I know when my granddaughter needs to be punished."

Mrs. Mormont smiles tightly. "Yes, yes. I just thought—"

"Go wash your hair, Olivia." Nana turns to her, abruptly breaking eye contact with Mrs. Mormont, and then she's gone inside. Olivia stands at the door for a moment watching Mrs. Mormont scurry across the street and into her house.

Inside, Nana's sitting on the couch, flipping through channels with the remote. The space where the record player had been is clear of debris, the wood it once obscured a shade darker. She adjusts her rectangular, frameless glasses, slid down to the tip of her nose and settles on a cooking show.

Dark falls like a damp curtain, stifling everything. It takes little more than an hour for the world outside to transform itself, the landscape blurred by constant, sloshing rain. Then the electricity chokes off all at once, the house struck dumb in the middle of it.

When the lights go out, Olivia isn't combing her wet hair layer by layer like Nana told her to after her bath. It's tangled and drying slowly on her shoulders and back, water-dark. Closing the flat, toothy hair clip—like Venus fly trap she saw once on the nature channel unsticking its gummy plant-teeth to catch a bug—on her fingers, she's looking at herself in the mirror rigged on the inside of her bedroom door, thinking that when she turns thirteen she'll look more like her momma and less like a baby. People have been telling her she's a mirror image of her momma for as long as she can remember. She tallies the similarities on her fingers, one

squeeze of the hair clip for each. The long nose; the blonde eyelashes; the small teeth, her two fronts turned in a little bit, as if they're talking to each other. Instead of attributing the features unaccounted for to her daddy, Olivia can see how Nana has the same thinner upper lip, those pointy ears. Her face is strange to her, then gone, and the rain pours down the windows. It's just like standing line under a slide at the water park. She drops the clip and feels her way out into the hall. She doesn't dare go farther than the top of the stairs this time.

"Nana?"

"I'm down here, honey. You scared of the dark? I got hurricane lamps."

Nana is leaning against the coffee table, her legs crossed Indian style, and inspecting the sleeves of her records, all spread out in front of her. Olivia steps carefully over them and takes one of the lamps to get some apple juice. The fridge light doesn't click on, which Olivia finds comforting. Her momma's fridge light's been broken forever, and she almost forgot fridges light up so bright and sudden—a bug zapper for people.

Two hurricane lamps are too bright together, so they settle one on the coffee table and save up the other. Olivia sits in the armchair, but Nana pulls in the sliding pile of records with her leg and pats the floor beside her. Up close, she can finally place the strange smell. A barely lit joint smolders in an ashtray under the coffee table, next to Nana's glasses. Some nights, when the weather is nice, her momma pulls one out of her stash and smokes outside. She acts like she's keeping it secret from Olivia, but Olivia even knows her momma gets it: from the big, swole-ankle woman two trailers over who'll take any chance to talk about her glaucoma.

"Your ankle feeling okay?"

Olivia fingers her bandages, nodding. Nana stands up and opens the cabinet at the bottom of the entertainment center, pulling out an old record player, rinky-dink plastic and dusty. She

wipes the dust off with her shirt and places it gingerly on the floor. Her choice of record from the stack as a picture on the sleeve of a man with long hair and serious face on a background of flowers.

A soft drum roll, and then:

We can't play this game anymore, the man's voice pleads. But can we still be friends?

Behind his voice is simple piano chords at first, then more instruments and a cooing backup singer chime in. Nana and Olivia are silent for several minutes, listening to the music. Olivia runs her fingers through her knotted-up hair, watching Nana sway on the spot as she squints down at the record playing. The movement is childish, her frame too big for it.

“Do you know why your momma and I never talk about your granddaddy?”

Olivia tucks her hands under her legs and shakes her head. Nana lights up the joint with a white Bic she pulls from her pocket. Olivia lets out an involuntary squeak, and Nana laughs.

“Found it when I was cleaning your room.” Olivia’s frozen in place, eyeing the lighter. “I wish you wouldn’t smoke,” she says seriously. “But your momma’s given you that lecture already.”

“I don’t smoke.”

“No?” Nana sucks on the joint and lets the dense smoke out of her nose. She’s got the mischievous air of a teenager. “You don’t play with fireworks either?”

Olivia shrugs, and the moment stretches thin over them.

Suddenly, Nana says, “I was a lot like you. When I was a younger woman. Wild, like. I thought I could do anything. Thought I was invincible. I pissed people off, my daddy especially, and caused real trouble for the fun of it.” She laughs. “Don’t look so guilty. It’s alright. It’s got something to with blood, I bet. Your momma was like that, too.”

Olivia sucks her lips in. The record skips a little when Nana taps her foot. She cusses under her breath and resets the needle, from the beginning.

Can we still be friends?

“Then I got pregnant with your mamma, and my daddy wanted no part of it. Wouldn’t pay a thing. For your mamma’s crib and diapers, whatever, I sold all my things—except a few records and things I hid away.” She smiles and closes her eyes. “I loved this song then. I loved Todd Rundgren.” She opens her eyes again briefly. “He was a singer who wore makeup. Like David Bowie.”

Olivia nods, although she has no idea who either of those men are. Nana nocks her hands behind her head, pushing her hair up off of her neck, and continues to sway until the song stops and turns to crackle. Then Nana stops, her arms falling to her sides. She looks up at Olivia wearily, then down at herself in her sweatpants and cotton T-shirt.

“Me and your granddaddy, we had to grow up quick. He started work for the dairy, I got an in at the bank. Later I got this house on the cheap and fixed it up with my settlement money from the accident—did I tell you about that car accident, when your mamma was in middle school?” Olivia nods. The next song is a soft guitar solo. “Kept your mamma in school as long as I could.” She smiles softly. “I did okay.” The rain lightens up its assault on the windows. “There’s not much left from before my marriage. These old records, some other things.”

“I’m sorry I broke one.”

Nana shrugs and waves her off. She drags on the joint, looking off to one side. “He didn’t want it. None of it. Not the dairy, not this house, not us.” It bursts out of her. “He left on the 20 to go to California. He never told me for what.”

Suddenly, the lights blink on, a lamp on a side table here and more lights upstairs. Nana's eyes grow wide, the mood overturning quick as a card game.

"Oh! Good. Good, now we're cooking with fire. You want to see something?"

Nana grabs Olivia by the hand. Before Olivia can realize what's happening, she leads Olivia up the stairs and into her bedroom, lights on and ready.

In Nana's room, on the other side of an enormous bed with austere cream-colored sheets, are three leaning coat racks, tipsy with cloth. One has coats, fur ones and parkas. The other two have only dresses hung on them, on wire hangers or draped over the hooks. The whole color spectrum is represented, jewel tones and pastels, primary colors and stark blacks and whites.

"These," Nana announces as if she's unveiling a circus act, "are my old clothes." She laughs a little and puts her wineglass down carefully on the nightstand.

Olivia moves closer to the racks but hesitates and glances at Nana, who waves her on. She touches a red dress hanging limply from the shelf of its padded shoulders. She squeezes the pads, half-expecting them to squeak.

"That was in style then," Nana says, and she reaches behind it for a silky dress in a vivid, peacock-feather teal, unstructured and slippery. "So was this." She holds it to her body, posing with her stomach sucked in and her ankle turned in just so, and laughs. Digging in the other coat rack, she comes up with a peach-colored one, short, with frills frothing on the underside. She throws it to Olivia. "Try it on."

Olivia turns it over in her hands, unsure, then she looks up to see Nana stripping out of her sweatpants, her shirt already on the floor. Her white bra has slight sweat stains on the band under her arms. The ring of her lower stomach sags, seemingly unconnected from the upper

stomach. On her hips, there are lines scarred into the skin, silvery white and scraggly, reaching around.

“Nana!”

“What? Oh, honey.” She gestures to the room around them. “We’re all girls here.”

Olivia slowly takes off her old T-shirt, peels off her mesh P.E. shorts. Nana moves fast. She has the teal dress on, her bra poking out over the neckline, before Olivia has considered how to step into the frilly peach one, which has thick crisscrossing straps at the top. Nana pulls on a zipper Olivia couldn’t find, then holds it open like a trash bag when someone needs to throw that one last thing. The inside of the dress is scratchy and unpleasant, and the bodice dips out to accommodate a chest Olivia couldn’t dream of having yet, but she likes it. She inspects herself in the mirror Nana pulls from behind the coat racks, a tall beautiful one with a wood frame, while Nana zips her up in the back, struggling with a snag. The light shining off the peach color brings out the flush in her face and the gold in her hair. She resembles her momma in her prom pictures.

Stopping to look at herself, Nana snorts. Olivia watches in the mirror as she pulls the dress back down around her waist, reaches one arm behind her back to unclip her bra, and, in an expert’s move, yanks it off by the center clasp. Her breasts are lopsided, the nipples larger than Olivia thinks nipples can be. And prune-y, of course, the skin a stretched-out drawstring bag. Seeing Olivia looking at them, Nana stuffs herself back in the dress and waggles her fingers in the bodice of Olivia’s.

“You’ll have them before you know it.”

Then they stop and look at themselves in the mirror, Nana looking exposed in barely more than lingerie, Olivia swallowed up in satin. And it’s funny for a while. It’s the funniest thing they’ve ever seen, Olivia’s puffy chest, like unfinished, half-raw pastry, peeking out from

over her sagging neckline and Nana's belly pooching out the taut satin. But they stop eventually, and Nana looks about ready to cry, staring at the dresses on either side of the mirror. The rain pelts the windows with renewed vigor.

The dress starts to feel too itchy for Olivia to bear.

"Nana?" Olivia's voice sounds whiny to her ears, and she tries to clear her throat before she continues.

"Yeah?" Nana runs her hands over her torso, smoothing the fabric.

"What happened to my granddaddy?"

Nana stares at her for a moment. "He died in a gas station bathroom in Sweetwater, Texas." She unzips Olivia's dress in one swoop, and Olivia steps out of it. Nana runs her fingers over the fabric. "He was a sad man," she says, so quiet Olivia leans in. "Sadder than I want to give him credit for." She starts like someone pinched her and, slipping the straps over a hanger, starts making bright, clucking sounds. Suddenly, she's Nana again, brisk and in control.

"I loved this one," she says before finding a spot for it on the rack. She strips her own dress off just as quickly, working it over her hips in such a practiced way that Olivia tries to mimic the movement in pulling her shorts back on.

They go downstairs, where the records seem to have multiplied. Nana scoops them up, shove them into their place, and puts on another record, another one by Todd Rundgren, or at least one that sounds like it. On the chaise lounge, Olivia puts her feet on Nana's lap and lets her stroke her hair.

"Honey?"

Olivia nods, although her eyelids feel droopy.

“Promise me you’ll take care of yourself. Okay? Your momma and me—we’ve been saving up all the good luck for you. Don’t waste it.”

Just as Olivia is starting to doze off, Nana says her name again. Olivia grunts.

“Tell your momma when you go home that I said to keep an eye out for boys like your daddy, your granddaddy. They’re coming for you soon. Too soon.”

Olivia slips off before she can respond and dreams of her name written in the ghostly afterglow of a sparkler, a whizz-bang, three-headed explosion coming off the dot in the *i*, Todd Rundgren off his album cover, serious and sweet-eyed, flicking his cigarette into a pile a unlit fireworks, singing all the while: *Things just can’t go on like before, but can we still be friends?*

Nothing but Water
after the earth-diver myth

When I arrive, armpits damp and hair flush with static, the body had been out to view for hours. The funeral home cools the skin on my arms too fast, and goosebumps rise on them like an ambush. The priest, an old one I don't recognize but perhaps should, notices me and tries to beckon me forward without dropping his aura of authority, stiff as the starch on his collar under his pleated vestments, in white for hope. Boots tamping the thick carpet down with every step, I ignore the mourners in their rows of creaky wooden folding chairs whispering about me.

Jacqueline Vincent—as they still call me, more out of blind stubbornness than nastiness—*Here? What nerve.*

After all, I didn't visit Rita in all the time she was sick. For all these people know, I moved to one of the more liberal states, Minnesota or California, places where they let gays marry. In fact, I did move, several times—to Arizona, Florida, even up in Delaware, although that didn't last long. I don't have a tolerance for the cold. It compels me to drink too much. Anyway, I missed Louisiana the way a dog misses the kennel.

Here's the rub: didn't they guess I received one of Rita's notes, too? Mine read: *Jack, you were my first and best friend.* It was just like Rita to send out specialized last words, handwritten and elegant. I called her house once, months ago, but she was sleeping. Her hospice nurse told me how she had rapidly declined since taking time to write the notes, how the radiation had rotted her teeth. Sympathetic as I was, I dropped it and didn't call again, thinking of the years since we talked, and more since we were close. I told myself there was nothing to say.

Rita's little brother Manny, I note out of the corner of my eye, points at me and says something to a squashed-looking woman who must be his wife. They can't pin me, these people.

Here I am, my hair still long despite my age and despite my clothes, the slouchy pants and breast-denying blazer. My sins have not, as I expected, been dismissed as old news.

I move to the front of the room purposefully. When I saw the obituary, I had felt a surprising sense of duty settle on me, a superstitious responsibility I haven't experienced since childhood when I served as an altar girl. This morning, I drove down from the next big city over, where I've been living quietly for months with a friend, a transplant from Arizona. The entire time I was stuck in traffic, I kept thinking about my momma's apartment, how I couldn't make it here to help clean it out after she died. I lost all of her jewelry that way. A cousin, some leech, pawned it all. I'm sure of that.

"Would you like to see the body?" The young funeral director, emerging from somewhere in the shadows, wears his suits too tight and seems concerned with appearing concerned.

I nod and step up to the casket, feeling a hush spread again over the mourners with the reminder that a body lay out in front of them. The body appears well-preserved, despite the general sunkenness that wasting away brings; a smell hangs over it like ammonia and old perfume. Her face is tight on the edges, the nose foreign to me from the one I knew as a child and teenager, perhaps smaller, definitely less sharp, and her hair is tucked under a smooth, innocuous, dark brown wig that washes her out. In anticipation of that effect, someone rouged her cheeks good, a streak of pink from the apple to her hairline. Her arms, bent at the elbow and joined at the hands over her stomach, are ready to splinter, peel away in threads.

Behind me, a rash of murmurs, a stifled cough, the measured breaths of the priest.

Kneeling on the prayer bench beside the casket, I cross myself and count to fifteen slowly in my head. Then I get up and quietly make my way to the back of the room to a row of vacant

chairs. The other mourners stir and sneak glances at me along the way, still pretending they are caught up in the sobriety of the occasion. I recognize many of them. There, near the front, sit the relatives, the uncles and cousins, brother and parents, who have done their best to forget Rita and I were ever friends. Rita's momma stiffens in her seat as I pass, her eyes on the floor, a rosary with icons worn to the plate looped around her fist. I sit in the back, almost directly behind her, the angry lines of her shoulders. You'd think I killed somebody, not just dealt a little pot, stole a little alcohol in high school.

The first husband, Rita's high school sweetheart, is long dead, from a hunting accident soon after Rita married him. But his friends are there, men I know, some I also count as friends. There is Big Pete Gaubert, who called me not Jacqueline or Jack but *Jackie*, like Robinson, when we played baseball on sunny days in Godchaux Park, and Timothy Lebeouf, the skinny, big-eared idiot I lost my virginity to in his truck bed. They both acknowledge me with nods when our eyes meet.

There are other men: boys who considered me trash then for dealing pot (not that they ever refused my goods), boys intimidated by what they ascribed to greed: my inability to choose between boys and girls. It must have been confusing, to come up with the perfect string of digs for me, *dyke* this and *lesbo* that, then see me kissing a boy in his car at lunch the next day. I could almost feel pity for them. Many of them look old, paunched, feathery around the eyes and aware of it. I can tell which have let their drinking get the better of them. Tim is one. And Rita's second husband, a distant cousin of Pete's named John—or was it James? Him, too. They split up a couple years ago, I hear. He's handsome, if a bit red in the face, with a thick, dark, toothbrush mustache like a cop's. I only know who he is by the wedding announcement in the paper, which my momma mailed me in Tucson.

I take in the priest's finery again, the bouquets packed in the front like bricks, fighting for attention with their sprays of freesia and the bold heads of red and yellow roses. She was cremated, my momma. She didn't like the idea of funerals, and I was her only living relative by that time, so the ashes were shipped to me in a sad bronze jar, which was stolen by a friend of a roommate, apparently gripped by the thought I would hide the good stuff in a damn urn. Rita's head lies on silk there in the casket, and it will forever, or as long as the silk takes to rot away. Not the worst way to spend eternity.

The priest makes his preliminary comments, the same ones he'll repeat at the burial, about how pleased the Lord is to have received Rita into the kingdom of heaven. That really is a comforting gesture, I think, assuming Rita's had no problems in heaven, everything's in order, come to me, child, I forgive you everything.

The Lord's Prayer begins, its rhythm in every throat. I've been making approximate noises to this tune for as long as I could talk. I half-mouth the words that come to me a beat too late.

Even with the car window down, the heat smothers, rising from the asphalt all around me like smoke. The metal bits on the seatbelt and the steering wheel sear my skin when I let them touch. Clove cigarette in hand, I make sure to keep an eye on the hearse. There's something wrong with it, the engine stopping and starting. People mill around in front of the funeral home, fanning themselves with the memorial bookmarks laid out by the signature book. I didn't grab one. Rita looks old on it, smiling on vacation somewhere with bright eye shadow up to her eyebrows.

"Mrs. Vincent?"

Commented [S6]: with the idea???

There's a tap on the closed window, passenger-side, and a small, frowning girl with a runny nose is standing there. "Yes?" I roll down the window and lean over, tipping my cigarette out of my window, out of sight. I don't correct her use of "Mrs." It's a nicety here, like ma'am at any age.

"My momma says there's gonna be food after the burial." She wipes her nose on the back of her wrist. "At our house." She points in the direction of the funeral home, then, as suddenly as she appears, she's gone again, running into the arms of a woman standing to the right of the hearse. Sophia Mouton waves at me and says something to her daughter, who runs back inside the home. I noticed Sophia inside, of course; she's barely changed since graduation. The haircut's different, now motherly and sculpted, but her figure is the same, the way she wears her dresses breathlessly trim in the waist. I'm not surprised she has such a young child. She married late, against all the odds. It endeared her to me, to hear from my momma year after year that Sophia was still attending optimistic singles dances at the VFW.

I wave back, mentally reminding myself to ask for her address after the burial, and stamp out my cigarette in my ashtray. A shadow falls over it.

"Jacqueline Vincent."

I turn back to my window and take in John or James, whatever he is, swigging from a leather-bound flask. He was one of the pallbearers, near the back, somber as anybody, but now his tie has been wrenched loose, his jacket folded over his arm.

"Yes?" I feel like I knew him, somehow, when I lived here. If he went to high school with us, he must have been a year or two below. There's something so familiar about that anger, the set of his eyebrows, even that patronizing mustache. Maybe he has a brother, one of the boys

who taunted me. Or a father on the school board, a man with a dull portrait hanging in a hallway somewhere.

“You smoke cloves?” His voice is higher than I imagined.

The smell must be lingering in the air. “Yeah, trying to cut back on the real ones,” I say.

He chuckles and stuffs the flask into his back pocket. “What are you doing here?”

I smile. Nice to have it out in the open, this quiet indignation, this suspicion. I wonder how many people want to ask me that, how many anticipate some sort of trouble from me, an argument with Rita’s momma or a good, old-fashioned binge. “I’m here for a friend,” I say. He raises his eyebrows and stretches the corners of his mouth down as if to say, *Not bad*.

“I don’t think we’ve met,” I say. “What’s your name?”

Silent, he eyes me suspiciously, like I might be tricking him into saying something embarrassing. I try to adopt a pleasant, non-threatening expression. “Jack,” he finally says. I laugh. “What?”

“It’s just—I go by Jack, too.”

“Oh?” He’s mocking me now, his head cocked to one side.

I continue like I don’t notice. “I didn’t know Rita married a man named Jack. The announcement must’ve gotten your name wrong. It said John.”

“Jack is a nickname.”

“For John?” I know Jack is to John like Dick is to Richard, but he’s so ready to pounce on me that I can’t deny him. He must have waited since I walked into the wake to do this, must have thought about it when he passed me by, casket balanced on his shoulder.

“Yes, for John. And Jacqueline, apparently.” He snorts softly as he jimmies his flask back out. “Why did you ask for my name if you saw the wedding announcement?”

I shrug and scoop my cigarette pack out of my console, feeling like I, too, should have something in my hands. “I forgot until now.”

We are silent together, his breathing hard. He props an arm up and leans in so I can feel that breath, hot and sour, on my face. “Why are you here?” It’s not what I expect. His voice is softer, more disappointed than angry now, although his mustache quivers like a rabbit’s mouth.

“I told you. I’m here for my friend.”

Suddenly he is booming. “Yeah?” He laughs, his face a ripe fruit, bursting and shiny, red and mean. “Since when?”

“Oh, 30 years. Give or take a year,” I say, cold. “How long were you married, again?”

“Five years,” he says, fiddling with his flask.

I light my cigarette, take a drag, and slip my hand out, nearly brushing his face with my knuckles, to tip the ashes out the window. I have an ace in hand. Rita’s hospice nurse, a chatty woman, told me that her last husband left her right after she was diagnosed. Quite the scandal, according to the nurse.

“But not the last five. Right?” He jerks the flask away from his mouth, narrowly avoiding a spit-take. The liquid—vodka, by my guess—slops out of the flask in a weak, halting stream like water from a pinched hose, landing on me in spurts and soaking my clothes. I drop the cigarette out of the window and wipe at my lap. The crotch of my pants darken, the fabric clinging now to my thighs like shrink wrap. My blazer, heavier at the hem. Ah, fuck. I smell like my year in Delaware.

Across from my car, some of the mourners, still hopping around and fanning themselves, notice the commotion and stare at us. I dare myself not to glance at them, focusing instead on John with contempt. Pale and nervous, he’s still pissed as all get out.

“Let me ask you something—”

“Yes, why don’t you?” I wring out the bottom of my blazer into my lap.

“What did she write on that note you got?” I laugh spitefully, softly. Of course he brings up the note. “You did get a note, right? What was her little message for you?”

Reaching into my glove compartment, I take out the note and read it aloud. “You were my first and best friend.”

“Huh. I bet you think you’re special.” Coming no closer, he angles himself so he’s looking into my car on an even plane and claps his hands together. “Everybody here got one. Mine said ‘I cherished our time together.’” His jacket slides off his arm onto the asphalt. “Okay?”

“Yeah, I heard you.” I wrestle my blazer off and fling it into the backseat.

Shaking his head, he bends down to pick up his jacket, and the hearse comes to life behind him. The crowd of mourners disperse all in one move, getting into their cars and waiting to slide out into line, all hoping to follow right behind the hearse. I start the car. Straightening up, John turns and sprints down the parking lot, eager as the rest of them to get out first.

The burial site is on the other side of the bridge that marks the unofficial border between town and country, in a sprawling cemetery with one headstone per family. Sun has yellowed the grass, faded the ribbons holding the wilted flowers together.

Mourners pack in under a canopy tent set up around the casket, to get out of the sun, but I hang back. So does John. Although I leave my blazer in the car and squeeze the liquid from my pants best I can, my smell repels the other mourners by a foot. They must think I’m on a bender, that I got soused in my car in the time it took for the procession to set out.

Meanwhile, no one gives John a second thought, though his flask meets his mouth several times during the ceremony. Apparently, he refilled. People bump into him after, say “Hey, cousin,” shake his hand. The divorce is notorious in an immediate sense, his presence here a boon, an expected embarrassment, while I intrude with an old drama they washed their hands clean of years ago. Besides, his crimes are in some ways more easily forgivable. Husbands aren’t stuff of family myth like wives are—they make all kinds of bad decisions, publically, and get away with it. Look at Zeus. Look at Ross Geller. And my roommate’s ex-husband once suggested they bring his pet parrot into bed, sexually. There was something about the feathers.

After the ceremony, which isn’t quite as touching the second time around, I hear someone whisper *poo-ye-yi* as they pass me, meaning something around here smells. Big Pete and Tim acknowledge me, but they rush off before I can ask them the basic catching-up questions. I am left blinking in the sun, surrounded by people who are careful not to catch my eye. Once the elderly and sun-drunk children have stumbled off, Sophia, effusive as ever, finds me and tells me the get-together (she doesn’t use such a vulgar word as *party*) will be at her house, and did I know where that is? Thighs burning with the heat of evaporation, my head nods and my mouth says, unaccountably, “Yes, of course. I’ll see y’all there.”

“Okay. We’ll wait until tonight—so it’ll be cooler,” she says, chipper and light, that big, pageant-queen smile in on their joke.

Again, I wait in my car, windows rolled down, while the other mourners line up to go. It all feels rote, the heavy sound of dirt still being heaved onto the casket and body like a footnote on the day. There they go, back to their separate homes with leftovers wrapped in tin foil, giving in to peeling their Spanx off and ordering the children to their math homework, back to who forgot to pay the car note and *American Idol* is on tonight, the fact of Margherita Latiolais, dead

and buried, dusted off of their shoulders. As they pass my car, I imagine what Rita's note to each one might have said. If John, that asshole, got *I cherished out time together*, she really must have scraped the barrel.

To Sophia: *You are my last and truest friend.*

To a cousin: *How glad I am to be related to you.*

To her first mother-in-law: *You make the best green bean casserole I've had in my life.*

I press my pointer finger on my pants, dampening the tip just enough that I can taste the alcohol when I bring it to my mouth.

When I set out for the party from my hotel, the bridge is up for a barge passing through the river, so cars are backed up past the intersection. My own flask, filled with the last of the cheap whiskey from my mini-bar, cools my legs. I fidget, tense as a race driver at the starting line.

To the left, the car dealership on the corner is a monument of glass, from the showroom held in place by story-long, tinted panes to the glittering trucks with ballooned neon letters on their windshields. To the right, a watermelon stand set up just off the road, really only crates in the tailgate of a pickup where three men sit dangling their legs. The buttoned-up car salesmen walk like the asphalt burns their feet, checking the lot one last time before closing. The watermelon men, flagged down by a driver or two, come forward cradling fruit in their arms.

One knocks on my passenger-side window, patting the melon with his other hand like calming a small child. I offer a five and accept the melon through the window, onto my seat.

"You keep cool now," the man says, pocketing the bill with a big smile.

A few cars in the line up ahead pull out and cut through the gas station lot to take another way around. We move up together, and the watermelon men run back to their truck. The bridge eases down, the red and white striped barriers go back up, and I drive across. Then past the syrup factory, with its giant yellow syrup can out front, and the Vietnamese-owned gas station that sells crispy shrimp po'boys better and cheaper than the ones at some of the nicer seafood restaurants. I enter the nice part of town, driving past an oyster bar, the tables out front filled with oil-rich retirees slurping, the furniture store where the old office supply used to be, the red brick cathedral dedicated to Mary Magdalene.

The streetlights sputter on as I wind through the nice neighborhoods, lifted brick houses with cars tucked away politely in their driveways. I'll know the house by the mourners' cars wrapped around the block like ticker tape, but I can't seem to find them. Have I missed it? The sun sets by degrees, slipping as if hung from a rope behind the houses before I can orient myself. I cut off a mini-van that comes out of nowhere, then I park on the curb, next to an oak tree I'll remember by the thick ring of white paint on its trunk. On the way out of the car, I stuff the empty flask in my pocket and heft the watermelon, a fine hostess gift for Sophia, under my arm.

The sidewalk rolls over a network of distended oak roots, too uneven for my unsteady legs. I take to the middle of the road, searching in each house a characteristic primness that will tip me off to its being Sophia's.

A dark figure is born on the ground in front of me, bisected by the yellow dotted line, until a car horn from behind jerks me aside. My shadow collapses in on itself as the headlights sweep past.

The stars come out, the mosquitos. Then I recognize something, an iron lawn ornament: an arch framed in flowers, and, inside it, the name *Latiolais*. My momma had told me, back

when Rita was between marriages, about Rita's momma getting a copy made of the one on the family lawn, barnacled with rust, leaning to one side since, as far as I know, it was posted in the ground. This one shines in the starlight. I consider the house, plain and respectable, and realize I've always imagined Rita living in her childhood home, nearer my hotel than here, padding barefoot on its sparse, yellow grass, mewling at the feral cats slinking to and from their muddy kingdom underneath the floorboards, where they yowl and spit, waking her in the night—not this place.

Something spooks me out of knocking. Instead I slip, watermelon held high over my head, into the strip of grass connecting the back and front yards.

In the back, elephant ears line the fence, dry leaves chipping from their stalks like paint. By the French doors, sections in panes of glass from top to bottom, a small planter lies, knocked on its side with dry dirt spilled onto the welcome mat. Watermelon balanced between my stomach and the French doors, I press my face against the cool glass. Directly in front of me is an uncluttered dining room, a long dining table, meant for dinner guests, and, to the left, visible only if I squint and tuck my hands closer to my face, a seating area with plush furniture and a television with the dimensions of a movie screen. The glowing green numbers of a microwave alert me to a kitchen beyond these rooms.

My breath fogs the scene into fat pixels right as a faint white light, remote and small, turns on. I jump back, smooth as hopscotch. The watermelon rolls down the window and bursts into quarters on the mat, juice sloshing up to kiss my legs, arms, face. Someone, some dark, creeping outline, slides into place in the glass, walking towards me. At the same time, we scream, and, at the same time, we recognize each other.

In the same clothes as earlier but less grimy, his hair hanging wet in his face, John throws the door open, gumming up the bottom with watermelon, and stands there with a sandwich in one hand.

“*What* are you *doing* here, woman?”

I bend over, hand on my heart. “Goddamn you.”

“Why are you here?”

“Why are you here, John? I know you don’t live here.”

“It’s Jack!”

“Okay, Jack!” I use the bottom of my shirt to scrub the juice off my face.

We stare at one another until his shoulders slump and his eyes film over with resignation. “Dinner,” he says around a bite of sandwich. He nods his head at the watermelon. “C’mon inside.”

Air pumps audibly out of the air vents, cooling the house to a chill. He wordlessly shows me the inside of the refrigerator, the untouched tubs of soft comfort food: potato salad, canned cranberry sauce still in its log shape, yams with marshmallows, fillets of fish stuffed with crab meat. I recognize the names written on the lids, Sophie’s and others, and know with no small amount of guilt that Rita’s friends and neighbors brought her food until the very end. I search the cabinets for plates and scoop some of everything onto one. I don’t ask about the key on the table, crusted with dirt. He serves the watermelon in those same chunks, so juicy they drip down our arms when we bite into them. We’re sticky all over and stuffed by the time I break the silence.

“So, are we the only ones here?”

He cleans his teeth with his tongue and combs his fingernails through his mustache. “I don’t know. I haven’t checked.”

“Fair enough.” I toy with a watermelon rind left on my plate, leaving fingernail marks in its gnawed side. He fishes a flask out of his pocket and hands it to me. I take a long swig. He’s switched to gin, cheap acidic stuff.

“Not the upstairs, anyway,” he offers, taking back the flask.

We leave the plates and climb the stairs in locked step, him wobbling on his feet as much I am. The house is bigger than I expected, the stair landing leading into a long hallway peppered with doors. It’s common knowledge that Rita got some kind of life insurance money from that first husband, but I had no idea how much. The carpet is pale and soft, the hall lined with framed prints of biblical quotes, decked in flowers. The first on the right is a spare guest room, all beige. John opens the curtains, peers into the backyard. I drop to my stomach and check under the bed.

“I’m sorry,” he says at the window.

“For spilling on me?” I say into the space under the bed, feeling my voice bounce back to me from the far wall like a wave.

“Yeah, and.” He must make some gesture I can’t see.

“She was my friend,” I struggle onto my knees, then to my feet. “All through school.”

“I remember you.” He tosses me a plain red matchbook from the nightstand drawer and opens the closet door. He nods at its emptiness, not closing the door until I nod, too.

“How did I know you?”

“You didn’t. I was friends with Rita’s brother.”

The room across the hall is a small bathroom. He throws the shower curtain back, exposing the gleaming lip of the tub, as my reflection wavers in the small, immaculate mirror. We continue, having hit a rhythm, talking without eye contact like we’re in a car or walking up a hill together.

“So that explains it,” I say, inspecting the label on an old prescription bottle from the medicine cabinet. Useless. Anti-nausea. “He thinks I’m some kind of predator. And so do you.”

“Was that not you on Dateline?”

“Said the man with the lip fur.”

We snicker like children playing a prank on teacher.

“Check the toilet tank for cash, you shady fucker,” I say.

He lifts the ceramic lid with two hands and eyeballs the whirring depths with intense concentration. “There’s nothing but water,” he says, poking out his bottom lip in a way that makes his mustache appear fake, a strip of fur from a coat pinched in place. He’s joking, but the hangdog effect, his eyes red in their hollow sockets, gets to me.

Next is a library or office, a room lined with bookshelves, a clear, empty desk overlooking the street. I sit with my hand poised to draw on an imaginary sheet of paper and watch the street and its undulations of heat stiffen under my scrutiny.

“I do both, by the way. Not just women.” I burp, the taste of our feast rising into my mouth, and almost gag.

Leaning on the bookshelf and inspecting the book bindings, he rubs at his neck and swallows. “Since when?”

“What?”

“When did you know?”

“JCPenney catalog, 1978.”

Rita and I fawned over the models, her for how she wanted to look and me for women I could one day love. It must have been the same as Rita’s boys in bubble-gum-bright teen magazines, the ones with the perpetually wet hair and three-part names. They weren’t my type,

and neither were the clean-cut, plastic men in the catalog. But these women—wrapped in timeless cardigans, warm around the eyes, on a pier somewhere with their long legs displayed in slacks, glancing coyly back at us—they beckoned me towards a sailboat off-camera, where we would drink wine and cheese and kiss, the wind ruffling our hair but never getting in the way of our kissing. I had a narrow idea, at that point in my life, of what a date was.

John, slid down onto the floor with his back to a bookshelf, laughs so hard I think he's going to stop breathing. "Did she know?"

"She caught on quick." In hindsight, I was so obviously mooning over them, daydreaming about our day on a river in Europe, an anonymous sailor manning the boat as we laughed, faces close, in the full-toothed way of models. "But she didn't say much about it. It helped that I showed interest in boys we knew, I guess. And we were twelve, you know. We didn't, neither of us didn't, uh—" I burp again, a sickening wetness behind it— "know which way was up."

We stumble into the master bedroom, laughing, and immediately stop. Curtains drawn, it is still as death or a long absence. An elemental smell, the smell that clings to a body before it is just a body, lingers. The bed is made, hotel corners and all. On the carpet around it, geometric imprints from her life-sustaining machines flatten the carpet.

"Fuck," I say.

The room does tricks for me, spinning, expanding and compressing. The whole thing, bed and carpet, doors and curtains, peels away like wallpaper— and underneath is cold white bathroom tile, the heavy ring of my breath in porcelain. I empty myself, heaving up gray mush that tastes of cinnamon, of all things, dimly aware of John sitting near me on the floor. When I

come up for air, he's got his head in the cabinet under the sink, poking around in the old bottles of shampoo and hairspray.

"Why didn't you come back?" he asks.

I tear a square of toilet paper off the roll and wipe my mouth before rattling off my answer. "No siblings, no family here other than my parents. Daddy dead by my fifteenth birthday, and Momma kicked me out right after graduation. We kept in touch, but I couldn't make it back in time when she died. Other than that..." I shrug, using the elastic off my wrist to pull my hair, now tacky with sweat and whatever else, into a ponytail.

"Not for her?"

I pull myself up. In a corner plastered with mirrors, there's a large, white bathtub in the shape of a Jacuzzi and, in the opposite corner, a standing shower with textured glass walls. I open the shower door and walk in, using the old pretense of checking for trespassers to smell her mint shampoo, anything to distract from my hot, stale breath.

His voice echoes in the cabinet, lending it the same authority as the Wizard of Oz. "Not even when she got sick?"

"Why? Why should I have? She had you." Silence. "I mean, all of you at her funeral, everybody who got their note from her in person." I press one finger into an old, crumbling bar of soap, noting strands of dark hair stuck to it. It's damp, and what seems to be more vomit, the solid bits of it, has clumped and stuck around the drain. "Which—by the way, why you not with the rest of them? Out at Sophia's?"

"She went out of her way to send that to you." He's come closer. I get out and close the shower door behind me, bumping against him. I focus on the pink patches of watermelon dried

on his forearms, stamped onto his shirt. “She searched high and low for your address, thinking you were still in Arizona.”

“Okay. So? I hadn’t seen her in years. I barely knew her.” We meet eyes and turn away quickly. The bubble around us, whatever tenuous barrier we’ve erected to make this possible, threatens to pop. He makes the first move, walking back to the bedroom, straight to the closet. I turn my back on him and lean over into the tub, running my fingers on the bumpy bottom. My skin feels coated with juice and sweat, and, I suspect, traces of vodka I didn’t catch when I showered at the hotel.

“Kind of cold, coming from her *first and best friend*,” he calls from the next room. His voice rings off the walls. At a glance, he’s deep in the closet, feeling around behind the clothes with his back to me. Then I lower myself into the tub, back first, legs dangling over the lip.

“You’re the one who served her divorce papers on her deathbed.”

I yank the hot water on, then the cold, and slip my shoes off. The water rushes in, the sound of each drop hitting the tub reverberating around the room. If John answers, I don’t hear him. Plugging up the drain with the stopper, I swing my legs into the tub, my pants quickly soaking through from the bottom. My reflection, now stable, appears wan, my eyes piggy and dull, and, on my cheek, a gray smear. I cup water in my hands and douse my face again and again, scrubbing hard with my fingertips. When it finally feels clean and I open my eyes, I can see John in the mirror, standing in the doorway. Rising, rising, the water slops over the side when I move to stop the flow, my clothes slowing my movements through the water. That sound from the faucet gone, dead air floods in from every other room in the house, lifted from every empty corner, ending our game of finding an imaginary third trespasser for good.

“She didn’t call me Jack, either,” he says, voice level. “One of the only people I know who called me John. To everybody else, we were Jack and Rita.”

He trails off into silence, and I struggle with the knot, chin bobbing in and out of the water, trying not to slip down. He watches me in the mirror, unfocused, mindless, as I grab a cup from the side of tub, dip it into the water, and pour onto my hair. Two more times, and still John doesn’t continue. My fingers rake through my hair and find my elastic twisted up in a hopeless knot at the back of my head. I curse under my breath and John starts again, his voice more vacant now than calm.

“Do you know how she talked about you?”

With a sound of pleasure, I unsnag the elastic from my hair and slingshot it across the room, right over John’s shoulder.

John starts forward so quickly I jump, but he just leans over in the tub, submerges the full length of one arm in the water, and yanks up the drain-stopper. The water doesn’t visible move, but a nearly imperceptible tug swirls around my limbs. Tucking my legs up, I dunk my head under, raking the suds away with my fingers. When I come up, he’s still standing over the tub, his mustache quivering.

“She defended you to everybody, about anything, from the second you skipped town. From the way she talked, anybody would’ve thought you’re a miracle-worker, not some—”

“I am,” I say, scooting forward in the water to lean my arms on the lip of the tub, looking up at him through my eyelashes. “I am. Look.” I push off the side with my legs and smack my arms down, spraying the mirrors, the floors, John and everything. “There. She lives.”

Splash. “She loves you.”

The force behind this splash is weaker. “She loves me less.”

Weaker. “Then not at all.”

The drain chokes, gurgling under the foot of water left like a sea monster luring prey into its trench. My hands sink into it.

“I’m gone. You can have her.”

John has backed up to the doorframe again, arms limp at his sides, his lips shut so tight they disappear into the brush of hair above them. Then he makes a choice—just like the many that sent me out into the big, mean world, eventually catching on the unavoidable current of guilt and longing to boomerang me, finally, home. Wordless, he walks out, his sure footsteps loud enough on the floor and down the stairs that I can track his progress to the door. The finality of its closing, a whisking noise through the floor, makes me shiver.

Running my fingers through my hair, I work out tangles as gingerly as I can, and braid it with the same deft movements Rita taught me. I sit in the tub, slowly drifting sober, watching the drain seduce the water in a whorl. The last of the water slips away with a sucking sound, until only I’m left, my soaked clothes bonded to my skin. Through the doorframe, Rita’s bed, shining in the light coming through the window like something lost and found again.

Certainty
after the creation from nothing myth

My husband just stood me up for a date. I waited at the coffee shop, feeling conspicuously alone while working on today's crossword, then walked to the house we shared up until almost a month ago. Now I weave between the cars parked in the shared semicircle formed by two parallel streets joined by a bend in the road. Stepping around the circle of mixed gravel, slushy with fresh rainwater, I come at our house from an angle and almost put a foot in the neighbor's kiddie pool, sitting unused since school started, algae collecting in fungal bursts on the surface. Anything could be swimming there, in the turbid water beneath that carpet of radioactive green. Anything. The downy, undetectable hairs on my neck prickle at the thought.

All the windows are dark. I knock on the back door with the side of my fist, so I can be sure he hasn't slept through our date. His voicemail picks up immediately when I call.

I dig the key out of the planter, then decide to sit in a lawn chair out front of our house, a clapboard two-story in a neighborhood full of them, all built in the 1940s and bolstered through the years by layers upon layers of paint in tropic colors, in the style of the more famous Garden District in New Orleans. Ours is a pea-green, one of the more bland on the street, while our neighbors are a powder pink or a fluorescent teal or, two doors down, a sweet, faded corn-yellow that used to be, I imagine, as bright as a child's crayon sun. Here, sidewalks unroll hesitantly through the belts of clover and grass, sometimes disappearing under a layer of mud or packed dust in the dry season. Through trees, flush as they can get, the sun is out like a bald lightbulb.

Above me there's a woodpecker beating a confident rat-ta-tat-tat into the dry bark of the featureless evergreen. I'm amazed I notice him at all, as small as he is. My only exposure to birds being the aviary exhibit, where I have lunch every work day, I've come to consider parrots, with prehistoric beaks hard and curled as ancient toenails, an average size. My woodpecker holds

himself at a perfect angle, tensed for the next peck, checking his surroundings with his alert black eyes. This isn't the nervous checking of the graffitist, but a matter-of-fact, nearly unconscious check for predators. If I were a woodpecker, I would peck a hole in the tree big enough to hide in and improvise a way to suss out the grubs in the bark another way. But I suppose that would make me a species of bird not as bold as the woodpecker.

Tiny raindrops sting my arms and neck, though not enough to send me running inside. I imagine scenarios to explain my husband's absence.

He's gone to the doughnut shop to buy us breakfast, selecting the perfect one for each slot in a mixed half-dozen. Glazed and filled with strawberry jelly, powdered and filled with tawny cream, a raisin-studded bear claw, a chocolate-frosted éclair.

Or he's lying on the bedroom floor, post-aneurysm, dead.

I scan the street quickly and don't see his car, but there's parking off the bend I can't see. I don't waste time. Inside, I stand in the stillness of the dark house for a moment, expecting my husband to appear around a corner and greet me. I move through it quickly, opening doors and expecting him to instead appear at my feet, dead. When it's clear I'm alone, I get myself a soda from the refrigerator, empty except for that and a bag of oranges. Already it doesn't seem like mine. Nothing in the house does, except—on the first floor are two floor-length windows, sheathed in curtains that block too much light. I hadn't replaced them out of fear of being watched through them by a shadowy unknown while I pay my bills or lope naked to the kitchen for water after sex. If only curtains could be made like one-way mirrors, with opacity on one side and, on the other, a certain romantic gauziness that takes full advantage of the afternoon light.

Drawing the curtains back to let the sun in, I sit on the floor and watch the world through the sunshower. People say this kind of weather means the devil is beating his wife, bitter at the

beauty God sends down on the earth. I check with the animals, God's advocates if there are any, for distress or other signs this is true, but they're not bothered: not the woodpecker, who is, by the sound of it, still feasting, and not the unleashed dog on a lawn across the street, sunning himself out of reach of a magnolia's shadow.

A young man emerges from a house of cotton-candy blue, leading a pretty woman by the hand to his car. They're both wearing sleek exercise clothes. Before she climbs in but after he's opened her door, he says something that makes her laugh. I can't tell if it's sincere, not from here. Then the young man walks around to his door, looking at his shoes, half-smiling and muttering under his breath—that I can tell, in the looseness of the lips, that he's not speaking aloud—either in practice for the next comment or to relish what he said before.

Then the young couple is gone, and still I am waiting for my husband. I check the time again. Draining the last of my soda, I work out in advance what I will say once he makes an appearance.

I'll accuse him of neglect and meanness. Five years together, four of them married, and this is how he treats me? (I will be indignant.) The third date on the way to reconciliation and he flakes on me. What kind of husband does that make him? Or date? What kind of father would he be to my children? (The last would be too cruel, but still I say it to myself, in case cruelty is needed.)

I am thinking this over when my husband pulls up. Hopping across the street on the pads of his feet, papers crushed under his arms—case file, by the look of them, fresh from the office printer—he finally sees me framed in the window. Our eyes meet like two gears dropping into place. My rehearsed attack escapes me, and his excuses, however real and forgivable, lose their

terrible importance. In his drawn face, softened by post-sunshower light, I can see the years like a layer of algae on the water.

When I told my husband about the children, I made them sound like houseplants. My job was to care for these two dependents for one weekend a month away, while their mother, my friend Marissa, went on a revenge trip to Belize with a new boyfriend, the first sign she was emerging from the bitterness of her divorce.

He spun the noodles in his tongs while he listened, carefully dipping them onto our plates and grinning like he won something.

“What?”

“Nothing, I think it’s great. It’ll be a fun experience. For you.”

“You sound like a kid trying to hint at what he wants for Christmas,” I said.

Still grinning, he shrugged in his wrinkled work shirt, splotted down the front with tomato juice. Even as he sliced the French loaf—lovingly, like it was the main course, a juicy whole pig roasted in its hooves—I noticed that he under-seasoned the sauce, which lies in the pot thin as soup, a uniform rust and not a medley of speckled greens, blacks and oranges. We took the same cooking classes together three years ago, when he first itched for hobbies to fill out our married life, and we fought, then, about spice ratios and overuse of base liquids like tomato juice. I knew I’d have to get around it by grabbing the can of shredded parmesan from the kitchen, after we tucked in but before he asked how I liked it. I didn’t want him to think I had been criticizing the meal before it was served.

When he sat and picked up his fork, I did the same, poking around in my noodles, lifting them gently with the tines of my fork as if to check for something hidden. I busied myself with

this and picking at the bread until after he took his first bite, then I perked up and put a finger in the air. “You know what I’d like on this?” I pushed my chair out quickly, and he winced at the long rub of its legs on the tile.

“Do you really need it?”

“No,” I called back, already in the dark kitchen. While I dug in the spice cabinet, headlights swept through the room from a sedan parking in the semicircle, illuminating a tree frog hanging on the window by the strength of its sticky feet. Small and wet with a yellow underside, it was what my family would have called a piss frog.

It seems, looking back, that they had a piss variant of most living things—like piss flowers, tiny and daisy-like, growing in patches around our house, which my parents claimed would make me piss my bed in the night if I picked them. But I couldn’t recall a similar frog mythology, only that my parents took their clinging to the windows and screen doors personally, spitting the moniker out like a bad taste and sending one of us to dispatch the thing. If she had been there with me and still thirteen, my sister would have gone outside, peeled the frog off the window like a sticker, and squashed it between her two fingers. Her son might do the same one day, for her. I tapped the window under its belly until it hopped off into the grass, where the bugs were chirping and carousing, celebrating the height of muggy summer.

I came back with the can in hand, quick to sprinkle and bury the cheese in the thin sauce.

“But I like it,” I continued. “You know how I am.”

“Weak palette,” he said, resigned, half-serious. The joke is he’s the beleaguered husband, thwarted in food and all decisions by my contrary tastes. On vacations when he wants to follow a guide book, trekking to the top of inactive volcanoes or pacing in museums, I want to have languorous sex in our hotel room, stopping only for room service or the right movie. We carry on

like we consider each other's plans wasteful, but I don't have the nerve for adventure. With just the two of us in a bed, there's no outside factors, nothing I can't plan for.

"Donna at the office says baby fever hits all at once," he said mildly, using his spoon to smooth his noodles and curl them around his fork.

I choked on a mouthful of pasta densely coated with cheese. My throat lined in parmesan grit, I coughed into my napkin hard enough that my eyes watered and the room went slurry. There was some relief that I didn't have to face him, the hope in him. Paranoia confided in me: as soon as I met his eye, my husband would be able to tell everything in my face.

"I don't know," I said, hoarse. "I do like the role of auntie." Once we laughed together, I knew he couldn't tell a thing, and he couldn't tell even when I blew up a week later, ignited some pointless argument over another meal, called him patronizing, and hauled a suitcase out to my sister's. For all he knows, or is willing to admit he knows, I really am this upset about the appropriate amount of bread crumbs in a meatloaf.

My nephew just received a swingset in the mail from his father's parents. We sit outside, my sister and I drinking iced tea and playing gin rummy at a table overlooking the birthday boy, playing in the grass, and my brother-in-law struggling with the gift's assembly. He smacks his lips at the instruction manual, thumbing through the plastic bag of mixed bolts. He takes up a metal pole every so often, only to lay it down again in confusion. At the tail end of a particularly competitive hand, he interrupts us by screaming "Fuck!" to the sky, having smashed his foot with a fumbled pole. I jump and my sister snorts, but my nephew has been desensitized to their yelling so completely I scared him once by whispering his name when he didn't expect me. He pays no mind to us, bringing two of his green plastic army men up to clash clumsily in midair.

His father sits on the ground, rubbing the toe of his shoe. The hint of a bald spot at the back of his head glints like a gold tooth. His anger enfeebled by embarrassment, his eyes shift side to side under lowered lids, taking stock. I return to my cards. Though hot-tempered like my sister, he's a nice enough man, a man who tells a lot of jokes, mostly about poop and people mishearing one another.

From the front of the house, the doorbell rings.

"We out back!" my sister calls over the house, rearranging her cards in her hand. She likes to group her hand by suit, then number, and I can tell she's got a shit hand because none of her cards are bunched together.

The doorbell, again. She calls over again, louder. My sister won every one of our childhood screaming contests, held ceremoniously whenever we visited our grandparents in the country. After a pause, her husband moans from the ground, "Just get the door, Lizzy."

She smacks her cards face-down on the table. "It's probably her man, anyway."

While she's gone, I watch my nephew play. Making an explosive raspberry with his puffy baby's lips, he throws the soldiers together again. One rebounds off the other and breaks free, zipping through the air in an arc and landing near the fence; he doesn't understand where his toy has gone and freezes, squinting his eyes against the sun, expecting it to fall any moment by his feet. My brother-in-law smiles briefly at me, with half his mouth, when I pass him to retrieve it. He's absorbed in comparing two poles when I pass again on the way back to my chair.

My ears piqued to the sounds coming faintly from the front door—my sister's voice, mostly—I try to focus on the grass, where the picture on the package is slowly leading my brother-in-law through a rough diagram of the swingset in two dimensions. If it is my husband at the door, he'll offer to help, having a knack for things like this. My brother-in-law will refuse

assistance, at this point determined to work through it on his own, and, before I know it, I'll be inside talking to my husband again, accepting the apology I refused to hear over the phone and setting another date.

I hate how the hot weather makes a person squirm, adjusting clothes and unsticking thighs from chairs, and how I feel the wrinkles between my eyebrows deepen with every squint. My head swells under the sun like a fruit left out and I lean back, closing my eyes. The inconsistent clouds sneak in while I'm not looking. The change of light shudders me alert again, and I open my eyes to a washed-out world, tinted blue like a corrupted length of film.

My sister comes back out, hauling a fresh pitcher of tea and announcing that another birthday package has been delivered. My brother-in-law heaves himself up and inside, muttering under his breath, before my sister can pour herself a fresh glass.

"Clothes from one of the uncles," she mutters, trying not to laugh. Then, "Don't look so relieved. What if it *was* your man out there? How long you planning to ignore him over a date?" I eye my cards and go over patterns and possibilities. She knows the dilemma plain on the surface of my marriage. When I left in the middle of the night and came here, she didn't ask for much detail.

"I'm not ready."

"I keep telling you to get him a puppy," my sister says, laying down a four of diamonds.

"You're not funny," I say, snapping up the four and laying down a set of diamonds, four to ten.

"You bitch," she says, tossing her cards to the center of the table. Nothing, even a couple point-heavy Aces.

On the way back to his task, empty-handed, her husband stops behind her and leans close, murmuring in her ear: “The baby’s right there.”

“You bitch,” she challenges him in a whisper. Their eyes meet and a fight simmers in the space between their faces. Instead of retaliating, he abruptly kisses her on the cheek and returns to his task. Something was won, but by whom I don’t know. My sister watches her husband wrestle two poles into place with benign interest. Done gathering the cards, I square them off with one hand like a bookie straightening out his bills after counting them.

“You’re lucky he wants babies,” my sister says, turning back to me. “This one had a conniption fit when I told him about Junior.”

“That’s true,” her husband says, louder than is needed, swinging two poles he wrenched together upright and shaking them slightly. “It’s like I knew what I was in for.” He winks at her before dropping the connected pieces and flopping down next his son. The pair make simultaneous, wet explosion sounds with their mouths when the soldiers clash again, chest to chest.

“And if you think he’ll be bad with them, just invite him over when you watch Marissa’s kids,” she says. “A trial period.” I shake my head, silent.

Just as I use my thumbs to separate the cards, the beginning of a shuffle, my sister grabs my arm and stops me. “Is there something you want to tell me?”

“No,” I say, bending the cards out, then releasing, letting them flutter into new order.

“Are you sure?” She stays my hands again and lowers her voice. “Is it an affair?”

“No, I am *not* cheating on my husband.”

“Is he?”

“No!” I wrench my hands free and the cards fly. My nephew looks up at the sound of the cards hitting the ground, the same dazed expression on his face as when he froze, expecting the shape of his toy to bloom darkly in the aura of the sun.

I’m well aware it takes all types to cheat, but the signs I’ve seen in the overturned marriages of my friends, that dead-eyed boredom or jittery inability to focus on each other while talking, aren’t there. No one, besides my sister, has had the gall to suggest it.

“If my ex had bothered with my clit, maybe I wouldn’t be boarding a plane today.” Marissa throws a bathing suit, this one even smaller than the first two, in her open suitcase. I shush her, pointing to her children, watching television in the next room, oblivious. “No, really. That is my theory. You know who don’t mind bad sex? Whores.” She stuffs lace thongs into a pair of heels. “You don’t know how lucky you have it,” she says, suddenly deflated, and I nod.

No, that’s not it. He’s a loyal man, dedicated to and even sentimental about our marriage. But there is something about my husband that eludes me. Some days I write it off as the detachment he’s learned through practicing law, that distancing from life’s ugly, sloppy details in order to get through lunch. Whatever it is, this withdrawal into himself leaves me in suspense of our life together, even after these years, if not of flat-out joy, at least of satisfied contentment.

Marissa abandons her packing to whisper sentiments I’ve heard before, unconvincing declarations of relief, exulting freedom from that ogre of a cheating husband. Then her voice grows so high and thin she can’t whisper anymore, choked off by tears. Her daughter, seven years old and sporting thick, frameless glasses, walks over and asks what’s wrong in a tone I can tell she learned from her mother—better than the mother persona I would take on when my sister and I played house, phrases gleaned from television depictions of mothers, all concern if only I

could perfect the inflections and that impossibly precise softness. The younger one, a boy of four, stays on the couch, sucking his thumb and watching us with an intense, impotent worry, uninhibited by the pressure to keep face or do something, content to stare and hope for absolution.

“It’s okay, baby,” Marissa says to him once she catches her breath. His expression remains unchanged until she goes over and takes him wholly in her arms, pinching his thighs and goading him into laughter.

When the taxi rolls up, I all but tear her away and send her out the door with her suitcase.

“I left my number on the fridge in case something happens. And their daddy’s, too, in case you don’t have it.” I make an exaggerated face of disgust, and she continues, holding up the driver long enough that he starts grumbling. “But don’t let him talk to them on the phone too long. He’ll get them to invite him over, and it is *not* the bastard’s weekend.”

For a while, the only sign of trouble from the children is their appetites. They consistently want more food than I prepared for them, bigger portions at each successive meal. For the first meal, a lunch of macaroni and fish sticks, I fire up the stovetop again and boil more macaroni, tapping my foot. It feels like an egregious oversight, underfeeding two growing children, but they only pick at their second servings. When I press them, the girl admits they “got full” since they finished their first. After that, I invoke Marissa like a god.

“Your momma,” I intone. “She wouldn’t like it very much if y’all ate up everything in the house.”

The girl smiles politely at my joke, but the boy’s pouty and resistant to my attempts to charm him. All weekend, I’m uncomfortably aware of my inferiority to my fiercely maternal friend. When the boy was a baby, Marissa would abandon sleep entirely, watching over him or

singing simple lullabies into a baby monitor if she had to leave the room. Once, I caught her at her car with only half a face on. Turned out she had stopped in the middle of applying her makeup to give her daughter, nervous about her school pictures that day, an impromptu glamour shot makeover. The picture, positioned next to the sugar bowl on the kitchen counter, shows the girl feverish with blush, her gapped teeth parting a ring of faded pink gloss. I linger by this picture once they go to sleep, thinking about my own school pictures, the wrinkled blouses and egg yolk crusted in the corner of my mouth. We never bought any of them, but I remember stashing away the proofs in my closet, pulling them out to compare the new one to in hopes that I would have improved in some way.

On the morning of the second day, after refusing them second bowls of cereal, I step outside when my husband calls, leaving them to their cartoons.

“You alright? God, you sound nervous.” He’s probably leaning back in his office chair with his feet propped on a stack of papers, tie loosened. On the line, a door opens and a female voice filters through—though unsuspecting, shellacked stiff with news of business. He thanks the woman, probably a law clerk, still wet behind the ears, maybe Deborah, the one I met, with the ridiculous strand of pearls. “They’re not misbehaving, are they?”

“No,” I say. “They’re fine. Who’s in the office today?”

“Me, the big boss, two of the other partners, a handful of the clerks.”

“Deborah?”

“Who? Oh, you mean Diana. Yeah, she’s here.”

Just then, another call pops up, a number I don’t recognize immediately. “Gotta go, another call on the line.”

He heaves a sigh into the receiver. “Alright, honey. Have fun with the kids.”

On the other line is Marissa's ex, the children's father. "Sorry to bother you," he says. "Just wanted to check in on my babies." That grates me, the sugar in his voice, like I don't know what he's done and still doing to these kids. His babies. Who did he think I was, some bleeding heart sticking up for the cheating bastards of the world? I peek through the window, through a hidden sliver of a view into the dark living room, the children's eyes reflecting back the images slipping past on the television.

"Hello?"

"Oh, hey, sorry. They haven't gotten up yet."

"Haven't gotten up?" He sounds skeptical. "It's almost noon."

"Yeah," I say, raising my voice a pitch to impersonate the tested, responsible babysitter who's seen it all. "They just got so tired out last night playing Twister."

"Huh." He grills me on what they've been eating, how long they've been playing, whether the boy had been coughing or the girl complaining of heat rash. He goes on so long on the phone I grow afraid that the children might come to the door to check on me and recognize their father's voice. I return to find them watching television, unmoved. They've been so calm about the whole thing. How can these children not be as nervous as my sister and I had been, her pressing her ear to the door, me preferring to watch my parents' faces as they argued in the side yard? We watches a madcap cartoon together, and I jump when the piano flattens the villain like an aluminum can. They don't.

It then occurs to me that they've never learned what signs to watch for. If their parents had fights before the discovery of his infidelity, I hadn't seen a sign, not on the couple themselves or the children. And Marissa and her ex have been successful so far at keeping their rebuttals fresh for the court room, where the children aren't allowed. In the room with me, the

girl chews on her hair, and the boy sucks his thumb. Both laugh when a wayward wrecking ball smears the cartoon villain into a disc. Neither have the pinched, watchful look my face has in pictures from that time. I wonder if they know what's happening to their family at all.

The bleeding starts all at once. Later that afternoon, I peek in on them, coloring on the girl's bedroom floor, and the boy is fine. I turn my attention to his sister, filling in a mermaid's tail orange as a goldfish, and, when I look back at him, a dark rivulet as wide as his nostril is snaking around his mouth, clinging to the firm border of his top lip.

I scramble for something to staunch the blood and, in a moment of pure, jolting panic, forgo the blankets on the bed for my own shirt, lifting the hem high to the boy's nose. We spend an awkward moment, me straining to pull the shirt as far off my body as I can, bra and abdomen clearly visible, and him pliant but confused, his gushing nose pressed to my chest, before the girl returns on a run for a roll of toilet paper.

"Does he get these a lot?" I sound like I've just reached the top of a steep hill.

The girl shrugs and nods at the same time, standing back, ready to unroll more paper but not coming forward to help press it to the boy's nose. Although I try to keep his head tilted back, protocol I have absorbed from the countless children at the zoo who get nosebleeds mid-field-trip, he slowly drifts forward, dripping red onto the rug. I adjust and readjust him, going through a half roll of toilet paper, until I accidentally push his head back with the hand holding the reddening tissue to his nose. He whimpers and starts to cry. I jump back and the tissue sticks to his face like a clinging animal, quickly bleeding through.

"I'm sorry," I pant, snatching another length of toilet paper from his sister. "I'm so sorry. I'll fix it." But I can't. The blood keeps coming, and the boy stops wailing—which should be

reassuring, but it spooks me. Is he losing too much blood? How close is he to passing out? Could he bleed out from a nosebleed? I can't tell if his skin just looks that pale in contrast with the smeared red.

The girl taps me on the shoulder. "Call Momma," she instructs.

Twice, Marissa doesn't pick up. I dab wearily at his nose. I ask the boy, who's sitting by this time, eyes trained to the ceiling, if I should call his daddy, and he nods. I turn to the girl, and she nods. I get his voicemail.

"Oh, sure," I mutter to myself. "Now he doesn't have any input for me."

As a last resort, I call my husband.

"Don't tilt his head back." He's calm, detached. I imagine him flipping through a file on his desk.

"That's what you're supposed to do!"

"No, lean him forward and pinch the bridge of his nose."

I groan, then drop the phone and do as he says. Next to me, the girl picks up the phone and talks into the receiver.

"Hello? Lisa. Nice to meet you, too. Yes, sir," she says. "I can do that. Okay. Yeah. Okay." She holds out the phone to me and pinches her brother's nose when I let go.

"Better?" Smug, almost. That unflagging calm like a salve on my nerves, not cold so much as in control. I orient myself in attitude next to him, beyond panic, watching the toilet paper come away pink, then white.

We decide over dessert that I'll move back in tomorrow. On the drive back, we keep the radio off and the windows down, the air whipping into the car cooler than it is, soupy with an

impending thunderstorm. I lean over the center console, touching as much of him as I can, running my fingers over his arm. He's warm, my man.

At the door, I kiss him with my wine mouth until we're newlyweds again. I slip off my heels and grip the front of his shirt, pulling him down to me, and every promise we've ever made to each other is real. Is there anything I wouldn't do for him? I pull the door open blindly behind me, with one hand, and trip over the threshold, falling until my husband scoops me up. There's his arms around me, then, when the door closes, the house around me, those old smells, of the freshly printed missives from his office and the oil soap I use on the floors and the layers of our sweat steeped into the walls.

We collapse on the couch, and I know what I want with a certainty older than intentions. Once his shirt's off and my dress is pulled up around my waist, I reach for him—but find him soft. In the dark, I can't see his face hanging over mine, but his breathing is slower than mine, low sighs strung in the air like beads.

"I'm sorry, June," he says. He doesn't move from his position, body parallel to mine and weirdly slack for the tension in his arms, planted on either side of me, fists balled up and driving pits into the cushions.

"It's alright, Troy," I say, thrown by his quiet formality. "We had too much wine." He doesn't sound drunk, but I do. I lift my hips to pull my dress back down. He pushes off his fists and sits back on his knees, twisting around to click on a lamp. The living room is the way I left it, except there's more junk mail out on the coffee table. We end up watching a sitcom with the kind of jokes my brother-in-law tells, sitting with our feet on the floor, and I lean on his arm, but barely, knowing how little he likes to be touched when it's this hot.

Either we both fall asleep or just I do, but I wake up alone on the couch, sticky with dried sweat, a wine headache forming already behind my eyeballs. The lights are all off, but the television is still on, playing another sitcom with the volume turned down so low I can't hear it over the rain until the laugh track plays. My dress has gone askew in my sleep; one of my legs, staticky and weak. When I try to stand, the leg gives out under me like rubber, bending to one side, and I fall to the ground, limp.

There it is, like a plastic bag sucked taut over my mouth.

The first time I wasn't carried to bed, I woke late in the night, sprawled on the carpet in front of the dead television in a house so still and dark the world might have fallen away from me. The carpet's there under my knees again, the hot air from the nearest central air vent blowing up at me like a furnace, dredging up my fear of the air shafts, their dark depths with the shining metal at the bottom I knew from peering through the grates on self-inflicted dares. The terror of walking to down the hall, to my room, and running the risk of disturbing the empty space, held in a sort of timeless stasis connected to the air trailing out of my sleeping family's mouths. The details how I know them, at last in my little twin bed:

I fell asleep watching the Andy Griffith Show with the whole family, relegated to the floor because seniority dictated who got the available seats, the one loveseat and recliner. My mother was drinking, my father glowering from a spat they had over dinner about how the last tank of gas was spent. I feel the moment of betrayal as if I had been awake for it. My sister went to bed of her own volition first, out of fear that they might blow up again and she'd be caught up in it. She didn't think of me on the floor, drooling on the carpet. My father went next, his departure giving weight to his last blow, a simple thing whispered to her, a statement of purpose for the next morning. He wasn't thinking of me either. Then my mother, sipping whiskey, got up,

stepped over my body to turn off the television, and left, not bothering any more with the cleaning of her glass than with me. And in that same spirit, distant and selfish, did my husband slip off at the end of the episode, maybe calling my name once but more likely shaking me off his arm and climbing upstairs, rubbing his aching temples and hoping to sleep without the heat of another body oppressing him.

It's sudden, the outrage that fortifies me. One moment I am scared like a child, remembering my mother's cold hands lifting me clumsily by the legs and ribs every other time, then I find myself again. The leg drags and wobbles, but I pull myself upstairs to our bedroom, ignoring the uneasiness of cutting a path through all this space being preserved by whatever force yokes reality together in the night.

My eyes can't locate him until he makes a chuffing noise, then I can dimly see him lying under a sheet with his arms over his head. His outline is terrifying, like a museum piece after hours with all the spotlights off. At the dining table the next morning, they avoided looking at me, concerned only with whatever conflict they sat brewing in their working jaws—not even my sister, the guiltiest, maybe—and I know that if I cry they will look at me but only to shut me up. Who am I when no one will look at me? I'm the one who watches everybody else. I am in my bedroom, a woman and wife, watching my husband and trying to work up the nerve to shake him awake. Or I could get in bed and sleep, could wake up in the morning pinned under an arm he's flung across me and say good morning. Should I? His face is blank in sleep, his mouth slack as a deflated pool, and it doesn't have an answer for me.

Route
after the emergence myth

Eighth grade, a dark, moist Monday morning in the fall. I'm the first kid on my bus every day. I wait at the road at the end of my long gravel driveway. My ears can pick up the engine sounds before the bus comes around the curve to my right, cutting through the fog, glowing in the gray of the morning.

Mr. Ronny starts the bus going again as soon as I step past him. Bouncing my hands on the seats, I navigate the center aisle in the dark until I find mine. Cold vinyl bends under my butt. The lights on the side of the bus blink the tree branches into crackles like lightning, like the veins in the lungs of a frog I dissected weeks before, when I had to force my nausea down so my lab partner wouldn't tell everyone how green I turned when the smell hit me.

I don't take my booksack off yet; it feels like too much effort that early and there's no one else here to tease me. Little kids, the ones in the very first seats, sit like that, with their booksacks adjusted to the shortest strap, earnest and ready. My seat, almost in the middle of the bus, is where the eighth graders sit, and on the right side, where the boys sit. This status holds an importance I won't be able to articulate for years, long after I graduate to the ninth grade seats directly behind me, not even when I sit in the coveted half-seat against the emergency exit doors. When I can look ahead at all the seats I occupied, seeing every decision that made me who I am up until then, the hierarchy will be clear and unthreatening. But my eighth grade seat is the halfway point in a backwards walk up a mountain. I anxiously watch my progress lengthen in front of me like a shadow.

Since I'm on the bus this early, I always get the window seat in the mornings—mostly useless, given that I live in what the high school boys call "Bum Fuck Nowhere," where the road, a battered state highway, winds through woods yet untouched, the acres my family still refuses to

lease to the oil people. I don't have a single neighbor yet, not for miles, just a house for my momma, daddy, sister, and me, so far back from the road that my daddy drives me to the top of the driveway when it's too cold. People speed like crazy out here, knowing no cops bother. Mr. Ronny drives so fast when it's just me that the one white cross on the deep curve marking where a woman died in a crash blurs, and I can't tell if the stiff-bulbed flowers laid next to it are fresh. It's the first of many small comforts along the way, a remnant of that recognition of landmarks, naïve to context, every child experiences before he can put together a better map of his intimate surroundings.

Across the bridge, the second kid gets on, a fifth grader wearing high-waters. I dip my head under the seat to confirm his calves showing between his shoes and pant legs.

Next we stop for Ruby, her house on the wrong side of the road so the cars in the oncoming lane have to stop, too. When she climbs in and takes her seat just ahead of me where the seventh graders sit, and on the left side, for girls, we don't greet each other or make eye contact. It's rude to start someone's day like that, without permission—especially during Daylight Savings Time, when the morning ride is dark right up until we drive up to the school and definitely not before the other kids get on, when the quiet can be suffused with any daydream.

Often she lies down in her seat and dangles her head upside-down in the aisle, or sits on her knees with her back to the window, arms hooked over the seats, turning her head side to side like she hasn't seen this procession all before. This morning, she rests her head on the window, out of sight. In the quickly lifting dark, I conjure up the blue of her hair in the sun, weaved in silky French braids, pure in its lack of the bows so popular at the moment. She'll chop it to her shoulders in two years, foreshortening its magic.

The bus pulls free of the woods, and the fields stretch out on either side. I miss the trees immediately when there's nothing for the blinking lights to catch anymore. The gray horizon is foggy and uninteresting.

A high school girl runs out of her trailer just in time for Mr. Ronny to notice and hit the brakes. Her trailer has tin foil plastered inside the windows, and there are rusted car frames sitting in the yard like playsets. She climbs on with her booksack hanging off of one arm, unzipped, her hair wet. I take my booksack off and place it on the seat next to me.

"Young lady, you know the rules on this bus," Mr. Ronny calls down the aisle after her, turning on the aisle lights. "Tuck in your shirt."

Her khakis are low-slung, her shirt almost too short to tuck in the waistband. She struggles with it as she passes my seat, and I spy a little Playboy bunny symbol, white as the skin under her tan. I exhale very slowly, trying not to make a sound.

Mr. Ronny keeps the lights on even after she settles in the last seat and yells, "I got it. You can let us sleep now." She takes a hoodie out of her booksack and drapes it over her head.

Our stop at the big brick subdivision, Meadow Park, is the heftiest: most of my friends get on here, including Tyler, in eighth grade but with one more growth spurt than the rest of us under his belt. We all expect him to keep growing, maybe star on our God-awful basketball team, but he will level out suddenly mid-sophomore year and take up billiards instead, leading him into a series of infamous petty fights in the parking lot of the local pool hall. There's also a surly ninth grader in the seat behind me, identifiable to me only by his hot breath on my neck, and a clique of eighth grade girls seated across from us. They come on this morning talking loudly about the upcoming Sadie Hawkins dance like we can't hear them.

“Nathan is sick today,” Tyler says, hooking his fingers around “sick.” Nathan skips a lot. His daddy doesn’t know the tricks yet, the fake puking and touching the thermometer briefly to a light bulb. The way he tells it, when he lives with his momma, she watches him take his temperature, and she would need fresh dribble on the chin to believe the sounds she heard him make over the toilet.

“Two Mondays in a row. Brave,” I say, but I would hate to make up the work for two schooldays in two weeks—not the only opinion I hold close to my chest. I don’t like it when my friends, swept up in the art of laying claims, sign their names on anything of mine. The booksack I have now is almost without a mark, but the one from seventh grade had straps riddled with ink. When I gripped the straps to keep it from bouncing while I ran, my sweat reconstituted the ink, staining my hands with sloppily penned graffiti letters or part of the ubiquitous doodle of a puppy that resembles a naked, kneeling woman when you squint. The trend has since quietly waned, but not before the girls took it a step further and wrote on each other hands and arms, and the boys could spy their names scrawled in the tender web between a girl’s thumb and pointer, a heart looped on the last knuckle of the thumb.

Across, the girls giggle behind their cupped hands. Tyler smooths his bushy hair down in his reflection. I tell him quietly, through the gap between his seat and the window, that he’s got a crush on the one with neon bands in her braces—Bianca. He denies it, tucking his head into the crook of his arm and only emerging when I tell him about the boy with the high-waters. We swing our heads down under the seats and laugh until our heads are woozy with blood.

School drains us. We lose bits of ourselves around the edges as the day wears on, so we appear chipped and smaller at the end of it. I imagine, wrongfully, that it will get better as we get

older. Ruby's braids have come loose, sagging on her neck. Tyler's face is cherry-red; his last class is P.E. Our shirts are untucked, our belts off or unbuckled. We never know what kind of mood Mr. Ronny might be in, if he'll let us relax on the way home or yell at us about dress code.

We push how much we can get away with, and there are so many rules to challenge—too many, it feels like, for our teachers to keep track. There's rules for what kind of pants pockets are allowed, how high our socks can be. We can't wear backless shoes or sweatshirts without a zipper. Girls can't wear big earrings, and boys have to keep their hair cut short. Ruby's somehow avoided punishment for her ID lanyard, but Tyler forgets his belt so much his last report card got held back. In my late high school years, it will become trendy to show up in polo shirts just slightly the wrong shade of blue. Most of the kids around me will sit through not one but two assemblies on appropriate polo color before letting that tiny rebellion go. Word is the private schools, the Catholic ones, are much worse. The parents sign permission slips so the nuns can whack the kids with wooden paddles.

The bell for the high school sounds, smothering the relative superiority I enjoy as the kid sitting farthest back for the brief time between our bells. If I turn my head now, the two ninth graders who sit behind me smack me on the forehead or call me *piss-baby*. The high school students used to get out of class first, and walking down the aisle toward them might as well have been death row. The social climate is primitive and absolute in its judgments. I have a gut feeling that one move could condemn me to the sort of brick-wall ridicule the boy in the high-waters will get for the next ten years, the same I narrowly avoided when I actually wore the fuzzy earmuffs my momma fits on me on the way out into the cold.

Mr. Ronny gets on, pulling his pants higher on his hips. We act like we don't notice him, hoping he'll let us be, and he does. No red-faced screaming about dress code or bus rules. We're

the first bus to leave the semicircle in front of the school, which is purely an administrative choice, letting loose the bus that travels farthest first, but it feels like a prize to all of us, especially the ones daring to put their hands out the window and wave to friends on neighboring buses.

We mess around. I throw a paper ball to the front of the bus, where the littlest kids are sitting with their knees pinched together and their booksacks on. Every seventh and eighth grade boy groans when it just misses the head of the high-waters kid, whose calves have been a major center of conversation all day. But it doesn't get too rowdy. Mr. Ronny yells a couple times. We lose interest in each other and retreat to our windows. Some kids sleep, some do homework with the paper propped on the back of the seat in front of them and the pencil poised just above the page, waiting intuitively for a patch of smooth road.

I watch the ditches get narrow and wide again, speech bubbles growing long and breaking off. In the time I was in school, doing long division and getting points off for using *don't* in place of *doesn't* in my English homework, part of this field of sugarcane was harvested. About half is standing tall, lurid green stalks whipping in the stiff wind, and the other half is shorn, rows and rows of shivering brown. The ashy smell leaks through the cracked windows. That smell, with the same appeal as the smell of gasoline. Bad enough that it's good. When my momma smells it, she rushes me and my sister Gracie inside. The ash rains down and leaves black marks on our clothes. Gracie tries to catch them on her tongue, always forgetting that they taste, she says, "like burnt."

The afternoon rides stretch on. Kids get off and look around dazed, like they can't believe the school day is over.

Some mornings Mr. Ronny's got the itch to sing. We boys joke under our breath that he must have had sex with his wife—a woman we imagine to be both forbidding and coy, withered and lithe—the night before. Usually this music is unpopular, twangy country-pop about giving your daughter away at a wedding or about growing old more quickly than you imagine, nothing we honestly care to hear about. I tolerate it quietly in the dark before anyone gets on, even bob my head to it when a familiar tune comes on. I stop once Ruby climbs on. She's alert this morning, poking her head out of her seat like a rabbit out of its burrow when the bus stops to let someone else on. Some kiss-ass fifth grader tells Mr. Ronny that the song playing is his momma's favorite.

After the Meadow Park stop, Tyler and I croon along to a perennial song, pinching our noses. I play it up for the girls, especially Ruby, giggling uncontrollably at us, her chin hooked over the back of her seat. We poke Nathan, who lumbered on without a hello, to join us. He sighs and readjusts his booksack on his lap. We howl in his ear, and he swats us away.

“What's up with you?” I say, while Tyler silently angles a pencil into Nathan's ear. He snatches the pencil when the lead starts to tickle the little hairs lining his ear canal and throws it out of the window, dashing it on the concrete. We all pause, shifting our weight, eyes on Mr. Ronny, but he didn't notice. Throwing things out of the window is a capital offense.

“What's your problem, dude?” Tyler searches back through the window, although we've left the pencil far behind us. “That was my only pencil.”

“I'm sick.” Nathan snorts back a glob of snot. “And my dad made me come to school anyway.”

Tyler and I raise our eyebrows at one another but leave him alone. Tyler, his legs edging into the aisle no matter how tightly he compacted himself, accidentally trips a high school girl.

Mr. Ronny finally concedes to the incessant begging from the back of the bus and changes the station to hip-hop, which isn't as fun to mock, not when we could offend the high-schoolers who sing along. A little boy up front puts his booksack on the floor and it slides back to us when the bus stops. Tyler and I spend the rest of the ride passing notes back and forth, negotiating its release.

Kids from other buses start rushing through, cutting the line, trying to get closer to the fight brewing in the line of us waiting to load. It isn't long before we hear the resounding *Ooooh* up ahead, marking the first good blow. We rubberneck, but the crush of people is too dense. I imagine the girl with the Playboy bunny standing off to one side, hair big and sultry, waiting to be claimed as a prize by the victor. My ideas about girls are heavily influenced by the movie *Bloodsport*: every red-blooded male must either trick or judo-chop another meathead to get the girl. The fight barrels into the side of the bus, wobbling it on its axles. The shit-talkers at either elbow of the fight sound like imps, like chattering monkeys. Our vice principal comes from behind us, talking low and urgent into her walkie-talkie and strong-arming her way through the crowd. She responds to fights because, unlike our reedy, pleasant principal, she's solid-limbed and imposingly tall.

"Boys!" she booms, flinging hangers-on away from the epicenter with a fierce glance. I live in secret fear of this woman, even once I overtake her in height.

Nathan shows up behind us, sniffing, sweat staining an oblong through his polo on top of his protruding stomach, just as the fight's broken up and the vice principal barrels through the line, pushing a junior or senior boy along with his hands held behind his back. Mr. Ronny

follows with the other boy in tow, one of the ninth graders that sits behind me, limping, his nose and lip bloodied.

“There was a fight,” Tyler explains to Nathan.

“No shit,” he says, blowing his nose on the bottom of his shirt.

Tyler holds his hands up, palm out. Nathan rolls his eyes and swings his booksack around, sliding his hand between the notebooks to dredge up a ragged square of tissue, darkened with pen smudges.

By the time Mr. Ronny opens the doors and we trudge up the steps to take our seats, the other buses have already left the lot. Our high school boys, usually energized into play-boxing or reciting a blow-by-blow, have been drained of enthusiasm by either the long wait or disappointment that their guy, the fearless instigator, was beat so badly. Still, there is a tension in the air, as there is following every fight, both excited and fearful that this kind of lawless confrontation can happen here. The windows are all up, the radio off. We can feel every bump in the road acutely. Two girls in the back of the bus argue loudly about who they felt deserved to win the fight. Mr. Ronny keeps his eyes to the road, and I wonder if he’s as wary as I am, if he holds a desperate hope that we’ll settle anything else that comes up this afternoon amongst ourselves. Right before one of the girls gets off at her house, the other summarily wins the argument with: “Well, no one asked you!”

Nathan intermittently snorts back snot, legs set wide, arm leaning on the booksack taking up an ass’s room on the seat between him and Tyler. It isn’t long before Tyler tires of booksacks rubbing against his shoulders and protests.

“Put your booksack on your lap, man,” Tyler pulls away to give him maneuvering room.

“This is my seat, too.” Nathan silently leans his head against the window.

“You barely give me room as it is,” Tyler says, “and I ain’t sitting in the aisle.” Again, Nathan doesn’t move or respond. “Move!” In one fluid motion, Tyler lifts the booksack, pushing it clumsily onto the other boy’s lap, and scoots into the seat, hugging his own booksack.

Red-faced, Nathan pops up. “Don’t touch my stuff!”

“Fuck you,” Tyler says, stubbornly keeping his seat.

“What’s your problem?” I poke Nathan in the chest before I can think too hard about what I’m doing.

“Me?” Nathan shoves my shoulder with his hammy hand. Tyler remains sitting, watching.

“You,” I say. “You’re being a little bitch.”

“I’m *sick*, you dick.” He demonstratively snorts snot back in his throat with a prolonged rattling sound.

“I don’t fucking care,” Tyler says.

“Bout time your dad stopped listening to your whining,” I say.

We’re three sides of a pyramid, eyes locked on an intangible point of tension hanging in the air equidistant from our bodies.

“Hey!” Mr. Ronny hit the brakes at the stop sign of a busy intersection. “You boys sit down. Y’all know the rules.”

“Aw, let them fight,” a high school boy yells to the front. “That one could use the exercise.” The back of the bus titters. Nathan flicks the boy off, an indolent, damning gesture.

“Ooooooh, look at that! The ape knows signs,” I say. We crack up, and it’s a deep, quenching relief. Nathan inherits the fight, the girls’ argument, all of our frustrations and tensions. I’ve snapped the tension over my knee. I don’t even have to fight him—we laugh him

out of the running. He sits down, fuming, booksack balanced on his legs. Mr. Ronny yells at us to settle down, but there's no heart in it. When Nathan disembarks, wiping his nose on his sleeve, the kids left on the bus taunt him out of the open windows. His feet drag on the way up his stubby driveway.

The next morning, I oversleep for the second time in my life and my daddy drives me to school, jocular about the whole thing, accusing me of chasing a girl in my dreams. The passenger seat in the trunk feels impersonal, the yawning cab behind us empty as a sleepwalker.

Whispers about Nathan in the hush of a long-finished in-class assignment don't penetrate my bravado. We slop from class to class, no one mentioning my fistless triumph over Nathan, although I know they must be secretly in awe—less of me than my bus, the worst behaved in the fleet. We're not like school on television, that place where boys overturn others in garbage bins and lockers. Our kind of bullying is more subtle, the kind of behind-the-hand mocking our parents taught us. And we haven't had lockers, even in our high school, since the last hurricane wiped the innards of the buildings out to pasture. But I'm good at this kind, sneaking and brutal.

I expect more of the same when I climb onto the bus that afternoon. "Where's fat ass?" I say to the bus, swinging my booksack off my shoulder and unbuttoning the remaining two buttons on my polo. No one answers me. Ruby's stare, peeking out over her seat, is inscrutable, black as ash.

"Haven't you heard?" Tyler takes a knee on his seat, leaning over with a sober look on his face.

"Heard what?"

He shakes his head and drops down. Nothing I say can get him to tell me. So I turn casually to the seat behind me. I boldly turn and address a long-faced boy sitting behind me, his hair swooped across his face and caught up in his eyelashes. “Hey, what happened to the fat ass?”

He shakes the hair out of his eyes and pins it behind his ear. “Nathan? He found his dad hanging from the ceiling fan.” His hair slides freely into his face, and his one uncovered eye blinks at me.

A restrictive feeling wraps itself helically around my body. I feel my attitudes and emotions, all of my reflexive responses, have been decided by someone else, and I have no choice but adhere to a long-made decision.

“What?” I say, loud, my mouth pulled grotesquely to one side, my shoulders and neck hunched as if to prepare for a blow. “Isn’t his dad too fat to hang himself?”

He recoils, pushing his hair back from his face and turning away with disgust to his window. The bus engine starts with a hungry noise. The bonds release me. Without my noticing, the bus has filled up. Every kid is looking at me, and with a collective, quiet shudder, they—Ruby, my seatmate, waiting silently to slide in, Tyler, the often giggling girls, the high-school kids, that Playboy bunny girl in the last seat, everyone—dismiss me. My seatmate slides in instead next to Tyler. Our distinct code of social humiliation denies me a rebuttal, just as it had Nathan the day before. I sit back down the right way and, through the gap between his seat and the window, Tyler mutters, “That’s cold, man.”

All the way home, the other kids return to a healthy afternoon buzz, few doing homework or sleeping, talking loudly with a mincing refusal to look my way. I keep to my window, blowing past Mr. Ronny when it’s finally my turn to get off. It’s only once the bus is a rumble in the

distance, hurtling toward the bridge, that I start scuffling down my driveway, laid out in front of me like the road over rolling hills villains take, beating out of town in old cartoons. I measure my steps, stopping when I feel like I've covered enough ground to be at Nathan's door. I try to imagine opening his door, but I can never get farther than the handle. I do this four, maybe five times, always unable to open the door. When I reach my own door, I'm beyond morbid curiosity. I reach for the handle and shrink back, sitting hard in a porch chair. My sister Gracie hears me through the door and comes out with her hair in knots, her afternoon cookie in hand. She climbs onto my lap. My momma and daddy come out of the house with a cookie for me, not noticing right away how upset I am. My sister's thin, warm arms around my neck, I don't cry so much as gasp.

In the morning, when isolated once more at the road, I will be hyper-aware of how the light fuzzes, developing in a wash over the cringing, half-molted trees. The future's a mystery, as always, but if I ever come close to foretelling my life—the cancer that erodes my momma's bones, the selling off of our land and consequent loss of our precious seclusion, the bloom of resentment between me and the older, sadder Gracie—it will be this moment, panning-out into a new world of tragic possibility. I will wait for the bus, with all its impotent classifications, to appear around the bend in the road, golden as an age.

Afterword

This project has been, on its surface, a study in story lineage. Tracing back any story to its origins leads to one fundamental mystery—the creation of the world. Only five stories exist, following this logic, outlined in the five archetypes of creation myths in Charles Long’s *Alpha*: creation from nothing; emergence; chaos and the cosmic egg; world-parent; and earth-diver. In this text, Long gives the general qualities and identifiers for each archetype and examples of each story, repeated again and again, in the mythologies of cultures uninfluenced by one another, unconnected by geography or belief system. Monotheistic and polytheistic systems intermingle in those five categories, organically adopting the same structures and symbols to tell their unique story of how their world, lives, and customs came to be. To clarify how my work has depended on this framework, I’ll summarize the primary identifying aspects of each archetype, with concession that I cannot cover all the variations within each and focus mainly on those details that most influenced my work.

Most bizarre cosmogonic structure, in terms of translatability, is the world-parent myth. In short, the sky deity and earth deity, respectively male and female, are so close to one another, physically, that there is no room for the world to exist. The importance of these opposites’ embrace, according to Long, is that it “expresses the totality from which all other powers and realities finally emerge” (67). In the subtype found in, among others, the Polynesian myth, the children of these deities, minor gods in the style of Greek Olympians, are the agents of separation, triggering the birth of the world. The children of these two deities, joined in primordial unity, disagree about whether they should separate their parents, allowing for the birth of the world, or leave them to embrace. Two camps form within the children, one in favor of each course of action, and they physically clash. The motives of the first camp are the desires for

either a less cramped space or for light to replace darkness, and, in a stunning upset, these children win, rending the sky and earth forever, creating the world

In comparison, the most familiar is the *creation from nothing* narrative. Simply put, it's the archetype for the Christian Genesis—"And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (188)—as well as what we would refer to today as the Big Bang, a scientific theory in many ways prophesied by myth. Often through the will of a monotheistic force isolated in a void, the cosmos is shaped out of nothing. Rather than dealing with an arrangement of natural forces, like the sky and earth, resulting in the creation of man and other creatures, this myth is more concerned with the materials from which a world can be borne.

The emergence myth comes in several forms, all dependent on the idea of an incomplete version of man and the world we know emerging from the mothering earth. Some subtypes of this myth depend heavily on a female deity representing the earth, from which all life blooms. The subtype to which I referred most is characterized by the movement of manlike beings through worlds—each world distinctive in color or direction, as in the Navaho story of emergence, when these beings are often escape a world through an opening in the sky. These beings are banished from each world successively because of a repeated bad behavior (in the Navaho myth, adultery with the wives of native leaders) which insults the beings native to each world. Each antagonistic retreat emphasizes both how unsuitable each of the worlds are for the beings and how incomplete the beings themselves are. When these beings finally reach the world we inherit and stop making that crucial mistake, they become man, our forebears.

In the earth diver myth, it is not the possibilities latent in the earth that foster a world, but water, that feminine source of life, often representative of chaos—but more on that in the next archetype. The generalized plot of this archetype is a creature (usually an animal) dives into this

water and brings up the first bits of earth to see the light of day. There's also a strong subplot of antagonism between divine beings, often twins who represent good and evil.

The fifth and last archetype is actually a combination of two cosmogonic structures: chaos and the cosmic egg. Both are stories of making order out of disorder. To refer back to Long directly, "chaos, which is described in terms of confusion, darkness, and water, carries with it the notions of indeterminacy and potentiality. This is reflection on the condition of reality before the 'centering' of the cosmos by a definite conception and form of reality" (114). This archetype also depends on water as a source of renewal, a metaphor easily transferred to the cosmic egg, that obvious symbol of fertility. The egg can take the form of general dark places, or of caves, shells, or the earth itself. The difference between this archetype and the earth diver and emergence archetypes is the focus on these symbols as analogs for the womb. For example, in the African Mande Creation myth, the vessel of conception is actually called the "Egg of God" or the "placenta of the world" (118).

In a sense, my five stories are just continuing the tradition of these five—which, if evaluated by example, should have been simple. After all, a variety of cultures adapted these forms into stories representative of their beliefs and ways of life. The feat proved more difficult than that, and not just because I eschewed the religious significance in each archetype.

For one thing, it took me longer than I'd like to admit to turn fully to my home culture, that of southeastern Louisiana and the Acadiana region in particular, in these stories. I cycled through more fantastical, otherworldly settings in the style of Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomics* or the collection *Xo Orpheus: Fifty New Myths*, in which writers like Aimee Bender rewrite myth and fairytales, and realistic, yet unfamiliar locales along the east coast, falsely familiar to me in the work of writers like George Saunders or Joyce Carol Oates, before coming to realize that the

setting of my own life is worthy enough of the material. I have my thesis advisor, Professor Jennifer Davis, to thank for this realization.

Simple, too, would have been a reliance on Louisiana's wealth of religious and mythological narratives. However, I had no interest in retelling these specific narratives, often informed by Roman Catholicism or the expulsion of my ancestors from L'Acadie. I wanted to access something more universal, more personal, using my native setting as a grounding element. Over anything else, I feared failing in this because the largesse of these traditions would obfuscate that undeniable something.

Because, more so than the lure of the fantastic, the staying power of these myths and the ideas behind them lies in the fact that life is mundane. Life is a miracle, to be sure, and the formation of the planets, the elegant design of a world that is perfectly suited to sustain us (if only we didn't muck it up) is remarkable. But life itself is an accumulation of days, a reenacting of social strata and norms established gradually by those who came before us, sometimes becoming irrelevant even as we instinctively perform and reinforce them. It is a constant growing, expanding and contracting.

It is, at least to us humans, a collection of consciousnesses that abut each other, one always judged more central, more right or logical or sympathetic by itself. Always, always is the creation of other people happening in each of our individual consciousnesses, a universe in miniature being born in increments, like the emergence narrative, in which the world is borne through a string of misguided actions, crawling from stage to stage, or all at once, as in the familiar out-of-nothing narrative.

Each story reflects this discovery of other people, often those we would assume we already know, our family members or even ourselves, and each approaches the material in the

present tense, which I assumed in order to explore creation not as an explanatory past event but an ongoing process. I found that this perspective does not play out in the same way in every story, however. In “Emergence,” the perspective evolved into a reflection on a pivotal moment in the narrator childhood, told as if the memory played onscreen, the narrator existing both in and outside the story. A similar transformation occurs in “Certainty,” in which the interweaving of the narrator’s familial past culminates in a temporally split perspective in the last scene. In “Nothing but Water,” the fact of Rita’s death is skirted throughout the story, introducing a dual narrative of past and present. And again, Robert of “Gone Home” cannot let go of the lingering physicality of his mother, the five years since her death spent in a state of denial similar to his father’s. Only in “Real Trouble” does the narrative play out traditionally focused on the present tense, although the final scene does open up the narrative to future possibility.

The work this variety of orientation in respect to the moments of creation in these stories does, without my planning for it, is reflect on the nature of discovery and of storytelling. What story does “Certainty” tell except the one of reverberation, of discovery over time of a significant factor shaping one’s outlook, not unlike the reverberations rippling through the universe billions of year after an iota of matter expanded into everything? Likewise, how does the emergence from a naïve, self-centered perspective inform how we look back on our mistakes? In writing this, I confronted again and again what it takes to truly know myself and those around me. To summarize what I’ve learned, I return to Czeslaw Milosz’s “My Intention,” quoted at the beginning of this project, originally about the impotence of writing at all but applicable in a broader sense to the endless interactions, misunderstandings, and discoveries of life:

In any case, my consolation lies not so much in the role I have been called on to play as in the great mosaic-like whole which is composed of the fragments of various people’s efforts, whether successful or not. I am here—and everyone is in some “here”—and the only thing we can do is try to communicate with one another.

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