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86 CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES
Editors’ Letters

Dear Reader,

First, I am so thankful to our contributors and readers for your continued support. This year, like the last, has presented many challenges for us both personally and professionally, causing us to delay publication of this volume. But it is solely thanks to our wonderful contributors that it came together, and I am confident you will find it well worth the wait. Our readers and contributors have kept us going for the past four years, and I am so grateful to everyone who has given life and meaning to this magazine all this time.

We love to find stories, poetry, and art that makes us pause and think, and our contributors have nailed it yet again. From grief, to uncertain realities, to aging, to fear, this volume is full of thoughtful concepts that made us have to take a breath. We hope you will find these treasures as impactful and relevant as we have.

Thank you again to our dear readers and contributors for making this possible, and for enjoying each other’s work so enthusiastically. We always look forward to reading your comments and the excitement every new volume brings.

Wishing you good health, and a warm and bright summer,

Victoria Elghasen
Editor
Dear Reader,

The start of this year has been a difficult one for many of us. There has been great change and great trials, and we have all had to learn new ways of coping. But even when things seemed their most overwhelming, hope has always shone through, and our ability to reach out to others across the world has helped us maintain the bonds we cherish so dearly.

While at times the sheer volume of work and obligations I found myself in the midst of during this time felt like it would be too much, we managed to get through it and come out with a strong summer volume. I am so grateful for all the work we are sharing with you. I am so grateful for the fortitude, patience, and kindness shown by all of our contributors, readers, and everyone who submitted work to us during this hectic period.

A lot of the pieces that appear in this volume touch on topics like isolation, connection, grief, and how a single event can impact multiple people in different ways. I believe these topics will always be important and relevant, and that literature is a safe and engaging way to explore what troubles us and can help deepen our understanding of others. I hope the works within this volume will help you feel less alone and will help you negotiate with the times we are facing.

Thank you for your kindness and courage,

Michelle Baleka
Editor
ROBERT BEVERIDGE

*Fear and Trembling*

You wake up
and go to
the kitchen
and all the hot
dogs are the same
as they were
last night
but all the eggs
have changed
LAURA STRINGFELLOW

Requiem for a Childhood Home

House on a hill of thorns, columns of ash. Inside, a carpet of crushed roses attempts its blossoming. The back yard is sharp with hair of palmetto, brittle from the sun. Thistles slide along the edge of the house, brackish with grief. There are splinters in the yard, I believe, which assemble themselves into bones, even as shadows disappear and the land darkens. It's all a dream under which the cloud of reason is shaken, broken to bits. Shattered—like a mirror that tries too hard to see.

A woman strokes the remnants of a dismembered photograph, the roots of my mother's hand disheveling time, alchemies of earth grown rough by wind.
The Shape of Fear

April 2020

Morning broods into being, despondent, downcast, the thunder grumbling its grievances, coughing the heaviness of its burdens over the roof like laborious stones.

I contemplate the dangers of land, the continents rising up out of their shelves, the globe quickly bleeding to red, overtaken by the turbulent undertow of disease.

My finger traces the boundaries of the Carta Marina, the colorful brocade of its sixteenth-century monsters jutting from the North Sea like perfectly illustrated terrors.

I envy their definition, their clear, clean lines, the Sea Serpent, the scarlet scales of its elongated body clutching a lone ship, the form of man’s fears starkly traced into permanence. I don’t give name to our present fear, the dolor sitting sluggishly upon the chest like stones and long for the time when we can give shape to things once more.

But this fear, it seems, has no destination nor definition, a hovering poltergeist that threatens to spread its enormous shadow, an immense net cast across vulnerable waters.

Now, rain spills from the eaves. The sky darkens once more, thunder galloping its angry hooves across the sky, a horseman harboring his last revenge.

Outside the window, the dead turn from their silent conversations toward me. Caskets line the row of trees, fear taking its shape at last once more among us.
MARIE FIELDS

_Swallowing_

I'm building bombs
To feed my body
I wish I could
Tell you
Acceptable poison
In unacceptable quantities
I'm building bombs
To feed my body
Empty except when
Full
Of all the things
I wish I could
Tell you
I'm building
Your Absence
Bombs
Make my heart
To feed
My body
Bloody.
Tell me again
The lies
The lies
We’ve already gone through
A whole pack
Of cigarettes
Did the typical
Hurried
Flurried
Exchange of
Numbers
Pleasantries
Vices
Slices of
Truths I’d rather not
Put your lighter to
Sharing this burning
That falls away
In the daylight hours
And hours
And hours
One unbearable night
Among the others
Where we reach
But don’t quite touch
Crowded out by
Bodies
By thoughts by
Being
Too much
One unbearable night
We watched
The sun kiss
The city lights
Together
Yet apart
Thanks
For walking me back
Two and a Muse by Kyle Hemmings.
CHRIS BLEXRUD

Canal Street

violence is a passage
each strike a tack into the wind

night falls, and my stars become your bruises
a way home alighted—our northwest passage—
with the sea ice cracking beneath us
the setting skin of an ocean that will never be again

diligent captain,
you steer through me
SYDNEY FAITH

Unbecoming Roadkill

I was a twisted knot of broken bones and gravel-coated cuts while you drove away with my hair stuck in the cracks of your headlights.

I dragged myself off the road, into the ditch, through the thorn bushes, and into the woods. The leaves whispered to me and beckoned me further. I found a place to hide—where I could gnaw off the worst of my injuries—and if that didn’t work, it would be a quiet place to die.

The split in my skull gave way pretty easily, and I ripped out the part that wanted to forgive you. Already my bones began to heal, but they didn’t really fit together anymore. In fear, I wriggled my toes into the earth and began to sink.

Headlights raked through the trees like searching fingers. I was up to my knees in dirt, determined to get my head under. A frog watched me for a while, but he eventually started to hop towards the road. Maybe he was trying to get me to come with him.

When the rain came, the dirt around my waist turned to mud. I could either get out the earth or I could sink until there was nothing left of me above ground. What if I came out of the woods and you hit me again? Would I survive that time?

But I forced myself to leave the quiet place where I did not die and get back on the road. I felt both wildly feral and vulnerably gentle, flipping between the two at an uncontrollable interval. My steps started to falter—did I leave the woods too soon?

As I sat on the side of the road, unsure whether or not I should keep going, I met a frog in the flooded ditch. He told me something wise: “If healing were something with a beginning and an end, then we’d all unfreeze in the spring and never freeze again. If healing were linear, we’d be dead the next winter.”
Confessional

The moon is worried about me. No matter the hour, she’s there in the sky, as thin as an eyelash on a cheek.

At night I sit at her feet and weave a crown of amaranth, confiding everything:

“I wish there was nothing human left of me, nothing recognizable, nothing that had been in that blurry room where hands grabbed at flesh, my stomach shriveled, sickened and betrayed. Where no words escaped, *Swan Lake* played, and I could only stare at the ceiling and wait for it to be over. If I could dig my fingers into my eye sockets and pull my cheeks from my skull and rip off strips of skin until I was just a bundle of nerves writhing and rotting on the forest floor I wouldn’t hesitate.”

The moon is silent when I finish. The only sounds are the shivering leaves, my teeth gnashing at my fingers, and the quiet sobs of rain.
AD KNOSS

me in corners

if I collect in corners
I am memories
no
you are a memory
glass gleam of my phone on the wall
marking like your sulphur-sweet shout
the night a star broke the haze
it wasn’t anger
you just needed to wrench inside
we did things the wrong way
coffee on the stove
duffel in the back seat
the rough leather of your spine
winding its way around my wrist
lost sequins on the ride home
sun scars that were teeth grazes &
the ice cream scorching of
my scalp with hair-pull
we halved like knuckle bones &
two lips into three
it’s currency, the scent that lingers
I trip on your reflection
you’re the tread-pull of my pillow
my shirt with buttons chipped like teeth
throat full of summer-sick grass stains &
shower drain hair &
the dangerously bent tine of a fork
the burn of fire miles away
sour-slick, travelling time
you’re acrid from the past
scried in tree seeds beaten to mud
not a vision, not really
unless it’s me in corners
time-out tantrums &
debt survival
you promised penalties when we began
I signed up knowing the end
you’re not a memory
no
but I think I might be
five things I remember about your carpet and one I want to forget

one
my form adorns it
pale and freckled, warm flesh splaying and full as we lie and sit and lie again
combined we start sentences and start days and start living

two
its colour is a food
somewhere between olive and lime, maybe pear, maybe artichoke
a meal of shag that should be unsavoury, should be ugly, but I crave the taste of it on my skin

three
electronic cords convene
black strands braided by inanimate determination
they extend for us to reach the outside through screens and receivers and waves

four
your grandmother’s magazine rack
magazine-less, feet dipped luxuriously in the green pool
my half-read paperback and your unused remotes concealed in its womb

five
bunnies at the edges
fur and lint and dust watch and collect memories
they hide just far enough away from the vacuum to exist as we exist

one
your form blights it
pale and ragged, cool, splaying and empty as you lie
I am only half at this cessation, the end of the sentence
I’m only half
and you lie
JANA BAUK

*Drainage, my dear*

My thoughts, a clogged faucet.

Thoughts. One day I want to be—

Let's order pizza for tonight. No, cheese. No, pepperoni. A doctor.

I want to disappear help others. Why? Well, let's just order cheese & pepperoni. I suppose I've always wanted to help people, that's why.

OK. But you can't even help yourself. It's about time we called an expert. What? For the clogged faucet, of course. Oh.

Of course. But first, do you think I got the interview? I don't know.

My thoughts, a clogged faucet. Wait, we can't fix it now!

What? Everything in this house is breaking down! What?

Just look down, my dear, look at all the water.

Look at all the water.
The Blue Heart by Kyle Hemmings.
Phoenix Song

Where have the orchids gone?
I wake to a flowerless room
again, the psych ward is quiet.
My skin, lost in the ripple
of white sheet, white pillow.
I plant myself in bed, turn
my head towards the window.
The sun loves me.

It cuts through the pane, feeds me
like a hungry bird.

Everything I see, orchids.
I think I might be an orchid.

My feet root the floor, petals
spill into an aisle of torn paper.

One tear says I’m meaningless,
another says the same, another the same.

I follow the passageway to the window,
place my face on wintered glass—

red bird, perched
on the arthritic finger of a naked tree.

Avalanche of white / orchids.
Blizzard of white / orchids.

Red bird, a candle
curling in a pool of bleach.

One flick of his wing could scald me
set blaze to this long February,

sear this cold, wet light
into summer, somewhere,

anywhere, here.
Litany with Ash, Blossom

I scrub through a white glove
of soap, my hands—sun-dried
beneath the running faucet.
I lather cracked skin crimson,
rust, burgundy, sangria
with candy apple and lipstick.

My mother praises me
with fire, rubies my blood
with fire, cherry, merlot.
I drowned myself in a holy ghost,
called him—Daddy,
guzzled his bottomless empty.

My mother begged me back
to the psychiatrist, reminded me
when knuckles split
like summer strawberries
she'd fill me to the brim
with breath.

Mother, I need you
to lay beside me
in the silver-grey of a worn sheet,
remind me: I am enough.

Mother, I need you
to pillow my skull
with bamboo and cotton,
remind me: I am enough.

Mother, with you, I surrender.
Ink each word permanent: I am enough.
Ink each word permanent: I am enough.

I surrender.

I am enough.

I surrender.

I am enough.
turning 30

i haven’t tried to kill myself
in about five or six years    yet
somehow    i still managed
to turn 30 elbow-deep in concrete
the dried mortar of everyday

dear Reader

have you noticed the balloons
strung like hickies
throughout my room? welts
of red    exsanguinated grey
rubber cadavers
sheeted in the ordinary
dust of skin    hair     dander

there’s a slice of week-old cake
molding in the corner    a stack
of rainbow plates    untouched
above    another thud    again

my arthritic dog collapses
into sleep    her hips
mangled chicken wings

Reader    how did i get here?

to 30    i mean
my belly swollen & sagging
like a wrinkled balloon    pause

stop    rewind    edit

out the doomsday filter
of each cinderblock
minute    insert a laugh
track    maybe a live
studio audience that cracks

into applause

when i wiggle out of bed
hopscotch my way
into another day of denial

wink
at the camera   Michael

smile with proud shoulders
then siphon oxygen   a heartbeat
into the lines you get paid to say

   golly   what a darling day
   this is turning out to be
RICHARD LEDUE

The Misery of Creation

Can feel it
gone, as a lost mitten, dropped in the snow
while running home,
wise enough to fear bigger children
already schooled in breaking bones.

Can feel
it gone—abandoned with a blank page
a toddler knows to colour in with crayons
or rip into tiny pieces,
learning the joy of destruction.
SHIKSHA DHEDA

Shade

How can you be expected to grow in the shade of the same tree that you’ve fallen from
—the same tree that pushed you to fly when you only knew how to fall—to plummet to the ground like a weightless fist of feathers—the mangled branches mocking your weakness, whipping your wounds over and over—even weeds would die in this endless winter.
ELI DUNHAM

THIS. IS A COFFIN

robin
williams
thought
my
uncle
was
funny &
they're
both
dead.

in my
heart a
stork is
fishing,
a lake
of how

can you
see
through
all
these
clouds?
the stars
are
vultures

. i wake
with
sweat &
panic

at my
parent's
house
outstret
ch

ed my
hand is
a moth.
meande
ring
dusty i
am a
candle.

i am a
farewell
. aren't
we all
phases
of
moon?
somethi
ng to be
endure
d. little
Kings

gather
crowns
just to
hold
them
railway tracks have always scared me. Long lines melting into the ripple of a summer's day, the possibility of something dark, something powerful careening down their length. Echoes of a horn blast firing into the midday sun—*get off the tracks, get off the tracks.*

Sally dreamt of them taking her away, somewhere far, somewhere better. But I couldn’t shake the idea of my small foot catching in a rotting sleeper, lodging between the heated rails, as the horn sounds again.

We stayed at Aunty Jane’s house every summer, perched beside the main trunkline, the rumbling of each train shaking the foundations like an earthquake. The corner shop lay across the tracks, the end of Fisborough Street, and we would walk there most days, Sally crossing behind the house. She would slip through the thin gap in the fence, onto the tracks where the lines split, and motion for me to follow her. I never did. Shaking my head softly at her calls, I would take the long way, lower my eyes to the footpath as I rounded the domain behind Whittnail’s, cross the tracks where they rose to meet the ground, where I could pretend they were just some old pipes lodged into the concrete.

She beat me always, waiting at the shop entrance with her bag of sweets, her eyebrows cocked, lifting her skirts in a bow as I slunk inside to retrieve my own.

“I wonder, were you hit?”

“What?”

“In another life. Did you get hit on the tracks? Maybe that’s why you’re such a scaredy cat.”

We walked together on the footpath, our lips sliding back and forth, the sweets hard upon our tongues. I wondered what she was talking about. Another me, another life. A place where a different body lay upon the smooth rails, screaming as the horn blared closer.

“But our souls go to heaven.”

“Maybe.”

I looked at her above the sweet bag, the apple sour suddenly sharp within my mouth.

“You’re lying.”

“Maybe.” She smiled, stopping by the lane that led to Aunty Jane’s. “Come on, come with me. I won’t let anything happen.”

“Aren’t you scared of anything?”

“Sure I am. I’m afraid I’ll never get out of here, that I’ll grow old like Aunty Jane, never leave this place.”

I took another sweet from my bag, scrunched the paper inside my pocket, let my hand fall into hers.

I can see myself on the tracks, feel the fear rise in my chest as I let my eyes follow their rusted line towards the hills. I watch as if from above, white socks navigating wooden sleepers, see myself falling, hear the shrill roar of metal upon metal, blood-orange sparks upon the rails.
The house shakes and I wake. Darkness seeping, the low blare of a whistle sounding out in the distance. I hear rustling in the bed beside me. Know it is not Sally, know I am not at Aunty Jane’s.

_Are you not afraid of anything?_

I whisper out into the darkness, but nothing whispers back.
Kizzmi by Wayne Wolfson.
That woman there in front of you has a constellation of freckles at the edge of her hairline that you’d never have noticed if she hadn’t worn her hair up, or if the column of her neck hadn’t struck you exposed like that, the way a tree trunk can look—the way necks often did, particularly from behind. She probably didn’t know that these freckles were there, huddled out of sight, and why should she? Why should you, except that this was what you did with people, ruined them by hunting out zits and cold sores, uneven eyes, crust in nostrils, scars, blemishes, whatever you could hold against them, these bodies that walked as if they were beautiful. What could they know of how that beauty was seen by others? Nothing, not when our bodies are studies for other people, as you believe: scrutiny in the mirror will still have us failing to see things that are evident to our closest friends.

(For those who have friends anymore. Nowadays, who knows you better than yourself? This is sad, isn’t it? You’ve not given yourself more than the usual amount of study—you’re not an egotist—but there is something egotistical about targeting this woman and her neck and her freckles, there next to a galaxy of a cowlick, as if the freckles swept in its outer gravity, her neck the cradle of creation. Egotistical because you can’t just share the room with another young woman without reminding yourself that every taint you’ve found in yourself exists here, too, somewhere, if you look close enough—and in places unseen, too: unseen and unseeable wherein awaits the festering boils of the heart, the scars of the soul. But no, you’re not the type of egotist who stares at herself in the mirror, and yet that time in front of the mirror—it’s more than anyone else spends looking at you. A body ought to be looked at, and if no one else will…)

But even this woman’s closest friends (if she has them—she’s about your age, so probably not; probably they’ve gone, and maybe they claim that she has changed, though what they mean is that they’ve grown bored of her), likely they don’t know about the freckle at her hairline; only a stranger would. (What about a husband, or boyfriend? The thought barely crosses your mind, but maybe he’d have noticed if she were the type to show her back to men, but it wasn’t likely; men had other things on their mind when they were at a woman’s back.) Those freckles might be the most exclusive sort of secret, knowledge known only to you while you stand in line at the bank, secrets escaping the notice of even the body itself.

She turns to look at you, and her look—not that you were caught, but the look itself, the face itself—unsettles you. It’s not that you know her, but you’re certain that she knows you by the way her face stays still, unbreaking. A stranger would smile. She’s so familiar in pieces; it’s the whole of her that you’re certain you’ve never seen before. Or maybe. You doubt it. Why would she have stared so long otherwise? You’ve forgotten each other, maybe.

But you doubt that, too. No, you haven’t forgotten.

When you’re a child and you’re huddled in a school bathroom, lights out, chanting out the name of whatever urban legend has been passed down from your best friend’s older sister, you might catch sight of your own face in the darkened mirror. Few places are dark enough that we don’t try to find ourselves in them, and there you are, a silhouette not yet self-conscious of its own pudgy outline. And just to be sure, you move your head side to side to confirm, and she moves with you, this mirror-girl.
You don’t scare as easily as you used to. Other girls might be waiting, as you had once waited, for a possible, near-certain death as claws sticky with your best friend’s blood reach out to kill without any other purpose than that they were obliged to, because you had summoned them. Brave of you girls, to die together. The most avoidable death, a death summoned from boredom, and it had you wondering how your parents would explain it. You had asked them if she existed—that woman whose name you chanted and were afraid to say even now, even once, in the light of day, your mother standing there—and your mother said, “No such thing,” and laughed a little. You pitied them, that they were old and still had yet to know the world as you did—and, worse, would have to know it by finding their daughter a victim to something that, to quell their own mind, they couldn’t believe in, that they laughed at, although the laugh was a bit nervous at its edge.

There’s a name for everything, even for what happens when you look too long at your own reflection in a dark mirror and begin to see the face distorted, the expression yours but angrier than you could make it because you could never fill it with such malice—the type of anger that doesn’t come from your charmed life. You girls scream at what is only your own reflections made strange by the dark. You don’t remember the name of this phenomenon, but you remember the relief hearing about it in college. Because you had convinced yourself, that day when you no longer believed in that woman in the mirror (you still won’t say her name) and bloody claws, that you had seen something impossible: your own face as a nightmare.

Your mother had said her name—said it thoughtfully and fearlessly—then said, “No such thing.” And then a laugh. You think it sounded nervous, that laugh.

You remember the game and, as you’re getting ready for bed one night, you keep the light off and study your reflection in the darkened mirror, just a faint light from the hallway to see by. As you knew they would, you watch as your features stretch into an expression that is a just trick of the light, you tell yourself: your eyes stare at themselves, but in the mirror, they seem to be looking up from beneath a shelf of wicked brow; you don’t smile, but the corners of the mouth in the mirror turn upward. Does the reflection seem to flick its eyes to look at something moving in the dark behind you? Yes; a trick of the light. You’re not a girl anymore. You watch as she blinks. You lick your lips with a dry-sponge tongue.

You flick on the lights. Your breath is short. You’re embarrassed that you can scare yourself like this when you know it—what you’ve seen—has a name. It wasn’t the face’s distortion; it was that the distortion was, for a flash of a second, familiar, as if you had seen that face not in a reflection, but walking out in the world.

Breathe, sweet thing.

You wonder. You open a drawer and take out a hand mirror. You hold it behind you while you hold up your hair, trying to see the place where your neck meets your hairline. Is there a name for this, for seeing a face reflected back to you from a mirror that, that morning, you had seen walking around in the daylight, stood behind in line at the bank?

There, reflected twice—from the mirror in your hand to the mirror on the wall and into your flickering eyes—is a constellation of freckles just where your hairline stops. Sweet thing—you’ve never noticed it before.

Breathe. You’re a woman now.
It isn’t the type of things adults talked about seriously. If you had a friend... What you need is a child to talk to; a child could understand this peril. They know that horrors walk the world that adults can’t seem to believe in and therefore can’t see.

But you had a feeling eyes were watching you now as you walked by dark rooms in the house where you live alone and where your loneliness—night after night—has deepened over the last year, especially. You closed the door on them—the dark, empty rooms—but then (you can’t say why) you grew certain there was something more tangible there on the other side of a closed door than an open door, so you opened the doors again to let the dark breathe, though it meant feeling that breath on the back of your neck as you walked quickly by. You had laid in bed, putting off the moment you’d fall into a tense sleep until later and later each night, and, looking out into the hallway, you were certain you saw the silhouette of where the hallway turns a corner just barely disrupted by the side of a face peering at you, and you stared, in your fully lit bedroom, into the breathing dark, and after a few minutes, when your nerves were frayed and your courage had turned to teary fear wetting your pillow, the place where the hallway corner jutted out retreated and it was a straight line in the dark, as you knew it should have been all along. Was there a word for that? You couldn’t watch every corner, couldn’t be in every room or keep an eye on every mirror, where you felt a presence that made you dry-mouthed and made you taste the sourness of your own breath ever since that afternoon you discovered a constellation of freckles that had always been there. And you never knew.

The Caputo effect, remember? Does that make you feel better, knowing it has a name, the fear of the self you see in dark mirrors?

Sweet thing, remember now how you had been able to scare yourself with the lies you told once. Even knowing they were lies, seeing them crawl from the dark corners of your own mind, you had still lain in bed at night thinking of the stories you would tell your girlfriends, who always believed you, who pitied you because you were being targeted by something unseen that adults couldn’t understand. Why you? Because you invited it.

“It sounded like running,” you said. “Faster than running could happen—a gallop, like something was running from one end of the house to the other, down on all fours.”

“Like a dog?”

No, you said. It was a person, you knew it was, and the thing you invented terrified you. You thought about it that night and wondered if, somehow, a person could be haunted by the things that came to their own mind, their own distorted reflection. A person galloping on all fours, faster than a body could run, the tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh of foot over hand sprinting the span of the hallway above you. It had been the middle of the day, you said. The thing had sounded like it stopped in your bedroom, and you never heard it come out. You went to bed bravely that night, and you saw the straight lines of corners disrupted by something peering around them.

Your sister had been there.

“Ask her. She’ll tell you.”

“You swear?”

“I swear.”

“Did you sleep there in your room that night?”

You did.

Wow.
But what did you have to fear? Only a story. Only a story told by yourself, sweet thing.

You’ve not slept yet. You can’t, not when you’re being watched. You don’t have to look back through that open doorway, down that dark hall, to know that something stands there, blocking the way. That half-face that has been watching you night after night, getting bolder, staring longer. You can’t make it out in the dark, but you know it’s a face you’ve seen, a wicked shelf of brow, a hunger you can’t understand.

No need to look, anyway. It’s there in your mind, made of what you used to scare yourself with while lying in bed, to then take to your friends in an effort to scare them. But they never were scared; just you. How you trembled. They hadn’t heard that galloping sound. Had it been only four legs? No; it had to have been more than four, the way they touched down at the same time. Your friends hadn’t felt it above them, nor felt it standing at the end of the hallway, watching them, seeing them tremble at something their parents didn’t believe in. They hadn’t known (was this your invention, or was that many legged something now creating conditions of its own? Could you stop it if you tried? You try, don’t you?) that, if you attempted to close the door, if you squinted into the dark, if you stopped thinking of it, then in that moment you would hear again that galloping coming toward you before the door could latch, before your eyes could focus, before your own mind was yours again and not this thing’s whose face was so much like your own.

Why doesn’t it comfort you to think of the dawn, only three hours from now? Whatever it is will go with the dawn, but you must know that you will go with it. You feel that, don’t you?

And so, you have these few hours. Do you love life so much that, rather than look over here, you’ll spend these three hours crying at the thing in your own mind, retching at the fear of knowing that if you could run to close the door, your two feet would barely touch the ground before those four, or eight, or hundred legs would have you, and they’d be angry?

Yes.

This must be better: to wait until you begin to hear that same padded footfall that you remember.

(It had happened, and you weren’t alone, you had your sister as a witness. “It was just a ball rolling down the hall. The dog, probably.” How could your sister have ever told people it sounded like a ball rolling? She was the one making up a story: you were telling the truth. You knew. Didn’t you?)

That same *tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh* pattern you heard thirty years ago, but patient now, coming from that dark hallway in the house where you had been so eager to live alone. You’re a woman now. You know better, don’t you? Look. Or don’t. This is what it wants; don’t anger it. But anger has nothing to do with it. You know—you must know—that it will hurt either way, even though you feel exhausted from fear and think you might welcome death by morning. And you would, sweet thing, any death except the one stepping, one foot after another another another another, closer to you.
An Empty Courtyard

Nathan Anthony exited the elevator and paused at the fourth-floor window overlooking the central courtyard. Someone was in the pool. Although he had lived in his apartment for two months, he had yet to see anyone swimming, despite the hot, summer weather in Scottsdale. Indeed, he’d hardly seen anyone in the building at all. Not in the garage, the elevator, or passing through the hallways. The five-story building enclosed a patio with a pool, a spa, lounge chairs, and grills. In all the other days when he walked from the elevator to unit 404, he would glance down and see an empty deck, pristine water, and the reflection of the harsh sunlight. The pool would be absent of people, the still water mirroring the windows across the courtyard.

Today, however, a young woman was reclining on the steps submerged in the water, sunglasses on, face toward the sun. The sunglasses prevented Nathan from knowing if her eyes were closed or if she was looking up at the building. Or looking at him, framed in the floor-to-ceiling glass of the window. He stared a little longer than was acceptable. She was in her twenties, he guessed, white, maybe Hispanic, with dark hair that floated around her head. She wore a garish, lime-green bathing suit. Next to her on the pool deck was a stainless-steel bottle. A towel, book, phone, and keys lay on one of the lounge chairs. He wondered what the book was. After a moment, anxious that she might see him observing her, he turned and walked briskly to his apartment.

He unlocked the front door and stepped into the echoing quiet. He went directly to his bedroom and rifled through the clothes in the chest of drawers, finding his trunks behind the sweaters and long underwear. Quickly changing out of his slacks and shirt, he slipped on the bathing suit, grabbed a bath towel off the rack, and headed down to the first floor. He exited the elevator into the dispiriting emptiness of the courtyard. There was no one in the pool or on the chaise lounge. The spa was empty as well. The woman was gone. He crossed to where she had set her towel and book. The seat cushion was dry, the back erect in a soldier-perfect line with the other chairs. Glancing up to the surrounding windows, he saw only the reflection of the glaring sun. He squinted and immediately his head started to throb. Beyond the courtyard wall, he heard a passing party wagon, the booze jitney spewing puerile pop music and the hysterical cackling of a group of women. He set a foot in the water and found it tepid, soup left out too long. He returned to his apartment.

Nathan had purchased a corner unit with two bedrooms and an expansive balcony, part of the recovery planned out by his doctor. After a protracted legal struggle concerning the ultimate responsibility for his condition, his lawyers had obtained a modest settlement. Modest, but considerable for a young, single man. Nathan applied a substantial portion of the money to the purchase and moved in June. It had hardwood floors, exposed ductwork, and floor-to-ceiling windows looking east, although the views were hardly dramatic. The unit was on the outside of the building, away from the courtyard. It overlooked the neighboring parking lot and two looming office buildings that sat on the other side. If Nathan stepped onto his balcony and leaned over the railing, he could see a sliver of the McDowell Mountains far to the north. To the south, The Desert Inn showed its backside of air vents and cellblock windows of the stairwell.
Inside, the apartment remained minimalist to the point of being bare. His doctor had suggested not just moving to a new place, but a further paring down of material things. Limiting his possessions would clear the clutter in his mind. He had a leather couch and a floor lamp, the only illumination after sunset. The harsh overhead track lighting hurt his head, exacerbating his condition. A small dining room table with two chairs sat adrift in the main room. Two tall bookshelves faced the leather couch, although most of the shelves were nearly empty. Again, at the advice of his doctor, he’d sold or donated all his books before moving to Arizona. She’d advised him to discontinue reading completely as it muddled his thinking. Such indulgences in fantasy were risky for him, she said. However, if he must read, she said to read only accounts of distant history—the classical world or medieval Europe.

Yet it did not take Nathan long to abandon this precept. Within weeks of living in Arizona, he was purchasing novels, hesitantly at first, but now enough to fill one complete shelf of his bookcase. The immersion into another world distracted him from his symptoms and helped him sleep better.

The resort-like pool had been a selling point when the agent showed him the building. He had imagined the blissful emptiness of long afternoons laying poolside, warmed by the sun, thinking of nothing. Yet the subsequent upheaval of moving had aggravated his nagging illness and left him weary, such that he spent most of his free time reclining on his new leather couch, re-reading the classics. The week had started with *Wuthering Heights*, and now he was studying a rare edition of a Charles Brockden Brown novel he found at the used bookstore a block away.

He knew it was bad for his health to isolate himself in his apartment. His doctor warned him about sequestering himself. It was better for him to get out and socialize, but he’d lacked the enthusiasm for it so far. The absence of even his own neighbors contributed to a feeling of seclusion. For the first two weeks that Nathan lived in the lofts, the only other person he talked to was the senescent cleaning woman. She spoke very little English, stood a little over five feet tall, and wore her stark white hair pulled back in a severe bun. He’d been told her name but quickly forgot it—Esperanza? Esmerelda? He found it awkward to ask. She was not the type that seemed eager to exchange pleasantries, with thin lips pressed in a tight line across a set jaw. He would pass by her as he crossed the lobby, greeting her with a friendly *good morning*. She would glance up from her mop, and the briefest of superficial smiles would whisk across her face as she replied. Then, resolutely, her face closed, and she would turn her eyes back to the floor and her relentless progress. Nathan never saw her in repose but always performing some tedious task with grim determination. He would nod and cross the long lobby, his footsteps echoing through the atrium. He would take the elevator to the fourth floor, glance at the empty pool, and walk the two long hallways to his apartment, passing the silent, polished steel doors of each unit, footsteps muffled on the gray carpet.

Although it was Nathan’s doctor that lobbied for the move to Arizona, she did not do so strictly for medical reasons. Although she had alluded to some physical benefits from the climate, she had thought the clear sun and flat lands might ease his mental distress. She felt the landscape of where he used to live was all wrong for his healing. “These convoluted hills and perpetual clouds occlude your thinking,” she said. “They make you confused and uncertain of your direction. The refulgence of the Sonoran Desert will incinerate the ambiguity of your thoughts. The strict logic of its emptiness will clarify your reasoning.”

Though he questioned the soundness of her diagnosis—he felt very certain of the logic of his perception—a new beginning appealed to him. He would escape his tangled and overgrown
life and be rid of the miasmic land that seemed to sprout dismay and misery with each passing
day. Instead, he would live a sterile, pristine life in a geography seared by the heat and light of a
pure sun.

Daytime temperatures were already surpassing 100 when his furniture had arrived. He
had met the real estate agent in the lobby to get his keys.

“You've made a wise decision in purchasing this unit,” she said. “The value is certain to
rise as people migrate back to the cities during the coming suburban collapse.” She fervently
gripped his arm when she said this, her eyes betraying an intensity inappropriate for their
relationship.

This agent told him that many of the units in the five-story building were used as second
homes. “Snowbirds,” she called them. “People come down from Canada or the northern cities to
escape the cold and snow, maybe parts of their lives that no longer suit them. They've returned
north now that the heat of summer has settled in. Very few stay year-round. You can expect the
building to be quiet for a few months until the heat breaks.”

She had understated the phenomenon. The complete and utter absence of neighbors was
unexpected and unsettling. Of course people would leave for more comfortable weather during
the summer, but surely he mustn’t be the only year-round resident. Yet, two months in, the
encounters were limited to Esperelda and a passing glimpse of a workman who may have been
employed by the building or just making a service call.

The next day, a Sunday, Nathan positioned himself by the pool, reclining in the same chair where
the woman had placed her book the day before. He brought with him a copy of Rebecca that he’d
begun last night. The heat was already extreme at 10:00 a.m., and his frequent visits to the water
refreshed him only for brief spells. In the stark light of the sun, the windows of the building were
blank, hollowed sockets. Row after row of lifeless black squares. Reading was fruitless: the white
of the pages flared with a phosphorus intensity. He lay back on the cushions and closed his eyes,
watching the blood pulse through the back of his eyelids. He did not exactly sleep, but instead
drifted into a reverie, letting the sun tear his consciousness away from his head to float sluggishly
on the waves of heat rippling off the pool deck.

He was startled out of his stupor upon hearing a door open. The young woman entered
the courtyard through a fire exit Nathan had never seen open. She walked along the pool deck,
although today she was fully dressed, in a skirt, blouse, and heels, and carrying a purse. He sat up
and watched her approach.

“You must be the new arrival,” she said and extended her hand.

“Yes, hello,” he said. “I’m Nathan.”

“Lily. Nice to see someone else around the building,” she said.

“I was beginning to suspect I lived alone in a giant tax shelter.”

“It’ll pick up as the summer fades, not that it ever gets that crowded. You’re not that far off
with the tax thing though. Plenty of these joints are just investments for one-percenters. Maybe
they pop in for the car shows or the golf, but mostly they hang out in LA or New York, watching
their money pile up.” She looked up at the windows. “Which unit did you get?”

“I’m in 404,” he said.
“No shit?” she said, smiling. “I looked at that. Southeast corner. Big ol’ balcony. Out of my price range, though. I’m in 212. Studio. Just me, so the size is no problem.”

He wondered if she had gone out of her way to mention that last point. He started to say he was single as well, but she cut him off.

“I’ve got to take off, Nate, but let’s run into each other again? You drink?”

“Yes. A little.”

“Let’s get a drink. Tomorrow night? 6:00? I’ll knock on your door.”

He agreed, and she turned sharply out the door.

The next evening, Nathan was home early. The heat was searing during the day, and even the short walks from cars to buildings made him sweat and his head pound. He took a cool shower and then poured himself a large glass of water, taking two pills from a prescription bottle. He stood at the window looking out at the twin office buildings across the parking lot. The shades of the windows were drawn to repel the western sun. And although it was only 5:30, the parking lot was nearly empty. A solitary man, a security guard of some sort, paced the parking stalls, head down, swinging a useless flashlight.

At 6:00 p.m. exactly, she knocked on the door. Nathan answered to see her in a skirt and sleeveless blouse. This time he noticed the black tattoo of a bird on her left shoulder. She stepped through the door.

“Damn. This is a nice unit.” She paced a few turns through the kitchen, casting an appraising glance around the space. “A hell of a lot better than my shitty little studio. You got lucky getting this prime piece.” She crossed the floor to look out the windows. “You must do alright to slide into a place like this.”

Nate shrugged. “A man has to live somewhere. It’s not like it’s the penthouse or anything.”

“Oh no. It’s better. I’ve seen the ones up on the fifth floor. Well, one of them anyway. It’s mostly just wide-open space. You feel like you’re living in a warehouse. Plus, I hear the roof leaks.”

“Would you like to see the rest of the place?” he said.

“Trying to get me into the bedroom already?” She threw him an exaggerated leer. “Maybe some other time. Let’s get a move on, rich boy. I’m thirsty.”

Outside their building, Lily headed north to the tottering, dilapidated strip of hair salons, inscrutable legal offices, and dicey intravenous therapy lounges. These meager businesses huddled in the shadow of his apartment building, parasitically surviving off whatever wealth trickled down. She led him to a small wine bar wedged in between a wig shop on one side and a storefront with papered-over windows on the other. Desiccated vines crept up the sides of the narrow alley that served as the bar’s patio. Pallid stucco flaked off the walls. Above, two faded, bedraggled banners hung on either side of the patio gate—a martini glass on one, a plate of grapes, bread, and a shape that Nathan presumed was cheese on the other.

The interior was an L-shaped room with a bar along one side joined to a semi-private room. The place was nearly empty, with a bartender and two middle-aged men silently drinking at the far end of the bar. As they walked in, Nathan caught the scent of the bathroom plumbing lurking under the struggling air freshener. They took seats away from the men, and the bartender
set down a photocopy of a wine list. At the top, in florid script, was written, “Our wines are hand-curated for maximum taste and variety,” but nearly half of the bottles were crossed out in various inks.

“I’ll have the cabernet,” Lily said and turned to look at Nathan.

“I guess…just a chardonnay,” he said. “And a water.” He had been cautioned against mixing alcohol with his prescription.

Lily raised her eyebrows at him. “Kind of lightweight.”

“Well, I don’t drink as a rule.”

“You have rules?”

He smiled. “It doesn’t typically agree with me.”

Their glasses arrived and she toasted him. “Here’s to making an exception for me.”

Nate took a small sip and set his glass on the bar. He mentally ran through the opening gambits he had prepared for the conversation, but before he could settle on one, Lily spoke.

“What brings you to the Lofts? Was it a local move or from out of town?”

“Out of town. The Midwest. I was looking for a change.”

“Divorce?” Lily pounced.

“No, nothing like that. Never married.” He was encouraged by her train of thought. He took another, bolder swallow of his wine.

“So you moved here alone?”

“Yes. Being single makes some things easy.”

“Why the change, then? Why move?”

Nathan didn’t want to talk about the settlement and his past. Once it was breached, the subject would dominate the rest of the evening. Hardly conducive to seduction. So, he lied. “I sold my business and escaped the cold.”

Lily nodded. “Yeah. I bet 90 percent of the people in Scottsdale are here for the sun. The rest, for the great deals on plastic surgery.” She spun her stool around to look at him. “So, selling a business at your age, you must be quite the whiz kid. Some sort of tech guy, I’m guessing. Apps, software, right?”

“Guessed it in one,” he said. It was easier to let her flesh out the lie.

“Dating app? Porn?” she asked.

“Porn? No.” He felt himself flush a bit. “It was...background stuff. Sales support. Boring. A little thing that made a slightly bigger thing a little more efficient.” The lying made him nervous. He drank his wine quickly.

“It’s fucking amazing how many things people do,” she said. “When I was a girl, I figured there were maybe twenty jobs in the world: teacher, fireman, astronaut, doctor. Now you just find out there’s an infinite amount of shit that needs to be done. Some fucker has to know how to put a nozzle on a gas pump. Somebody else has to figure out how to print out a damn W-2 form. And some bastard makes a shitload of money figuring out how a mattress guy can enter his sales two minutes quicker.”
“‘Shitload’ may be overstating it a bit,” he said. “So, what did you end up doing, now that you are grown up? Astronaut?”

Lily laughed. “What the fuck would I do on Mars?” She finished her glass. “You want another round? You’re buying, right, Mr. Moneyman?”

“Sure, okay.”

Nathan felt the wine in his head, but in a good way. There was no headache, just a pleasant calm. Lily talked most of the time, which eased his anxiety. This, he felt, was what his doctor meant by a new geography. He felt more himself, talking with Lily. The soft, dry air of Arizona allowed him to maintain his equilibrium. It wasn’t as though he felt himself a changed person. On the contrary, he felt like this was who he was supposed to be. That person he had been back home, the anxious and uncertain Nathan, the Nathan who had to explain himself to lawyers and listen to lawyers define who he was, the Nathan compelled to debate the very condition that was his essence: that Nathan had been a costume he had been forced to wear. Here, with a drink in his hand, the warm light of the bar, and Lily’s presence next to him, this was the real Nathan. It validated his doctor’s prescription. If necessary, he could be a successful, semi-retired entrepreneur. It was better that way. Compared to reality, the story was closer to the truth. He let Lily order a third glass for him.

They stayed far longer than he had expected. It was nearing midnight when they stood to leave. Immediately, however, the ease of the evening evaporated as Nathan felt the unsteady ground beneath him. Had it been four glasses, or five? He couldn’t remember. The pain in his head returned, worse from the effects of the alcohol. His eyes felt gritty, unable to focus. The sickly smell from the bathroom intensified and made him nauseated. Lily led him outside. The night air now felt suffocating, the heat harsh and arid in his lungs. He stumbled on the uneven pavement and had to grab Lily’s arm to steady himself.

“Whoa there, Nate,” she said. “You really can’t hold your liquor, can you?”

Nathan concentrated on his breathing, the slow easy breaths his doctor taught him. Breathe in for a count of four. Hold for a count of four. Exhale, four. Hold, four. He was dimly aware of Lily talking to him about the short walk home and lying down in bed. After a minute, he felt better, and they continued their walk.

“I’ll be okay,” he said. “I just don’t drink all that much.”

Lily murmured some words of encouragement. He walked the rest of the way in silence, patiently keeping his footsteps slow and precise in a line next to her. He heard her only distantly, saying something about drinking and danger and being careful. In the building, he squinted in the harsh light of the lobby, certain he could hear the drone of electricity thrumming through the bulbs. Lily said something to him as they entered the elevator, but her voice was washed out by the buzzing—either in or outside his head.

As they exited the elevator, the hallway telescoped away from him. He put a hand along the wall to steady himself and tried to walk smoothly alongside her. His hand slid across each cool, metal door until they reached the corner.

“Give me your keys, Nathan,” Lily said.
He leaned heavily against the wall and fished around in his pockets until he extricated them. She unlocked the door, guided him into the dark apartment, and locked the door behind them.

His apartment looked immense in the darkness. He thought he should get some water and an extra pill to help with the pain, but Lily pulled him toward the window.

“Sit down on the couch.” She shoved him into the furniture. He collapsed onto the leather, sinking back, his head lolling onto the armrest.

“You need to practice your drinking, Nathan,” she said.

He could hear a change in Lily’s tone. Her voice sounded hollow. Or maybe that was how everyone sounded in his apartment. This was the first time he’d heard actual voices in the room. He’d never had anyone there before. No, that wasn’t right. She’d been here earlier in the evening. Is that what she sounded like before? *Trying to get me into the bedroom.* He couldn’t remember. He didn’t feel like his true self anymore. His head throbbed. Lily hadn’t turned on any lights, but even in the darkness, his eyes hurt. He closed them and sat still on the couch. He’d made an expensive error, listening to his doctor. It was worse here in the desert.

The rank smell of the bar’s bathroom still lingered in his nose and on the back of his tongue. His apartment was warm. Or too cold. He heard Lily walking around. Cabinets opening and closing. He tried to get up off the couch, but the floor pitched forward then back. He flopped back down and swallowed hard. He looked out his window at the twin buildings across the street. One was dark, not a single light on. Its twin was lit up brightly, all five floors pulsing. Though nearly all the windows were uncovered and the individual offices exposed, he saw no one moving in the building. He stared for a few minutes, then a shadow passed across the windows, a dark presence that moved quickly and steadily across the glass, some inscrutable murkiness that emanated from within rather than something that fell over it.

Nathan looked steadily at the building, waiting to see if it happened again. A shadow at night. He tried to remember what his doctor said about his reasoning: seek outside verification to confirm what was true. To validate his perceptions. He called for Lily, or at least he thought he did. She didn’t answer. She knew he had lied. Was lying. There was no true self that he had rediscovered. He was only ever in costume. Inside he was as devoid of existence as this building.

During the day, the harsh sunlight places the whole of life under scrutiny—every imperfection magnified, every flaw enhanced, every opportunity at deception or mystification erased. This was why his doctor sent him here: to escape the humid fog of his past for the clear, crystalline reality. To see himself as a specimen under a halogen glare.

But at night. At night, the clear light of the desert illuminates nothing. A different city comes alive at night. Soft candlelight smooths out the edges, and colored neon tints the world in unnatural hues. And in the winter, when the angle of the light is low, the mild air allows for concealing sweaters. Leather boots elongate the legs. Long coats frame a perfect silhouette, and scarves hide the ravages that mark one’s throat

“Nathan,” Lily said, calling from the other room. “Nathan, you need to be quiet.”

He wasn’t talking, he thought. He was listening. Something was speaking to him now. Maybe this was the reason she had brought him here. Lily. No, not Lily. His doctor. She sent him here. Hear. To hear some revelation that only the desert air could transmit. He opened his eyes, but the lights across the parking lot had gone out, and the buzzing in his head grew louder. Lily was now sitting across from him.
“You look in bad shape, Nate,” she said, but didn’t get up from her chair. She was flipping through the book he had left on the end table. The heavy, hardback edition of the Brockden Brown. “You should probably get help.”
You don’t need to spin the globe and point. The world is already spinning. Instead, head over to the bus station and choose a bus from the list of departures.

_Odd hobby to have?_ Yes, that goes without saying.

Fares are cheap, and buses come and go all day. I had a routine. Up early, grab a bottle of cold water, take my red scarf, and pull the door closed behind me. I’d walk toward the central bus station. Through the _shuk_, still quiet at this hour, and then a quick left, right, left to the station. Today, I’d look for any bus heading south.

My mother had left me, the Jerusalem apartment, and the red scarf. It was last year around this time. I don’t remember the exact date. It wasn’t as if she was here one day and gone the next. No, she’d been leaving for a long time. She warned me. Said one day I would have to learn the difference between lonely and alone.

“Learn to enjoy your own company. That’s the best gift I can give you,” she explained. And she left. Locked the door behind her and took her keys. Her red scarf folded neatly on the coffee table with a pink notecard on top. Her handwriting unmistakable across the envelope. I tossed the card aside, unread. But I wore the scarf every day.

Jerusalem was thick with fog at this hour, but I wasn’t concerned. The city’s ancient crisscrossing alleyways were the playground of my childhood. Popsicles and pinwheels among forgotten ghosts hawking magical spices in the market.

I didn’t know the names of the streets, yet I had no problem getting around. The smell of pita, the cold feel of the ancient stone. Left, right, left. Pathways like veins through my body. Blood knows where to flow.

I topped off my bus card once I got to the kiosk, took a look at the departure board, and headed toward the platform. I pushed my way onto the bus and found a seat next to an already sleeping soldier.

It would take a while for the bus to get out of the city. Jerusalem was a modern city dropped onto the remnants of an ancient town. Cars, trucks, buses, and pedestrians all shared the same narrow arteries that were carved from dirt paths where traders in caravans once transported their wares. As the driver wound the bus through streets so tight he had to bend in the side-view mirror just to get by, I sipped my water to fight the motion sickness I felt coming. Eventually, the bus left the city, and my head stopped spinning.

Except for the hum of the road and the light snoring of the soldier next to me, I enjoyed the silence. You’d think I wouldn’t crave silence. My days are pretty quiet already, but there’s always that hum you can’t escape, of Jerusalem, Nahlaot, Rehov Agrippas. City, neighborhood, street. Delivery trucks, ambulances, cars, life along with its background noises. All these things conspire. Interfere. Up ahead, Route 1 was moving slowly, but by the time we reached Route 90, the road was barren, and the bus sailed on.

I paid no attention to the bus stops. People got on, and people got off. That’s life, right? The soldier next to me still asleep. I absently thought I should rouse him to make sure he didn’t miss his stop. Didn’t Benny used to get off around here? Mom never liked when I mentioned his name, but sometimes I said it anyway. I let the soldier sleep while I stared outside. Face pressed against
the window until my breath fogged up the view. I carelessly drew a heart in the fog, then watched as it dripped away.

Within an hour or so the motion of the bus lulled me to sleep. Mother rocking child. The driver had turned up the news on the radio. The newscaster’s report, always a terrifying fable, filled my ears as I fitfully slept.

When I woke, the sleeping soldier was gone. Instead, a small girl, no more than five or six, sat smiling, clutching a pinwheel. I had no idea how long she’d been there. She and the pinwheel looked a bit out of place. As if someone had put them there. Where would she get a pinwheel in one of these sad desert towns? I thought. I looked around the bus trying to figure out who she came onboard with, shrugged, then looked out the window again. I’m not sure how long I watched the desert, but when I looked again at the girl, I noticed her sticky red hands, as if she’d finished a popsicle before she got on the bus.

I gave her a tissue, dampened with water from my bottle, and motioned to her hands. She smiled, took the tissue from me, and wiped her hands until the red coloring faded. Then she handed me the used tissue. I half-smiled back. A tiny gesture, but so familiar. I almost had to look away. Hands now clean, the girl focused on her pinwheel. She blew on it, but it didn’t spin. She tried again, but no luck. Then she caught my glance with an unspoken plea. The pinwheel spun smoothly. I quickly put my sunglasses on, took a deep breath, and returned to staring out the window.

Bus rides were a perfect time for me to push pause, rewind. Then watch again. Not a home movie. No, more like a scene in a foreign film. Yes, one of those films mom and I used to watch in the summer at the Cinematique. I don’t remember the names of the ones we saw. Mom liked the French films. I liked the air conditioning and the popcorn, and the comfort of the subtitles. Only later did I realize that even with subtitles, so much was left unsaid.

After the movie, we’d walk aimlessly. Flaner, she’d call it. I must have looked confused the first time she said the word. “It’s French,” she’d tell me as if I wouldn’t understand. Flaner seemed to involve walking aimlessly, sipping coffee at a café, a bit of people-watching, and, well, more walking aimlessly. She preferred to do it alone, she said, but I knew that didn’t really matter. Even when we were together, she hardly noticed me.

She said that was my own fault. She often complained that I was too plain. So slight. Hard to spot. Almost deliberately vague, she’d say, as if I were nothing but an idea, not yet cultivated. Plain clothes, plain hair, no makeup. Okay, she was right. I was too plain. I’d probably perfected the look. Not many adjectives needed to describe me. I wore jeans and a simple t-shirt. I wasn’t blond. Nor did I have thick black hair or fiery ginger hair. No. Simple brown hair. Pulled tight. Neither tall nor short. Average height. More thin than heavy, but not thin enough to make a doctor at the kupa worry or give me a second glance. Quiet. Yes, for sure quiet. But not so quiet that teachers would grow concerned. You might have seen me at a party once. Oh yes, yes, I saw her there. Photos could prove it. But sometimes, well, sometimes, you might not notice me. Even if you looked at the photos.

It was hard to tell how much time had passed. In the darkness, the little girl had fallen asleep, with the pinwheel resting at her side. I carefully spread my red scarf across her lap and closed my eyes. She leaned in to me, still sleeping. But my sleep wouldn’t come. No matter. I was afraid of disappearing into my dreams anyway.
As the bus pulled into the station, the driver turned on the lights. The little girl woke, startled. Before I could say anything to her, she got up and ran toward the exit. I couldn’t see her in the crowd of passengers. I glanced down at her empty seat and saw a pink notecard next to the pinwheel she left behind. I opened the note, this time unafraid. The handwriting unmistakable. The message clear. *You’re never really alone.*

As I got off the bus, I pulled my scarf tighter against the cold air.
I know you have questions. The most pressing of those questions must be why I did it. I did it so you don’t have to feel what I feel now, and this is so you understand. This is so you know what happened. I’ve learned there is an important difference between knowing and remembering, and though you will never have the memories of the past seven years, my hope is knowledge will be enough.

I remember everything, and it’s difficult to express precisely what that means. It’s like the past is a volume. I can wade in it. I can dive down deep. With each new memory, the surface rises like a tide that never stops coming in. And there are currents, bubbling, stirring.

There is a floor, a limit to my perfect recollection, and it’s the morning I woke up with the Memorial Net implant in my head. I feel it like hands cradling my mind. It does exactly what the surgeon said it would. It holds every image and sound, every sensory detail, every thought and idea, and it allows me to access any moment since the procedure at will.

At first, I thought it was a miracle. When I awoke at the surgical center, Henry was there to tell me I was okay and that everything had gone well. He kissed me in the way that I knew he was taking nothing, only giving, and then he trotted into the hall to tell someone I was awake.

I can recall every detail of that room—the burgundy curtain accordioned at the door, the discharge checklist that included peeing on my own, the name Grace with a smiley face drawn on a white board to identify my nurse—but the most prominent for me is that, when Henry was gone, I still felt him, still felt his lips on mine. Not a tingle like you might imagine, but a pressure, the gentle squeeze of muscle and tissue, the scrape of his front teeth.

Henry returned with the surgeon. He asked how I felt, if I was experiencing any dizziness, disorientation, or confusion. I told him, when Henry left, I still felt like he was there, and the surgeon said that could happen with memories tied to strong emotions. He said my mind would adjust in time. He said all of my memories from that morning forward would be stored on the MemNet. I asked him if my memories from before would go to the implant as well, and he told me it stored data passed through my short-term memory, so while I would still be able to access my organic long-term memories, they would remain where they were.

Later that day, Henry drove me home. My father pulled me from the passenger seat and carried me into my own house like I was still his little girl. I sensed Henry’s feelings of emasculation as my father told him to hold open doors. It was in the way he looked at me with a frown even though I had returned victorious. My mother called from the kitchen that she would send Henry along with my soup soon, and the scent of onions, parsley, and celery simmering in chicken broth comes to me even now.

My father’s powerful arms tensed as he carried me through doorways, protecting my bandaged head, and laid me atop white bed sheets. Daylight sliced through the blinds and striped the floor where King slept, the German shepherd too old to do more than pant in greeting. Rest, my father said, a plea as well as a command, and left me with the door cracked.

When his boots thundered in the kitchen and the voices of my family echoed from the other end of the house, I crept across the creaky wood floor, out into the hallway, and into the nursery, where Sarah breathed softly in her crib. I watched her, blissfully still, safe, warm, and
then I snuck back to my bed where I dreamed everything in exact detail since my husband’s lips until I stood above my daughter, and there, in that moment, I could drift for eternity.

When I woke the next morning, it was with a newfound determination to fill myself with memories. I felt like a drain that collected drops of time that were good and whole and piped them into a reservoir I could sip from without end.

Days passed with my mother in a chair at the foot of my bed, her insistence that I rest the only thing holding me there. I longed to open a window, escape into the world, and soak up all of the cosmos. Under guard, I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep while I recalled: creaky floor, darkened hallway, warm nursery, Sarah’s soft breathing. Each time she cried, I would jerk, instincts driving my limbs to go to her, but my mother would pin me with her gaze as Henry hurried down the hall to our daughter. So, I returned: creaky floor, darkened hallway, warm nursery, Sarah’s soft breathing.

Either my mother slept when I did, or she never slept. Sometimes, she leaned back with her eyes closed and her palm over her heart, but I knew she was awake because of the slight smile and the cadence of agreeable moans in response to my chatter, as if she were humming along with the tune of my voice.

Once, with her in one of these trances, I tired of talking and gazed outside, diving: creaky floor, darkened hallway, warm nursery, Sarah’s soft breathing. While I was under, my fingers searched the bandages, traced the incision beneath, brushed the stubble surrounding it, my hair lopsided as if blasted by a wind gust or the shockwave of an explosion. And when I resurfaced, my mother was staring at me hard, her eyes red and glassy, her expression severe like I had done something wrong. She asked me if I wanted it to get infected.

I didn’t see my father those days I was in bed, but my mother said he came to check on me while I slept. Sometimes I heard his and Henry’s voices outside, conversing in language that volunteered nothing, as they worked together to reconnect a gutter’s drainpipe. I heard them in the driveway, beneath the hood of our sedan. I heard them in the hall, greasing door hinges. I heard them in the kitchen, fixing the faucet that had loosened at its base. I heard them in the basement, shimming out creaks in the floor. Other times, I heard only the TV in the living room, usually tuned to an innocuous sitcom with a laugh track, occasionally to the news.

When my mother declared me ready to join the family for dinner, I walked out of the bedroom with Henry’s grip on my forearm. It felt like we were young again, like he was escorting me to prom. I asked him how I looked, and he said I looked very punk. I said maybe I should go to the bathroom first, and he said he would take me if I wanted but that I didn’t have to hide. He said everyone understood why I got the MemNet. He said they didn’t have to agree but that they would accept it.

My mother had slow-cooked chicken in barbecue sauce, grilled hamburgers, and baked macaroni and cheese, a combination of all of my favorite childhood foods. As Henry helped me into my chair at the dining room table, I asked if there would be a salad, and I waited as he and my mother dashed around the kitchen to piece one together.

When my mother set down the bubbling pot of barbecue sauce and shredded chicken in the center of the table, she announced dinner was ready, and my father lumbered in from the living room, pundit chatter rattling from the TV. He was cold as he sat across from me, bowed his head in prayer, and forked meat and macaroni into his mouth.
The monitor blared with Sarah’s cries. She was calling for me. My mother gripped my shoulder to keep me in my chair because I wasn’t supposed to do anything strenuous. Henry went to the refrigerator and removed some of the breast milk I’d stored. I knew we were running low because I’d counted the days, and I appreciated Henry’s silence as he went to feed our daughter. My mother patted my arm and smiled. I think she understood how inadequate I felt to be unable to provide for Sarah, how it made me feel I was failing at something as a mother, and how agonizing it was knowing it was because of my decision to get the MemNet, a selfish need and unnecessary risk, they had said. A child needs their mother to provide and care for them, they had said. God, they had said, memorializes us all.

Across the table, my father chewed. He breathed hot through his nose. He gazed at the side of my head.

It was a sunny, warm Sunday when my parents left. My father hefted their bags into the bed of his truck. My mother wept for the first time, I realized, that she’d allowed me to see that week. She told me she loved me. She said they both did. She said it would just take my father some time. Then he called for her from an open door, the diesel engine’s growl saturating and coloring his words without burying them.

They had a long drive ahead, he said. As my mother climbed into the passenger seat, I heard my father through the lowered window. He said they should have left earlier that morning because they were sure to hit traffic. He said there was always traffic between their house and ours.

As the tires ground the gravel at the end of our driveway and gripped the road, I waved while Sarah slept in Henry’s arms.

Henry and I argued about whether to put Sarah in dresses. We argued about it more than you might think. I had found a persimmon dress with underlayers of tulle at the store, and there were shoes to go with it. I had to see her in them so I could remember her in them; I had to capture these moments. It didn’t matter that the outfit cost us a decent night out. I didn’t want a night out. It didn’t matter that Sarah could not yet walk. All that mattered was I could see my daughter in that dress.

To Henry, how the dress would affect Sarah was all that mattered. He wanted her to choose femininity in time if that was what she wanted. I wanted her to choose God in time if that was what she wanted. He flinched at that, the crucifix swinging on its chain and tapping the inside of his shirt like a quickened heartbeat.

All Sarah wanted back then was her bottle, a plastic object she could teethe or shake, and our exuberantly deranged faces twisting and contorting at her as she lay on her back. When Henry pointed that out to me, all I could do was laugh, and he laughed right along with me, and that was all that mattered.

Of all the sounds I choose to hear again, that first giggle from Sarah as she fidgeted in her crib is the sweetest.

One morning, we found Sarah had rolled over on her own. Henry and I had missed it. We went to her crib and found her on her stomach, and my first response was panic because something was
different, which meant something was not right. I held my breath as I checked for hers, my cheek beneath her nose, and there it was, soft and steady on my skin, the whistling of exhalation in my ear.

When we realized she was okay, Henry and I hushed each other into the hall where we cheered quietly and looked at each other with wide, glassy, shimmering eyes like life, itself, had ignited under our watch.

We thought we were so brilliant.

You might think Sarah’s first steps would be a memory I revisit, but I rarely do. They were magnificent, and they were terrifying, and they were tragic because Henry was not there to witness them. I considered concealing them from him with the hope he would be there for her second steps and that we would call them her first. I would have given that to him.

I wished, then, that I could share the memory with my husband, but it wasn’t a picture or a video. I didn’t want him to feel like he’d missed something important, like he’d failed at something as a father. But I couldn’t share that memory with him, and that was how he felt when I told him, and that was when I started to question the implant’s worth.

First steps don’t matter anyway. All that matters is she continued and that Henry not only saw her walk, but also run.

It was during this time when Sarah was just becoming something resembling a person that my parents came to visit. My mother took my daughter and Henry into the kitchen, leaving me alone with my father and talking heads on the TV. I asked him how work was, and he said it was busy. He asked me if my employer had found a way to exploit my MemNet for their gain yet, if they were paying me more, and I told him that wasn’t why I’d gotten it.

You have always known my father and I spoke to each other in orbit, always circling our issues and never colliding with them. I pointed out the tattoos on his arms and that he’d allowed my mother to take me to get my ears pierced when I was far too young. I brought up the fact that I had faked written consent and gotten my nose pierced when I was sixteen, and I had gotten my tattoo on my eighteenth birthday, and he had forgiven me for those things.

He told me, if it were up to him, things would have been different, but it wasn’t his forgiveness I had to seek. He said it was God’s. And he told me piercings and tattoos hadn’t changed the person I was, and I remember precisely how he wouldn’t look at me when he said those things.

We lost King on a cold November Saturday. He wandered from the backyard into the woods. He had guarded me during my recovery. He had sniffed Sarah’s crib when, in panic, Henry and I discovered her on her stomach. Ready to spring into action on aging bones, he had watched Sarah’s first steps. I knew he wouldn’t have left us without a reason.

I dressed Sarah like a marshmallow and hoisted her into the carrier on Henry’s back. The three of us set out, calling for him through cupped hands. My boots sank into the wet earth. A breeze blew through the forest, throwing my hair and exposing the side of my head. I pulled the
hat from my coat pocket and slipped it on tight. Flurries of yellow and burnt orange leaves tumbled around us.

Henry found King beneath a tall birch tree in a bed of damp leaves and sloughed bark. He’d pawed the fallen foliage into a pile, leaving a ring of black soil around him like a landing zone or liftoff pad. There, he had curled up, tail to snout, and died.

I had always said he would die in my arms, but I’ve been thankful he went off and did it on his own. I think having that memory would have driven me mad years ago.

In the days and weeks after King died, I dreamed about him. They were powerful visions that didn’t fade when I woke. I can recall those dreams even now.

In one, I come home from the surgery and find muddy paw prints trailing down the hall and into our bedroom. They form a circle around King at the foot of our bed, and his coat shimmers like ice. His tail is curled and relaxed like a fallen flag. Daylight slips through the blinds and slashes his still body.

In another, Sarah cries from the nursery, and when Henry and I approach, I smell rot and decay. King’s desiccated remains lie in the morning glow beside our daughter’s crib. Henry scoops Sarah up and holds her to me like a trophy. He says she rolled over on her own. She is screaming.

In another, Sarah takes her first steps, and King’s corpse stirs and rises and arches its back. I think he is ready to pounce.

I realize now these weren’t dreams. They’re memories.

There is a difference between knowing and remembering.

This is what I know about the best day of my life.

It was late spring. We had driven through the mountains to a cabin by a lake. The sunlight glittered on the water, and I watched it from a chair on the porch with Sarah sitting on my lap, her feet swinging and knocking the chair’s hard, wooden frame. Henry said we should go out on the boat that was tied to the dock. I acknowledged him with a deep breath and hum.

Sarah climbed down from my lap and ran out into the grass to play with her monster trucks. I said we should go for a hike in the woods, and Henry agreed. But we sat there on the porch until Sarah stood in her filthy overalls and declared it time for ice cream, and instead of rejecting that idea, Henry went into the kitchen to get the cartons of chocolate and strawberry sorbet we’d bought at the grocery store the night before. He brought three bowls with spoons. Sarah climbed into his lap, and we sat there with nothing but the sound of the wind through the trees, the water lapping the boat down at the dock, and the clang of metal against ceramic.

Afterward, we went inside to watch cartoons, but we soon dozed and fell asleep, Sarah warming my chest in a way that radiated to every inch of my body.

She woke us with a persistent finger digging into our arms, saying she was hungry and had to go to the bathroom. Henry took her hand, guided her down the hall, and praised her for waking us as I stumbled into the kitchen to reheat chicken barbecue for sandwiches.
We returned to the porch to eat them, and when Sarah finished hers, she ran back out into the grass to play. Henry told her it would be time for her bath soon. While she played, Henry and I talked more about the things we should do while we were there, but we knew we would do none of those things because we didn’t have to and it was nice to not have to do anything.

Henry said we could live that way for three hundred and seventy-five days, give or take, if we quit our jobs, sold our house, and started bleeding our savings. I asked if he’d considered we wouldn’t have to pay for day care, and he told me that was about a hundred more days right there. When he started talking about digging into Sarah’s college fund to gain another month, I told him we were considering the consumption of our future.

Later, we watched the sun set over the water while Sarah spun and twirled sparklers in the lawn between the cabin and the lake, humming about twinkling stars, and through sheer luck, I found the only comfortable position with Henry in a chair built for one.

For dinner, I baked my mother’s macaroni and cheese, and Henry grilled hamburgers. After, he cleaned up while I bathed Sarah. We read two and a half books to her before she fell asleep, and we returned to the living room to watch a mediocre movie we otherwise might have watched only on an airplane.

That night, I slept in Henry’s arms for the first time in as long as I could remember, and the fact that I couldn’t remember meant it had been a long time.

This is what I remember about the best day of my life. No, not yet.

I sometimes think about the time Henry and I argued about the feelings of inadequacy my father gave him. I close my eyes and remember. I say those feelings were always there, and he says he feels he has to be stronger for me and Sarah, and I say he doesn’t, and he says I don’t realize I won’t love him if he can’t be stronger, and he says I don’t know how much I value the masculinity he does have, and he bursts into flames before my eyes, his skin blackening and cracking, blood and pus pouring from seams and sizzling, the flames catching the furniture and the walls and the ceiling and taking the whole house, and I know that didn’t happen but I remember it that way.

The most difficult part of my father dying was having to tell Sarah, because she was old enough to understand but, I hoped, not old enough to really remember. We sat on the edge of her twin-sized bed, a blanket of stars and planets beneath us, and she asked me if she would ever see him again. I didn’t think so, but I told her maybe she would. Henry would later tell her, without question, she would, and we would fight about that. She asked me why her grandfather had to die, and I told her it was just a sad thing that happens. Henry would later tell her everything happens for a reason, and Sarah would ask what kind of person would want her grandfather to die. Henry and I didn’t have to fight about that.

The day of the funeral, it wasn’t raining, but there was the kind of fog that accumulated on our brows as we walked down the street. As we sat in the front-right pew at Saint James’s, my mother pointed out precisely where she’d stood when I was baptized, exactly where she was when she was married, and then she held my hand. I thought about how she used to hold my hand often when I was a child, even into my teenage years, as we entered grocery stores and talked about boys or as we went to the movies and sat in silence. There were gaps in my
memories before the MemNet, but a kind of intuition held them together. Even when the specifics had evaporated, a sense of how it had felt remained, and I could imagine a kind of truth in spirit. In that moment, with those memories, I found myself overcome by love, not grief.

When the priest concluded his portion of the service, he said the family wanted to speak before he would open up for anyone else. My mother had planned to mount the lectern, but when the priest stepped aside and waited for her, she didn’t move, and she whispered to me that she couldn’t. I told her that was okay, and I stood in her place.

I talked about how big and strong my father’s heart was, that it had failed him because he had given it to everyone else. I told the story of how, when I was twelve, a scary-looking homeless man had approached us in a parking lot, asking for money. My father had told him he wouldn’t give him a dime but that the man could come eat lunch with us if he wanted. I said I’d learned about my father’s kindness that day. I said people who really knew him understood his kindness but that he’d hidden it well, and that elicited laughter from everyone who really knew him.

I talked about my father coaching my softball team. I talked about the years during which he was mostly absent because he worked three jobs to ensure we could keep our house, the one my mother had always dreamed of, the only one I had known growing up, and the one in which he died. I talked about him building me a small castle with plywood and lumber in the backyard, and I talked about carving an igloo with him during the biggest snowstorm of my life.

Nothing I talked about was stored on my implant.

I was okay with my father’s death. Really, I was. I was sad he was gone and we hadn’t closed the rift between us, but I knew he had wanted only the best for me. And when I was finished talking, I felt like I had given a sense of that to everyone who had come that day. I felt like, even though they hadn’t known him as I did, I was able to share him with them.

As I stepped down, I know I glanced into his open casket. I know he was there, lying peacefully. When I remember it now, he is chewing. He is chewing and his gray, cloudy eyes are open. Those eyes search for the side of my head where my hair has grown back in but, if parted just right, reveals a curved scar smooth as wax.

My mother came to live with us. She said she couldn’t stand to stay in their home. She said everything she saw, everything she touched, reminded her of my father. I told her I understood that perfectly.

One day, when I picked Sarah up from the bus stop, I could tell she had been crying. It wasn’t in her eyes. She was irritable and fussy and quick to anger. She wouldn’t let me hold her hand as we crossed streets, and if I took it, she would jerk it away. When we got home, she dropped her backpack by the door and ran to her room, where she stayed curled up on her bed, silent.

I gave her time, and when I felt she’d had enough, I asked her if she wanted to talk. She shook her head, and I tried to guess why she was upset. Did something happen at school? Did someone do something to her? Did someone say something to her?

She told me a teacher had said she looked like a boy. She said the teacher said she should let her hair grow and that she should ask her parents for nicer clothes for a girl. She said the teacher told her she would be such a pretty girl if she tried a little. I asked her for the teacher’s name, and she wouldn’t tell me, but I knew who it was anyway.
Later, I went to my mother and cried because I understood the world was making decisions for Sarah. I told my mother I was going to go to the principal’s office in the morning and would set the place on fire if I had to. She told me, when I was about Sarah’s age, something similar had happened to me at school, and she had to take it all the way to the board. She said it was difficult but that it was the only way things were going to change. She said it takes only one person with conviction to fix corruption, and she was glad that lesson hadn’t been lost on me. She said, if corruption couldn’t be fixed, it had to be removed, ripped out if necessary.

It was then that I realized we were the same kind of mother.

I used to think about the future all the time. Even before we had Sarah, Henry and I knew each day would have a tomorrow with alluring possibilities, but beyond that, it was important to plan, to peer through the present and prepare for what was coming. Sarah defined our future. It was true that we led her through her life, but she was the vanguard of ours. I was so focused on cataloguing everything that I didn’t, I couldn’t, consider a future without her out in front.

Perfect recollection does nothing for foresight.

This is what I remember about the best day of my life.

It must be late autumn because the brown and black leaves flurry with the wind, and many of the trees are skeletons. It is the kind of wet that makes you think, if you step onto the grass, you might sink and suffocate. We drive through the mountains to the lake, over which a dense fog has settled, and it leaves thick sheets on the windshield to be wiped away. When we find the cabin, the interior holds the kind of cold the burning wood stove can’t fix no matter how much we feed it.

Sarah says she wants to play outside. I’m concerned she’ll get sick, but Henry tells me she’ll be fine. I have this feeling she won’t, but I relent.

In the mud, Sarah plays with her monster trucks. Her overalls are stained black to her chest, and her hands and face look like those of a coal miner. She molds mounds with the earth for her trucks. I’m trembling, and I can’t stop. I turn to Henry, wondering if I can somehow squeeze beside him in his chair, and I find his face and hands are blackened, too. He smiles at me, and his teeth are impossibly white. I ask if he was playing with Sarah in the mud, and he says, hmmm?

Henry gazes toward the water. We can barely see the bank of the lake through the fog. There is a boat tied to a dock. It is sunk, only its gunwales and outboard motor visible. He says we should take it out, and I think he must be joking. Rain begins to fall, and I ask Sarah to come back in please. She doesn’t move. Henry says maybe we should go for a hike. I tell Sarah to come back in now. She shoots up and declares it time for ice cream. Henry rises to go inside. He kisses me, and his lips taste like smoke that lingers. I don’t remember thinking the coffee was burned, but I am so cold I ask him to bring me a hot mug and a towel to dry Sarah off.

She runs to me. She is dripping. She wraps her arms around me, and when she pulls away, she leaves a stain, an imprint, on my jeans.

Henry returns with a towel draped over his shoulder and three bowls. Chocolate for them, and strawberry sorbet for me. I stare at the mounds that are already melting even though the cold digs deeper into my bones. The strawberry is wrong. There are bits of black like Henry
scooped it with his muddy hands, or maybe he didn't rinse the scoop after using it for the chocolate. I decide that must be it and dig in because I don't want to be rude. I grind the grit between my molars, and no matter how many times I swallow, I can't rid myself of it.

We go inside, and Henry takes Sarah to change out of her overalls. They return, and she is in a blue dress, white tulle fluttering beneath her splayed skirt. We sit to watch cartoons, but there's only one channel, and it's playing an evangelical sermon. Sarah stares at it. I ask if we can listen to the radio instead, but Henry is asleep with his arms wrapped around me, and soon, Sarah is lying on her stomach, so still I worry she's not breathing until she rolls in fitful dreams.

The storm picks up. The fog encroaches, whiting out the windows. Thunder rumbles, and I can't sleep. I can only try to find the distance from the stove that keeps me from shivering but doesn't burn.

Hours pass like moments, and Sarah is jabbing my arm. *Ow*, I say, and recoil. She doesn't respond to my expression of hurt but says she's hungry and has to go to the bathroom. Henry wakes and takes her, praising her down the hallway. I go to the kitchen and make barbecue chicken sandwiches. The meat smells wrong. I detect onions, parsley, and celery. I decide it can't be spoiled because we just cooked it last night.

We take the sandwiches outside. The rain has stopped. King emerges from the wilderness and stares at us. He bares his teeth, his maw dripping. Sarah declares he is hungry and runs beyond my reaching grasp to offer him the last bites of her sandwich. She grips it in a fist. King releases his sneer, whimpers, and licks the sandwich from her hand until it falls onto the ground, and he devours it.

After Sarah finishes sharing her meal, she says she wants to play with her dog in the mud. I protest, but Henry says it will be time for her bath soon anyway. I ask about her dress. I say it's going to get dirty. He says she chose to wear it.

Henry sighs and says we can live this way forever. I say I don't want to. I say I can't. He says it's nice to not have to do anything. I say there is no future, only the past.

Later, the gray fog becomes a black shroud as the sun sets. We decide to make dinner. As Henry ignites the grill, the flames leap to his face, and his head bursts. The blaze descends his body like a curtain until he is a pillar. Through the fire, he grins at me, and he waves with a spatula.

Sarah takes his hand, catches, and I long for their embrace.

Does it make sense to you now? You wanted the Memorial Net to preserve the memory of your little girl, every wonderful moment, but there was an accident and pain no mother should have to endure. So, I'm going back to the surgeon who put it in your head. I have asked him to remove it. I know you will have no memory of the last seven years, but the doctor has assured me everything prior to the procedure will remain intact. If after reading this you still don't understand, I want you to consider that I know I'm erasing everything I am and everything I have become. I'm doing this knowing I'm returning my body to you. Ask yourself what would drive you to do such a thing, and then you might understand.

My mother will be there when you wake. She will look older to you, but she is what became of your mother. She will tell you where Henry and Sarah and your father are, she will show you pictures and videos, and then she will take care of you as she always has.
I know you will grieve for the years you can’t remember and the future you have lost, but I hope you will find some comfort in the knowledge that, even though you can’t remember, you were happy for a time. In the absence of memory, I hope you find solace if you try to imagine it.

Your little girl, curls bouncing as she twirls in twilight, sparks fountaining from her hands, her face beaming toward the heavens, and Henry by your side, holding you like he will never let go because you know he never will.

Just imagine it.
Millie mooed.
Cate mooed with her.
The cow stared at them.

Millie giggled at the old joke, a pure, authentic song.
Cate giggled with her, exaggerated, trembling notes.
The cow stared at them.

Millie continued to pet the cow's cheek. Cate stroked the other, looking for signs of impatience in the otherwise stoic animal, searching its blank eyes for knowledge of her charade. What made her want to release the scream that had been lodged in her throat for inconceivable minutes was how Millie, sitting comfortably in her numb arms, was so far away from screaming; Millie, who had every justification for adding her shrill voice to the one behind them.

She hadn't asked Millie if she was all right; doing so would have given her the impression something was wrong. She hadn't asked Millie her actual name; as far as the little girl's amiable behaviour indicated, they had known each other all their lives, and names didn't matter. She hadn't asked Millie her age; from the moment she took the little girl into her arms, she could tell she was no older than her career.

Three years old, Cate mused as she transferred Millie from one desensitized arm to the other, careful not to break contact with the cow. Three years, and once again she imagined the retirement banner, growing longer and larger as the idea cooked in her mind, advertising the pitiful number.

Cate was grateful for the brown-and-white animal's presence. Moreover, she was grateful that the cow was the first thing Millie had noticed. She wouldn't have thought to mosey on over to the cow; instinct—training—would have told her to immediately transport the dishevelled little girl to her car, and there they would have waited for the next routine steps. And then she would've known something was wrong, she thought. And then she would've started screaming.

A scream perforated the ambience, a cocktail of pain, fear, and perhaps a note of anger.

“Moooom!” Cate issued her loudest impersonation yet. Millie echoed her sentiments, prolonging and exaggerating the bovine language until it devolved into more giggling.

Another scream smothered the laughter, and, for a terrible moment, Cate thought she felt Millie stiffen, thought she saw registration on the little girl's suddenly sagging face.

“Moo moooo moo moo moo moo moo,” Cate interjected, the sound spoken in the rhythm of conversation. She fixed upon Millie's eyes, hoping the little girl would take the bait, ready to shift her body should she decide to go peeking behind her back, toward the scream.

Millie's bowed lips glistened, saliva pooling as she gathered her thoughts about the conflicting sounds. Cate readied her own lips with another string of nonsensical cow-speak, when Millie broke out of her trance, and fired off a meaningless statement of her own: “Moooom moooom moooom—laughter—“moooom moo moo moo.”
Relieved, Cate kept the dialogue flowing for as long and as loud as was necessary to beat the intermittent screaming from Millie’s ears. As their banter rose and fell with the outbursts behind them, she imagined how the others must have seen them: vulnerable backs; a revolving red light highlighting Millie’s arms wrapped comfortably—or is she in shock? Cate couldn’t decide—around her neck; mooing from unseen lips; the cow itself unseen, blocked by their combined bodies. How unreal it must have appeared to them.

How grotesquely real it was to her.

How beautifully real it was to Millie.

A terrible thought returned Cate to their cozy huddle: This is your first time, isn’t it? The scream she struggled to keep deep down in her gorge threatened to erupt. It occurred to her that this cow—not the pair grazing further down the fence, dangerously close to the break; not the calf flanked by several adults; not the others standing nonchalantly, laying nonchalantly, living nonchalantly; not the countless others that might have been a blur in Millie’s passenger window—but this cow might very well have been the very first cow Millie had ever seen.

Cate mooed and wondered if Millie could detect the underlying melancholy. You don’t need to meet a cow, she desperately wanted to assure the little girl. Not now. Not like this. She was certain that when Millie was one day no longer a size fit for one’s arms—there’s no guarantee of that, Cate reminded herself—she might learn to hate the cow. All cows. The way Cate hated them for what they had done to Millie. To her.

To Millie’s mother.

The human sounds behind them were less frequent now, quieter, the pain, the fear, the anger—if ever there was—giving themselves to realization. Cate hoped Millie’s mother would soon forget how to scream, hoped her mother forgot her daughter’s name. This line of thinking was drenched in selfishness, but Cate had accepted it for now; may guilt torment her later. It was just that she and, more importantly, the cow had worked so damn hard to keep Millie occupied.

Or are we keeping the cow occupied? Cate thought for the first time. She looked into the animal’s eyes, glossy black islands surrounded by thin halos of bloodshot white. Pulses of red light, rotating like an angry lighthouse—an eye of its own—searched those eyes, much as Cate was doing now, for knowledge. Do you see the red light? she mentally transmitted to the cow. Do you understand it? Did you see what happened before the red light? Do you understand what happened?

The cow stared.

Do you understand that this little girl I’m holding, the one mooing at you, the one petting your face...do you understand that her mother is the one who killed your calf?

Based on its indifference, she couldn’t tell if the calf was blood-related to the cow. Would it bite Millie if it understood the situation behind them? Would it reconsider biting if it understood the whole thing had merely been a matter of a broken fence? Would it refrain from seeking revenge upon Millie if it understood that the calf had wandered through the broken fence, onto the asphalt, and before Millie’s mother’s car? Would it rethink its potential bite if it understood that Millie’s mother had, from the looks of the finale, done her best to avoid the calf, but instead clipped its behind, sending her speeding vehicle into the ditch? Would it accept that the calf had been mercifully put down, quickly and painlessly, unlike Millie’s mother, who found herself wrapped deep within her metal womb, gasoline-for-placenta everywhere, unable to be reached or moved, lest she perish sooner?
The cow stared.

Cate focussed on Millie's silhouette within the animal's sheeny eye: Do you understand?

A voice answered the question. Cate couldn't make out the words, only the harshness of it. She sensed an approaching presence, and immediately understood what was happening. In a voice tailored for Millie's benefit, Cate said, “Please, don't come any closer,” and resumed mooing along with Millie.

“Officer?” The voice didn't sound so harsh. Perhaps it hadn't been at all. Perhaps, Cate decided, she was prejudiced against voices outside of she and Millie's precious bubble.

Cate sensed the intruder take another step forward.

“I said don't,” Cate said in her rosiest voice.

“Officer, I need to examine the little girl,” the soft voice said.

The well-meaning plea incensed Cate. She’s fine. I checked her when I pulled her out of the car. Some scratches, a few bruises, but she’s fine. I checked her. And I named her. She knew someone close to Millie must have known her real name, but for tonight, in her arms, the little girl would take the name of the first girl Cate had lost on the job.

Footsteps crunched behind them.

“Don't,” Cate emphasized, momentarily breaking her character of utter serenity. Before the intruder could interject, she added, “I...just give us a few minutes, okay?”

And then what? she thought.

Once again, she caught Millie's silhouette in the cow's eye. Do you have a father? Grandmother? Grandfather? Uncles? Aunts? Anybody? Do you know your name?

What would become of Millie when Cate decided enough “few minutes” had elapsed? What would become of the little girl when the cow was gone?

The intruder's footsteps—a paramedic just trying to do her job—retreated, but Cate sensed she hadn't gone far; Millie did need to be examined.

She realized the screaming had died. It made sense to her, not because the outcome was inevitable, but because the paramedic now had time to check on the only survivor.

But they still had a few minutes.

And so, Millie mooed.

Cate mooed with her.

The cow stared at them.
On the night of her mother’s funeral, Sylvia stood in the kitchen of her family home, fingers pruning in cooling soapy water, and felt weariness settle into her body. She had been on her feet for most of the day, standing in the kitchen all morning, desperately putting together hors d’oeuvres for the wake (Mom had been the cook and the hostess, not her); standing as she cleaned the house, which had more dust in it than she remembered; standing at the door of the church, shaking hands with the tiny number of people who showed up for the service; standing at the pulpit, voice cracking as she tried to remind the nearly empty room of her mother, tried to help her older sister, Alice—sitting in the front row—remember her mom, a woman full of energy and generosity, who played piano for the church and taught music lessons.

And now she was standing at the sink, washing dishes, alone, after hosting the wake, alone. Alice had disappeared just as people showed up. More neighbors came for the wake than the funeral, carrying casserole dishes and false smiles. They must have been afraid to show their faces to her mother in church.

Sylvia ached. She bent over, wincing as her back popped, and slipped her feet out of the new shoes she had bought for the funeral.

Alice had come in late last night. When she got to the house—when they stood across from each other on the threshold, silent and resentful—Alice declared that she would pack up the attic. She hadn’t volunteered to help cook, or clean, or speak at the funeral. She watched Sylvia last night as she tried, in a frenzy of anxiety, to pull together the threads of what you are supposed to do when a parent dies.

*I’m nineteen!* Sylvia wanted to scream at Alice, who stood in silence in the living room, eyes black and unreadable. *Why aren’t you doing this? You’re seven years older! Why do I always have to be the good child? Why aren’t you helping me?*

Alice’s response to Sylvia’s anxious ramblings had been to suggest that they cancel the funeral entirely. Sylvia had asked, incredulous, if she was serious.

They had not spoken since.

Alice had disappeared upstairs, only reappearing when it was time to drive to the funeral.

Sylvia flexed her aching feet on the cold hardwood floor, breathed out slowly as she rolled her head back and forth. Her neck crackled, a thousand splintering pops. She imagined the sound of trees falling as they are cut down—a thousand small snaps crescendoing into a roar of inertia.

She stared out at the barren land that once had been a forest, eyes straining to make something out of the darkness. The house still breathed. The water rushed through its pipes in a long sigh. Its walls shivered in the wind. But Sylvia could no longer hear the pines whisper against the window. Without the forest—without its soft susurrus—the house had no voice. It was alive, but no longer living.

Alice had left two trees standing when she made the deal with the land developer. She had chosen to leave the two oldest and tallest, which stood closest to the house.

Sylvia tilted her head to the side, slowly easing the grinding feeling in her jaw, her neck, and winced as the cut on her tongue throbbed. She had bitten it during the wake. Someone—one
of Mom’s DAR ladies, one of her “friends” who hadn’t called on Mom in years, who had given up on her when she became reclusive, strange—made a simpering comment that she didn’t think “Marion was the type.” Sylvia bit down on her tongue and her mouth filled with the taste of blood. She excused herself, went to the bathroom in the cramped hall between kitchen and dining room, and closed the door. When she spat into the toilet, the blood diffused in the water like smoke, curling downward.

She watched it disperse, then flushed.

Sylvia stared down at her hands in the kitchen sink. Mom should be on her left side. Sylvia cleaned because Mom cooked, and then Mom dried. The absence itched at her. The dish towel occupied her left shoulder. She anticipated moving one space to the left. It was another echo. Another reverberation of the loss.

She wished she felt something more. She only felt scooped out, exhausted. And the worst was yet to come.

Sylvia heard the crinkle of paper in her pocket as she shifted her weight to her left foot; her mother’s folded and refolded suicide note, personalized and written for Sylvia alone, poked into her hip. The memory of her mother’s broken body being lifted from the river on a stretcher, long hair tangled and dripping off the side, rose in her mind like garbage backing up in a drain. She’d drowned, alone.

When the mediator had told Sylvia that she and Alice had gotten separate letters, she had felt something sickeningly like relief. Mom had always confided in her and had wanted to confide in her even at the end. Then she heard that she and Alice were to read the letters to each other.

“Enough,” Sylvia whispered to herself.

It was eight—time to read the letters. She only had one more task to fulfill for Mom, and then she could sleep. She was so tired, she might finally get a full night’s rest.

Sylvia pushed through the kitchen door and moved to the stairs. She avoided the two squeaky steps on instinct. Light was eking under the attic door. “Alice?” She grimaced at the hesitation in her voice. She wasn’t going to be afraid of her own sister.

Alice was backlit by the attic’s single lightbulb, hunched over a pile of boxes. The two windows behind her were curtainless, empty eye sockets filled with nothing but a bleak, razed landscape.

As she turned to face Sylvia, Alice’s lips stretched into a thin, sharp smile. Sylvia thought of rats. “Hey Sylvie. Everyone gone?”

“Yes. I cleaned up, too.” Since you weren’t helping. Sylvia bit the inside of her cheek and continued, “Why didn’t you tell me you were going back upstairs? People asked about you.”

“I texted you. I wanted to get a head start on these big trunks.” Alice gestured behind her.

“You texted me? Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“I texted, you didn’t answer, I went upstairs.” Alice turned, arms full, and dropped their contents into an open box. Sorry. It sounded like a curse.

Sylvia tried to smile. “Thanks for starting.” She tried to keep her voice light.

“Yeah.” Alice turned away. “I don’t actually want to leave you to deal with this on your own.” The rosacea that had blossomed in splotches when she was a teenager now spread across
Alice’s cheeks in a spiderweb of broken blood vessels. In books, drunks had cheerful red cheeks and noses, but the reality was grisly. Her skin looked raw. Makeup patchily covered the bumpy, misshapen surface of her face. Alice must have tried to hide it for the service. With her hollow, deep-set eyes, she looked like a blushing corpse.

*What a horrible way to think about your sister.* Sylvia leaned against the side of the door. “We don’t have to move it all this week. I’m planning on moving back in.”

Alice’s eyebrows crept up her forehead. “What about college?” She sounded amused, but her eyes were flat. “I thought you were really invested in that art program in Seattle.”

Three months before her mother died, Sylvia got a call from her family. It was early—five in the morning in Seattle—and her roommates, who had gotten in late, told her to go outside. Sylvia left her dorm room, apologizing over her shoulder as she went into the hall.

She was shocked by the low, hoarse wail coming through the receiver. It wasn’t until she heard her name that she realized it was her mother, sobbing that Alice had murdered the forest. Cut it down for hardwood. After ten years of not hearing from her alcoholic older sister, Alice had come back into Mom’s life to destroy what Mom loved most.

Mom hadn’t been strong enough to put up a fight. When Sylvia urged her to call her lawyer, find some way to fight back, Mom gave a slow, mechanical laugh. “If only you were here to help, little forest.”

Alice wasn’t noticeably swaying at the funeral. She avoided the drinks table at the wake, before she headed upstairs. She wasn’t passed out in the attic. She might even be sober, though Sylvia doubted it.

Sylvia raised her chin. “Mom wanted me to take care of the house. I can stay here and fix things. That’s what she wanted for me.”

Dark eyes glinted back. “That’s a shame,” Alice said. “I liked the watercolors you had at the service.”

Sylvia’s paintings of the three of them—Alice, Mom, and herself—picnicking in the woods. Sylvia thought they were beautiful three months ago.

Alice straightened up, hefting a bundle of cloth in her arms. “But I guess you could go to college anywhere, with the family’s money.”

The objects in Alice’s arms caught the light from the hall. Sylvia took a step forward without thinking. “Are those Mom’s dresses?” Alice glanced down with an exaggerated expression of uncertainty—as if she needed to double-check. They were. They were the beautiful dresses Mom had worn for parties, for tea with the ladies from the DAR, for church.

“Seem to be.” Alice smiled at her. “I’m going to burn them.”

“No!” Sylvia shouted. She laid a trembling hand on the door frame, steadying herself. “What? No! You can’t. All of this is going to Goodwill.”

Alice gave a bark of laughter. “Why would you let someone wear a killer’s clothes? That’s cruel, even for us.”

Sylvia’s nails pierced the paint of the door frame. She stifled a scream, lungs burning. Alice did this. She gnawed at Sylvia’s calm, frayed her control. “Mom didn’t kill anyone.”

“I guess she never succeeded. That’s true. Does self-murder count?” Alice chuckled and dumped the dresses into the box at her feet.
Sylvia couldn’t blink, much less breathe. The thrum of blood in her ears was growing louder. The letter in her pocket shifted against her skin through the thin fabric of her pants.

Alice sank into a crouch in front of Sylvia. “Mom’s dead.” The smile was still there, a thin slit in her face. “You should be happy for her. She got everything she wanted. She doesn’t care if we set the whole house ablaze.”

The satiny teals, pinks, and blues of the dresses were blurring into a watery kaleidoscope. “She loved you.”

“No, Sylvia,” Alice said, hefting the box into her arms, “No one in this family loves.”

Listening to Alice’s footsteps on the stairs, Sylvia tried to shove the building sobs down, sucking in musty air and the smell of dust. Unable to suppress the mounting pressure in her stomach, her chest, she finally clapped her hand over her mouth and screamed, biting down on the heel of her palm to muffle the sound.

This was how Alice had always operated. After the fights and spankings—Mom trying to shake sense into Alice—Sylvia would listen to Mom cry. Her oldest daughter had a poison tongue, and when she stabbed at her, Mom just wanted to make her stop.

Sylvia closed her eyes and wanted, with an urgency that made her eyes water, for her mother to be there. Just to the left, a comforting warmth radiating against her arm. She wanted Mom to cup the base of her skull with her hands and to kiss her forehead. Wanted her to press her hands together, crushing Sylvia’s curls to the nape of her neck.

She tried to picture Mom. Instead, she remembered the woman who only looked like her mother. The woman who had lived in the house with Sylvia more and more frequently in the last few years. Who looked like Mom, but whose eyes were as flat and black as Alice’s. She didn’t want to see that woman’s face. She wanted to remember her Mom cooking. Playing piano. Laughing. Anything.

Sylvia wanted to tell Alice how wrong she was. Mom had loved Alice. After she left, Mom seemed to crave her. She would wait by the phone, eyes unfocused. Hunched back and shoulders curved over the kitchen table, hands locked in prayer, waiting for a call from her prodigal daughter. Standing on the porch, swaying in time with the trees. Picking out songs one-handed on the piano, her smile empty.

But why should Alice know? She had twisted Mom’s heart slowly, slowly, until Mom was not only sad and lonely, but broken. Sick. And Sylvia—who had stayed by her mother, had been the good child—watched as her Mom was swallowed by her misery. She was dead long before she jumped off the bridge.

Sylvia’s feet carried her downstairs, down the spine of the house, picking around floorboards that popped and creaked like joints. “It’s time,” she called out. Her words were eaten by the walls of the house.

Her footsteps were muted as she walked toward the living room. Sylvia’s unease was building, making her queasy. She was trapped in a nightmare. She knew this house so well, but everything felt wrong. She listened for piano music filtering through the hallway. When she turned into the living room, it would be full of red light from the sunset, broken up by stripes of shadow from the trees. Mom would be playing. Sylvia would walk through the narrow hallway toward the open double doors to see her, face glowing, as if the sun were her personal spotlight. She would smile and continue to play while Sylvia sat on the couch and drew until Mom got tired.
Some days, Mom was very tired. Some days, she lay in bed, gaze unfixed like she was asleep. Those days, she couldn’t drive them to school. When Alice lived with them, she had to walk Sylvia through the woods to town, hand-in-hand.

On other days, they were up and about and moving, moving, moving. Some days, Mom had a thousand social commitments and shopping trips; or she would stand behind Sylvia and Alice while they practiced singing and tilt their chins up, poke at their stomachs and backs to adjust their posture, pinch their noses so they would breathe using their diaphragms; or she would cook and cook and bake and bake; or she would clean the house before the housekeeper even arrived, flying about in a flurry of poorly pinned-back curls and anxiety.

After Alice left the house—went to stay with family—there were fewer and fewer of the fast days. Mom homeschooled Sylvia, and they stayed inside or walked through the woods together. Or they would stay in bed, Mom’s gaze drifting over Sylvia’s shoulder as they lay next to each other in the belly of the house, dissolving into damp, sweaty sheets.

Sylvia stepped into the living room. The light poured through the window, an unbroken dark amber. There were no more silhouettes of tree trunks. No music.

Alice turned away from the fireplace. A flame was growing in the hearth. “Ready to read Mom’s final words, then?”

Sylvia avoided her sister’s gaze as she sat down in the faded armchair. The lingering smell of rose perfume mingled with the scent of burning wood. The wind whistled behind the grate in slow, wheezing breaths.

Alice sat on the couch opposite her, close to the fireplace. She looked cold. She had always been a thin girl.

The wind grew louder, the house breathing more deeply, the windowpanes chattering in the cold. The walls felt close, skeletal.

“Who wants to start?” Sylvia asked, watching her sister.

Alice’s hands tightened on her envelope, wrinkling the paper. “I’ll go.” She pushed her short curls behind her ears. Sylvia remembered a younger, longer-haired Alice tucking her hair back—a nervous tic.

She remembered Alice had long hair when she was thirteen. It had whipped around her face as she stared back up at the house, eyes white with panic, stark against the night.

It took Alice a few seconds to tear open her envelope. “Fingers are shaky.” Sylvia watched her unfold the page on her lap. Alice’s small smile grew. “Sylvia, it smells like roses. I think she put her perfume on it, like when she sent out party invitations.” Alice’s eyes were watering. “She wrote it by hand.”

“Alice.” Sylvia couldn’t finish. Just read. Why are you crying? You hated her. Please just get this over with.

Alice’s smile slid away. “Right.”

The house inhaled with her.

“My dear Alice. It has been so long since we spoke. It will be a little while still. I hope you can now understand why I left you in the forest. You told me that you—” Alice’s voice faltered. “You told me that you cut down the forest to save me.” Alice stopped and squeezed her eyes shut.
“I saw you falling apart under the weight of all your demons, Alice. I thought that I could teach you a lesson, save you from yourself. I acted to help you.”

This wasn’t right. Why wasn’t Mom furious with Alice? She had abandoned them. She had hurt Mom, deliberately, by cutting down the trees. Sylvia pressed her hand against her chest until her sternum ached. She felt nauseated.

“Please know that what I did, I did out of love, to keep you safe. I don’t know what will happen after I die. I expect—” Alice gave a little, choked-off sob and looked at the ground. She raised her head, continued, “I expect I’ll go to hell.”

Tears welled in Sylvia’s eyes.

“I forgive you, Alice. I hope you can forgive me.” Alice swiped at her cheeks with the back of her hand. “That’s it.” She held the letter up, turning the page to show Sylvia the front and back. “That’s all she wrote.” She refolded the paper in a flurry of movement, fingers shaking as she stuffed the letter back into the torn envelope.

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“It’s been ten years. You didn’t care about her for ten years.” Sylvia was barely able to hear herself over the humming in her ears. “You killed her forest, and you showed up at her funeral to burn her things and talk about her like she was horrible—”

“She was horrible.”

Sylvia stared at her sister. “What is wrong with you? She used her last words to tell you she loved you! That she forgave you!”

“Mom’s ‘love’ was conditional. Always.” Alice’s eyes were bloodshot, but her expression was hard. She didn’t look away.

“Conditional? You were terrible to her!” Sylvia’s hands were shaking as she pointed at her. “Always fighting with her, and insulting her, and sneaking out to drink. You set grandma’s Bible, Mom’s Bible, on fire.”

They had been eating dinner when Mom and Alice got into one of their daily screaming matches. Sylvia tucked her shoulders up to her ears, trying to focus on her macaroni and block out the yelling. Alice ran deeper into the house. Mom petted the curls at the back of Sylvia’s head, the ones that always got tangled.

Then Alice was back, eyes full of fury, dangling the burning book between finger and thumb.

“You were a fucking kid from a horror film, Alice. She was sure you were possessed.” Sylvia closed her eyes, blocking out the sight of her sister, her face blistered by alcohol. “And even then, she loved you. She was a good person.”

“Right. You went to college in Seattle because Mom was so nice.”

For a few brief heartbeats, there was silence.

“The thing is,” Alice said, “I did forgive her. It’s one of the things they teach you in AA. You’re not a drunk because your daddy abandoned you, or your mommy was crazy. You’re a drunk because you drink.” She was smiling. It was an open smile, one Sylvia hadn’t seen since
they were kids. “There’s a freedom in that. You take everything they did to hurt you and you tear
at it until it isn’t holding you anymore. There’s just you.”

The wind picked up. It traveled through the house in a long, thin wail, and Sylvia shivered.
The hair at the nape of her neck was curling closer to her skin, prickling her. The sound died,
slithering away through the cracks in the paint, the joints in the wood, the rattling grate. The
house settled back into silence, listening.

Alice nodded. “All right. You’d better see what your mom wrote to you.”

The envelope was damp with Sylvia’s sweat. The letter would be loving and kind. It ought
to be that kind of letter. She was the good child. It wouldn’t give her back her Mom—the mother
who didn’t kill herself, didn’t have flat, dead eyes and an empty smile— but it would prove that
her Mom had existed.

She gently pried the lip of the envelope open, taking care not to rip the paper. There was
one page inside.

“Little forest. When you were born, I was so happy. You were so sweet, gentle, and
beautiful. Alice seemed half-formed, full of anger and ugliness. But I see now that God is cruel.”
Sylvia sensed Alice’s gaze sharpen, but she couldn’t look away from the page. “Where is my
forest? My grove? My daughter? You had all the appearance of goodness, but I see now that the
seed of evil was putting forth roots into the flesh of your heart. Your love turned to disdain and
hate. Your care vanished as your selfishness grew. Your gaze became cold, calculating, as you
plotted to go across the country, to desert me.” No. No, no no.

“Alice wounded me, but you killed me. You deserved none of the love I gave you. I am
going to die because of you. I will die alone. I hope you do too.”

She’d read the words faster than she could speak them, eyes traveling across the lavender
cursive in a daze. There was no sound leaving her mouth; she’d lost her voice somewhere in the
last paragraph.

A hand tugged the paper out of her grip. Another pushed her back into the armchair. A
quiet voice was making shushing sounds. She couldn’t hear what was being said over the ringing
in her ears. She felt tears on her cheeks, but the feeling of distance—her mind floating along
above her head like a balloon, barely tethered—was overwhelming.

“So. What do you think of Mom now?”

Sylvia took a quick breath, the air burning like water being sucked up her nose, and she
was propelled into her body at top speed. “How fucking dare you,” she managed to gasp between
sobs, which now had caught hold of her. She shoved herself to her feet. There was a deep aching
well that was overflowing, pouring out of her from where her heart should be, driving tears from
her eyes and breath from her lungs. “Mom accused me of causing her suicide. You want to say ‘I
told you so?’”

“What kind of mom does something like that?”

“Shut up!” She screamed, everything boiling up inside her. “She was in pain, and you did
nothing to help her!”

“Neither did you.” Alice hadn’t moved from her spot on the floor. She hadn’t raised her
voice. She didn’t look smug anymore, or even pitying. Just dead-eyed.
Sylvia had to go outside. She had to get outside, into the cold air, away from the fire. Careening into the hallway, breath coming hard as she banged her shoulder into the wall, unable to stop the wracking sobs that were shaking her apart. Mom had hated her. Had died hating her. Had hated her for years.

“I know why you don’t want to see her for who she was!” Alice yelled behind her. “You’d have to admit that you didn’t deserve special treatment—that you weren’t a really good girl, and I wasn’t a fucking monster!”

Sylvia scrabbled at the front door, hands slipping as she tried to suck air into her lungs. Her throat hurt; she was being choked. The door came open, and she rushed outside, toward the two trees left standing.

Arms wrapped around Sylvia’s shoulders, holding her back from rushing into the void where the forest used to stand. “Sylvia, Sylvia, wait, please.” Alice sounded like she was crying, too.

Sylvia looked up at the blurred, pale house looming before her and gasped. It was settled back on its haunches, watching her with its attic windows. The wings of the house were long, grasping hands; the curtains fluttered—lank hair blown around a skeletal face. *It wants to eat us, oh god, it wants to eat us.*

Sylvia could almost hear the missing trees swaying in the winter wind.

“Do you remember what happened after I tried to burn the Bible?” Alice asked. “She got so angry that she dragged me out the door by my arm. You just sat at the dinner table, staring as I screamed at you to help.”

Alice, hair long and curly, thirteen years old, staring back in abject terror as the heavy door slammed shut behind them, Alice’s hand outstretched to Sylvia, who couldn’t move, couldn’t move.

“She pulled me to the shed and got rope. Tied me up to the big tree—one of the ones I didn’t cut down.” Alice pointed to the tree on the left. “I wanted her to remember.”

Alice’s screaming and sobbing carried through the house on a gust of freezing wind as Mom came back inside, hands bright red. She scooped up Sylvia and took her to her room. She hadn’t finished dinner.

They had stayed in the bedroom through the night. Sylvia couldn’t sleep. She listened to her sister screaming, kept listening as the moaning died away.

After Mom fell asleep, Sylvia went outside to find Alice. She had screamed. Her sister’s eyes were closed, her eyelids fluttering. Her skin was blue. Her mother put them in the back of the car and rushed to the hospital. Alice was feverish for days, half-conscious.

“Do you remember that?” Alice said, almost pleading.

Sylvia shakily pushed her arm away, stepping out of her sister’s reach. “No. Mom wouldn’t do that.”

She walked back toward the house. It ached the way an infected tooth ached, to see this place that was not her home but looked so familiar. It was a husk of her childhood, cold and uncanny. The quality of the light that came through the open door was no different from when Sylvia was a girl, but it looked flat, as if it were a watercolor of a happy home, instead of her home.

She didn’t know anyone in this picture.
What Did You See? by T.W. Selvey
Hazel missed Marty. He was such a help to her, taking the baby when he got home even though he mended fences all day and tended animals. Every evening, without being asked, Marty would walk in the door, take off his boots, and take little Tommy out of Hazel’s arms. He considered it his treat after a long day, not a favor or women’s work. While Hazel cubed meat and fried onions, Marty blew kisses on Tommy’s sweet round belly and then made like he was gobbling up his dimples. Tommy dissolved into a hiccupping guffaw Hazel found irresistible.

Her mother would say Hazel should have supper on the table when he walked in the door, and her Home Economics teacher would agree, adding that tying a ribbon in her hair couldn’t hurt, that men liked a little color every once in a while. Hazel obeyed these strictures gamely in her first year of marriage, feeling a bit silly about the ribbon but wanting to please. Since the baby came, though, her everyday chores took longer; she couldn’t put Tommy down for two minutes without him fussing or knocking something over. While she was drying the breakfast dishes, he’d pull a lamp over. While she was sweeping up the mess, he’d get into the dustpan. It seemed easier to start dinner after Marty got home, and he didn’t mind.

Tommy bit down—he’d started teething—and Hazel winced. He startled into a frustrated cry at the movement, gasped a breath, and settled into a wail. He could sense her mood, and besides, he missed Marty, too. The pain and change of routine of being at Mother’s made Hazel’s little angel exhausted and cross. Hazel adjusted to make more room for Tommy in the narrow bed and whispered a verse of “Hush Little Darling” against his scalp. His wailing subsided, and he huffed a sigh, quieting.

There was a quick, two-beat knock on the door. “Are you decent?” Mother called.

“Feeding Tom,” she replied, “but I’m covered.” The snow had put a nip in the air, and she’d retreated under the quilts to escape the chill and didn’t want to emerge from her cocoon.

Her mother stumped into the dark room and shut the door behind her. Despite being so thin, all angles and elbows compared to Hazel’s soft flesh, her mother was commanding, standing with her hands clasped in front of her steel blue apron, lips pursed and chin raised so she could look down her nose at Hazel, tucked into bed, Nancy Drew and the Secret in the Old Attic propped open beside her.

“Well. Don’t you look comfortable. I wish I could read a book and take a nap in the middle of the day.”

Hazel pulled herself and the baby to sitting and swung her feet over the side. Tom jerked into his wail again, angry at being dragged back from the edge of sleep. “I’m sorry, Mother. I’ll come help.”

“Wait a minute.” She sat down heavily next to Hazel, and pulled Tommy into her lap, whose face was red and wet with tears. She crooked the baby in her elbow and stuck a cloth rag in his mouth, pressing it against his gums. Hazel smelled her father’s whiskey, earthy and sharp. “Marty hasn’t had a decent meal for three days now,” her mother declared.

Hazel bristled. “He could go to his parents’, or the diner—”
“I thought I raised you to have some sense in your head, Hazel Marie. He can’t let the whole town know he can’t control his wife. Especially his father.”

“Well,” Hazel said, “he shouldn’t have slapped me.” She felt like a petulant child.

“Oh, Hazel, be reasonable!” Mother shook her head, rocking Tommy back and forth. “Did it even hurt? I don’t see any marks.”

“Not exactly.” She didn’t know how to explain to her mother the shock that the man she’d loved since childhood, the man she thought she knew, could do something so out of character. It was worse than the embarrassment, and certainly worse than the pain. While she knew that other men raised their hands to their wives now and again, it had never occurred to her that Marty, such a gentle soul, would. She remembered his face when his palm connected with her cheek in a quick tap she barely felt: his lips were tight, his brow furrowed, his eyes focused on her chin. He looked determined.

Mother sighed. “You shouldn’t have talked back in front of his father.”

“I didn’t—”

“You did,” Mother barked. “He wanted prime rib, and you got chicken. When he mentioned it, you said chicken was all you could afford.”

“But—”

“All you could afford.” Mother gripped Hazel’s knee in her talon-like hand. Her small eyes were bright. "While you were hosting Sunday dinner for his family. You said it in front of his father. You gave him no choice.”

“That’s not true,” Hazel protested, but her voice had lost its conviction. She didn’t want to fight. She wanted to go back to the way things were, but she didn’t know how.

Hazel’s mother patted her daughter’s knee twice, underlining the lesson. “Marty’s a good man. Would you rather be Judith? You could have a husband who falls sweet on every woman he sees. Or Milly! Now, those are bruises.”

She was right. Hazel was lucky to have Marty. Handsome, quiet, a hard worker.

“You have a good man,” her mother repeated. “Don’t turn him mean by acting a bully.” She pulled herself to her feet with the aid of the bedside table. She looked at the fresh snow coating the yard outside. “Your husband will come home cold, wet, and tired.”

Hazel’s chin dipped in a reluctant nod. It was the first day of hunting season.

Mother continued, “If you don’t go home and make it for him, I will.”

Hazel’s head jerked up. “Mother!”

“I will.” Mother deposited now-sleeping Tommy into Hazel’s arms and walked to the door. “You’ve made your point. You’ve punished him. It’s time to go back,” she said, shutting it behind her.

A hot supper awaited Marty when he got home that night. Hazel managed it by nipping a bit of father’s whiskey, imitating Mother with the soggy rag, and making Tommy sleep. She was glad the dear soul, exhausted from crying, had a little relief. Since she’d dragged herself, the baby, and her valise through new snow to the small house on the edge of Marty’s father’s land that afternoon, clutching her mother’s gift of sirloin wrapped in butcher paper to her chest, she’d been
so on edge her blood seemed to fizz. Everything was too loud—the door banging behind her, the pounding of the knife against the wood of the board, the sizzle of the meat dropped in a hot skillet—it all sounded accusatory somehow. She’d been debating whether to demand an apology, burst into tears, or perhaps—and this decision seemed by far the easiest and the one best for her marriage—to pretend nothing happened. She knew there was danger in this precedent, but her need to hug him, to inhale his scent and feel the confinement of his arms wrapped around her, shoulders broad and strong, overrode her doubts.

When the door slammed open and Marty stomped through in a flurry of snow and icy wind, he stood mute for a second, taking in the warmth of the kitchen and the wafting aroma of grilled meat and onions. He didn’t look at her, sussing out his next move, and she rushed to shut the door and help him out of his boots. He half sat, half collapsed in his chair and allowed her to tug them off, trade his damp socks for fresh, dry ones, and lace up his house shoes. The task done, she sat back on her heels and looked up at him. He met her gaze with an expression akin to wonder, questioning and intense. His eyes were glistening. Without hesitation, she rose up, wrapped her arms around his neck, and pressed herself into him. It felt like coming home.

They lazed in bed the next morning, the three of them, skipping church. Delighted to see each other again, Tommy and Marty played peekaboo under the covers, Hazel the barrier they reached across to poke the other, giggling and retreating. Tommy thrust his head out from under the blankets repeatedly, looking around in expectation until Marty and Hazel yelled peekaboo! at which he’d cackle and dive back under. After he tired himself out and fell into a whiffling sleep curled up between them, Marty eased to Hazel’s side, and they made love quiet and slow, careful not to wake Tommy. She buried her face in Marty’s neck as he leaned over her, and she liked the way his shoulders blocked out the light. She felt protected. Since the baby came, it didn’t hurt anymore, and she even felt a glimmer down below, the promise of possibility. After, he laid his full weight across the length of her body, and she gloried in its heaviness. Its closeness.

Marty propped himself on his elbow and looked at her, eyes soft as he traced his finger along her jawline. He paused. “Hazel,” he started, but his voice was thick, and he looked away and blinked hard. His cheeks deepened as his jaw clenched, and she realized he couldn’t finish.

She remembered how when they were ten, Joe, the class bully, had once knocked Marty down in the schoolyard. Without thinking, Hazel had stood in front of Marty and yelled up into Joe’s face that he was mean and should be ashamed. Joe had backed down, not knowing how to handle a fight with a girl in front of the schoolyard, and the teacher had called the class inside. Hazel heard that Marty had got a whooping from his father for letting a girl fight his battles, but Marty hadn’t been mad. He wanted so badly to be strong. Watching his jaw clench, a tenderness filled Hazel that almost hurt. She vowed to be his strength.

That evening, in a kitchen newly scrubbed clean and warmed by a fire in the hearth and the scent of supper on the stove, steak from the deer Marty had shot the day before, Hazel watched him play with the baby while she cooked. Everything was exactly right.

The music cut off the radio as the announcer prepared to read the news. Hazel heard Plainfield, Wisconsin, and perked up. Theirs was such a tiny town—it was usually only on the radio in weather warnings.

“Detective Attorney Earl Kileen announced today that recluse farmer Ed Gein, in whose home ten human skulls were found, made a ‘partial admission’ to the butcher-slaying of a woman storekeeper,” the announcer said.

Hazel looked at the radio.
“Gein, who at one point curled his hands like claws and said, ‘I’ve been killing for seven years,’” told Kileen after two and a half hours of questioning that he ‘could have killed’ Mrs. Bernice Worden, fifty-eight—” Marty strode to the radio in a step and shut off the broadcast.

“Marty?” Ten human heads? Mrs. Worden?

“Let’s not—” Marty started, but then put his hand over his mouth, at a loss for words. “I don’t—” He trailed off.

“What was the radio saying about Mrs. Worden?” Hazel asked, dazed, but Marty abruptly clapped his hands together as if punctuating a verdict, although he’d given none.

“Well,” he sat down at the table and tucked his napkin in his lap, ”let’s turn the radio off during dinner.”

Tommy, abandoned on a blanket on the floor, let out a wail as if sensing tension in the air. Hazel picked him up and spent the next ten minutes crooning and rocking him before he quieted.

When she finally cut into her steak, it was too bloody.

Eddie Gein! A complete surprise, yet it seemed inevitable. He’d always been a bit odd. Touched, some said. Hazel felt bad that she didn’t like the way he looked at her—it wasn’t his fault he was slow, the way Mother put it, and he put in a hard day’s work, as Father attested. A lot of the womenfolk in town appreciated his knack with children.

Mother pointed out all these things when Hazel telephoned. She’d confirmed for Hazel that he’d killed Mrs. Worden but wouldn’t say more about it, nor would she comment on the ten human skulls the radio mentioned.

“It’s a terrible thing,” Mother spat. “None of our business. Good Christian women shouldn’t think about these things. You hear me? You better not let me find out a daughter of mine talked to any reporters.”

“Reporters?”

Marty agreed with Mother. Hazel made a casserole for the Wordens, knowing Violet was sure to have her hands full with Frank and the kids, but Marty took it in her stead, saying she’d best stay home and out of the hubbub. She wondered what he meant by “hubbub.”

When Marty got home that night, he looked haggard, haunted. Hazel was dismayed.

“Marty,” she said, taking his hand. “Tell me.”

He shook his head and bowed it to his chest, squeezing his eyes shut. “It’s not fit for your ears,” he said finally.

Hazel shook hers too, trying to meet his eyes. “What isn’t?”

“Eddie Gein. He—he killed Bernice Worden.”

Hazel nodded and closed her eyes in remembrance of the dead. But, she knew that already. She proceeded carefully. “Were there...others?”

Marty reacted almost violently, standing and turning away from her in a motion, hand shielding his eyes. He cleared his throat. Hazel was about to change the subject when he muttered, “Mary Hogan.”
“No!” breathed Hazel. Mary Hogan, owner of the local tavern, had been missing for three years. Hazel had always thought she’d turn up again. Why would Eddie Gein have any reason to hurt Mrs. Worden, widow and hardware owner, mother and grandmother? Or Mary Hogan? What could he have had against them?

When Marty got home from tending the cows, Hazel had the radio on in the background. Although she’d hoped for news, so far she’d only heard music and the tail end of a comedy show. But he eyed the radio and cut it off. Hazel kept cooking, hoping he’d be the first to respond to Tommy, fussing in his crib, but Marty unplugged the radio and carried it into the bedroom.

“Marty?” Hazel called after him.

When he reappeared, he smiled.

“Let’s not have any distractions at supper tonight. What do you say?” His voice became overly animated as he swooped down to the crib, picking up Tommy under the armpits and swinging him around the room. Hazel smiled and said nothing.

The next morning, Hazel couldn’t find the radio. When Marty came home, he said he hadn’t liked it and had dropped it off at his parents’ for them to enjoy. She was surprised he hadn’t talked about it with her first, and when she hinted as much, he hugged her close and pressed his lips to her temple.

“Let me be in charge sometimes.” He kissed her on the forehead, chucked her under the chin, and patted her on the bottom as he turned back to Tommy.

She giggled at his playfulness.

The coffee and sugar were running low, but Hazel didn’t mention it until they were out so she’d have an excuse to go to the grocer’s. This annoyed Marty, but it couldn’t be helped; a calf had somehow stuck itself in a section of the fence, and he had to help his father unstick it and mend the section.

“If you had let me know sooner, I could’ve gotten these yesterday, and you wouldn’t have to drive on the ice or carry the bags.”

“I can carry the bags, and the tires are chained. I’ll be fine.”

“You know they’re heavy.”

“Martin Hotz, you know I can lift a bag of sugar!” She swatted his chest and pouted her lips in faux outrage, and he grinned and kissed her.

“I worry about you is all,” he said into her hair as he embraced her. “And our town, it’s—” He paused, the seeming horror of it all robbing him of words. What? What was it? “You wouldn’t recognize it,” he finished.

Hazel was thankful for the chains as she made her way into town, but the muddy and rutted snow as she got closer surprised her. The road was usually pristine in winter—one or two sets of tracks, perhaps—but today, black lines zigzagged all through the intersection in town, and the snow was slushy, gray, and littered with bits of paper—advertisements or trash, Hazel couldn’t tell.
Cars were everywhere, and people crowded the streets. She eased past the diner, which looked as stuffed as a phone booth in a fraternity gag, and tried to give a wide berth to the many passersby darting across the road, seemingly oblivious of their own safety, or lack thereof, coming so close to her vehicle. She had to park farther away than she’d intended, and she realized Marty had been right, that carrying the groceries to the car in the snow would not be easy. She thanked her lucky stars that Mother had agreed to take Tommy while she was on her errand.

A man caught sight of her, someone she didn’t know, which was surprising in a town this size, and hustled across the street to walk beside her. “Can you tell me anything about the Butcher of Plainfield?” he asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Ed Gein. You know him?”

Hazel blinked at the short, heavy-set man with a big red nose who was huffing to keep up with her while talking at the same time. Mother had warned her about this. “I’m sure I don’t,” she said, quickening her pace. He fell behind.

Hazel saw Mrs. Klein, a friend of her mother, standing down the block, nodding and smiling in approval. When Hazel came abreast of Mrs. Klein, the older woman fell into step beside her. Hazel slowed to accommodate the shorter woman.

“You handled that just right,” Mrs. Klein started, as if in mid-conversation. “They’re everywhere, harassing everyone. Theresa tells me they’ve been ordering Gein burgers from the diner! Can you imagine?”

“Why would they order Gein burgers?”

Mrs. Klein sighed, exasperated. “Because of the cannibalism.” She whispered the word, like a swear. She saw Hazel’s blank look and continued, “Have you not seen the papers?”

Hazel shook her head. “Marty hasn’t brought any home in a while.”

Mrs. Klein raised her eyebrows. “Well,” she said. She paused for a bit, and Hazel thought she’d have to ask her to tell her, but Mrs. Klein restrained herself only a few seconds. “Well, they found human skulls used as bowls is all. And a human heart boiling in a pot on the stove.”

Hazel turned horrified eyes to Mrs. Klein, who blanched, realizing she’d stepped too far. “That’s the least of it!” she declared. “Everyone knows that! But—” She looked around, ostentatiously, Hazel thought, enjoying the role of bestower of such tasty morsels of information. Mrs. Klein lowered her voice. “Do you know how they found Mary Hogan?”

Hazel thought of her Nancy Drew collection. “They found her jacket?”

“They found her face.” Mrs. Klein’s eyes were wide, searching Hazel’s for a reaction, but Hazel didn’t know how to react. What did that mean, to find her face? Mrs. Klein continued, still scrutinizing Hazel. “They found it in a paper bag. He removed the skin. Tanned it like a hide.” Her voice slowed, sensing Hazel’s interest. “He wore it like a mask.”

Hazel stopped walking. She tried to process this information, and realized she’d missed the store. She also saw that three men ahead of them on the block had seen them talking and were heading their way.

Mrs. Klein asked, “Are you going to Joe’s? I’m heading there myself.”

They turned around and hurried into the store before the strangers could catch them.
They walked into the small storefront, a long and narrow room with a shelf cleaving the middle to make two aisles and a ladder extending to the top shelves. Joe, Milly’s husband and the new shopkeeper, heard the bell clink above the door and came through the curtain at the back.

Since the last time Hazel had seen him, in church two weeks before, he’d lost weight, and his shirt hung on his frame. Dark circles ringed feverish eyes, and his cheeks were hollow. Hazel, taken aback by the sudden change in him, didn’t speak when he approached and stood in front of them, waiting. He didn’t offer a greeting.

Hazel collected herself and brought out her list to give to him. He grunted and moved off to fill the order. Mrs. Klein widened her eyes at Hazel, but Hazel wouldn’t risk a response Joe might see—he’d been the schoolyard bully, after all. Hazel remembered he pretended to hit people walking by because he liked to see them flinch.

Hazel waited until Joe was out of earshot to ask Mrs. Klein who the victims were. Mrs. Klein fairly smacked her lips over this question. “Well, that’s the latest,” she whispered, eyes glittering. “They weren’t exactly victims.”

“What do you mean?” Hazel said, sensing Mrs. Klein wanted it pulled out of her.

“Eddie told the sheriff he didn’t kill them all. He dug most of them up.”

“From where?”

“Where do you think?” Mrs. Klein clutched her purse to her chest, and looked at Hazel, wide-eyed.

It took a second for realization, and then horror, to dawn on Hazel’s face. The Plainfield Cemetery.

Mrs. Klein started shaking her head. “I’ll tell you, I knew it. I knew it! Henry’s death was always suspicious.”

“Henry?”

“His brother! Don’t you know the story?”

“No, I haven’t heard anything. Wait, I remember—something about a fire?”

“He died during a fire, but there wasn’t a burn on him. Just bruises. Who dies in a fire from bruises?” Mrs. Klein paused, so Hazel shook her head.

“Well, what I heard was Eddie led the search party straight to the body. You hear that? *Straight to the body! Knew exactly where he was!*” Her eyes glittered the more she riled herself up. “I knew. Everyone said it was a terrible accident, best leave a grieving family alone, but I knew he did it.”

Hazel couldn’t remember. She’d been small.

“Eddie always gave me the willies,” Mrs. Klein went on. “Something in his eyes.”

“Didn’t you have him over to your place to fix your window latch a few weeks back?” Joe’s voice was low, and Hazel could hear its sneer before she turned and saw it on his face, hovering above her left shoulder.

In her surprise, she almost fell into the stack of canned goods behind her before she could cover her agitation and busy herself with the groceries. As she was checking the packages, a movement behind the back curtain caught her eye. Milly stood in the doorway, peering at them between the part in the curtain.
Hazel never much liked Milly because Marty liked her pretty blonde hair. Hazel's was brown, and her eyes were green, but Milly had pale blue eyes and hair so blonde it was white. Hazel thought she looked like a rabbit, and Milly's eyebrows, invisible against her skin, gave her an unsettling gaze, too intense. She acted like a rabbit, too, cowering at every interaction. Hazel suspected Marty might like a woman who would make him seem strong in comparison. She wondered sometimes if Marty would prefer she faint dead away at the sight of a spider or garden snake so she would need him, but she didn't have the patience for it.

When Hazel looked Milly's way, she backed away and disappeared, but not before Hazel saw Milly's right eye was purple and swollen shut.

As Hazel counted out coins to pay for the groceries, the look on Joe's face reminded her that his mother had gone to the good Lord only the year before.

Carrying her groceries back to the truck, Hazel was knocked off balance when a man brushed past her unexpectedly, and she fell smack on her right elbow, the weight of the groceries increasing the impact. It took her some time to collect the items that spilled out, and the man, a stranger to Plainfield, gave no indication he noticed his role in the fall, or even that there was a fall. Hazel recognized none of the few people who came to her aid, handing her cans and packages while peppering her with questions she only half-understood. She berated herself for her now muddy coat, which she'd have to launder this week, and for her elbow, which would be sore for a few days at least. The housework would be even more difficult.

Worst, Marty was right.

Her clothes were wet to the skin on her behind and right side, and an icy wind picked up. By the time she made it to the truck, her elbow radiated pain and a chill had reached her bones.

On the drive to Mother's, the snow became cleaner as Hazel left town center. Despite the wind, the day was clear, the sky a bright blue. The sun was also bright, filling both the heavens and the earth, reflecting back in the snow so dazzingly it burnen the shape of the horizon into her retinas so she could still see it when her eyes closed. The light was so glaring she could see the way the air bent it, and then she couldn't see beyond the light and air, couldn't see the road she was driving on. She squinted, wondering why she couldn't see, why the light was taking on its own shape. Had light always done this? Surely, this was a new development—hadn't she been able to see straight this morning? Her confusion mounted as pressure built behind her eyes, and by the time she got to Mother's, she could barely stumble into the house and collapse.

Mother pressed her for information, but Hazel was so occupied with the pounding that had started in her temples she couldn't answer. Mother called the doctor.

The doctor gave Hazel a sedative and put her to bed. For a while, she could only concentrate on the pain, the only thing that existed. Then, it was muffled, blanketed by a layer of quilt batting, providing sweet relief and allowing her to fall into an exhausted sleep, not opening her eyes until after the sun had set. Her elbow still hurt, and she felt weak, but the pain in her head was gone.

Mother opened the door, Tommy on her hip. She closed the door behind her after she entered and sat next to Hazel on the bed.

"I'm sorry, Mother. I don't know—" Hazel shook her head, dazed, already exhausted by the prospect of explaining something she didn't understand. "I couldn't see. Everything was so bright."
All I saw were edges.”

“Mmm,” Mother assented. “It’s called an aura. Some people get them before migraines.”

“A migraine?”

Mother gestured to Hazel’s chest. “How are—they?”

“My—?” Hazel faltered on the word.

“Are they tender?”

It was funny Mother should ask that; just this morning she’d about jumped out of her skin when Tommy had accidentally grazed her nipple with his fist. Later, the groceries pressed against her front had caused them to harden in a slightly painful way, through her clothes and coat. She felt like the princess and the pea, and she thought that Tommy’s new teeth meant he might have to move to formula, which the doctors said was better anyway. “Well, Tommy’s been teething, so…”

“Mmm,” Mother said again. “When was the last time you had your—?” This time, she nodded her head toward Hazel’s nether regions.

Hazel understood what Mother was asking, but her cycle hadn’t been regular since Tommy. Some months she skipped it altogether, like last month. She thought Tommy’s tendency to bite her, to cut his new teeth on her nipples, was to blame for the sensitivity, but now, Hazel remembered her first signs she was pregnant with Tommy were sensitive nipples and crying three times in a single day for no reason she could explain to herself or others.

“Oh,” Hazel said, and her hand instinctively cupped her abdomen.

Mother nodded. “Mmm.”

Marty came to Mother’s to pick up his family and his truck, and Mother got to him before Hazel could. She was feeding Tommy in her childhood bedroom, grimacing and considering the merits of formula, when Marty rushed in.

“Hazelnut! I’ve been so worried!” Instantly at her side, he kissed her hand, her forehead, her mouth, and he enveloped her in his arms the way Hazel loved, the way that blocked out the light and made her feel cushioned. She leaned into him.

“Is it true, darling?” Marty’s voice was earnest, and though Hazel had not yet considered the idea of a new baby, her heart fluttered at his eagerness, and the already strong faith she had in her family surged. At the end of a bad day, she had this: her very own Prince Charming, who loved her as she loved him.

Hazel asserted a pregnancy was too early to predict, but Marty gave this no heed, and neither did Mother. In her heart, Hazel knew. Her body felt different, alien, the way it had when she’d been pregnant with Tommy. Her hormones had affected her mood and her memory, and her back had hurt as the bones shifted in preparation of Tommy’s arrival. Her body was not hers any longer, but host to another.

She hoped it was a girl.
Hazel was not to go to the grocery store, and she was to keep careful track of the pantry so that Marty could make the trip himself. He would not risk another “attack,” as he called it.

This pregnancy was already more difficult than the first one—she got dizzy easily, which led to nausea, and she could only keep the blandest food down. She cooked for Marty with her head turned away from the pan to avoid the smell, and sometimes, he even finished the cooking himself when it got to be too much for her. She ate porridge.

For weeks, she didn’t leave the house except for supper at her parents’ or Marty’s. He decreed church too much excitement, claiming that the Lord and the congregation would understand the need to worship at home for a spell for health reasons. At the suppers, conversation was about the dairy or the weather. No one ever mentioned Eddie or Mrs. Worden.

Hazel spent the winter with Tommy, watching the snow pile up through the window, trying to keep up with the cooking and cleaning, sometimes getting a chance to read her Nancy Drews, which seemed false all of a sudden, childish. She wished Marty would bring home a newspaper or a magazine. He was careful about what he brought into the house. The news was not allowed—he wanted to “spare her,” the way he put it—and when she wasn’t tired or nauseated, her curiosity about what Eddie had done burned. Spare her from what?

Marty worked hard at the dairy, but Hazel suspected he also spent a good deal of time jawing with his father and other men, especially when he came home for supper late. When he came in those nights, he was distracted, preoccupied with something he wouldn’t share with her. He used to tell her everything.

One night when he was late, on impulse, Hazel picked up the telephone and listened on the party line. She heard a man talking.

“What’s Eddie’s favorite food?” A wait for a grunt, and then, “Ladyfingers.” A guffaw and another voice chuckling.

“What did Eddie give his girlfriend on Valentine’s Day?” the new voice asked, another man. “A box of farmer’s fannies!”

As the men erupted into laughter, the door slammed open, and Marty blew in with the wind. Hazel slammed the phone down instinctively, but the sudden movement and the startled look in her eyes told Marty that he’d caught her at something. He looked at the phone.

“Who are you—?” He strode to the telephone and picked up the receiver. “Hello?” he demanded. A pause as he listened. “Ah. I apologize for the intrusion.” He placed the receiver down and turned to regard Hazel. His brow furrowed. “Were you...listening to their conversation?”

Tommy cooed from his crib, hearing his father.

“I don’t know why I did it, Marty. You were late, and it was an impulse. And, well, you won’t tell me anything—”

“I’m trying to protect you! You don’t want to know these things, trust me!” He gripped her shoulders, trying to make her understand. Tommy started crying, an insistent wail. “Is this who I married? Is this my wife? Someone who listens on the telephone? Someone who listens at doorways?”
“Oh, Marty, I’m sorry,” Hazel cried, the sting of his disappointment spawning a flood of tears. “I’ll never do it again, Marty, I’m sorry.” She tried to wrap her arms around his neck, but he turned his back to her.

“I don’t know who you are.” His voice was icy. She wrapped her arms around his torso, pressed to his back.

“You do know me, Marty, you do! This isn’t me, I swear to you, Marty. Please.” She started sobbing.

An eternity passed before he turned and allowed her to embrace him. He smoothed her hair back, and pressed his lips to her forehead, lingering and inhaling her scent. Her sobs became hiccups, and Marty swept her into his arms and carried her into the bedroom.

Tommy cried until they were done.

Hazel’s nausea dissipated as her belly hardened and expanded, but Marty still wouldn’t let her get groceries. Mother delivered them one day, and as she was unpacking them on the kitchen table, she commented on Joe’s foul mood.

“You should be glad you don’t have to fight the throng to get supplies. And Joe! He’s not the same man since he found out about his mother. Not at all pleasant.”

Hazel doubted that. She’d never found Joe pleasant. “What about his mother?”

Mother glanced at Hazel. “Never mind.”

One day, when Hazel was sure Marty would be gone at least an hour, she picked up the phone again, eyes peeled on the window for Marty’s return.

“I can’t fathom all the money people get off this. Grifters, all. All that merchandise! And the auction!” A woman this time, Mother’s age, animated and indignant. Maybe Mrs. Helmrich?

Another woman cut in. “It breaks my heart to know he’s going to get all those profits because of what he did to Bernice. To our town. To our dead!” The last word was whispered with such force it was louder than a shout. The desecration of it shamed Hazel, and she silently replaced the receiver.

The winter gelled to a crawl, but one day, Hazel saw buds on the tree out front, the snow melting off its bough. Hazel had hope for the spring, for the new baby, for her return to the world. She began attending church again, and everyone congratulated her now-apparent pregnancy. After a service, she watched the men gather in a circle, discussing something urgent. The women gathered in their own circles, and Hazel was surrounded by young brides, her schoolmates.

“What do you think they’re talking about?” Hazel asked.

Doris replied in a whisper, “Probably nipple belts!” and she and Joan tittered.

“Mammary vests!” Joan replied, and the two dissolved into giggles.

Hazel half-smiled, but she had no inkling what they were referring to. She felt Mother’s glare on the back of her head and joined her circle meekly, which was discussing quilting bee
announcements. Hazel looked at the men, the way they yelled and pointed. They weren’t fighting, not exactly, but they were passionate about something.

The men were distracted at the family supper that night, the women closemouthed.

A few days later, Hazel woke in the middle of the night, reached for Marty, and found his side empty. An hour before dawn, he returned smelling like whiskey and smoke. She worried this was a sign of his waning interest, but he was cheerful after that, so she let it be.

At the beginning of the service, the pastor announced the Gein house had burned down. Hazel gasped, but when she looked around, the other faces were unconcerned. In fact, they were all carefully blank. No pity, and no censure.

“Good riddance,” her mother told her while they were washing up after supper. “Word was they were going to make it a tourist attraction.” She spat the words.

It took a few weeks back at church for Hazel to realize she hadn’t seen Milly since that day at the store. When she asked Marty, his face clouded over in a way she’d learned meant he was keeping something from her.

“Haven’t seen her.”

Hazel asked Mother, who clucked and shook her head. “She’s been gone.”

“Gone? What do you mean, gone? Ill?”

“Maybe. She hasn’t been in the store. Joe said she went to visit some family out west.”

“She left?”

Mother shrugged.

One day, Hazel found herself in the church nursery with Mrs. Klein while the other women decorated for Easter. Remembering the bruise from that day in the store, Hazel jumped on the opportunity to ask Mrs. Klein if she knew anything about Milly.

“She wanted to know what happened to Bernice. Joe wouldn’t tell her.”

“Marty’s the same with me. He was upset I had nightmares after you told me about—about Mary Hogan.”

Mrs. Klein glanced at Hazel guiltily. “Milly asked me to tell her,” she explained. “People have a right to know if they want to.”

“Of course,” Hazel murmured, hoping Mrs. Klein wouldn’t button up. “What did you tell her?”

“Nothing, really. I showed her a photo.” Mrs. Klein looked off into the distance. “It’s not...for polite company.”

Hazel glanced at the children on the floor in front of them, playing with blocks and little green army men. “What did you show her?”

Mrs. Klein looked down. “I didn’t know it would get to her like it did.”

“What was it?” A little more edge than Hazel expected crept into her voice.
Mrs. Klein sighed, unbuckled her handbag, and pulled out a black and white photo on a thin piece of paper. Continued handling had worn away the ink at the creases. She handed it to Hazel in silence.

It was a photo of Mrs. Worden, who was nude. She was upside down, strung up by her heels. A gash started between her legs and extended to her neck, the skin puckering around the black cavity of her body. Her head was gone. She didn’t look like a person. She looked like meat.

Hazel looked at the photo for a long minute. She couldn’t reconcile sweet Mrs. Worden with this body. This couldn’t be the pleasant woman who’d run the hardware store since Hazel could remember.

She handed it back to Mrs. Klein. They didn’t speak of it again.

That night, Hazel made Marty his favorite meal. While cooking, she thought back to the Sadie Hawkins Dance when they were fifteen. She’d asked Marty to be her date, knowing he’d wanted Milly to ask him but that Milly wouldn’t have the courage. Hazel had won. She watched Marty now, playing with their baby in the living room, watched the love shine in his eyes, and she was grateful.
The moment she steps onto the bus I know. The way he shadows her, his image appearing first, hers second. As if fate had them collide momentarily, one stranger kindly allowing another to go ahead. I see him before I even see her insert her MetroCard. She is carrying several plastic grocery bags, the weight of them draining the blood from her fingers, turning them a milky white. She breathes heavily, little gusts of desperation accompanying her slow shuffle down the rows of seats. Her hair is in a sad limp ponytail, grey strands escaping and sticking out in front of her ears. She doesn’t give off a smell, but an impression that more than a day or two has passed since she last shampooed, a greasy shine at the roots.

I look away from her immediately. Focus my gaze out the window. Will her to pass the empty seat beside me with all the mental energy I can muster after a long day at the office. I know her type—I mean, not only do I see it, just like everyone else does, the baggage no longer a metaphor—but I know the type of person she is—the kind of woman who spits at times from great fervor in her speech. The kind of woman who assumes camaraderie at the slightest sign of similarity, and mine is as obvious to her as hers is to me.

“Is this seat taken?”

I rudely pretend I don’t hear her. I wish I had put my headphones on. I keep my gaze steady out the window, watching the evening commuters pass each other on narrow sidewalks.

“This seat isn’t taken, right?” she asks again without waiting for an answer. She lowers her backside down, her grocery bags on either side of her, intruding on both the aisle and my leg space. Each thigh splays out in relief as she relaxes herself further into the seat, the fabric of both our pants now against each other. I scoot over, my head still facing the window.

“I know, I know. It’s crowded, I mean, with both of them here right next to us. My therapist says it’s best I just put it all out there right from the get-go. So that’s what I do these days. I found him myself you know, hanging from the ceiling fan. I had to replace the whole fan.”

I rest my forehead against the glass of the window. I clench my eyes shut. Part of me thinks of how many germs must be there, seeping into my skin, but the other winning thought knows I need the coolness of the glass to brace myself for the conversation she is dragging us both into. I don’t want to know this. About who he is, and how he died, or about damaged ceiling fans. Any of what she is about to tell me.

I think back on the others I see while walking on the street, or standing in line at the grocery store, or the uncomfortable surprise of seeing one of them in a meeting with a client. Some acknowledge the presence of their dead, but for the most part, most of us just ignore it. We know if they are there, it’s because it’s fresh, because the wound has not yet healed.

“He was only nineteen years old. What kind of troubles does a nineteen-year-old boy even have? What could have troubled him so much that he would take his own life? I swear, it’s been twelve years and me and my husband still don’t have the faintest idea why he killed himself. How does such a young boy have so much darkness hiding inside…and us, just going about life not even realizing? But I think about my Jimmy every day. Oh god, do I think about him. And not just because he’s right over here, but because I think about him.” She takes a deep breath, releases it with a hiss through pursed lips. “He was a fine-looking boy, you know.”
The number strikes me like a fist to the gut. I lift my head from the safety of the window and turn to look at this woman, to really look at her. To try and see past the ugly similarities in our lives, past her dirty hair and wrinkled, khaki cotton dungarees. Twelve years. Twelve goddamn years that she’s been walking around with the ghostly image of her son replacing her own shadow. The length of time is too much to hide my shock at this confession. My face is transparent, and I realize my mouth is slightly open and, quickly, I close it.

I always used to avoid the image of the ghosts when I ran into the loved ones mourning the lives that took themselves. I want to say it was out of respect, but I think it was really out of fear, and now it is out of shame. When Ted and I would walk together at dusk, when shadows were most apparent, I would look down at my feet. I didn’t want to look any of the mourning in their eyes. But Ted always looked ahead, a half-smile plastered across his face, and he would nod at those with death at their side. Later, I would wonder if that was a sign. You always wonder later at what might have been a sign.

Now I could see, looking directly at him, that this boy was young, so young. It’s often hard to make out in their eerie shape and almost glowing effect, but I could see that she was right, that he must have been a fine-looking boy.

I look down at my feet, because it feels like I have violated some kind of code by looking directly at the ghost of her dead son, and I notice all her shopping bags are full of adult diapers. It would have been the sort of conversation I’d have brought home to Ted. The exact kind of thing I would tell him while I was preparing dinner. We took turns preparing meals; we were both fine cooks. We never cooked together for some reason, but always kept the other company while they prepared dinner. My wine glass would have been set on the counter, his in his hand while he leaned against the sink, watching me dice and sauté and bring the burner up and then down, set the oven to the right temperature, a tray of chicken sliding onto the rack. I’d say to him, Ted, the strangest thing happened to me on the bus today. Except, no, it wouldn’t have gone like that at all, because if Ted were here, he would have picked me up from work. He would have said he’d leave work early to come get me. I wouldn’t have even offered to take the bus. I would have simply said, Ted, my car has to stay at the shop until Thursday, and he would have told me he’ll take me to and from work. That’s how it would have gone. I probably wouldn’t have even thanked him, and he probably wouldn’t have noticed that I didn’t. It would have been that natural to us both. That mundane.

I want to tell him. I want to run to Ted and say, and she had diapers! Adult diapers in her shopping bags. And there were several bags, Ted. Who needs several bags of adult diapers? What would he have said? I close my eyes briefly and I try to imagine it, what his response would have been. This is a game I play now, what would Ted have said. He’d have for sure made me laugh, and I smile now just imagining that. It makes my belly feel warm. And then my head feel dizzy. And then I realize I am finding it hard to breathe.

“Suicide is a funny thing. It’s not natural you know, like illness or an accident. It’s an intentional death, and it’s quite a thing for a parent, you know, a mother who gave this person life, who made the conscientious decision to bring this being into the world and give him life. And then for that same being to say no, I don’t want this. And if we can make the choice to bring them into the world, why can’t they make the choice to leave it? It just really fucks with you.”

I look back up at this woman’s face. I want to have a better look. Who would have thought? I would have said to Ted, the woman with the diapers is a philosopher. Ted would have replied something like, and why wouldn’t she be? What’s a weak bladder got to do with a brain? It’s just
that I hadn’t anticipated this. And I certainly didn’t invite this. It is unfair for her to assume I want
to talk about it, just because it is right there for her to see. Irritation creeps up and burns my
chest. What right does she have?

“After I found him, my husband didn’t speak to me for three full months. And you know, I
still to this day don’t know why. I never thought to ask. Grief is a strange thing, and if he needed
those months of silence, even if it was from me, I was okay with that. In fact, I wonder if he had
spoken to me, maybe I wouldn’t have spoken to him. For the first three months after he died, the
only voice in the house was mine, just talking to the pipes I guess. Because David never answered
me, and Jimmy, well, his voice box was crushed the day he decided to hang from that damn
ceiling fan.”

I rest my eyelids a moment. It’s uncomfortable to hear her speak of her dead son while the
apparition of his body hovers horizontally from the tips of her feet.

“But you know what’s a funny thing? Right after those three months, David’s shadow was
back to normal. There we were, the both of us moving through his silence with two dead sons
now instead of one living one. And then—poof! One day, he says to me, 'Debra, could you pass me
the juice?' And just like that, right after he said those words, his shadow was just his shadow
again, and it was just me and my Jimmy passing him the OJ. He managed to find some sort of
solace and comfort in those 90 days of silence that I haven’t been able to find in twelve years.
That’s why my therapist said just address the elephant in the room.”

I smirk. Because I would have repeated this right back to Ted. _Ted, she called the
apparition of her son an elephant._ This time, it would have been Ted who laughed. He would have
lifted that glass of wine up to his lips and spit a little bit of the Merlot back into the belly of his
cup as he let out a laugh he was trying to contain. The kitchen would start to smell of the roasting
chicken by now, and at this point, we would be heading to the living room sofa to finish our wine
and share the rest of our day. Ted would have my feet in his lap, he’d rub them and ask me about
the office, and I would relay details of cases he wasn’t remotely interested in, his mind too
creative for the nuances of the law. Ted would tell me about his team of writers and the show
they were working on, and he would bounce some ideas off me. But ultimately, we would land
back on the woman on the bus with the diapers and the elephant.

“I hope it doesn’t upset you. I mean, I know most people don’t like to discuss the weight of
their shadows. But to be honest, I haven’t met anyone who has walked around with one for as
long as I have. And I guess I just hope the more I address it, the more likely he’ll finally leave me.”

I want to offer her a comforting word, or even will my palm to a safe place on her forearm,
but I am dried up. I have nothing to give.

She is reaching for something. There is a worn, black leather purse across her chest, and
she is unzipping it. I hold my breath. I wonder what in God’s name she is going to pull out. This
would be the next chapter of mine and Ted’s discussion. I’d let him give me endless guesses as to
what she pulled out of her purse. It would go on long past dinner. Way after showering and
changing, and likely I would withhold the information until the lights were out and my head
found the crook in his chest. And I would whisper it into the darkness, release him from the
agonizing grip of my long drawn out game. He would have said, _of course!_ And we would laugh.
We would kiss. I would feel the weight of his body on top of mine.

Her hand is moving aside items, searching until she finds it, another piece of leather,
folded over in half: a small wallet. She flaps it open and rustles through the pockets until she finds
it, and I know it now. I know exactly what is coming.
“Here he is, my Jimmy. I’m real old fashioned, like a hard copy photo. These smart phones are so stupid, glaring photos on the screens and my fat fingers are always pressing the wrong thing on them. I miss the old days, where pictures were something you developed.”

She hands me the small photo. She is right. He is really a fine-looking boy. I look at the photo and then, razor sharp, I glance again at his apparition at the feet of his mother for reference. In the photo, his hair is dark and carefully short, his teeth straight and his jawline high. This would have been a boy who had a girlfriend, or a boyfriend. Would have been a boy who walked into a school cafeteria and had a bunch of people calling his name. This did not look like a boy who would kill himself. And I can’t help it now, but I am imagining it: the beautiful young face slumped over a rope, hanging from a ceiling fan. And my morbid thoughts imagine the fan is on. It’s rotating around and around very slowly, just enough to drag him in a circle but not enough that his feet would have flailed out. I am horrified by the image. But also, relieved to use it as a replacement.

“He is a lovely boy,” I say.

“He was. He was a lovely boy.”

I would have told Ted this part during dinner, while we were seated at the dining room table. The chicken would be mostly eaten at this point. Maybe we are finishing up the last of the rice, pouring a second glass of wine, moving around the remaining green beans on our plates. I would have told him my mortification at having used the wrong tense. Ted would have comforted me, he always did. He would remind me to look at my best qualities while minimalizing my worst. Don’t beat yourself up about that. I bet it comforted her to hear him spoken of in the present tense. And you were looking at a present picture, a frozen piece of time where he was very much alive. I wouldn’t really internalize his encouragement; I never did. I relished it, I lived for it, but I didn’t buy it. Because when it came down to it, I knew Ted was what people called my "better half." It was true, he was a better person than I am. He was always forgiving, always offering the benefit of the doubt. He let people merge in front of him during traffic and tipped generously.

The imaginary conversation would end. I’d have picked up my glass of wine and we would have moved on entirely. Likely to petty office gossip. I was always bringing us back to work politics whenever the topic of conversation no longer suited me. Ted humored me on the gossip, as if it was a quirky quality of mine he found amusing. I convinced myself he actually did find it amusing, that it was good fodder for his writing. But he was never invested the way I was in following anyone’s lives other than our own. I used to tease him, how could he develop fully realized characters if he wasn’t fascinated by the goings and comings of actual people? He liked to remind me writers have an imagination. He was the more thoughtful one in the relationship. He was funny and thoughtful. Those would be the two main characteristics I’d have dwindled him down to if I was asked. And I was asked. But most of what I shared with Ted I wanted to keep to myself. As if a monologue about all his wonderful qualities would mean I was relinquishing him over onto a crowd of mourning people. And, as it was exceptionally obvious to any person who would pass me in the street, I wasn’t at all ready to let go of him. They saw his long, slender body, his green eyes, the stubble on his chin—all these former physical parts of him seep out from the tips of my stilettos when heading to the office, or the soles of my rubber-bottomed sneakers during my morning jogs.

The bus comes to a stop. I wonder briefly if I am lucky enough that it is this woman’s stop. But she doesn’t budge as passengers come and go, those walking by us deliberately diverting
their eyes from our publicized grief. It was uncommon to find two apparitions hovering together, their iridescence melting into one another. A confusion of a shared grief when each of us were strangers. I resented the thought of our experiences being tangled together like that, as if this commonality made us partners in some sick game, teammates, weirdos, outcasts, just a common statistic.

The bus lurched forward again, and she continued to talk.

“T’ll tell you one thing, though—human nature, it’s a remarkable thing. When you need to, when you really gotta, you just dig deep inside yourself, and you’re able to muster up incredible resilience. I thought to myself, standing there in my grown son’s bedroom, his second year of college under his belt, an internship lined up that summer, and his face all blue and bloated...I thought, well, this will be my last day on this earth, because there ain’t any way in hell I’m going to be able to live one day without my Jimmy. And yet here we are, twelve years later. I have somehow managed to live more than four thousand, three hundred and eighty days without my baby.”

But you walked four thousand, three hundred and eighty days with his silent ghost blocking your shadow. I almost say this, I am so close to blurtin it out, but I hold back. I find that, somehow, as she is speaking to me, I have begun leaning in towards her. Like her conversation is a magnetic force, or as if she has undone the patchwork of the physical foundation I have been carefully balancing on these days. I realize then, as I roll her numbers around in my dizzy head, that I haven’t been counting mine.

“I remember what I made for supper that night, the night he hung himself. He hadn’t come down to eat. I had made meatloaf and a macaroni casserole. House stunk of it while the paramedics came to get him down. Haven’t made meatloaf or casserole since, and I have no intention of making it before I take my last breath. That ever happen to you? Just can’t ever eat something again simply because of association? I hear that happens to people with the stomach bug. Can’t ever eat that last meal they had right before it got started.”

When Ted and I first moved in together, we both came down with the stomach bug. I got it first. It was a Friday when I first started to feel a little off. When the sweats started to come, I cancelled the rest of my day and raced home. I hardly made it in the house before I felt my lunch coming up. By the time Ted had come home from work, I was vomiting up only the water I forced myself to keep drinking. The bathroom smelled terribly. As soon as Ted walked into our bedroom, he was accosted by it. I told him to go away, to not look at me. I was in a sweat-stained bra, and that was it. I stopped bothering with underwear by my fourth run to the bathroom. I couldn’t be slowed down by even the slightest extra task. Ted sat next to me, wiping my damp hair off my face. My fever was raging, and he kept telling me how beautiful I looked. He threw up within the hour. At that time, we had an apartment with one bathroom. We nearly clawed each other as we fought for the use of it. He asked me to marry him four weeks later. He said if we could make it through a stomach bug with just one toilet, we could make it through anything. I believed him.

Now, my mouth waters with nausea at the memory of a turkey sandwich. I don’t want to remember, not here on a public bus while sitting next to a stranger. But she is practically forcing me to. I had been eating it on my way home from work that day. It was on this delicious crusty ciabatta bread. I can still eat both turkey and ciabatta just fine, but it’s the distinct taste of the olive tapenade in the sandwich that causes my stomach to lurch by just the thought of it. The scent of a black olive hidden in a Greek salad on the plate across from me while lunching with a
A well-meaning friend can send me into jagged breathing, a sharp shooting pain in the center of my chest. This was the taste that lingered when I vomited the evening I found him. I had never seen a dead body until that moment. The first dead body I ever saw was my husband’s. I retched up my late lunch eaten on the drive home right there in the garage. Later, when the paramedics came, the bottoms of their shoes stepped right in it.

Ted used to joke that either he needed to die first or that we would have to die together. In these dark end-of-life fantasies he painted for us, he never mentioned a scenario where he would outlive me. Usually these hypotheticals would arise after a drama show that we watched late before bed, or if some tragic headline showed up on our newsfeed that day. I didn’t read into his thought process because I only counter-argued that I should get to die first. Neither of us wanted to willfully offer ourselves up to be the grieving widow. He even would give me a detailed menu of what he wanted served at his memorial. When I actually spoke to a caterer and they asked me if I had anything in mind, I only said no olives. I couldn’t remember a single item of food he had mentioned he wanted people consuming while he was six feet beneath fresh dirt.

We were married five years. Once in a while, if someone was rude enough—and it was rare, because at this point everyone really knew better—but every once in a while, when they stood in the casting of his glow, someone would say, who was he? My husband, my husband of five years. And once, someone said, just five years? Well that isn’t too long. You’ll be okay. As if love has a timeline it must mature to in order to be worthy of grief, in order to be worthy of uprooting your living life. In order to warrant you walking around with the morbid presence of your dead husband’s ghost for everyone to witness. No one has yet to ask how long he’s been shadowing me. And no one would ever expect to sit next to someone on a bus and learn twelve years. It almost made me want to roll my eyes at her. Move on already! But it also frightened me—that grief could linger that long so strongly.

“You’re probably wondering why I’m telling you all this,” the woman speaks up again.

I check my watch. The amount of stops the bus makes triples my route home from work. For a brief millisecond, I wonder what I will make us for dinner that night. It is very quick, but enough that the thought fully formulates, and I decide on pesto salmon and a spinach salad with sautéed beets. Then I remember I am heading home to an empty house. An empty bed.

“It’s his birthday. Today. Today is my Jimmy’s birthday. He would have been thirty-one years old today. Each birthday I can’t help but rewrite his life. You know, try and wonder where he’d be if he hadn’t decided to kill himself that day. I feel like he would have been married by now. Yes, I do. Maybe five years or so. I feel like this would have been the year he and his wife would have had a baby. Man, that part hurts, you know. Lost my chance to be a grandma. He was my one and done.”

Ted and I wanted a baby. Of course we wanted a baby. Five years wasn’t enough to make people wonder aloud if there was trouble, but it was long enough for people to forget their filter and make teasing remarks that caused the needle-pricked bruises in my thighs to smolder beneath my jeans. The lack of sensitivity would make me sniffle back quiet tears on the drives home from relatives on the holidays, or the birthday parties of close friends’ children. Ted was always very quiet about it. About the pain we carried instead of a baby. Sometimes I’d ask him what he was feeling, to tell me, please! He would say, there’s nothing to tell.

“He killed himself on his birthday too. So, you know, happy fucking deathiversary on the same day you were born. I mean, to me, that was his slap in my face. That was his way of saying fuck you very much for giving birth to me. I mean, how in the hell does a mother not realize her
son is hurting so bad, that she’s got to figure it out once she sees his feet floating above the
ground?”

People like to ask this. People like to know if you saw it coming. I had people ask me this.
I’m usually struck by a desire to punch this person straight in the face. I want to punch them so
hard it knocks the wind out of them, that they stumble to their feet and say, where the hell did
that come from? And then I want to tell them, that’s how I felt. It fucking blindsided me.

I was just running late, hungry and eating a sandwich. I was waiting a long time in the
house for him. I had watched three entire episodes of some mindless show with a laugh reel. I
might have even laughed out loud, several times. I texted him, I called him. No response. The
other writers he was working with said he had left early that day, that he had complained of a
headache. But he hadn’t told me he had left early. I started to feel a little panicked. I considered
an affair. But he gave me no real reason to suspect him, and I decided it was unfair to even
consider that a possibility. So I got up and went to the garage to check if his car was there
because maybe he had come home early and left his phone in the car because he wanted to lay
down because his head was hurting and then maybe he woke up feeling better and decided to
take a walk and forgot that his phone was in the car. My mind rambled a scenario that would
clarify why my husband’s very predictable schedule was suddenly unpredictable. Quite frankly, I
have no real idea why I checked the garage. I mean, I just wanted to see if his car was there or
not. I walked into the attached garage from the kitchen door and there it was. His practical sedan,
always clean, always orderly inside.

I don’t go into the garage anymore. I can’t. I can understand his preference to die in
private and in close proximity to his home, and I also know he chose not to do so inside the home
as a courtesy to me. This I can surmise based on what I knew of him, of us. But no, I couldn’t
possibly have guessed he would do this. I don’t know why he did it. He left no note, so I guess I
wasn’t really meant to. We laughed. We made love. We had careers that were progressing in a
reasonably satisfying manner. We owned a home. We traveled once a year. We had good friends
and close family. We were happy. I was happy. Like this woman, this stranger, I really didn’t
know the source for his pain that made him choose to end his life. I am still waiting for an
epiphany. But at this point, I don’t think it even matters. He’s gone. By his own choice. Whatever
the reasons, they were stronger than his reason to stay for me.

He didn’t materialize right away, and to be honest, I stupidly forgot he would. People who
walked around with the apparitions of their dead loved ones were pitied, marked. It separated
your grief from those who lost loved ones by the hands of disease or an accident. Scientific
journals couldn’t explain the relatively new phenomenon, but the psychological ones published
plenty. Theories that the grief of losing one to suicide was a unique one, layered with feelings
atypical to those who grieve deaths outside the control of the dead. At the time, when it first
began, there was a morbid fascination we all had with it. One couldn’t help but stare when you
inadvertently ran into someone with an apparition, which seemed to seep right out of them, from
the tips of the feet, almost like a shadow. Like you’re constantly followed by the choice your loved
one made to leave you behind, to leave life.

I read many of those articles before I walked around with Ted’s silent and still ghost that
appeared one night as I stepped out of the shower, hair heavy and leaking water down the length
of my back. I screamed. I was so frightened to be alone and naked when confronted with the
image of him. The ghost was slightly blurred and glowed an eerie light, but once the drum of my
heart returned to normal beating, I could see him, his beautiful face. And my grief pushed me
down into his shapelessness. I wept in arms that couldn’t hold me.
At first, Ted’s presence haunted me. I sought therapy immediately to address the grief in order to free myself of him. My therapist said one theory for the apparitions was to motivate the surviving loved ones to do just that. It wasn’t her theory though. She believed I had to come to this place naturally, not as a means to simply escape his glow. But then, after a few sessions, I realized the image of him comforted me. I no longer walked alone at night, or sat by myself to eat dinner. I didn’t have to watch our favorite shows without him or get into bed alone. I began to talk to him, at first tepidly, but then without shame, but never in public. I began sleeping back on my side of the mattress, instead of in the center of the bed as I had after the funeral. Now his ghostly image fills his empty place in our bed. When I wake in the morning, I sigh with relief at the sight of him, grateful I am still deep enough in mourning not to lose this fleeting last connection to him.

“Anyway, that’s why, in case you’re wondering why I’m going off like a god-damn lunatic.”

“No, no. It’s okay. Really. It’s just, mine is still very fresh. So, you know.”

I didn’t even know. What did I mean by that? Was grief different when measured in lengths of time passing? Was hers lesser or more than mine because she lost a child, or was it me that was suffering more by losing the romantic love of my life? She still went home to her husband who drank orange juice. She still had a child, had one for nineteen years.

We were scheduled for an in vitro implantation for four days after Ted’s death. It landed on the same day as his funeral. I just simply never showed up. They still call me, about the frozen eggs, about the fertilized ones that they had to dispose of. I could have done it. I could have tried for it, tried for his baby. I was too frightened though. It was better not to talk to the clinic at all. I couldn’t be trusted in such a state to make a sane decision about the eggs, and anyway, it’s not like I can conjure him back through conception.

I rest my head back against the seat. Close my eyes and take slow breaths. Why am I comparing our grief? She is a stranger. She is hurting. I am hurting. My body reaches out before I can stop it. My hand operating on a different commanding system than my brain, because it is so out of my comfort zone, so unlike me to reach down and grasp this woman’s hand. But I do. I hold it tight. This woman who got on the bus with several bags of adult diapers. Whose hair shines with grime. Her hand is now inside of mine.

“Oh, honey.”

That’s all she says. And then the bus stops. It doesn’t cross my mind that this is her exit; I don’t even know if it’s my exit. But something in the way her hand twitches indicates the tiniest level of impatience. A need to move.

“I could stay. I could ride on with you.”

“Oh no, of course not.”

I open my eyes, but I don’t let go of her hand.

“It doesn’t mean it was you.”

“What?” I turn to look at her.

“Whoever he was, it doesn’t mean he ended it all because of you. If anything, he might have held out longer than you realized because of you.”

She squeezes my hand and then lets it go. My hand falls to my side and I watch her bend over her generous middle, reach down to loop her fingers through the many plastic handles of
her bags. She struggles a bit, so human, so regular. I would have repeated this to Ted. It takes her several minutes to just get up and get those bags in her hands, and I have to sit there in that awkward space, pretending not to notice. The bulge of the bags blocks her way into the aisle, this totally uncomfortable Tetris-like game as she hoists and maneuvers herself and the large bags of diapers. He’d be smiling, his wide toothy smile, and he’d say, you should take the bus more often! Look at all this wonderful human goodness you miss by having your own car! There’s a whole world out there for you to see, full of diapers and tiny seated spaces with strangers. Gosh, it’s just full of endless possibilities.

I look after her as she makes her way to the front of the bus. She doesn’t look back once, so she couldn’t have seen her shadow, the regularness of it spilling across the bus as she exits out into the day’s blinding evening light. The bus lurches forward and my eyes briefly follow her walking down the street, quickly absorbed into a crowd of shadows as I make my way to my stop, both a little more and a little less alone.
Contributor Biographies

POETRY

JANA BAUK is a writer with a passion for poetry and fiction. She has a BA in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing. She enjoys finding inspiration through nature and (often bittersweet) life experiences. Her fiction work has appeared in Number One Magazine, and she is currently working on a short story.

ROBERT BEVERIDGE (he/him) makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in the6ress, 1870, and the Hope Anthology, among others.

CHRIS BLEXRUD is a writer and editor living in New Orleans.

SHIKSHA DHEDA is a South African of Indian descent. She uses writing to express her OCD and depression roller-coaster ventures. Sometimes, she dabbles in photography, painting, and baking lopsided layered cakes. Her debut poetry collection, Washed Away, is forthcoming with Alien Buddha Press.

ELI DUNHAM is a queer, neurodivergent poet living in Sacramento, CA. You can find their poetry in DreamPop, Gasher, Indefinite Space, YAWP, Q/A, Anti-Heroin Chic, and elsewhere. They have poems forthcoming in Heavy Feather Review.

SYDNEY FAITH is a midwestern writer and poet. Drawing on a childhood of rural adventures and strange occurrences, her work explores emotional haunting and healing through natural and supernatural elements. She has been previously published in The Bitchin’ Kitsch and Blood Orange Review.

MARIE FIELDS’s work has been published in Mookychick, Door Is A Jar Magazine, Royal Rose Magazine, HunnyBee Lit, The Magnolia Review, The Cabinet of Heed, Turnpike Magazine, and Tiny Flames Press. She also has two poetry collections, "Marie! (mah-RIE!)” and “Conflagration,” available on Amazon. Support her on Patreon (patreon.com/mariefields).

AD KNOSS (she/her) is a white settler harvested in the Canadian Prairies who lives and loves in Toronto, Ontario. Words trickle through her professional life as a copywriter and her personal life as an aspiring storyteller. Her work has been featured in the winnow magazine.

RICHARD LEDUE (he/him) was born in Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada, but currently lives with his wife and son in Norway House, Manitoba. His poems have appeared in various publications.
throughout 2020, and more work is forthcoming throughout 2021. His chapbook, “The Loneliest Age,” was released in October 2020 from Kelsay Books.

MICHAEL RUSSELL (he/they) is Mama Bear to chapbook Grindr Opera (Frog Hollow Press). He’s queer, has BPD, Bipolar Disorder, and way too much anxiety. His work has appeared in Arc Poetry Magazine, Heavy Feather Review, Homology Lit, and Plenitude, among other places. He lives in Toronto and thinks you’re fantabulous. Insta: @michael.russell.poet.

LAURA STRINGFELLOW writes both verse and prose poetry and hails from the muggy strangelands of the Southern US. Her work has appeared in various literary journals and magazines, including Right Hand Pointing, Coffin Bell: a journal of dark literature, Black Poppy Review, Ephemeral Elegies, and FERAL: A Journal of Poetry and Art.

FICTION

Artisan baker by trade, ALFREDO SALVATORE ARCILESI has been published in over 50 literary journals worldwide. Winner of the Scribes Valley Short Story Writing Contest, he was also a finalist in the Blood Orange Review Literary Contest and awarded the Popular Vote in the Best of Rejected Manuscripts Competition. In addition to several short pieces, he is currently working on his debut novel.

ARON BROWN is a non-binary bisexual Angeleno who learned to read at a very early age by imitating their parents, holding the book upside down, and making up most of the words. This put them on the road to composing stories for the rest of their life. They are entering UC Riverside’s MFA program in the fall, where they will study fiction. Their work has appeared in From the Farther Trees, a literary journal specializing in fantasy, and Deraciné, a gothic fiction literary journal. They are obsessed with history, literature (especially Shakespeare), comics, and tabletop RPGs. Aron also spent many years writing fanfiction, but don’t look it up.

GODDFREY SUE HAMMIT was born and raised in Utah, and lives in Utah still, in a small town outside of Salt Lake City. Hammit is the author of the novel Nimrod, UT. Website: goddfreyhammit.com.

SCOTT HERMANSON’s debut work, “Christmasville,” was published in Superstition Review. In addition, his articles and reviews have appeared in Critique, Western American Literature, and The San Diego Herald-Tribune.

TALYA JANKOVITS’s work has appeared in a number of literary journals. Her micro piece, "Bus Stop in Morning," was a winner of Beyond Words Magazine’s 250-word, cold-themed writing challenge. Her short story “Undone” in Lunch Ticket was nominated for a Pushcart prize. Her poem, "A Woman of Valor," was featured in the 2019/2020 Eshet Hayil exhibit at Hebrew Union
College Los Angeles. She holds her MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University and resides in Chicago with her husband and four daughters.

TIMOTHY JOHNSON is a writer and editor living outside of Washington, D.C. His published work includes the novels *The Pillars of Dawn* and *Carrier*, as well as short fiction appearing in various professional and semi-professional markets. He is an MFA candidate in George Mason University’s creative writing program and an affiliate member of the HWA. Find him on Twitter @tim_the_writer or at timothyjohnsonfiction.com.

CLAIRE LOADER is a New Zealand-born writer now living in County Galway, Ireland. Her poetry and prose have been published in various magazines and anthologies, including *Splonk*, *Harbinger Press*, and *Tales From The Forest*. Shortlisted for the Allingham Flash Fiction Prize in 2019, she was the recent winner of the Fusilli Flash Fiction Short & Twisted Competition and has been nominated for the Forward Prize.

ELISA SUBIN is a poet whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Moment Poetry, Déraciné Magazine, 34 Orchard Literary Journal, CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly, Thimble Magazine*, and many others. She won an Honorable Mention in the Reuben Rose Poetry Competition.

VALERIE WAYSON is a former traveler and teacher who’s taught in Madagascar, Iraqi Kurdistan, and Texas. She now writes from Costa Rica and hopes to soon get a dog.

PHOTOGRAPHY/ART

JJ D’ONOFRIO is an artist living in Middleton, WI. His media includes photography and digital art. His pieces include cityscapes, wildlife, landscapes, and conceptual images. Most of his work, though, describes isolation, alienation, and loss—emotions acutely experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic by many people throughout the world. JJ D’Onofrio’s work seeks to make tangible in visual form those emotions crisscrossing atmospheres in which we all operate.

KYLE HEMMINGS has work published in *Sonic Boom, Failed Haiku, Unbroken Journal*, and elsewhere. He loves ’60s garage bands and ’50s sci-fi movies cheaply made.

Recently, T.W. SELVEY’s work has appeared in *Steel Incisors, Fugitives & Futurists, Feral, The Wondrous Real Magazine, Witch Craft Magazine, Mercurious Magazine*, and *Fairy Piece*. T.W. tweets sporadically @docu_dement, and is the proud curator of a haphazardly curated blog, [www.documentdement.com](http://www.documentdement.com).

WAYNE WOLFSWON is a Northern California based artist. His two main mediums are watercolor & collage. For collage, he came up with and trademarked the name Cinefield®. The definition: "Flat,
two-dimensional visual works of art on paper which create the feeling of movie-like narratives through a composition of image-rich and story-like printed pictures.” View more of his work at paperlifepainting.com.