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## Here There Is No Place That Does Not See You

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Here There Is No Place That Does Not See You

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing

by

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B.A. University of Tulsa, 1997  
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To Neil

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**I**

## **Water, not Fiction**

There's a cement curb in the parking lot of my apartment building. I look at it every morning to see if it has been transformed yet. That is, I'm waiting for it to become beautiful. The way I see it, everything has some moment when it becomes beautiful. Shawn says this to me all the time. Kathleen, he says, the world is beautiful. He's always asking me if I get that. He grew up and attended a private school in the northeast. The world, Kathleen, is just waiting for us to transform it, he'll say. But this curb is stained by tire tread and darkly beguiling remnants of what might have been chewing gum. So I wonder.

Megan, my older sister, called yesterday to tell me more news about Lonnie, her first boyfriend, who either jumped or fell to his death from the Talequah water tower last year. When I think about Lonnie now, I remember the sunflower wallpaper in his mother's kitchen. I thought I was something back then. Or, more accurately, I worried I was, in fact, not something and therefore spent a lot of time overcompensating for my secret sense of nothingness by acting like what I thought was something. That day in Lonnie's mother's kitchen, I made fun of her wallpaper by calling it country. His mother was mostly deaf even then, and I don't think Lonnie or Megan heard or cared what I said, the little sister stuck with them, sitting at the kitchen table, but the moment is filed forever on a notecard in my brain that is sometimes pulled out for review unexpectedly in my adult life, like when I am running or falling asleep or the other day when I

was lying on the floor with my legs up against the wall trying out one of Shawn's inverted meditation poses.

Now that Lonnie is dead, I think I really miss him even though it has been over ten years since any of us have seen him. Megan, however, purports to be more interested in than upset by the subject. Researching Lonnie's death has become her project, something like how older people start making genealogy charts when they begin to worry about their own mortality.

I'm pretty sure it's an early suicide note, Megan told me over the phone.

She has been rereading the old notes Lonnie wrote her in high school, both pre- and post-breakup, although the post-breakup ones in which he is heartbroken and says so are her favorite. She can now quote freely from them without going under her bed and retrieving the miniature cedar box where she keeps the folded pieces of notebook paper that are worn and rotted at the creases.

He fell, Megan, I said. He was drunk.

Lonnie didn't drink, she said.

Megan, he drank.

That was before. He gave all that up, she said.

How do you know for sure? I asked.

I guess I don't know for sure, she said. But I do know that there is something dark about this note. Something in this note foretells tragedy and water in a very big way, and either you see it or you don't see it.

She added that my mother agrees. She and my mother have become quite the duo since Megan has moved back home. She says it's just until she and her husband, Albert, get on their

feet, but they have their patterns, Albert in the garage, the shared ashtray on kitchen table between the two chairs, mom left, Megan right, so good luck, I say.

But yesterday on the phone, I tried to tread lightly: Don't you think, I told her, it's a little, I don't know, self-involved to invent the suicide of a stranger, basically. And then read yourself into the reason behind the suicide based on a twelve-year old note that has, in your view, a little water imagery?

I heard the closing of a cabinet door and the sound of a glass being placed on the countertop, which I know deep in the caverns of my heart to be green and Formica.

Megan, I said.

Still nothing, so I waited while the silence grew louder, like when your ear clogs with water and you suddenly hear inside your head, and then I waited some more.

Megan, I finally said. Why would he kill himself? I mean, years later? Why would he go through all that trouble for you?

Because believe it or not, people do things for other people, Kathy. They just do.

I sat on Shawn's couch with the phone tucked between my shoulder and ear and waited for what more she had to give—she has always been the more feisty of the two of us—but she only went on to talk about the neighbor getting his car stuck in the ditch along their main road and then got off the phone completely because she had to, she said, get ready for her shift.

---

I've been trying to think of things in terms of metaphor lately. Shawn says it's a good mental exercise, a way to sharpen perception. Being with him is sometimes like studying for the SAT.

Illness, he will say suddenly while we're waiting in the check-out line at the Safeway. Think of illness in terms of metaphor.

I look down at the rolls of triple-ply toilet paper and the Basamati rice I am holding in my arms. A mildewed sponge, I answer.

Shawn nods, satisfied.

A stovetop with burnt rice stuck to the foil liner on the burner, I continue.

That one's too detailed to pull off, he says and places the grapes and soda on the moving conveyer belt because now it is our turn.

---

The thing is, though, I have it backwards. I say that I am trying to think in terms of metaphor, which I see as an outward movement, but what really happens is that something strikes me, and I try to figure out what it means. Usually what the thing means has something to do with my life. The unbeautiful cement curb in the parking lot, for instance, represents my life, that my life, like the curb, might not ever be made beautiful. Walking to the dry cleaner the other day, I saw a trash can that had been tossed into a bigger trash can. What does that represent? I wondered. What does it mean when your purpose is made obsolete within a larger form of your own purpose? I shook my head to stop the crowding, the endless succession of garbage cans nestled into each other like Russian dolls and the memory they lead to of all the times I have angled the tri-fold mirrors in dressing rooms at the mall to see an infinite regression of me and then me and then me again.

---

Shawn is shorter than I am and has just published his first collection of short stories. We have recently moved into a bigger apartment in the city, a loft apartment, with pipes that run along impossibly high ceilings like exposed vocal cords. I suppose the pipes are really part of the air conditioning system, but I still think about voices when I look at them. When I tell Shawn to stop

teasing the cat, for instance, I imagine my voice bouncing around the enormous space, ricocheting off the steely pipes, becoming smaller and smaller until it finally rolls into the corner behind the defunct radiator.

Shawn loves to tease the cat when he can't think of anything to write. He wads marked-up paper and throws it at her, one inky ball after another. He likes it best when she starts hissing, when she charges his desk chair with a spiked spine and then scuttles backwards on the slick floor. We named her Muse, but neither of us likes her very much. She is the love child of a feral tomcat and Megan's fat calico. There were two other kittens in the litter, but both died in Albert's pick-up truck when they crawled under the hood and into the fan belt. He didn't know they were there, of course, when he started the engine.

Later Shawn wrote the incident into his story "Pastoral," only the main character actually sees one of the cats crawl into the engine and starts the truck anyway. I worried that Albert would think that we thought that about him, that just because he still lives out at the lake, he likes to kill kittens under the dented hood of his pick-up truck and then, I don't know, go out and shoot a deer and then buy and eat one of those pickled eggs that float in jars of brine and vinegar by the cash register of the Bait-and-Tackle shop. But Shawn rolls his eyes at this.

It's fic-t-ion, he says, spreading the word out, thick and slow. It's not about Albert, he says. And then, with his two longest fingers, he fishes out another black olive from the jar on the kitchen counter.

But it sort of is. I understand this because Shawn writes about me all the time, although he claims he doesn't. At first, before we were a couple, I liked the idea of being fictionalized. A few months after we had been dating, he let me read a story he was writing. It was about this guy who worked late nights at a boring office job. This coming from Shawn who, at the time, sold

insurance policies over the telephone to low-income households. The character hated his job and his life in general. He would stare at people on the bus and envision fantastic lives for them: the lady in the blue raincoat danced in Las Vegas for a cabaret show, for instance; the driver farmed peacocks and made mineral soap in her off hours. But the main character would always return to his cubicle and spend nine hours on the telephone repeating words like “co-payments” and “infant mortality” and scratching his forearms because he was allergic to the room deodorizer his boss sprayed around the office. Then this woman walked into the building wearing a red dress and white shoes and basically changed his life forever. They kiss, his mouth to her mouth’s kiss—I remember that line—in the supply closet just before walking out onto the wet, moon-glazed sidewalk.

—

Quick, Shawn asks me, muting the Palmolive commercial on television, what’s a metaphor for hope?

I hesitate.

Come on, hope, he persists. No doves or rainbows, either.

A line of endless telephone poles?, I offer.

No.

Faded kitchen wallpaper?

For hope?

I know. A moonlit sidewalk.

He nods, satisfied.

—

I, of course, own a red dress. I wore it for our second date at the sushi restaurant. At the time, I wondered, since he talked about them a lot, if I would make it into one of his stories in the same way I used to wish, one day, please heaven, to find my name in the liner notes of one of Megan's Def Leppard albums. At some point during the dinner, I even found myself behaving like I imagined a character in one of Shawn's story might behave. This was complicated by the fact that I hadn't yet read any of his stories, so what I ended up acting out was what I thought a girl would do in a story that I thought would be written by Shawn. All of it boiled down to me being very quiet and mishandling my chop sticks, which he says now is what he likes about me, my awkwardness. And later, when he showed me the red dress story, I thought, yes. I thought yes, but then the white shoes threw me off. Shawn specifically described the woman's white shoes, the way the polished, patent leather reflected the moonlight. Except for a pair of sneakers, I own no white shoes, let alone would I wear white shoes with a red dress.

Even having grown up on the lake, I know good fashion is a measure of balance and that darker colors should be worn lower than lighter colors. Dark shoes keep you grounded, my mother always told me. She wears only black shoes. Stretched out in the lawn chair overlooking the lake, she lets her black mules hang from the tips of her toes. They hang close to falling. They hang as precipitously as the cigarette ash she eventually taps off into her cupped hand and then blows away with pursed lips, a different sort of dandelion. They hang so loosely that sometimes, if she coughs too hard, she'll lose a shoe to the crab grass below. Then she immediately gets up, puts the shoe back on and starts the whole process over again. This is a story I know Shawn will love. I feel as though I wrote it for him, although I know what I have seen.

When much later, I finally asked out right if the red dress girl was based on me, Shawn laughed and said no. He said, What would make you think she's you?

I don't know, I said. Because you liked her in the story?

First of all, he answered, he is not me. The narrator, he said, is not the author. Second of all, don't you think it's a little self-involved to read yourself into every female character I write?

Maybe, I said.

—

Telephone poles have been getting a lot of my attention lately. I look at telephone poles on my way to work, the way they stretch down the street for miles and miles, leaning this way or that but always sadly symmetrical, like it's their duty to be in line and they are conforming half-heartedly because it's something they have to do. And the way you can go for days not noticing them and then suddenly they're there, everywhere, have always been there, and you can't not see them. I have been trying to figure out what telephone poles mean, to figure out what it means to be a telephone pole.

—

The last person to see Lonnie alive was his sister, Rita, who stopped by the laundromat where Lonnie was washing his clothes on a Friday afternoon. As the story goes, and Megan has gone over it more than a few times with me, he was washing a load of work pants, and Rita stopped by to drop off keys to her house because he had promised to feed her German Shepherd while she went shopping in Dallas for the weekend. He looked dejected in a plastic chair among strangers and staring at a wall of industrial washers. I can't take this any longer, he basically told her, and could she hand him the stain stick? She did, and he began to work on the mud dried to the cuff of the pants he was wearing. It just goes on and on, he told Rita who, at this point, wasn't sure if he was talking about his dirty pants, his construction job or his life. His life, Megan will tell me. Of course he was talking about his life. Then, according to Rita, Lonnie went on to talk about

securing a dryer, how hard it was to get one, how the bastard who built the laundromat thought it would be funny to put in less dryers than washers so that now he was reduced to this, hovering over a dryer near the end of its cycle.

This conversation struck Rita as odd, coming from her brother who typically spoke out only on such issues as pro-wrestling and the tyranny of a fishing license, her brother who was only ever depressed by the cancellation of his favorite syndicated television show. And then he asked her about Megan, my sister, if Rita had kept in contact with her over the years. It was this critical query, made more dramatic by the sudden, high-pitched rattle of a washer shifting into the spin cycle, that later inspired Rita to locate Megan, which in turn, launched Megan's search for the seeds of a suicide note.

—

My mother called this afternoon to find out how Shawn's book is coming along.

It comes out next Tuesday, I explain to her. They're publishing it straight to paperback, I said, but don't bring that up around him.

Are you eating peanut butter? she asks.

I know she knows I only eat peanut butter when depressed, otherwise it's off the list, so I feel trapped, unwilling to answer definitively lest I admit my vaguely hopeless mood. I can see her on the other end of the line, leaning against the green kitchen counter and fanning the smoke from her cigarette out the open window behind the sink. Maybe Megan walks into the room with a stack of catalogues, the day's mail delivery, and my mom shakes her head and puts a finger to her lips so that Megan, who slides into her kitchen chair and waits, doesn't interrupt our phone conversation. And as I go on telling my mom about the big book reading extravaganza coming up next week, I feel like a person who belongs to no place. I wonder how many times my mother

saw how much I hated our kitchen when I lived there, how the plastic peeling up off the edge of the counter embarrassed me, how the place smelled of smoke, how every second of every day, I felt myself tumbling toward something worn and ugly and unavoidable. How many times she saw it, and how now she listens to me talk about a book-signing boyfriend, like I have found my place.

Just be sure to wear a good pair of shoes, she reminds me before hanging up.

---

Shawn finds Lonnie endlessly fascinating. Why did the guy jump? he'll occasionally say in that mystified voice of suppressed mirth. What was going through his head? he will ask. He wrote a story about the whole thing. His editor insisted it be the title story in the collection. It's called "Water," which may be why Megan is now looking for water imagery in supposed suicide notes. She said that she felt almost famous when she read the story, even if she didn't like the name Shawn had given her. Arlene, she said, sounded like a fat woman in curlers. And Jed, she complained, what kind of name is that? She would have preferred Shawn to use their real names; she had, she claimed, nothing to hide.

Lonnie, in Shawn's story, is a born-again preacher, a Christ-haunted figure in deer-hunting fatigues who frequently stands akimbo. He is like a character in a Flannery O'Connor story, but Shawn would never admit that. In fact, he would be insulted because, in his words, Flannery O'Conner is an overrated weirdo with a bad haircut. Lonnie, in Shawn's story, drives lonesomely down dirt roads in a beat-up pickup truck composing sermons on a tape recorder. In a voice garbled by the pings of kicked-up rocks and the grinds of a rusted transmission, Lonnie speaks about God's love as a healing ointment, about his mother and her tenacious belief in Vicks Vapor Rub, about lost lambs and fatted calves, and then, in a voice made quiet by timeless

despair, in an almost impossible whisper, he announces that sadness, sadness is everyone's secret. It's a very moving moment.

If the story had ended there, I would have been okay with it. Unfortunately, it didn't. First, there's Arlene's mother who smokes Salem Slim Lights and is forever buying half-priced shoes at the discount shoe store. Arlene's mother smokes a lot. She is always waving the smoke away from her face with a leathery hand in order to make significant eye contact when talking to Arlene. She says things like, Arlene, Lonnie's a river rat or Arlene, you could eat soup off the top of that boy's head or Arlene, speech is of silver; silence is gold. And then she exhales and waves the smoke away from her eyes. There's the show-down scene with the loveless Arlene at the local laundromat where Lonnie tries to baptize her with hot water from the washing machine but she refuses and throws a beer bottle at him. And finally, of course, there's Lonnie's excruciatingly long swan dive off the rusted water tower into the waving ocean of weeds below, the description of his wooden, outstretched arms, the slash across his lower left rib from the broken Miller Lite bottle, the whispering of his final word: "love".

The only real truth in Shawn's story is that my mother does love shoes. Despite her almost chronic state of squalor, disregarding the stacks of catalogues and the ashtrays and the kitchen cabinets that spill plastic cups, she takes meticulous pride in her shoes. She saves the original box for every pair. She stores the shoes delicately in these boxes after each use. Her bedroom closet looks like something from the Roman catacombs, all the boxes lined in perfect symmetry, one on top of the other, every shelf stacked with boxes housing neatly spooned black shoes wrapped in tissue paper. Her closet is perfectly ordered, although you have to trip over dirty laundry to get to it.

What I'm saying is this: there is a word that borders on spiritual mysticism that describes what my mother feels for shoes. Shawn probably knows it, the word, but hasn't used it yet to describe her. He captures her trips down potholed streets to Payless Shoes, yes, the plasticity of her discount sandals. But he hasn't said anything, or maybe I have never told him, about the way she would sit on the edge of my bed for hours and stroke the hair back from my forehead when I would get sick with the flu or how she will pick up on a song I may have been singing under my breath while washing dishes, how she'll hum that same song all day long as though, because it was a part of me, it has become a part of her too.

—

At the big book signing, Shawn is standing behind the autograph table talking to his agent. The two are holding paper plates of grapes and brie and laughing at something. Shawn is wearing a black shirt and high-heeled, in my estimation, cowboy boots. I am wearing black shoes and thinking about the night my mom, Megan, Lonnie and I all rode the water flume at the state fair.

Why did he jump, Shawn is saying to a fan. That, he goes on, was the question that really mystified me. That, he says, is the question I set out to answer. The agent nods his bald head in agreement, the bookstore's track lighting reflecting alternately off both his scalp and then his glasses and then his scalp again. The agent confesses that he too was fascinated by Jed's character. Using words like "old soul" and "rustic" and "prophet," he tells Shawn and the fan that, in his estimation, Jed's crackpot religiosity was redeemed and made eloquent when considered in contrast to the extreme mediocrity of those around him. He was greatly moved by Jed's sacrificial death and final expression of love. Albeit darkly comic and absurd in a southern gothic sort of way, he says and takes a bite of his cracker.

And I remember how the four of us load into the plastic log and are swept downstream by the mechanical current, how we twist and bump this way and that before riding up the damp conveyer belt that brings us to the top of the hill. My mom clasps her arms around my waist and, during our slow ascent, I wrap my arms around Lonnie's chest, who is holding on to Megan's hips. We pause at the top and wait for the log in front of us to drop. The lights from the nearby Ferris wheel sparkle off the water and illuminate the brown plastic log, its black scuff marks and stains of dirty chewing gum. Your heart's beating fast, my mother leans in to say to me. I can feel it from here, she says. And just before we drop, she starts to hum "Love Bites" from Megan's Def Leppard album, and then we are falling down the hill at super speed, my mom humming and Lonnie whooping and Megan screaming, and my heart is pounding, pounding so loudly that it can't be mine alone and must really be four hearts, the four of us, all falling down river in a dirty plastic log. I haven't given this one to Shawn, not yet.

## **Fathom**

You:

When you talk to people, you sound like your mother. It's not only that you sound like her; you become her. You can be in the middle of a conversation, maybe offering advice, especially when you're offering advice, and you have to stop because as you talk, you see yourself talking, and as you see yourself talking, you see your mother talking, specifically her mouth as it shapes the words you are saying: make-up has coagulated in the fine hairs above her lip; there is a cold sore, freckles. It's very disconcerting.

But you have discovered that most people don't notice or don't care that you have stopped talking. People are usually eager to fill in gaps of silence, especially Jennifer, who lives in the apartment above you. She is very easy to talk to in the sense that she will grab hold of a conversation and run with it. She will add all kinds of wild gestures and throaty laughs and even props, like cigarettes that she will stub out when making her point. She has a special knack for making points.

You often sit on the front stoop with Jennifer and listen to her tell stories about her friend, Barbara, or the elevator. You watch pigeons land on the building across the street while she's talking so that you don't have to make eye contact. The pigeons drop off the ledge and then swoop back up at the last minute like they are just kidding about the whole jumping thing. Larry, your dog, is usually stretched out on the sidewalk at your feet and asleep, his ears periodically

twitching with the breeze. He is very peaceful and even dreams. You can see his eyes rolling back and his legs moving in miniature motions of running until a bird flutters nearby or a plastic bag blows down the street, and then he jumps up, alert, the muscles under his thin hair shaking like he is a kitchen appliance and someone has plugged him in. Jesus, Edith, Jennifer will say. That dog is uncomfortable in his own skin. And even though she is obviously talking about Larry, you know she means you.

Jennifer:

You sometimes like to visit Jennifer at the aquarium where she volunteers on Saturdays because it reminds you how she doesn't get it. You hang out behind the tropical fish tank and watch her scoop up a nurse shark in the petting pool so that the kids can feel its soft skin. She can talk to kids forever, it seems, kids and tired moms, grandparents, men in shorts, young couples with good hair, and then loners, especially the loners, the ones who appear to be looking at fish but are really trying to make out their own dim reflection in the glass tank. Jennifer's hands wheel about her face as she tells some story, probably something about the elevator. Occasionally you hear snippets from her conversations, melancholic words like *bioluminescence* and *evaporative loss* that pop out of her mouth like bubblegum. And you are alarmed all over again by how she spends her time here, how she wastes it making small talk with sunburned tourists when, in another room, sharks move in slow motion behind thick glass and a jelly fish pulses through water like a tired heartbeat.

You move deliberately through the aquarium: there's the Gulf of Mexico, the Coral Reef, the Amazon, the Mississippi Delta. You skip the amphibian exhibit, clumsy frogs. Then finally, the glass tunnel that leads through an enormous fish tank. Walking alone in the mottled light, you

become reverently aware of how glass holds back gallons and gallons of vertical water and that, inside, the fish see you as you see them. An analogy, you are to air as fish is to water. And then this starts you thinking how each fish has a memory of swaying underwater plants, the slow syncopation of deep unseen currents caused by some tropical depression way out in the ocean far beyond people and all their inflatable rafts, and this inspires another analogy that you are to fish as loneliness is to vastness and the loneliness of vastness and the redemption of lonely vastness. And, well, it's too much to put into words.

This makes you feel better.

Because Jennifer, she is back in the Coral Reef standing beside a shallow petting tank. She is flapping her arms around with words, a silly, silly penguin.

Larry:

You spend most nights in your apartment reading books you have already read. You drink the Chamomile tea your mother left after her last visit, a Super Saver box of five-hundred tea bags, and listen to the rhythm of Jennifer's footsteps in the apartment above you. You know she is going out with Luca, the elevator boyfriend, because the noise is more frantic and radiates from the bathroom, diffusing outward and then back again. Her phone usually rings too, an event that inspires a separate flurry of steps into the living room, the inevitable dropping and rolling of things on the way, and then, a few seconds later, the muffled surge of laughter because every person she talks to, every person, except you, is funny.

All the commotion from above makes Larry nervous. He trots back and forth following Jennifer's steps through your apartment, his ears pointed up. It is a betrayal you try to forgive. He is, after all, a rescued dog, a great sufferer of separation anxiety. As he moves from the living

room to the bathroom to the bedroom to the bathroom, his claws tap out a Morse code message of your thoughts on the wooden floor. Thoughts like *Isn't it just like Jennifer to—And, Who really says—And, Remember when she promised she would—and she didn't—and she never has—*

Other nights, nights when Jennifer sleeps at Luca's house, Larry's movements give you great peace. You lie on the sofa and listen to him lap water out of his bowl in the kitchen. You hear the lap and the clinking of the tags, and you place your book face-down on your stomach and close your eyes to be closer to the sound. The soft metallic clinks remind you of the delicate wind chimes you imagine would be hanging around Buddhist monasteries. Buddhist monasteries: moderately breezy places with billowing gold fabric and some sort of tropical bird flitting about; Michael continuously walking in through an open doorway, again and again, world without end.

Michael:

Michael has eyelids that droop to near-closing. His hooded eyes make you think he stays up late nights reading. They make you feel he can look at a person, say a girl, and see past all her empty small talk and charming frivolity. You have shared seven words and one contraction with Michael. They have all been extremely successful.

It started with, *Where's the watercress?*

He was sweeping up green beans, the green beans that careless people grab by the handful and stuff into a plastic bag, not noticing if some fall on the floor. There was Michael sweeping up other people's green beans in quick, tidy strokes when you stopped him to ask, *Where's the watercress?* He paused after the question and turned to look at you slowly,

meaningfully. The whole movement—the broom, the pause— felt familiar, like it was a moment you already remembered so that now, when you do remember it, which you often do, you remember the remembering, and it is like experiencing Michael squared. So, in this way, he turned and studied you. He studied your mud-splashed sneakers, your flat eyebrows, all of it, and still you managed to hold and return his gaze. It was a lengthy exchange, the automatic doors opening and closing twice in the distance behind him before he finally raised his arm and pointed to a wall of lettuce that you already knew was there.

Thank you.

He nodded.

When you returned to the store the next day, he nodded again. You smiled. He held out his hand, which was large and roped with veins.

Michael.

Edith.

Behind you the automatic doors opened and closed, opened and closed.

Your Mother:

Don't think about your mother, how she parks her cart for every free sample. How she blocks the aisle to bend over the cheese tray with a toothpick, her shirt riding up in the back to reveal a sliver of secret flesh, pale and soft and vulnerable in a way that makes you want to poke it. This is another thing to hold against her, this invitation for your meanness. Scoot in, you tell her. People need to get by, you whisper. And your mother looks up, a startled animal, a grass-munching deer who suddenly pops her head up at the sound of an approaching car. Unless

reminded, your mother is somehow able to be completely and entirely unaware of everyone around her.

When on Public Transportation:

You have a strategy. You don't remember when you came up with it, but this is what you do. If someone catches you watching her on the bus, you don't turn away, which admits your guilt. Instead, you look intensely at something just over her shoulder, an ad for cell phone plans, say, or a stain on the vinyl upholstery. You scrutinize the thing, whatever it is, as if it had held your attention all along, thereby making the person, whoever she is, feel foolish for ever thinking that, out of all possible things, you had chosen to look at her.

Barbara:

Barbara is an old friend of Jennifer's from St. Mary Gate of Heaven High School, the one who dove into the wrong end of a swimming pool during a college party that Jennifer dragged her to and broke her neck. Jennifer often complains that Barbara doesn't go out enough because she is in a wheelchair. They had made plans to attend their ten-year high school reunion together, but Barbara called at the last minute and canceled. Then let's do something else, Jennifer had exclaimed. Let's go to the movies, she suggested, but Barbara still refused, and now Jennifer feels worried and guilty. I love her, Jennifer tells you in the laundry room, but Jesus. She pairs her socks by folding one neatly inside the other, and you wonder why Jennifer's frustration with Barbara gives you a secret thrill, a rush of blood. You sit on the dryer next to Jennifer while she goes on about Barbara, and you bump your heels against the metal door. It's a deliberate nonchalance. You are trying to act nonchalantly sympathetic. You wonder what sympathetic

sounds like, and, not knowing, you decide to nod often, hoping that will at least look sympathetic. You begin to wonder if maybe you are not sympathetic at all, even though you want to be, even though you think you are.

When Talking to Jennifer:

Your voice goes funny and soft. You start to question your pronunciation. When she comments that Larry runs like a gazelle, you're struck by how effortlessly she pulls off the word. When having lunch with her at her favorite restaurant, you order French fries instead of the menu's *pomme frites*. You once referred to Jung as the guy who analyzes dreams. Soon you stop talking altogether around her. You stare off into the distance like you are distracted by big ideas. When necessary, you offer a well-timed uh-huh or okay that sounds, even to you, like a weed-choked lot between two tall buildings.

Some of Jennifer's Stories:

There are the crazy things Aunt Melanie, the one with a suggestive gap between her front teeth, does and says at family gatherings. There's Jennifer's father—the nut job, she says, shaking her head affectionately—who warned her and her sister, Yvonne, a nurse, an underwear model, that too much television would make them go blind. They were not allowed to shower during a thunderstorm because he was sure they'd be electrocuted. Mr. Information, that one, she says. Let me tell you. She holds her cigarette loosely between two fingers when she says this, her wrist limp and her arm bent at a ninety degree angle, elbow against shifted hip, in a pose that you are sure you've seen made by actresses in old movies where the lack of color makes lips look black and everyone is running through rain to catch a cab. When she exhales, she blows

smoke up and out the side of her mouth. You tell yourself that her family and the display of her love for her family may be just another prop in this movie of one, starring her.

Jennifer has felt like a star in a Fellini film when, wearing a blue satin bridesmaid gown, she walked with four drunk groomsmen through a moonlit sugar cane field. She has pedaled her bicycle up Tuscan hills at sunset and has stolen and then crashed a boyfriend's car into a telephone pole. The boy was a magician. He forgave her and produced a carnation from his empty palm. Of course! she said. What else was he going to do?

Jennifer has ridden in a limousine more times than anyone you know.

And maybe her stories are nothing special, but they steal something from you. They make you want to call your ex-boyfriends, both of them, and your childhood friend, Pepper, who once swore you had the most beautiful hair in the whole world. They make you feel embarrassed about all the times you ever felt charming or interesting, like one time at the bar, after several glasses of wine, you wrote your phone number on the top of the credit card slip for the waiter to find later when he was sitting at the bar sorting his checks and you were home, tucked into your bed and listening to Larry circle around and circle around before finally flopping onto the floor.

You and Jennifer, One Way to Look at It:

The whole time you're telling Jennifer you couldn't possibly ask Michael out on date like she suggested you do, she watches you. She watches you as though it's not your words she's listening to but your face. After a pause she touches your arm and says, You're adorable, Edith. I mean, you're really adorable. And it kills you, how easily she gives this compliment, which may or may not be a compliment at all. But it is a compliment; she likes you. You know she likes you and hopes good things for you. And it is natural and uncomplicated for her to like you and to

hope good things for you. And it's you who ruins everything. It's you who turns every offering into something quivering and dark, the slug inside a shell, the festering molar in the back of a smile.

#### The Elevator Story:

You have heard it many times and always with the same wording. Jennifer was once trapped between the 26<sup>th</sup> and the 27<sup>th</sup> floor of an office building downtown. Ever since that day, she clunks up and down cement stairwells, refusing, ever, to use the elevator. You call this an extravagant phobia, but she insists that it is real, that she hyperventilated the thirty minutes she was stuck in the elevator and that when it finally lowered and the doors parted, she, as she says, literally spilled out. And here, if space allows, she'll perform a mini-stagger for emphasis. I gulped at the air, she'll continue. And then, she'll conclude, I fainted and a lunch delivery boy caught me. If Luca is around, she will look into his eyes and tilt her head slightly. Sometimes she will cup her hand at the back of his neck. They are so openly in love with each other that you are pretty sure it is a sham.

In this way, Jennifer claims to be irrationally scared of many things: she takes Xanax to fly on airplanes; she refuses to drive over bridges; she knocks on your door when she needs someone to kill a bee. Her fear is very entertaining; if there's a crowd of people around Jennifer at a party and they are all laughing, which they always are, chances are she is recounting a time when she was afraid of something.

You suspect, however, that she has never been scared of anything, not really. She is only playing around with the idea of fear because she likes the attention, because she likes to be comforted. But real fear, you know, is not something that can be eased with a little comfort. Real

fear is not contained to a specific thing or event and does not always end with a handsome, Italian delivery boy. It is vague and always there, and it intensifies unexpectedly, like on the day you looked through your mother's sliding glass door at her yard, all mud and crab grass and chain-linked fence, and knew, without a doubt, that the world is irrevocably ugly.

Michael:

Michael carefully handles ripe avocados. Michael brushes dirt from the caps of portabella mushrooms and investigates their mysterious gills, smells the dark odors. Michael smiles as you walk through the automatic door. He is misting lettuce with a thin hose that snakes along the floor and, for a second, you see a rainbow. It is in this second that you decide to ask him out on a date. You act like it is your idea.

You and Jennifer, Another Way to Look at It:

Other times you are sure she needs you. She stops you at the mailbox while you are reading a letter from your mother, kitten stationary again, and complains about the water pressure and then launches into a story about her grandfather's banana tree farm in Puerto Rico. She invites you out to dinner only to leave you alone at the table with your Cobb salad while she talks to the hostess, the bartender, the regular who always sits by the window and who distills his own absinthe. Because this is the type of person she knows, a person who, in his spare time, distills absinthe in Eiffel factories in provincial France.

If she sees you and Larry on the front stoop, she comes out with news of Luca, dear Luca whom she is so lucky to have met, it was fate really, references the elevator again, and his food delivery business doing so well, the entrepreneur. She talks like she is always on a first date,

exclamatory and confident and suggestively eager. She tells you about her pony-hair boots and the new clownfish the aquarium acquired from a diver in Key West. You smile along, feeling smaller and smaller; you nod, saying yeah and uh-huh until you disappear. And you see how she needs your awkwardness to feed her charm, and then her charm creates your awkwardness, and the two of you are like the water cycle, the condensation becoming precipitation evaporating into condensation that precipitates, the relentlessness of it all.

With Michael, Over Mangoes:

Okay? you manage to say.

Yeah, okay.

Okay. So, I don't know, when?

I get off work early Saturday.

That sounds good. Saturday afternoon. Good.

Saturday then. Do you want to meet here? Like, at two?

Two. That's great.

Okay.

Okay.

In the silence that follows, Michael looks down at your hand, which, to your surprise, has been caressing fruit. Caressing fruit is not something you typically do, and you look up, embarrassed, but then feel a charged complicity because he smiles and you sense he understands, if not finds endearing, this nervous hand movement. You and Michael, you know, are cut from the same cloth, birthed from the same sea. You can tell.

So, what do you want to do? he asks.

Let's go the aquarium, you say because you are sure that he, of all people, will get it.

You and Jennifer:

You are knocking at her apartment door to tell her about Michael when you see her walking down the long hallway toward you with a grocery bag in each hand. Her hair is uncharacteristically limp and her face drawn, lips pinned in a brooding concentration that makes you feel you are encountering a dream Jennifer, a private Jennifer, the Jennifer that stars in your nightmares in which the terror is that everything seems normal and yet everything is slightly off. You wonder if something has happened. You wonder if it is Barbara again. You wonder if it is you. Is it you? You decide to stay silent and wait for her to say something first, which she does, she always does.

What's up, Edith? she asks.

But even then her question comes out hot and breathy and a bit harassed. She doesn't seem to expect or need a response as she puts down the grocery bags, digs in her purse for a key, unlocks her door, picks the bags back up and pushes the door fully open with her foot. Is something wrong? You should have helped her with the bags, you think. Why didn't you think to help her with the bags? You want to excuse yourself, disappear, say never mind in a way that wouldn't sound dismissive but that would really mean never mind, as in don't mind me, don't look at me because, once again, you have exposed something about yourself that she usually covers up with all her chatter. You saw a man wearing a T-shirt on the bus the other day that claimed in bold letters I AM NOT HERE. But the problem with the T-shirt is the problem you have now: you are here and, in a way, you want to be here if only to say that you don't.

Jennifer, maybe sensing your panic, Jennifer, picking up her role, turns to you and smiles, consciously attempting to lighten the mood of the two of you there in the hallway.

I ran into the fatasses on my way up, she says, talking about the two overweight sisters who live on the first floor and often complain about Larry's hair on the stairs. She runs the words together to make you happy. She runs them together so that they sound like a Middle Eastern dish only the two of you understand. She knows it always makes you laugh every time. It makes you laugh the way you imagine Barbara must have laughed at the pool party they crashed, where she only knew Jennifer and was probably only comfortable when Jennifer was repeating some inside joke they had or recounting a story that starred both of them. When Jennifer's cousin's friend started throwing people into the water, including Barbara, Jennifer was in the bathroom making out with a boy. She came out of the house in time to see Barbara climb out. She watched as Barbara, wringing her hair, looked down at her white dress, now transparent, and then searchingly across the pool for Jennifer, who grabbed a towel from a nearby chair and held it up like a promise. I'm on my way; I'll help you. It could have been another funny story to tell, but Barbara, too self-conscious to wait, dove headfirst back under the cover of water.

You:

Under dappled light of deep water, you and Michael have nothing to say. You have walked the length of the aquarium and have only talked about obvious things, like fish and produce. You converse politely like bus companions killing time before the next stop. He told a story that involved the check-out girl you knew you disliked and now had a reason. You shared anecdotes about Larry and admired the eels. There was a time in the Mississippi Room when you thought things were picking up—is that an albino alligator?—but the excitement dissolved to

quiet observation, and you soon found yourself pushing the audio information button to hear about the evolution of amphibious creatures.

So now you stand in the glass tunnel, the end of the line, a fathom of water pressing down on you. You and Michael watch the fish in silence, each with your arms crossed behind your backs. You begin thinking in analogies again: you are to fish as silence is to water; silence is to fish as desperation is to what? To me! To me! And you begin to imagine the prehistoric ocean and the poor limbless fish that first had to slug onto the muddy shore. All that humidity and pressure to change. That first fish must have preferred this, the sink and sway, the blue television light of underwater, and you wonder if Barbara felt that too as she came to rest at the bottom of the pool. After the drama of the dive and the snap of the neck, it must have been a relief just to lie there and watch the bubbles rise to the surface, disappear.

And, since you and Michael have run out of words, you concentrate on a stingray as it wings its way past you. Michael sees it too and opens his mouth like he wants to say something, but then doesn't. You turn toward him, the stingray ascending in the distance, and start to say, Yes, it is pretty, isn't it? when you see her. There she is at the end of the tunnel, Jennifer. She is talking wildly to an old lady, pointing and nodding and pointing again. She is offering directions, as usual, and it's not just relief you feel, not really, but something more hopeful as you and Michael walk toward her, fish swimming above like birds.

## Everything

Vincent pretends not to notice my body language when he says he needs me to pull a double shift, my arms crossed against my chest, which I'm trying not to do so much anymore because I know it shouts something like *I'm mad* or *Stay away* when I am all about people coming here. *Come here*, I want to say to everybody. Except sometimes Vincent, and even then, I mean the *Stay away* to say *Come here, here, here*. I watch him shuffling old invoices on the desk in his closet office, the overhead light buzzing between us. He shifts the papers around, trying to cover the *Cosmo* I know he pulled from the rack by my register because of its headlines about hints in bed.

Libby, he says, shuffling. I need you to work tonight. Please, work tonight. For me. I wouldn't ask you if I weren't desperate.

I'm part time, I remind him. I shouldn't even be here now, I say.

Still, Vincent says.

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It's the other girls who grumble when Vincent tells them to get back inside before their break is officially over. Cheryl, for instance, stubs her cigarette out against the brick of the grocery and says *ass* under her breath, a hand cupped over her pink-frosted lips so he can't see the word. She is O. Pressed. That's how she says it when she's talking about her lazy husband or her three kids or the guy from down the street who never picks up after his Schnauzer. She puckers her lips and slouches back into the store. O. Pressed., she says, like she's at the very end of the line and life is

something that has already happened. She sucks in when the automatic doors close behind her. She shakes out her hands like a track star and throws back her head, still holding her breath.

But I say, Breathe. Come on, I say, It's not so bad.

She cuts her eyes at me in that look. The look means, You? What do you know? Don't even begin to tell me what you think you know.

—

Be real, Vincent said one night when I told him how Cheryl and the other girls don't like me. We were parked under the river bridge again, the headlights off and the windows cracked to keep the glass from fogging up in a bad imitation of a sex-ed filmstrip. Of course they like you, he said. Why wouldn't they like you? The answer to why they don't like me should be obvious to everybody at the grocery store. We just finished doing one reason why they don't like me. But Vincent chewed his gum and looked away and made me troll around for recognition because he loses the upper hand if he gives it.

You need to pick up more shifts is all, he said, then patted my leg in a solid one, two and continued to stare out the windshield like something big was happening out there. My mother once told me something she learned from one of her books. She said that boys like to conduct their conversations looking out at something—like a fishing pole or startled deer—rather than the into the eyes of their talking partner. But maybe it's more than that. Maybe what they can't look at is the conversation itself. So, if you keep your hands busy and look away and talk about what you see and not what you're talking about, maybe then, eventually you can sneak in what you want to say or have said. What you want to have said will rise up and out from the regular words, like souls are said to stream out from dead bodies. I pulled my skirt back into place and turned toward the dashboard and gave the view a look from his eyes: azalea bushes, scrub trees, and there, just beyond the bank of weeds, a dark current of river water rushing someplace else.

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Of course, I've told my mom about Vincent. It's the kind of thing she loves. Well, at least you have somebody, she said, which is her way of not talking about my dad. Everybody needs somebody to buy them flowers once in a while, she will say to mean that no man bought her flowers, ever, especially my dad, even before he left us for another woman and moved across the river with the family cat. About Vincent she is very insistent. When will he come over, when will she meet him, what should she wear. Because I had to feed her something, I once mentioned he likes sushi. Now every time we pass a Japanese or even Chinese restaurant, my mother will ask, Have you and Vincent eaten there yet? How about there? These questions humiliate me. They make me feel like I am lying about Vincent when I don't think I am, not really.

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The truth is that I enjoy working at the grocery store. In the mornings, before Vincent turns on the music, I hear the hum of the refrigerated aisle. The grocery carts are all lined up neat and tucked into each other—please, don't part us—the sound of a cart being pulled out of the one in front of it. Even Cheryl can sometimes be in a good mood in the morning, her long fingernails tapping out a song rather than impatience on the top of her register. What creates this mood is knowing that regardless of what we do or what we fail to do, the store will soon fill with people. They will line up before us with their food and their money. Sometimes they will ask questions about our day. Other times, they keep their heads down and fish through a bag or a purse for something, their credit card, keys, anything to preoccupy them until it is time to pay. And even that is nice because we can look at them without them seeing us look at them.

I am trying to learn more about people from the books my mother leaves tented on tables around the house, books about body language and dream therapy and what it means when bad things happen to good people. One shopper, for instance, buys a lot of vegetables. I wonder

where she lives. Not a big house—she doesn't ask for much—but a three-room apartment, a quilt thrown over a chair, a pot on the stove, a tea cup. It's a comfortable place to spend the last dregs of the day. Even the early morning sun through the windows looks like twilight. The vegetables she picks are woody and gnarled, sometimes shaped like a human heart. I never know the codes for her vegetables. I have to look them up in the big notebook tied to my register, or worse, page Vincent over the intercom for a price check, a loud-speaker admission that I know nothing.

And then Vincent will sigh his way up to the front of the store, a clatter of keys attached to his belt loop. He has one of those surprisingly high and convex rear ends that makes his pants bubble out just under his belt. It looks like he is always leaning forward when he walks, always eager to get to where he's going, even though he's not.

—

*You, you, you.* That's what I would have said in the dashboard light had I felt he'd really been asking. *Admit it, Vincent. They don't like me because of you.*

—

Vincent likes to wait until the day has died down, just moths collecting in the light outside the automatic door and silly college girls wandering aisles for beer and trail mix. He drifts into my line and fingers the magazines in their racks. He waits for me to say something first. Hey, Vincent, I offer. Or, sometimes, I get right to the almost point: Do you want a ride home? He always answers yes without looking at me. He scratches his cheek, which is pitted with old acne scars in a way I have come to find beautiful, like a field of tilled soil waiting for seed. He stands there scratching and half-reading as though it is the teenage movie star, the headline about grapefruit diets that he finds fascinating.

I tell myself: Me and Vincent, we're two repelling magnets, desperate to be flipped around.

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Sometimes when I dream, it's just black, and that's okay with me. My mom wants more material. She wants rivers of fire and complicated plot twists where things are *suddenly* occurring. I was sitting on the edge of the water, she'll tell me, and, suddenly, I became a tiger. She'll say it again: I. Became. A. Tiger. And then she'll stare at me from her chair by the window, struck with the significance of it all. I can only shrug. I don't know, I say. I don't dream a lot. And she'll warn me that my subconscious is working over-time, the black just the darkness of my sleeping mind having blown a fuse. You have to dream, she insists. Dreams are where we work out all our problems. Then I guess I don't have any problems, I tell her.

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*Tonight*, Vincent says again without really saying it. I have just started my second shift when he walks over from the Customer Service desk. He wants to advise me on bagging a woman's groceries, her frozen pizzas and her laundry detergent. Libby, he says, always put the bread on the top. He looks at me with a lifted eyebrow as he demonstrates placing the loaf in the bag last, and, even though I know how to bag bread, I nod. Sure, Vincent, I say and then take my time running the credit card and looking for a pen so that all he can do is stand there next to the packed groceries and fidget with his keys and wait. I know he's waiting. The passing seconds magnify his idleness, which, in turn, makes me feel more powerful. I draw out the transaction. I tell the customer to have a nice day, which I almost never say. This, Vincent, must be what the upper hand feels like. The squelch of my car's vinyl upholstery, the price checker gun we knocked off the desk in his office last week, all the times we've wordlessly tumbled into each other like it's a big accident. It's never an accident. When the customer finally does wheel her cart away, he coughs before saying he needs to go over my tax forms with me after work, if I'm not busy.

I'm never busy, I tell Vincent.

I see Cheryl, still exhausted, uh-huhing with her head one line over from me. She compresses her lips into a smirk, rolls her eye. Cheryl has seen it all.

—

There is one dream, but I don't tell my mom. In the dream, I'm sitting on a fire escape, and there's a tree in the distance, a big tree with lots of leaves that shiver with silver in the dark. The wind feels like a secret as it blows in the night, its rush against unseen things. It comes in small gusts, like it's building up, like something big is on the verge of happening. Any second something is going to happen. And, because it's a dream, something actually does happen: thousands of lights begin to stream out of the tree. It's not sudden as my mother would have it. In fact, I think I've been expecting the lights all along. I sit on the fire escape and feel the unburdening of the tree, the relief of the lights, small and smoldering, as they rise up and up and out, like butterflies or fireworks or the embers that would spark and pop when my dad, wearing black socks, a hole that revealed his big toe, tossed logs into the fire on a cold and late Sunday afternoon.

—

My mom's new project is to remove all the photographs that feature my dad from the family album. You'd be surprised that there actually aren't that many. Most of them of them are of me and a few are of the cat, pictures of her on the couch or stretched out on the windowsill looking enigmatic. Maybe we should keep this one, she said the other day, holding up a picture of me and my dad fishing at his favorite spot on the river. You had to walk a path from the highway through the woods to get to the spot. It was easy to miss the clearing that marked the start of the path because it wasn't much of clearing. Driving along in the car, it just looked like woods, woods and more woods. We often had to circle back. We should keep at least one picture of him,

she continued, in case you want to show your boyfriend one day what your father looked like. You know, she said, for posterity.

—

Just before close, the flip-flopped college girls walk in through the automatic doors, moths fluttering in behind them. I stand at my line, my numbered light turned off for the night. Almost everybody has checked out. Almost everybody is gone. Cheryl, who is so tired, Cheryl, who expects nothing new, will have to ring the girls up.

I count the money left in my till and wait for Vincent. He is pacing the aisles with his clip board, making checkmarks, pretending to survey something. Can I help you? he asks the girls when they float by him in the cereal aisle. I watch him follow them into bulk foods. Can I help you ladies find something? he asks again. Yes, I think. Help me! You can help me! But the girls only laugh, shake their heads, long hair swaying. Uh, no-o-o, they say, because he's a creep. Of course they think he's a creep. He's a grocery store manager with bad skin, and they are young. They are off to some party across the river, a sloping yard strung with Japanese lanterns. Green, green grass. Lawn chairs pulled under bright stars. Men who say, I do. I do like you. I may even love you.

Soon, the girls will be flying across the bridge, windows rolled down. They'll be oohing at the sea of city lights ahead, the ones that, sometimes, when I drive to see my dad, shimmer just a little still. Everything can happen, the lights say. Everything can still happen. But then I descend the bridge and take the left turn toward his brick house and see that the lights are just lights. A worn yellow gas station glow. The motion detector that snaps on when the cat creeps through the herb garden. It's a staggering disappointment. It's a terrible loss. It's the kind of thing that teaches you to take what you can get but then always keeps you wanting more.

And even after the girls dismiss him, after they laugh at him behind their blue-fingernailed hands, Vincent doesn't walk away. Okay then, he tells them and fiddles with his keys. He stands there, a resigned spectator. He lingers while they scoop trail mix into clear plastic bags. He watches until they drift on to someplace else, the shampoo section, I imagine, the candy aisle. Then he turns and plods in my direction. He stops just short of my register and still doesn't look at me. He tucks the clipboard under his arm and reaches for a magazine, while I stand there, arms crossed, and wait.

## II

## **Your Loss Irretrievable**

I wrote a letter to a friend from high school yesterday morning. I said in the letter that I had dreamed the night before about her old house. I told her I was walking down the hallway that ended in her room. Her mother's room was to the left. Her brother's room, to the right. On her mother's bed was a drying rack with a white sweater stretched across it. A fan on the night stand blew air toward the sweater. To the right, the brother's door was mostly closed.

There are certain things I remember about her mother, but I don't write them in the letter because I have the problem of being intimate too fast. Her mother was the oldest of all my friends' mothers, more of a grandmother than a mother. She worked in the children's nursery at the Baptist church. She had gray hair that she rinsed with apple cider once a week to wash out shampoo residue. Your mother washed her hair in vinegar, I wanted to write. Instead I stuck to the dream. I stood in the hallway in front of your room, I wrote. Your mother's room was to the left. Your brother's to the right. There was an oscillating fan. There was a sweater.

The truth is I didn't have a dream about Rebecca's house. What did I dream about the night before? I dreamed about my ex-husband's house. I dreamed I climbed in through a window and lived in his house while he was away. My son had a guitar lesson in his living room. There was the feeling I had duped everyone, even Billy, the guitar teacher. Of course I live here, I told him when he seemed suspicious. Or maybe he wasn't suspicious. Maybe it was my guilt talking.

Then I woke up and wrote to Rebecca about a made-up dream after not having written or thought about her in years.

Your mother rinses her hair in apple cider. Your father was the sound of too many wrenches in a small metal drawer. When he emerged from the garage, I would be surprised again by his soft, white skin. He looked almost feminine, his skin and the way some men can carry weight beneath their belt. It made him look sympathetic. He looked like the physical presence of sympathy. He was taking on the tired uterus of Rebecca's mother who had birthed three children, one in her too-late years. Rebecca had been an accident, everyone knew. Her two brothers were much older than she was. The oldest brother had died and the youngest brother had already moved out when I met her, although his room was still intact next to hers. It was across the hall from his mother's room. His bed was tightly made up, blankets like a statue. Rebecca's mother also made Rebecca's bed too tight. When we slept in it, we had to pull the sheets out from beneath the mattress. First, we would climb in and try to kick the sheets loose, but our weight pressed the mattress down and worked against us. We had to get out of the bed and walk to the end and pull the sheets out from the corners. It felt like prying loose the fingers of someone who has clamped a hand over her mouth. Say it, you say. Say it. You force the words out. You force your way in.

The brother who died had shared his room with the younger brother, but you would not know this by looking at the room. He had left the house a long time ago and then he had died. Somewhere in between the younger brother moving out and the older brother dying, Rebecca had been born. He's dead, Rebecca's mom had said about someone else, a great-grandfather. He sleeps in peace, she said. The grass grows over his grave.

But it's impossible to think of Rebecca being born. She entered into the world already adult. I could never make her angry. I once threw a pair of dice at her from across the kitchen table. She was winning the game. She was always winning. She was first chair in orchestra class, and it was, for her, an embarrassment. If she could have given me the chair as a gift, if first chair had nothing to do with talent, of which I had none, she would have walked to the back and ushered me to the front. She would have let me win the game, but she knew I would smell pity. So she did the only thing she could do, which was win with a sense of defeat. She brushed her cards off the table. It was nothing, the win. Nothing, when winning is everything. When the dice hit her forehead, she smiled like I should know better. She smiled like she knew something I did not but was not saying yet. It's a smile I sometimes give my children now.

If I can't make you angry, I thought, you don't really love me.

Love is endurance, she might have replied.

But we didn't endure. I haven't seen Rebecca in years. Now what is left is her mother who rinsed her hair in apple cider. The back of her mother's white sweater and the whisking of her arms as she sweeps dirt from the cement patio. An overcast sky stretches out behind her. And, below the sky, a wooden fence, soft in spots, missing the top or the bottom of occasional planks to reveal the empty lot that a boy we once knew set on fire. He was playing in the field, he said, and he decided to set it all on fire. Now what is left is her mother as seen through the sliding glass door. She is sweeping leaves and bug shells from the patio's corners. She is moving the broom in short, strong strokes while beyond her, just on the other side of her fence, the dry field burns.

## Amusement

Outside our room, the courtyard pool has been filled into a rectangle of off-colored cement. There's a line where the edge used to be, a border where bare feet once poised to jump. Inside our room he's telling me to slow down. We should really slow down, he says again even though it's all said and done. And I say, Zac, because that's his name, Zac. Not Zechariah or even Zachary on his birth certificate but just plain Zac, like everybody was already on casual terms with him when he was born. Listen Zac, I say. I am not ready to talk about guilt. Let's keep guilt to ourselves, okay?

Okay Jessica, he says.

Okay, I say.

My husband, Jonathan Winchester, has the opposite problem. He's six years older than Zac, and I have wondered what shift in perspective Elvira, my mother-in-law, must have experienced in that interim to explain the difference in names between the two brothers. Whereas before she had always looked into her greenhouse and seen potted orchids and a neat line of lemongrass, I like to imagine that maybe one night, big-bellied, her breath fogging the glass as she squinted in for a better look, she hoped for something a bit more wild, the shadow of the rubber tree that was just the shadow of the rubber tree but what could look like, if she tried hard enough, the outline of the man about whom she had been thinking, possibly even seeing. Do you think it's strange your names are different? I once wondered out loud to Jonathan. But Jonathan

rarely sees different. Nor does he admit that anything is strange, especially within this family. When I try to imagine the world through Jonathan's eyes, it's like Elvira's pantry, cereal boxes lined up one after the other, cans of soup on a shelf. But of course, it makes things easier for me to think of him this way. When we first started dating, I tried out different diminutives like Jon or Jack, but it was embarrassing for both of us because we were courting an intimacy that wasn't there. He claims no one, not even Elvira, has ever called him anything other than his full name. Most days I throw in Winchester for good measure. It feels right, especially lately. Listen Jonathan Winchester, I say. I have yoga tonight. Remember to pick the boys up from soccer.

But having sex with Zac, it's like traveling to a third world country where things are a little run down, sure, but you get the sense that in spite of, or even because of, the shabbiness, something closer to a genuine life is being conducted. Zac's nails are alarmingly long and half-mooned in dirt because he runs a plant nursery in town, but it's not just that. It's also the sweat. Zac slides on my skin when he's on top, his Virgin Mary necklace a pendulum above me, first this way, then that way, and I might as well be in Mexico with an orange Fanta, an oscillating fan. And Oh, God, which he says often. He says it when he's unbuttoning my shirt or when he's lifting me onto the bed. Oh, God, like I'm not even there, and I suspect that in those moments I'm not there, not really, that he is waging a very private battle between desire and propriety. Oh, God, he mutters to himself, and it's like watching Zac when he doesn't know I'm looking.

Dinners at Elvira's house can be uncomfortable, however, what with Jonathan grilling in the twilight, and the boys playing four square on the patio, and me and Elvira cutting tomatoes in the kitchen, always talking about her dead husband or the divorced neighbor who never mows her grass. It's a disgrace, Elvira tells me. I've called the city three times about it already. And it almost feels normal, like, yes, this is how things should be, until Zac arrives with his daughter,

Hannah, who he keeps on the weekends, and his girlfriend, Teresa. It's Ter-a-sa, she tells us because, in the beginning, we were always saying it wrong. We were saying Mother Theresa. Here comes Mother Theresa again, I would announce when I saw her car pull into Elvira's circle drive, but she's corrected us enough times now for the others to get it right: Ter-a-sa. When Zac and Teresa walk into the kitchen, Elvira claps her hands and yells, Hello!—Zac clearly her favorite son—and then leans over to confide in me. I like this girl, she says. He says she is just a friend, but I know.

Zac won't look at me throughout dinner in the greenhouse, a big glassed-in affair off the back of the house where birds fly into panes with loud and greasy thumps. He sits sullen among Elvira's orchids like a boy, slouches low in his chair while Teresa cuts Hannah's chicken into small, manageable pieces and describes her job running a women's shelter in town. Jonathan listens attentively, asking her questions in his semi-rhetorical manner where her answers don't matter as much as his display of polite interest. Jonathan often trips over himself in this way; he's so conscious of showing concern that he doesn't hear a word people say. He chinks his fork against his plate, the asparagus he is cutting firmer than he must have expected, and looks up, a little embarrassed. So, he asks her in summation, you enjoy the job?

I like to tell people Jonathan and I met in our college statistics class, a core requirement, but really he sat behind me in Russian poetry. I could feel when he rested his sneakers on the metal basket under my desk, the slow vibration when he slid them off. You, the professor once recited to us in translation, you will never find what you're looking for.

I sometimes orchestrate a private conversation with Zac during these dinners. I am very cunning about it. He will get up from the table with exaggerated exertion, like that's his contribution to the conversation, exhaustion, and slouch into the house for another beer. I will

follow with something, a dirty plate, a glass of melting ice, a fork. Get me another napkin will you, Elvira will interrupt her conversation to call out, and I'll nod an of course as I walk past her and on into the kitchen. What are you doing? Zac will hiss when I meet him in front of the refrigerator where there's still the photo of him and Jonathan flanking their father, Fourth of July at the lake, everybody sunglasses and smiling, everybody's arms around the others' shoulders so that it's impossible to figure out whose hand belongs to who. I don't know, I'll respond. What are you doing? I'm getting a beer, he'll say. Well, I'm cleaning up, I say back. Hardly, he'll say, and then he'll stare me down with those eyes and rub at his chin and say something like shit, dragging the word out, staring, and it may be that he's genuinely angry, but angry is still something between us.

—

Concerning Jonathan, for instance, there was a fire. A house was burning to the ground, and Jonathan didn't want to watch. Let's leave it alone, he said as we walked by on our way to the restaurant, his hand light on my back. A frantic scene of sirens and fire trucks, mist from hoses and ash falling like confetti, people taking pictures and talking on cell phones and Jonathan said hurriedly, We shouldn't stare. He said, It's someone's tragedy. But I say, there's a fire. We should watch it burn.

—

Jonathan likes to take the kids to the amusement park on Saturday afternoons while I would rather send them off to their friends' houses. The boys always want to spend the night at someone's house or go to some party, and I say yes, yes, yes. But Jonathan says, Let's spend some family time at Bell's. And that's when it happens, the shared eye roll, the only true connection I feel with my children. The boys, blond and healthy, look nothing like me, but when Jonathan says something sentimental or otherwise ridiculous, the three of us slump our head to

shoulder, jaws slack and eyes rolling. Whatever, the boys will moan, their addition to our pantomime of resignation. It's such a great weapon in their powerless world, that subversive whatever, because it is both a concession to and critique of their assigned fate. You could say that the boys just learned these mannerisms from me, which is Jonathan's argument, but I like to think of DNA, the links that chain them to me, inextricably and forever.

Because I remember Jonathan. I mean, I remember a time when I saw Jonathan as someone else entirely. Like once we were bellied side-by-side on the sidewalk in front of our first apartment. We had heard mewling coming from the boiler room of the building, and Jonathan got down low on his stomach so that he could look into the broken basement window. He motioned for me to do the same. We both had on big coats—it was winter—but I could feel the cold cement under me and the lump of seed balls that had fallen from the sycamore tree above us. A branch from that tree sometimes rasped our bedroom window. On stormy nights I would listen to it while Jonathan slept, the sheets twisted between his legs and feet so that he wouldn't feel his ankle bones rub together. I would listen to the scratching and to the faint thumps of the seed balls hitting the metal window awnings and then falling to the sidewalk where we now lay sprawled. Jonathan was looking for the trapped cat, but I was looking at him.

—

It started with Zac when bagworms shrouded our persimmon tree. Why don't you ask Zac about it? Jonathan suggested, and so I drove into town and asked Zac about it. I asked him about it in the storage room of his nursery, a place where fertilizers mingled with herbicides. In truth, it had been starting with Zac for a long time, but it was in the storage room where I had to grab the edge of a shelf for balance. I felt the grit under my hands and heard it crunch and snap under the weight of his boots as he lifted me up. I told him, Let's find a better place to do this.

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Elvira contends that her divorced neighbor is making a mess of the neighborhood. Because she hires a legion of illegal immigrants to keep her yard at an irritable stubble, Elvira finds the neighbor's clover overgrowth self-indulgent, the spiny weeds and the clumped piles of decaying leaves offensive. The line between her yard and her neighbor's, however, is more than one of uneven grass. You put your head down and do what has to be done, Elvira says when I suggest the neighbor might be depressed or uninterested in her grass. She might, I say, have bigger things to think about. Like what for instance? Elvira asks. Give me an example of what she might be thinking about? And I change the subject because I get the sense what we're really talking about is something other than yards.

At other times it's different and always unexpected. It's like the guilt doesn't count if you have to think about it. Guilt has to sneak up on you while you're doing something else, washing your hands or peeling carrots, and you sense it in the periphery of your vision, a scurry, a frantic movement down low against the wall. But when you turn to look nothing is there except a knowing dread and the droppings you always find later in the silverware drawer.

—

Bell's is a graveyard of an amusement park. What I mean is, I went to Bell's with my friends as a girl, but before that, before it was anything, it was an Indian burial ground. The park fenced off a small rectangle of crabgrass between the Tilt-A-Whirl and the Wildcat to commemorate the dead, but now the space is just a reliquary of soda cups and plastic bags. Although I have read the metal plaque posted on the fence many times, I don't remember what the words say as much as the greasy Braille of them of them under my fingers when I was a teenager, my nervous hand movement while talking to high school boys.

—

When Teresa's not around, we'll sometimes meet at Zac's apartment, a one-story building where weeds grow from the gutter, but mostly we go to the motel because it's even seedier and we're already in so deep the squalor is something of a comfort. We have a regular room, not one we picked, but one the attendant, who shows me no other sign of recognition, keeps assigning us. I walk into the lobby, the same chime of the opened door, a fish tank bubbling in the corner, while Zac waits in the car. You'd think we'd get right to it once in the room, but we don't. I have to wait for visual cues that Zac has made the necessary transition between the sister me and the me. Every time I wonder if he will be able to make the switch at all. I wonder if it's going to happen, and how it happens, and what if it doesn't happen while he fidgets and smokes. He sits on the edge of the bed, his quiet pulling small, safe talk out of me. I have to tamp down the urge to say Jonathan, Jonathan, Jonathan. It doesn't bother me to say Jonathan's name, to evoke his presence here in this room, or even, once, to think of their father's funeral while I undress and wait for Zac to finish his cigarette, how his father was cremated and we spread the boney ash on a piece of wood, each of us grabbing handfuls and throwing them into the lake, not dust like you'd think, but the sound of small pebbles scattering in the water. Zac's skittish about all that, though, so I tell him about Elvira's traffic ticket instead. I prattle on until he finally stubs the cigarette and reaches for me, his desire creepy and inevitable, like the roots that grow from potatoes if you leave them in the cabinet for too long.

When I find myself alone in a room with Jonathan, however, my instinct is to get out. And, if I can't get out, I study only the small things: the threads looped around his index fingers when he flosses; the nails he holds between his teeth when he hammers; the purse of his lips when he looks in a mirror. The big picture is too hard and ephemeral, a sun that you know at any second is going to set and be gone, so better to watch the orange reflection off the video store

window than to turn and see the actual sky. I concentrate on Jonathan's fingers around the glass but not his ring. I study his hands, the bones there, but don't think about how those hands once made me happy. I watch the carbonation in the Sprite, bubbles popping up around ice cubes, the soda getting flatter, a strand of hair, mine, stuck in condensation on the glass.

—

Once at Bells, the boys want to ride the Zingo first, an old white-painted wood rollercoaster that shakes when our car goes down the hill or makes a sharp turn. This didn't scare me when I was younger, but now I know how people make mistakes. I've watched footage of bridges collapsing and airplanes crashing because of some structural or mechanical error, which really means a particular person's error, but back then we just waited for the plunge. The car clicked its way slowly up the inclined track and then paused before dropping. We lived in that pause, that delirious space between urge and action, between the rise and the fall down the hill and through the tunnel, our hands raised to the sky despite rumors about the kid from Bishop Kelly High School who lost his arm doing the same thing.

—

I can't decide if kissing Zac is as good as my idea of kissing him, the one I endlessly entertained during all those years of bumping into him on Elvira's stairs or in the hallway, those times when his eyes bore into me with a strange seriousness while his mouth flashed a lopsided smile. His stare told me he had a plan, even if his easy smile denied it. He has canceled two of our meetings, claiming first to have Hannah, then later, a big shipment for a wake, pallets and pallets of ferns, their unfurling tentacles reaching out toward him. When we finally do meet, he's late. He blows his cheeks out in a slow exhale as he sits on the bed like he's about to start another long day at work.

—

Elvira asks me what I think of Teresa one night when I stop by to pick up the boys. She calls me into the kitchen and says, What do you think of Zac's Teresa?

You mean Ter-a-sa? I say. I say, I think Teresa is great.

She turns and studies me for a moment, her plastic gloves—she's washing plates even though she has a dishwasher—dripping onto the waxed brick floor. She has known me for long enough to sense what I really mean to say, that Teresa strikes me as person who is too quick to write a thank-you note, someone who grows tomato vines in carefully roped-out gardens, someone who stops short to let a person cross the street only then to complain about jaywalkers. Teresa, who according to Zac, labels the shelves in her pantry to distinguish between salty and sweet snacks. I think she'll be good for Zac, Elvira proceeds cautiously, returning to the dishes. Zac can be so— and she pauses while I hoist myself up on the counter, interested to hear what she thinks Zac can be. But she shakes the thought off with pursed lips as though chastising her infidelity and, after shutting the water off, turns to me again and says, But you never know with him. She snaps off her gloves. How was your yoga class?

—

Spinning makes Jonathan queasy so he sits on a nearby bench while the boys and I ride the Gravitron. He watches while we spin around and around at super speed, spin so fast that our bodies stick to the rubber wall we stand against. Then, just when we think we can't take the spinning anymore, the floor drops out from underneath us.

—

It has just stopped raining on the afternoon Zac tries to break it off with me. He tells me, I think we should break it off. I tell him that, well, it's not possible. I tell him that we see each other all the time and how do we just stop now? Besides, I say, taking a new angle, where would I buy all my gardening supplies?

He gives me that stare from under his eyebrows, not amused. Jessica, he says. You don't garden. There's a steady drip coming from outside the window as leftover raindrops condense and fatten and fall one by one from the gutterless roof. If the pool were still in the courtyard, it would be brimming. Zac sighs, starts over. Listen, he says and slides the ashtray off the table where it thumps onto the carpet. Being good to someone, he says, is a choice.

I don't mean to, but it happens. I roll my eyes. He ignores it and continues with his speech, palms-down on the table, fingers spread out, a schoolteacher tone. We'll always have a constant set of conflicting desires, Jessica. It's just—it's a question of us de-ci-ding—he slows the word down, as if giving a phonetic demonstration of a decision, his consciously choosing to enunciate each sanctimonious syllable—deciding, he says, not to act on them.

When the boys were younger and learning how to talk, they would sometimes say something over and over, some gibberish word that I could not make out until, for no reason at all, the sound took on a shape for me, a meaning: Oh, you want water! You want Superman! This is what happens to me now with Zac. I start to say, Come on. Or, something to the effect of yes, of course, we both feel guilty about Jonathan and maybe, maybe Teresa. Of course we do. But, really! Only I don't say anything because I suddenly understand, in a way I had not before, the gulf that exists between me and Zac. He sees life as a series of choices a person can make. He thinks he chose to have this affair. But I know it's the opposite: life is a series of consequences you have to live out. It's a crossword puzzle where the options become fewer and fewer and then they are gone.

Let's just try to stay away from each other, Jess, he offers. Let's just give it a shot. Okay? he says.

Okay, is what I reply, but what it really sounds like is whatever.

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My favorite ride is the Phantasmagoria, a haunted house of painted plywood and black light. The cars run on a continual loop that doesn't stop until the attendant, always some sullen boy wearing black plastic bracelets, powers it off at the end of the night. Jonathan, the boys, and I have to jog along the side of a car. We have to climb in quick before the car slams through the wooden doors and into the house. The loud amusement of outside makes the inside that much more dark and quiet, damp and root-burrowing, like something that has been underground for too long. Soon, however, our eyes begin to adjust, and we can make out the rusted track on the cement floor, the gum wrappers and flattened cups swept against the wall, the asbestos tile ceiling.

The boys laugh at the Phantasmagoria's dreamy effort at fear, and Jonathan goads them by making ghost noises. They're all too busy kidding around to appreciate how the car pulls us from one place to the next, how it lurches through doors and down musty corridors, and all we have to do is sit and watch the haunted rooms pass: the crazy mirrors; the vampires; the bellbottomed skeletons in go-go cages. There's the hallway that ends in a bright headlight and the blast of train horn; and then, finally, the black light room.

The boys always hung out in this room. Not my boys now, but the teenage boys from my childhood. Boys who tasted like beer and wore too much cologne but who touched with shy hands. These boys would hop from their cars and crouch low against the wall, waiting. They would call to us from the shadows with teeth glowing gray. Climb out! Climb out! they'd say. Stay with us! If we hesitated, they'd say, Your car will come back around. But we rarely hesitated. We jumped ship for those boys, not because we liked them—we hardly knew them—but because they seemed to promise something greater than themselves. We jumped to them like they were an unexplored continent, a vast territory of hairless chest and sinewy limb upon which

we could forge a new self, our future selves, so filled with the ecstatic happiness that hovered always a little bit ahead.

## Urge

Now it seems the neighborhood is full of young women, pregnant women, women walking the sidewalks with a side-to-side sway that reveals their big stomachs to Nelson even when he is watching them from behind. Many push strollers, catching the small wheels in places where tree roots have pushed up under the cement, cracking it. Shit, a woman says now. She pulls back on her stroller, a wheelie, a shove, a sippy cup tumbled to the side. Nelson, walking home from the grocery, wants to help this woman. He quickens his pace, the paper bag cradled with one arm, the other arm stiff at his side, an uncertain jog, stopping and starting, up closer behind her, but he is too late. Nelson is always too late for everything. She has already righted the stroller and moved on, and he gets a whiff in place of words, his sweat mixed with her soap, lavender maybe, roses.

The storm drain, his mother says from her reading chair when he walks in with the groceries. The screen door makes a slow groan of springs before catching and clapping closed. Will you clean the storm drain? she asks.

Because it's supposed to rain, hard. All the weathermen talk of flash floods and so too the check-out girls, Libby, with her downturned mouth that spells disappointment. They're going to fill our lot with their cars, she told him, talking about people who park in the store's lot to avoid street flooding. He thought to make some conversation out of it while she scanned his groceries, to tease her because he sensed she wanted to be talked to in a certain way. He imagined how

other men might talk to her. How they might say, Girl. Give a slow smile. But he could only shrug, mired again in hesitancy, and wait for the transaction to be over. He envisioned the grocery bag's handle in his hand, the steps he would take to the doors that would open before him like conspirators, ushering him out to the parking lot where there would be sounds that required no response, birds, a low-flying airplane, a passing school bus, its yellow lit orange by the setting sun.

He might as well clean the storm drain because he might as well do one thing or another, so he calls out, Yes, sure, as he walks through to the kitchen where he unpacks his mother's canned pineapple and yogurts from the bag. His father's prescriptions, all past expiration, still fill one of the shelves in the refrigerator door. One day he will throw them out, maybe when his mother has gone to bed and he sits on the couch, watching the back of Agatha's house, waiting, the frogs blurting, another book, a ham sandwich. Agatha's window, it might light up or it might not.

Herman says it's supposed to flood, his mother says.

Who cares what Herman says, replies Nelson because he has heard more than enough about what the Czech-neighbor-turned-suitor has to say.

Her chair creaks back, and then he hears her footsteps, always the same sound, shoes on wood floor. It could be his mother of twenty years ago that emerges in the doorway, big brown waves of hair and a party dress. She would clink her wedding ring in the glass dish on the counter before washing the china cake plates she never trusted to the racks in the dishwasher. But this mother, although the footstep, the doorway, the shoes are the same, is old when she appears. Pineapple, she says, studying the label on the can, and Nelson nods. She rises up on tiptoe to place a hand on his shoulder and kiss his cheek. Yum, she says. Once Nelson saw a

trail of her wet steps leading from the bathroom shower to her bedroom, footprints already drying into a different shape and then gone altogether. You're a pretty good kid, she says now and pats his shoulder as she turns away.

Out in the yard, of course, people will mistake him for his father. The same graying hair, the same build, long and lean and yet a thickness around the middle, a paunch that pulls down on him when he bends over the flower bed or reaches for the hose. His father wore suspenders, and Nelson hopes that's enough to tip people off, but they just see an older man tooling around his front garden and they honk and wave, and Nelson knows they think he's his father. And even the neighbors who do know his father died will, for a second, while passing, think, There's Mr. Roundtree, before remembering, No. That's the son, someone will whisper, moved back. And there will be an Oh, a nod. In those seconds before memory kicks in, Nelson is one of the dead. The cement porch, water-stained green in places where the gutter sags, looks something like a cemetery, it's true. Nelson scuffs a patch of algae in the side alley with his shoe and takes the rake off the holder that his father, always tidy, had drilled into siding of the house. Even Agatha has told him how he is looking more and more like his father. Which is a compliment, she had said, because your dad was hot. H-O-T, she says, teasing him. She does that thing he sees pregnant women do, rest her hand on the top of her stomach and rub while she talks. She rubs her belly without thinking about it. She talks and rubs and draws his gaze to her hands. She narrows his attention to what she seems to have forgotten—at least in front of him, yes only in front of him—that her body is still a body and not some kind of holy vessel for the baby.

Yes, he might as well do one thing or another.

Out front, the dead leaves lump with mud and grass clippings and a rotted plastic bag that has blown down the street and eddied here in Nelson's father's storm drain. The clumps make

the raking satisfying. Large sections of muck come out, revealing the drain and their suggestion of the sewer below, the dark tunnels that intersect other dark tunnels beneath the grass and grout of the city. Remember when he worried about falling into the sewer when he was a kid? As if it were possible, as if there were anywhere to go but here, this street. But still it was thrilling to imagine. He had taunted himself with the fear while walking by, the hole looming larger, maybe a tennis ball rolling toward it, a dangerous reach, the pull of the fall almost a wish. He stoops down now to pick up a baby's pacifier embedded in a clod of mud and leaves, brushes it off on his jeans, and sticks it in his pocket.

*Instead of the return of memories*

*At the hour of death*

*I ask for the return of lost things.*

Nelson mumbles the words to himself, embarrassed that he memorized them last night with the book spread open on the dining room table, Agatha's window outside dark and him going slowly line by line. Instead of the return of memories, he mouthed the words, At the hour of death. Agatha had said the lines offhandedly, like she says everything, and all the while rubbing her belly. She quoted the lines in response to what he had said about his father's sunglasses, which he would like to wear if he could find where he, Herman, put them last because his father always placed them on the shelf by the door next to his keys. There he was, foundering in small talk, watering the yard, and she just leaned against the gate, Herman's dog barking and her interrupting the conversation to shush it. Stupid him with the sunglasses, and then she follows with Polish poetry, a translation he looked up later and memorized. He had looked up the poem with a feeling of shame and secrecy, like the times he sneaks ice cream

straight from the carton when his mother is not in the kitchen. What would she care if he eats ice cream? Still, he eats in quick secrecy like who he's really hiding the eating from is himself.

The problem is you're a hoarder, he says out loud now. You're a hoarder and a sneak, he says to the rake. And, as though in response, the wind starts to kick up in bursts, rushing in clouds and shuffling the silver underside of his mother's oleander leaves. Fronds on Herman's palm thrash one direction and then the other and agitate the dog who had been curled up quiet on the porch. Hush, Sofie, Nelson says, thinking of Agatha's hush of course. And then not Agatha—why give so much thought to Agatha?—but the dog, Sophie. Yes, why not let Sophie bark at the wind? Let her have her say. Let her stand on the edge of the porch and bark out as if to the raging sea, the way dogs bark and charge and retreat at the advancing waves, the way they skirt along the shoreline, tentative and impulsive all at once.

Stop, Sofie, Herman booms from his open front window. The name sounds gruff in Herman's mouth, harshly syllabled in a way that Nelson can't help but to confuse with the old man's wiry beard, his, not glasses, but spectacles. Usually it's Herman's retarded sister calling the dog's name. She walks the neighborhood in her black velvet sweat suit, clutching a stolen grocery basket filled with rocks that she collects and then arranges on the porch, rocks that Herman will eventually sweep into the trash can on collection mornings. Soo-fee, she'll call out in a sad sing-song, her jowl swaying pink and soft and untouched like nun skin. Soo-fee, she belts up and down the sidewalk. She calls for the dog as though it were lost when it's right there, in the front yard as usual.

Herman's a saint to take her in, Nelson's mother often tells him, but that's because his mother is, Nelson knows, in love with Herman and his model airplanes and his ability to rig up the impossibly tall and complicated ladder in order to mend the sagging gutter that Nelson would

just prefer to listen to, the rattle of rain in its broken seams. Herman, Nelson thinks as he decides what to do with the raked-up leaves—forage for a dust pan in the back shed or disperse them around the street—Herman, who piloted Pan Am flights into West Berlin during the Cold War. Oh, to be confronted with those stories one more time, not even the stories themselves but the implication of them during all those coffees Herman had at his mother's table while Nelson's father, who had only ever lived in this one house, slowly died one room over. Crumbs of cake lay scattered on the table, and his mother clanged around with plates and the silver serving knife, dropping her ring, pointless now, in the glass dish before she ran the blade under the faucet and squirted Palmolive. Herman would go on about something in accented English and then pause to reflect on what was out the window, just the four-foot wide alley between their house and his, a view of perfectly maintained siding. Adela, he would say, playing around with the l's, come sit. He would speak unashamedly about death and valor, which Nelson is convinced only an Eastern European can do. It's hard. It will be easier when he is dead. Brutal words for Nelson's mother during his father's illness but somehow a comfort when everyone else was quick to talk about the weather.

What he won't bring up unless another person asks, which his mother always does, are the Pan Am flights he piloted over East Berlin. His not bringing them up is maybe worse than him bringing them up. He wants people to ask. He makes them ask with his magisterial restraint that is already speaking while he is silent. His magisterial restraint is going on and on. Tell me again about Berlin, his mother says after he has patted the chair beside him, after he has asked her to come sit. And it was a commercial flight anyway, Nelson thinks now, so what's the big deal? So what if Herman has flown civilians over occupied territories? If he has wrestled with the world and come out reciting Polish poetry by heart? Because, of course, Agatha didn't get

that poem from just anyone. Agatha is a little in love with Herman too. When she's not in love with her husband or the mystery man down the street, she is standing by Herman's gate listening to him talk about the Polish poets who gathered for dinner in his mother's apartment, the street outside dark and narrow, cobblestoned, rising sharply uphill and ending in a flight of steps. What Herman says is called an impasse.

Nelson has decided to spread the leaves around the street because who knows where in the shed the dust pan might be.

It's true, other men think about the world, but Nelson can go only as far as the outline of the body: a belly, the kneeness of a girl, the clink of his mother's ring. And what rankles is that Sofie actually stops barking even though the wind is battering the trees now more than ever. She curls up quiet by the screen door, another votary. And why shouldn't she be, Nelson wonders while raking, scattering. He imagines Herman helming a ship or raising his arms behind an altar and saying Adela, calling out Nelson's mother's name, Adela, his foreign tongue playing with the l's but still somehow conveying a directive. Yes, Libby, there will be rain tonight, Herman would say. Girl, you know there will be rain, he might say, an obvious statement, yes, but the metaphysical import vast and understood by all. Herman who can penetrate the Iron Curtain, Herman who can—and that's when Nelson looks up from his leaves and sees Agatha walking toward him, hands in her raincoat and head down so that she doesn't know he sees her.

It's easier when she's behind the window because then she never looks up, just goes about her business, putting away shirts, talking on the phone, not aware of him at all so that her unawareness creates in him a feeling of delirious unconsciousness. He might not even exist at all. But here, seeing her approach him on the sidewalk, it's a countdown before his body takes shape. Until his thoughts and memories, every humiliation, all those years he thought Alaska was an

island, yes, he told his friend, Alaska is definitely an island, all of it gathers up like a wave inside of him.

How should I be? he wonders.

How should I be?

Nelson, she says, having finally looked up. Are you making a mess or cleaning one? she asks.

Both, he answers too quickly.

He looks down at the muddy leaves scattered around the street and wishes he had rooted through the shed for the dust pan that should be on the nail to the left of the door but never is anymore. It seems so obvious now with the wind tapping his mother's birdfeeder against the living room window and Agatha holding down the edge of her coat, which she is too big to button, that he should have actually picked up the leaves.

She steps down into the street and kicks conversationally at the drain with her rain boot. The toe of her boot fills up the space of the hole. Nelson had always thought the holes were larger than that. Winston cleaned our drain and everyone else's, she says. He moved both cars over to the grocery store, too.

That's a good idea, Nelson replies.

You know Winston, she says with another kick to the drain, a staged one. Because Winston, the husband, is a problem. Nelson has surmised this over coffees and lunches and quick conversations on the street like this one, she en route to the grocery or the coffee shop or some man's home office stacked high with piles of scavenged blues LPs. They sit on a carpet and listen to his record player. Of course the man has a record player. Nelson can't help but to imagine the rhythmic scratch of the needle when the record is over and they have stopped paying

attention even though she is nine months pregnant with her husband's baby and how would that work? These images don't come from nowhere. She tells him all these things without telling him. She almost tells him. She gives him just enough to shape what it is she's not saying but wants him to know—I don't love my husband; I don't want this baby; there is a man down the block—small confessions to unburden, and Nelson some kind of wishing well, mucked and stagnant and ready to submerge her secrets because he has none.

Here, he says and pulls the crusted pacifier out of his pocket. For you.

She takes it and laughs and says, I guess I'll need one of these soon.

You can't actually use it, you know, he says.

And he gets the Oh, Nelson.

Oh, Nelson, she says loping back up on the sidewalk. The Oh, Nelson is a default reply but code, he hopes, for a feeling he hasn't figured out yet, some intimacy, not of love but of complicity. Of something, anything between them.

It's about to rain, she says pointing up at the now dark sky, both clouds and approaching night, so it's hard to tell. He watches as she moves home down the sidewalk, a little penguin-toed with her weight, her rain coat flapping behind her. I wish you luck with your drain, she calls over her shoulder. But I say, let it flood.

And it does start to rain, heavy scattered splotches on the asphalt that Nelson feels he could stand between and not get wet. It is enough to drive Herman out of his house and onto his porch where he calls the dog. Sofie, he barks, and she's up, tail-tucked. Herman holds the door open ceremoniously, and she scurries inside. He remains on the porch with his arms folded behind him and rocks back, toes to heels.

You're a good man to clean the drain, Mr. Roundtree, he calls out.

Nelson nods a thank-you and tries to look busy with the rake. He waits until Herman also goes inside and then spreads his piles of leaves thin, mashed potatoes he's refusing to eat. The return of lost things, he says to himself as he tosses the rake into the front yard, climbs the front steps, and pulls hard at the screen door like it might be locked, but it's not. At the hour of our death, he says under his breath when he walks into the living room. His mother, who is back in her reading chair, looks up.

What? she asks, and he mumbles, Nothing.

What? she tries again. Tell me.

He watches her study him there on the couch where he has collapsed, her glasses now pushed up into her white hair.

Talking to myself, he says, and she flips her glasses back onto her nose, his being a completely acceptable answer because Nelson's father had often talked to himself, had muttered about forty-amp circuit breakers even before he was sick so that the kids would ask Nelson if his dad was crazy. The neighborhood had been filled with kids, all of them throwing footballs in the street, games they had to pause for what felt like an eternity in order for a car to pass. Hurry up and pass. He remembers waiting to spring off the curb, to get back into it. Hurry up and pass, he remembers thinking, we're in the middle of something here.

Well, his mother continues, they say most of it's going to miss us anyway.

Who says? Nelson asks.

The weatherman, she answers. And Herman.

Which, of course, makes a certain sense, what with Agatha's house dark and the drone of the backyard frogs, so insistently happy with even this little bit of water.

That's too bad, he answers.

Maybe for you, she says. Then she gets up and kisses his forehead before going off to bed.

He will sit here on the couch and wait for her to fall asleep. He will sit here on the couch and wait for Agatha's window to light up. He will sit here on the couch and wait.

Goodnight, Love, she says.

Goodnight, he says.

He hears her door shut and then closes his eyes and listens to the rain on the house, a dim shushing. He wishes it were louder and harder. He wishes for the sound of pots and pans beating at Herman's trash cans so neatly lined up in the alley. He pictures the grocery store lot filled with cars, the water moving in arrowed currents around their tires, and Libby walking home, drips forming and then falling off the edge of her umbrella, another disappointing night. He pictures Winston's cleaned-out drains burbling with water and still not keeping up. The branches of trees sodden and low, the swelling of wooden door frames and old magazines, the pooling seats of strollers left on porches up and down the block. It's only a mist now, a nothing, a don't-bother-with-an-umbrella, but in his mind, Nelson sees the earth brim. He sees the rippled reflection of trees in the park, the mud in his father's garden runneled with streams and streets flooded with water. So flooded that tomorrow, when the sun is out and Sofie is curled up on the porch, he will step over a trail of leaves that has washed up on the sidewalk, their curious pattern the only indication that water had filled and then overflowed the street when no one was looking.

## **Out Went the Lady**

Ann, heading downtown in a car with a rotten wiper that cleared only a half-arc of rain from the passenger-side windshield, almost stayed too long in the left lane. That mistake would have had her splintering from the main road and rising east to curve west and heading out over the river and the barges and the memory of the man she had almost, if they hadn't have stopped for gas after that party, seen jump. His abandoned car had blocked theirs in traffic for almost an hour.

The bridge spans to a different part of the city where there's a neighborhood exactly like her neighborhood. Same narrow houses, same porches, same oleanders, same strollers left out on front walks so that you have a secret feeling of not knowing where you are, here or there, even though of course you do know.

In the other neighborhood there's a corner diner where she had always meant to eat breakfast. Those rare times she did find herself across the river though, it was at night, usually a dinner party given by her husband's friend who had renovated his house with canned lighting in the kitchen and imported Italian tile in the shower. It's the lady with the alligator purse, she exclaimed rubbing her hand along the back shower wall because the tiles were bumpy and made to look like leather. She turned to her husband and the friend who were not in the shower but standing by the door. Patrick smiled, but the friend didn't say anything. The friend, who wore his pants fastidiously, too high and one cinch too tight on his belt. Ann didn't like him but found herself trying to please him anyway. You know, she tried to explain, out went the doctor, out

went the nurse, out went the lady with the— She made an extravagant rolling gesture with her hands for them to finish the nursery rhyme, but the two men just stood there and looked uncomfortable. Patrick held his smile. The friend picked at a flake of paint on the doorframe with this thumbnail. Ann felt her body burn hot. She had said the wrong thing again. He thought she was one way, but she had exposed herself as the girl wearing shoes in his shower on a street that looked like hers but wasn't. She sometimes found herself thinking about the neighborhood across the river at night when the boys and Patrick were balled up in sleep. She felt it was waiting for her, like the whole place depended upon her return. Someone had hit the pause button on that neighborhood, and now the sidewalks were still, the windows darkened, the air clammy with reproach that she should be there too, that this quiet was her fault.

But, driving downtown, Ann swerved in time. She veered out of the left lane when it was about as far from the right as a thumb can extend from an index finger. Flat, yellow caution reflectors bumped under her tires as she went into and then out of that webbed space of non-lane. If she had taken the ramp, she would have gone to the diner. She would have sat on a stool and ordered an omelet. She would not have to knock on room 336, her heart cramming into her throat. Groggy, the man had texted her that morning from his hotel. And she, after a phone call and some considerable orchestration, had texted back On way. Stay groggy. She would knock, and he would open the door, peek out from behind it, hair tousled from sleep and the imprint of glasses red across his nose. A misfolded map and keys tossed on the desk, a mint from last night's restaurant and a pocketknife. You carry a knife, she'd ask. She'd press her thumb nail into the groove and pull out the blade. Of course, he'd say, your city is dangerous. She'd leave the knife open on the desk, bared the whole time because to close it might be to lose the tip of a finger, something, in the blade's snap back into place.

Still there was the fear all this was made up. That somehow a trick was being played on her and the man wouldn't be there at all. Or, that everyone would be there. He'd open the door wide, and Patrick and the kids and the friend with the tightly belted pants and every person she'd ever known, her cranky dead grandfather, the woman she met yesterday on the sidewalk, all of them would crowd around her, emerge from the bathroom and behind jungle-printed drapes: surprise! Surprise parties, more conspiracy than celebration. If she'd taken the ramp, she could sit in the open and without guilt among other Saturday morning mothers who bend to pick up a cracker, a pacifier, a dropped coin. Look at that, she would say to a fussy baby in a stroller and point at the diner's awning, how it rolls and snaps in the windy rain. But she didn't take the ramp. She would never be without guilt. She swerved in time.

She'd been distracted. Nested in a drawer she had never assigned with a purpose but instead let fill with tacks and pens and take-out menus and broken rosaries is an envelope with a faintly penciled 336. The envelope waits in the drawer while Patrick scrambles the eggs Ann had told him to make for Sarah and Oscar because doughnuts alone aren't enough for a birthday breakfast celebration. Patrick wanted to ring candles around a doughnut for Oscar and call it done, especially after waking to rain and then her announcement that the Jupiter Jump people had called and canceled, the party was canceled, and she was going to drive downtown to pick up some balloons, at least some balloons, from the surplus store so Oscar wouldn't be too miserable that his fifth birthday party had dissolved into a swampy back yard.

Groggy, Ann read out on the back porch. She pressed herself into the far corner where the bug husk still clung to the screen. You have to come now, the man said when she called. Room three-three-six and don't be too long, he said. So she hung up with him and called the party store. It's raining, she said and they said, Well, yes. The party would have been canceled anyway.

Wasn't this a sign? When so many of her decisions felt arbitrary—really it could be one way or another, who cares—didn't it mean something that an act of God canceled the party and not her own will? But when she thought about God up there canceling Oscar's party, it was really herself she saw, an older version of herself. This older her sat up in the sky and received all the thoughtless requests Ann offered up in prayer form. She was weary and kind because she had seen it all already. She knew all the moves the younger Ann was going to make and was both sympathetic and complicit. In this way, Ann could never escape herself. So rain, and definitely, they would have to reschedule the inflatable elephant for next weekend. Next weekend would be sunny. The kids could jump and play tag and tear up Patrick's neatly planted gardens. They could make chalk outlines of each other's bodies on the cement path without worry the image would smear in the rain.

You don't have to move the tether ball now! she told Patrick, summoning positivity as a form of distraction. She said this as she burst into the kitchen with her hip, her arms loaded with Patrick's potted plants. That had been her concern out there all along, she wanted her enthusiastic movement to say, the coming storm, wind tossing terra cotta on cement. The tether ball was smack in the middle of the back yard where the elephant would have been inflated. Imagine the circle of dead grass if Patrick had rolled it off to the side like he said he would do last night, the yellow evidence of a thing removed.

Small consolations buddy, Patrick replied and rubbed Oscar's head while Ann skirted past him and her son with the plants. It was Patrick who watered them every day, the basil, the rosemary, the lemongrass, their flooded little saucers that splashed brown muck on her arm as she carried them with a waitress's balance to the counter. You're a waitress, someone said the other day at the coffee shop when he saw her carrying three drinks in one hand, one for her, two

for the kids. She liked that he thought that even though it had been years since she'd done anything. Plants down, she scribbled the room number on the back of a bill and shoved it in the drawer that she now knew Patrick would open while making eggs, his one hand holding the spatula, the other blindly brushing over the envelope in rummage, his eyes on the thickening yolk, the way he habitually mistakes the junk drawer for the one with the pot holders.

But what's to worry. 336 is not a story to him. They're three more scribbled numbers in a house teeming with numbers. When Oscar draws the universe, he gives earth the big middle of the page. Space is only a black crayoned ring around it. But space is vast, vast, vast, Ann tells him. It keeps going on and on, she says. But how do you draw something that never ends? How do you explain something that never ends? She starts to get confused herself when she imagines it.

She had gotten out of the house without a hitch because Sarah, their youngest, had to pee and Patrick had to help her. Buy helium balloons, Patrick said from the bathroom as she walked past with her wallet and the keys to his car, which she was commandeering, she said, for a change of view. I don't want to blow anything up, he called after her.

The oleander thrashed about the passenger-side window while Ann started the engine and turned on the headlights, the blinker, the hazard light all while looking for the windshield wiper wand, which eventually she found, the slow push and drag of rotted rubber between the blade and the glass. She was used to the minivan. Three blocks down, she pulled over and parked in front of yet another oleander. Its long, skinny leaves pointed toward her and then away and then toward her again.

On way. Stay Groggy.

Then to the few friends she had invited to Oscar's party: Tropically depressed about canceling. Next Saturday!

It could have been a warning, a call-to-action, but, because they never watched the news, neither Patrick nor Ann knew the wind that stirred the chimes in their backyard camphor tree was part of an atmospheric disturbance that was, somewhere way out in the gulf, stirring up white caps and pushing waves harder and closer to shore. The two had sat out on the porch swing, eking out a slow back and forth from the rusty chain. They were enjoying the breeze. I'm going to get up in exactly five minutes and move that goddam tether ball, Patrick said then slurped from his drink like he does, his beard, he claims, constantly complicating his sip. His free arm loped across the back of the swing approximating an arm around her shoulder. Five minutes turned to ten while he told her what he remembered of his fifth birthday at a playground with a merry-go-round. You? he asked. The tether ball's clasp clinked the metal pole, soothing, like ropes on boats. Husband and wife sitting in a tree, she thought. K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes—and the rhyme gave way to distracted observation, as happens, the rusted red spade left near an excavation Sarah had abandoned under the elephant ear. Oscar's mason jar of petrified roly pollies left in the grass. What torture to see the dirt and not get at it. They probably didn't understand, all balled up in terror. She let herself worry that he might not contact her over the weekend. The man had promised to call her when he got into town, but there had been other promises made where his ellipses were audible even over the phone. She tried seeing what he was seeing at this exact moment, the cone of headlight on asphalt, that incoming stretch of highway over the swamp with the charred trunks of cypress poking up pell-mell on the other side of the rails. What about you? Patrick asked again.

Now comfortably merged in traffic, now under the overpass that rises to the bridge, Ann decides to think how the rain, partially wiped from her windshield, is the same rain wetting Patrick's backyard, his dense and cultivated greenery, not unlike the jungle print she imagines to be on the drapes in the hotel room where she is heading. She realizes she has taken the jungle-printed curtains from the hotel she and Patrick had stayed last month for her birthday and placed them in the man's hotel room. She pictures those curtains—now his curtains—to be blowing into his room and then getting sucked back out with the wind from the storm. But what crap, Ann says out loud, catching herself. Most hotel windows don't open. Most have, in fact, glass inlaid with the metal hatching of a psychiatric ward. That birthday night in the hotel room with Patrick, the pipes groaned in the wall between the bed and the bathroom when Patrick ran water so she wouldn't hear him in there peeing or worse. She had wondered about their intimacy. Was his water-running, which she knew he would do despite her lectures on conservation, a sign of closeness or an exaggerated modesty meant to shut her out? Of what? She had once walked in on her mother pulling a stained Kotex from the underwear stretched between her knees. Her mom sat on the toilet, her bare feet set apart on the tile floor. Although embarrassed—Ann had backed out of the bathroom quiet, unnoticed—she knew it would be the image of her love for her mother, the one she would choose to remember when her mother was gone. What was Patrick giving her? Huh-uh, Patrick says, shaking his head no. He won't be swayed by that or any other story. Closed doors is love, baby, he explained. Some things you just don't want to see, he said and scratched his fingers through the hairs on his cheek like he does, angling his chin up and to the side and scratching his cheek.

She didn't think she could tell the man her story about her mother even though he once told her on the phone about his Russian grandmother who never loved him because his mother,

the wife of his father, was Mexican. He had paused here and there in a rehearsed way—he had, it became obvious, told this story before—for her to say something, perhaps Ah. And she wanted to say Ah, had found herself petting her own hair there at her kitchen table as though it were him she was comforting. Another spontaneous gesture that surfaced from some place inside her. Groggy, and she had been out the door. It wasn't thought that propelled her but some imperative of muscle. Sometimes she caught herself making the sign of the cross for no reason at all. Maybe you're a descendent of the Romanov dynasty, she had told him later during another call. She was holed up in the bathtub behind the shower curtain and the locked door so the kids would not interrupt her conversation. She was thinking about the documentary of Anastasia she had watched as a child, the grainy black-and-white images of the girl who was rumored to have secretly survived the execution of her family and to have hidden in a small town for the rest of her life. Here she is, age sixteen, in a Moscow garden with her father, the Tsar. Here she is an old woman by the river with a kerchief on her head. See how the mole is the same? The height, the frame? The family's bodies had been exhumed. All the vertebrae of all the skeletons were fused, but Anastasia's skeleton would have been immature. She would have had that yet-to-be-filled space between bone and bone that would have let her do somersaults or arc into a backbend, into almost any position. She is missing. She is not in the mass grave. She is living a secret life. Ann loved these stories. The Virgin Mary was not assumed into heaven but married to Joseph and living in a small house with lots of kids and laundry to wash. Elvis was still alive and eating doughnuts. Listen, the Romanovs were no joke, the man told her. They were all of them massacred in a basement by the Bolsheviks.

Patrick knew about her fifth-birthday party just like she had already known about his merry-go-round, his fear of the ostrich moving up and down and how his mother made him ride

it anyway for pictures. He and Ann had reached a critical point in their marriage where they could either pretend not to have heard each other's stories or decide to be comforted by the familiarity. Oh, you again. I know you. Such is the mood Ann should have cultivated on the porch swing.

Her grandfather had failed to steal her nose on her fifth birthday. He was an irritable man with an arthritic hand. He sat gloomy with a newspaper at the end of the dining room table every morning. What? he'd say, pretending not to hear her when she came downstairs during her visits. They were both early risers. While the other people in the house slept, she and her grandfather sat at the table, the sky lightening and the too-hungry birds spilling seed out of the feeder in their frenzy to land. The feeder hung outside the dining room window. The birds' chirps and the pebble sound of falling seed against the glass were the only sounds until she summoned the courage to say good-morning from her seat at the other end of the table. What? he'd ask over the paper. What did you say? And that thing she had to say—good morning—became diminished by its repetition. Never mind, she'd say to that grandfather; she'd wait for the version of grandfather who emerged at parties. At parties, he'd sneak one of her grandmother's wigs from the top of the hall closet and strap it on his head with the elastic band of a birthday hat. He'd chase the kids around the side yard and steal their noses. Got your nose, he'd say, his good thumb tucked between his index and middle finger. He'd pretend to run away with it, and she'd chase him all the way to the mimosa tree. Ann cried in her grandparent's pink bathtub after her party was over because of the nose gag. He doesn't really have your nose, her mother assured her. Your nose is in the middle of your face. I'm looking at it right now, she said, pouring water over her head to rinse out the shampoo. What Ann's mother didn't see—had she told Patrick this part? Ann wonders this as she parks the car, as she opens her umbrella and walks toward the hotel—was

that she was crying because her grandfather didn't, in fact, have her nose. All those times she hoped in some way he might have had it, but that year she finally understood the whole game as a trick. He'd never had her nose. It was the one thing she thought she could give him.

### III

## Cats Claw

We were just looking for a place to stop it was so hot. We were also arguing. I don't think this is a good neighborhood, I told William. We pulled our stools closer to the bar that someone told us had once been an altar. Diagonally across the street and dominating the view through the bar's windows was an abandoned bus barn, hulking and rusted and grown over with cats claw.

Years later I would tear a strand of that vine from the wall of a bakery and scrape its foot against the wrist of my middle son to show him. See how sharp, I said. We were standing in the back yard of the bakery where the owner keeps chickens. That's where your scrambled eggs came from, the woman explained but, gross, the kids didn't want to hear that. They wrinkled their noses and shook their heads, as though their simple denial would make the fact untrue. Meanwhile, the chickens scratched in the dirt with their arthritic claws, their heads bobbing forward like nothing was happening down there, like they didn't know what their feet were up to.

William pulled his napkin out from under his glass and rolled it into a wet ball between his palms. Where should we live? Where should we live? Every neighborhood looked dangerous with disrepair. Wires you didn't notice until you noticed them sagged between houses and slanted telephone poles, a whole world of tired wires crisscrossing above our heads.

It's fine, William said.

But fine is not a reassurance. It's not even a looking into.

Of course, the joke is on me because, eleven years later, the deserted bus barn is a busy grocery store. Every day, I head down my street, turn the corner and walk through its automatic doors. I sample cheese and buy vegetables that once rooted for warmth in some other colder state. And I have three sons and a family dog, Larry, who died after a happy life of sleeping in mulch and mud under the front oleander. Mothers push strollers, and girls are forever on their way to yoga. The neighborhood couldn't be better.

But is there still danger, yes.

The cars don't stop for crosswalks, not voluntarily. They don't even slow for the crossing of three small children and a dog and a mother toting a bag of groceries. I have to take matters into my own hands. I push dog and kids into the intersection. I push forward from the curb and stare down strangers until their only choice is to stop. I force us into danger in the most pedestrian way. I keep us all moving past the cars and the chickens pecking in the yard and past an abandoned house that always catches the kids' attention. The roof and three of its sides are smothered by a network of stems and leaves that bloom yellow flowers in the spring. My oldest son speculates on what the cats claw is hiding. Abandoned furniture? Rats? Or, maybe nothing at all. Maybe just a worn wooden floor, a piano too heavy to move. The house moldering into the garden; the garden overwhelming the house: either way, it's a magic trick, a green cape, a disappearing act. When we walk by, my son and I usually agree that someday we will go with gloves to where the front door might be and tear down the vines. We will pull and yank, unchoke the windows and free the weatherboards, and see, once and for all, what is inside the ruined house.

But then one day, I imagined the opposite. I stood in the rising heat of the street, too tired to fight and sweating through my second shirt. The youngest baby was crying in his stroller

again, the dog pulling on his leash to go. Only the weakest light could shine into the house through those stems and leaves, I thought. Only the most muted sounds heard. I don't know: what if we have it all wrong, I asked my son that day. Maybe, I suggested, it's not what is hidden that matters. Maybe it's the wanting to hide.

Ouch, Oliver, my six-year-old, had said about my cats claw demonstration in the bakery back yard. He pulled his wrist back and rubbed. Why did you do that? he asked.

So you would know how it holds on.

## **Laguna Madre**

Lagoon, I say to myself, thinking of owls, of monsters emerging from muck, of something black that rises. Lagoon, from the passenger seat, forgetting, for a moment, that I am not alone here in the minivan. We are taking the low-slung bridge over to Laguna Madre. The rise in the middle is slow you don't know you're rising.

What are you saying? William asks, looking over at me and then back to the road.

Nothing, I tell him.

It's day before the Fourth of July. We are bound for a cluster of rented units in the Breakers, one of the many high-rise condominium buildings that crowd the island's edge like a row of teeth. Everyone will be there, William's mother, his three sisters and two brothers and their assorted spouses and children. There will be twenty-two of us filling three units for eight days. As we crest the bridge, the van crackles with energy. The hum of power lines outside my house, only louder and less uniform and more likely to explode. Elliot, the youngest, shrieks at the sight of water and boats. Paul claims to see sharks, a pack of them. Oliver yelps frustrated nonwords, his mind a puppy unable to keep pace with the excitement. He lurches forward and back and forward again, his small body straining against the straps of his car seat while William plays the radio too loud, as usual. He likes to drown out the kids, everything.

All this and yet there is Laguna Madre, the water blinking waveless outside my passenger window. The lagoon is deep and translucent, a watching blue watery eye. I can make out the dark shadows of a reef, the sway of seaweed. I sense a school of fish only after they've glided away.

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Laura, sister number three, and her husband are unpacked, their three kids tracking sand into the condo when we arrive. Laura has given us the room with the ocean view. She wants the back bedroom, which she claims will be quieter. Laura likes to sleep late, perhaps her only indulgence, her bedroom always stuck in the midday gloom of closed miniblinds. Laura walks with her feet out and splayed just enough to make you think of a duck. She leans back as she moves, as if her body is propelling her forward against her will. The walk gives the impression that she has very much to do, very busy, which she is. Out, out, out, she says to her three kids when they climb onto the bed and muss the spread with sandy feet and damp swimsuits. She shoos them with her hands, which are small and efficient-looking, clean, unpainted fingernails clipped short so they won't trap dirt when she digs up the Heirloom tomato plants that have rotted again from too much rain, the tomatoes eaten from the inside out by mold, she says, tiny worms balled up in the fruit like seeds.

Out, she says to the kids.

I first met Laura in her childhood bed on Christmas Eve. I had wanted to sleep with William, but his mother assigned me to Laura's room because William and I were not yet married. We drove in late, the quiet streets of Waco, Texas wet in the glow of strung lights, the squelch of rubber wiping the misted windshield. Laura was already asleep when I crawled under the covers. I turned my back to her, aligned my body to the edge of the bed and willed myself to be still and small, a barely perceptible lump under the chenille bedspread. In the morning she

rolled over, said, Hello. I rolled over, said, Hello. We exchanged names. This introduction was almost sixteen years ago, but it is still how Laura and I interact: intimate friends who are strangers at the core, strangers who find ourselves embarrassed by flashes of intimacy. We can talk on the phone for hours and then be wordless when we finally find ourselves in the same room.

We don't have to do everything together!, Laura is saying now because some of the others have arrived. Lisa, sister number two, and her three sons and Vera, my mother-in-law. Our condo is a hive, and the fishing show that Chris, Laura's husband, is watching, provides the low-current buzz. Chris is an ophthalmologist with heavy-lidded eyes. He tells us that the other two doctors in his practice are evangelicals. They see their profession as an elaborate, amazing grace metaphor whereas he just wants to clock in and clock out and watch television. He will spend most of this vacation slumped on the rattan couch in the living room, his bare feet propped on the coffee table, dusting it with sand he's picked up from the tile floor. He will tell the kids to keep the glass door to the balcony closed. The air-conditioning, he says. Always the rush of the ocean lost, the vacuum and click of the door sliding closed.

Lisa and Vera, who are staying in the unit next door with Lisa's three boys, want to organize a moveable feast for the holiday dinner. Cocktails at their condo, fried shrimp and fireworks at ours, ice cream at the boys' place. Secretly, I know Laura thinks Lisa is being manic about all the festivities because she, Lisa, has just this month filed for divorce from her husband, Steve. She had discovered letters from another woman in his email account on the computer in the basement of their house. Come see me, one email had read. The letters went on and on. She clicked and scrolled through entreaties and responses, words that she and Steve had probably said to each other years ago and really meant. Lisa and Steve had been famous for telling stories

that embarrassed everyone. Oh, Good Lord, don't tell us *that*, Laura would say. Now Lisa was sitting alone in the computer glow in the basement reading words that Steve also meant. She leaned in toward the screen, taking an almost scientific approach to her discovery. Meanwhile, Steve and the boys thumped overhead in the kitchen, opening and closing cabinets, the clink of glasses, every day noises from upstairs where life was still, if only for a little longer, normal.

But she's fine! I'm fine! Lisa says because she's one who prides herself on bouncing back, who guards against the sump of depression by being what Laura, who views the slightest emotion as melodramatic, calls frantically festive. Laura now eyes Lisa who is drafting yet another grocery list. We just got here, Laura protests. We've got seven more nights for this nonsense, she says. I think about my own childhood family and how, if ever we're all in the same house, which we almost never are, we avoid each other. Some errand needs to be run or a book read or a movie watched, and then it's over. The visit is over, and we say our good-byes on the cement stoop where dead leaves pile against the bottom step. We hug and say, It was so nice!

—

What do you think of this Steve business?, Vera asks once she has me alone on the balcony. To get there, we had to walk between Chris and the television, him leaning to the left and then to the right of us as we passed so as not to miss the reeling in of what everyone on the show predicted to be an astonishing and enormous hooked fish. She's a fighter, you can hear the cameraman say, and Vera and I paused before sliding the door open. We turned and watched. The televised ocean looked calm, tiny currents arrowed around the taut line, but who could guess the struggle underneath. We didn't stick around to see how it would end. A fish hanging by its lip. Once my father took me to see the spoils of a shark fishing contest, a pier with shark after shark strung tail up and dripping, their gills pumping soundlessly.

Steve business? I ask.

Steve had made the final toast at my wedding reception. These two, he started in the silence that followed knives tinked on glass. Man, oh, man, he said.

I want to say, Who would have thought? Or, That bastard. Or, Poor Lisa. But all these responses feel false. So instead, Steve's still a good guy, I tell Vera.

Maybe, she says.

She fixes me with the stare she sometimes gives me when I complain about my children, about car pools and sticky countertops. Sometimes you put your head down, she'll say, and do what you have to do. I keep the real grievances from Vera because we both know the uselessness of saying them. I imagine her having played hide-and-seek with her kids the way the boys and I sometimes do. She would have crouched low and pressed her body between the bed and the wall and listened to them walk by and walk by again until it almost felt like she wasn't there. Until she could pretend like she wasn't there at all. William would have easily become frantic—Mom, where are you? Where *are* you? he'd say—and she'd stand up and say, Here. She'd say, I was right here all along.

Vera is from a small town in southern Italy. When she was eleven, her father left on his bike for the neighboring town and didn't return. The next day, a family friend found his bicycle on the side of the road and, farther down, under the shade of a tree, almost as though he were sleeping, him. Vera doesn't remember or was never told what killed him. Was it a stroke?, I ask. A heart attack? But she just shakes her head and says, Maybe, in a leading way, like she wants me to fill in the blanks. She does remember that the friend brought him back to the house in the bed of his truck and laid him out on their kitchen table. Sometimes, when she's asked to retell the story, leeches are involved. Sometimes not. Soon after the death, her mother, unable to support

all four of her children, sent Vera, the oldest, off to the States where an uncle took care of her education and later oversaw her marriage to Al, a tall dental student from Elgin, Texas. Al had told his sister, Vera's friend, that Vera looked like Sophia Loren. Vera, who had bleached her hair blonde, was disappointed he hadn't said Doris Day.

Because she never spoke Italian to the kids, William only got glimpses of her background, a bread soup recipe she learned from her grandmother, her peculiar relationship with the English plural. Did you pack your underwears?, she would ask her six kids. Or even now to the grandchildren: You're driving me banana! These are the myths of Vera: hosting the Waconian Herb Society in her garden room; secretly sucking marrow from chicken bones; accidentally backing over Sheila, the family dog, in her Lincoln and then having the dog put to sleep without telling anybody. It took three weeks before someone, Lisa, finally noticed.

William tells me these family stories, and I collect them like postcards sent from some foreign land. I retell them to people like they are my own. I picture his childhood the way he sees it, a busy house, morning sunlight on the tablecloth, muddy soccer cleats, and an aproned Vera with a green phone crooked against her ear while she stirs tomato sauce on the stove.

Vera, the slightly exotic and befuddled matriarch of a happy household.

This, yet I have seen a family photograph where the camera clicked a second too soon. She doesn't give her usual Texas smile but a look that makes me think of a bathroom mirror, the reflection you see when no one is around, before you start brushing your teeth, before you say to yourself, Okay, let's get on with it, and turn on the faucet. In the photograph, Vera is surrounded by the stair-stepped heights of her six children, Al, now dead, looming tall behind her, a hand heavy on her shoulder, and her face says, How did I get here? It says, How do I get out?

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There is a second sliding glass door to the balcony in our bedroom. I pull a string, and the vertical blinds slap one into the other revealing a tenth-story view. I want to open the door and leave it open while I unpack, but I won't because of the air-conditioning. Instead, I stay where I am and admire the lawn and the pool and beyond that, the busy ocean, always washing in weather and jellyfish and wrecked bits of garbage long submerged.

—

Albert, brother number one, and April, sister number one, and her husband arrive in a rented convertible. Paul, brother number two, and his wife pull their minivan into a shaded parking spot next to an untended hibiscus bush. They have two kids, and they're sneaking their dog, Jack, into the no-pets condo because the dog's too nervous-natured for a kennel. He will try to break out. Paul says he once gnawed on the bar of his cage until he broke a tooth.

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Now it's official: all twenty-two of us are here on the island.

—

My parents divorced when I was twelve and then each quickly found new spouses. My mother married a kinder, quieter man, a recovering alcoholic, a bricklayer. She met him at a retreat along the Arkansas River for the divorced, widowed and separated. One night, not long after returning from the retreat, my mom dropped her pen in the middle of writing a check, the bills scattered around her on the kitchen table. Ed has blue eyes, she told me, and I went on eating my sandwich without inquiry into what it was about them because I had never known my mother to be a woman who admired the quality of a man's eyes. My father has hypertensive eyes, big, watery hemispheres, a look of constant and enraged disbelief.

In the thick of Ed's drinking, his wife died of breast cancer, leaving him eight feral children. Five of those children moved into my house, the one I previously shared only with my mother, my sister, and my father, now removed. Becky, one of those five, was fourteen, the same age as me. Our parents—or, *the* parents as we soon dubbed them to avoid the possessive your dad, my mom—coerced her into being my roommate when she would much rather have stayed on in her small town where she and her friends sat on the 7-11 curb late into the night. She's your family, my mother said. I went into another room to cry when the boys lugged her headboard, studded with a dried gum collection, up into room, my own bed pushed against the wall under the window. The rearrangement revealed divets in the yellow carpet where my bed's legs had pressed for years. I had written a note to myself the night before and taped it to the back of my bedroom mirror. The note said, Remember this is your room! Even though I never looked at it again, I often thought about the note back there behind the mirror, collecting dust and eventually falling to the carpet to be crumpled and thrown away one day years later when everyone moved on, which we did, strangers all lost to our own lives despite my mother's constant call to family.

—

William and I agree to go to the fish market to buy shrimp for Lisa's big dinner if she'll take our kids swimming. My assumption is I'll want to run out to the ocean and dive in the water the second I get there. Each beach trip I think this, but then an instinct for hesitancy always creeps in. Take your time, I say to myself. Wait and see, I think, as though joy might also be some kind of trick. So I unpack the kids' swimsuits and throw my own into the dresser drawer. I slather the boys with sunscreen. Oliver can't put his trunks on right he's so distracted with anticipation. He keeps putting his two legs into one side. He leans into me as I squat to demermaid him, his

coconut-smelling belly pressing into my face and his hands tangling my hair. Okay, go, I tell them when they're all dressed and greased. You're free.

But then we all have to wait for the elevator.

Vera got a deal on the rentals because the Breakers is still under repair from a hurricane that washed ashore almost three years ago. I didn't notice the construction on the way in, but when I start looking now, I see trails of plaster dust leading into a vacant unit. A missing tile in the hallway ceiling, loose wires hanging down like vines. The one operating elevator seems stopped indefinitely on the fifth floor, so we're forced to take the stairs. All this suddenly perceived disrepair endows our condominium with a certain gravity. Other buildings bubble with rococo fountains. Plastic ferns that only pretend to unfurl. Girls in flip flops. But ours is pensive. Instead of piped-in music, we have the hollow of the inside stairwell, our footsteps echoing along the cement walls. We travel down this dim lit other space until the kids push open the door and just like that, the sun.

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At the market, William and I buy fifteen pounds of shrimp. You want that much? the guy asks, and I nod yes. He scoops the shrimp into the scale, one pound at a time. One persistent fly buzzes my ear and flicks his legs on the countertop. He lands on the pile of shrimp before the man shoos it off. The shrimp are brownish white, curled up into commas. I always picture shrimp on a plate, never as moving creatures tentacling the ocean floor. William and I stand side-by-side watching the pile grow, and then he turns and smiles at me, hands in pocket, as he does when we're quiet for too long. Dinner should be good, he says. I agree that, yes, it will be good.

You know William looks just like my father, Vera likes to tell me. She'll pinch my arm sometimes when we're all at dinner or pull me behind when we're walking down the street and

say, He's the exact image. Just look. But I've never seen a picture of Vera's father, and so when I look, I only imagine a bicycle abandoned on the side of a road, the shade tree.

William takes my hand while the man folds the last batch of shrimp up in yesterday's newspaper. We should take the kids to the dunes one afternoon, he says, talking about the nature preserve at the end of the island, a wide, rolling expanse of sand that stretches between the ocean and the edge of the lagoon. He gives my hand a squeeze, a gesture both insistent and tentative, even though neither one of us has admitted yet that something is wrong. Yes, the dunes, I say. I think how much fun they'll all have out there, Paul, Oliver and Elliot scaling the scalloped side of the hills, sliding down in a shower of displaced sand and then clawing their way back up. They'll yell for their cousins from across valleys. William will chase them, and Laura will kneel with a Kleenex from her pocket when Elliot gets sand in his eye. Poor thing, she will say before scooping him up on her hip and following after the others while I lag farther and farther behind, while I walk so slowly that I might as well sit here, a small ledge carved out of the dune by wind or rain, and watch their up and down progress toward the ocean. They look like they are walking in a group though they could be spaces apart. Only Oliver, who likes to daydream, is noticeably trailing. I squint to see if he catches up, if he joins them, which he does, all their shapes now becoming smaller and less defined, silhouettes that, after a while, I can't be sure, are they walking back toward me or even farther away?

## Gardening by Subtraction

Mr. Gonzales was the oldest on the block. He often sat on a chair behind the screen door and played the guitar. It wasn't easy to tell if he was there behind the dusty screen, the narrow rooms of his shotgun house dark behind him, their windows shuttered. If you could hear the music, then you'd know. But sometimes you had a sense of him sitting there inside even when the house was silent. Outside was never silent. Even in the dead afternoon, a car will pass, a door will slam, or someone will yell out to another, call out to the mailman. *Chris, aren't you hot? Chris, do you have something for me?* Chris is always hot, even in winter. He delivers the mail with a towel draped around his neck. When he stops on the sidewalk to talk, he wipes his forehead first with his terry cloth wrist cuff and then with the end of the towel. He smiles and reveals a shortened bicuspid, a baby tooth never lost.

It was Chris who heard Mr. Gonzales's Social Security checks pile up behind the mail slot. A letter hitting hard wood is one sound; a letter falling on other letters is another. Chris raised the cover of the slot and peered into the empty living room. He walked over and knocked on my door. Have you seen Mr. Gonzales?

But it's hard to say. You feel Mr. Gonzales behind the screen even when he may not be. Wasn't he there the other night? You remember you waved as you passed his door, like you wave every time. A gesture turned instinct like the Father, Son, Holy Spirit your mother made

you do when you passed a Catholic church. Chris returned to Mr. Gonzales's porch while you stood on yours and watched, a baby on your hip.

He called through the door, Mr. Gonzales? He walked down the alley that separates Mr. Gonzales's house from yours and tried the windows. Mr. Gonzales? Luca, a neighbor, joined. They rattled shutters and scaled the chain-linked fence into the dead man's backyard. They told you how they cupped their hands against the kitchen window but could not see past the mattress pressed against the glass.

—

Newly wed or nearly dead, joke Gary and Vicky about the people living on our block of Laurel Street because they are not quite next. They have Mr. and Mrs. Roundtree next door to go before them. I think of the line of electrical tape we stepped up to as kids at the neighborhood pool when we queued for a dive. Next, the lifeguard would order. Okay, next. Adela Roundtree was the first into Mr. Gonzales's house. Chris and Luca and the landlord who brought the key did not want to go inside because there was a smell of something shut up too long. When Adela reemerged on the porch she said, He's swolled up like a tick. She said, He's leaking.

Rumors, perhaps self-perpetuated, circulate around the block that Gary and Vicky are swingers. Both are in their sixties, attractive, athletic, and on their third marriage. They host barbeques in their bricked-in backyard that Vicky has trellised over with a ceiling of vines. Moonflower, she says at one of the parties when she catches me looking up. The way she says it sounds like a wink. They're taking over, she adds. She wants me to think a certain way about her and her flowers. And I do admire them, the insistence of their vines in and out of the small wooden squares. They seem to have a private life all their own, an intelligence, but I resist telling her any of these things because I feel set up. I nod and excuse myself to get another drink. Here

in New Orleans, we garden by subtraction, I can hear her saying. She has turned to someone else to deliver her favorite line.

Inside the kitchen, Gary shows me pictures from his and Vicky's cruise to Greece. We stand close, and our arms touch when he turns the pages of the album. Vicky on the beach, Vicky leaning against a ship railing, Vicky in front of a sunset. She's often wearing a black swimsuit, her long white hair tousled so that looking at it, I see a wind that blows at night. Vicky looks half her age, something I hear people tell her all the time. Only her legs show her age. Her legs, which swell sometimes from the knee down and bulge here and there with bluish veins that make me wonder about the squish under her fingers when she pushes at them in the shower. She must push at them in the shower. In all the swimsuit pictures, Gary has carefully photographed her from the waist up. She's beautiful, I tell him. But what I think is, it's beautiful you picture your wife the way she feels. I know it, Gary says about Vicky's beauty. I'm one lucky son of a bitch, he says, grinning at me before slapping the album closed.

Gary has joined our book group even though he only reads in airports. Life is for living, he likes to say. He flies less now that he's retired, but he still shows up at the meetings to drink and to offer his opinion on the few chapters he's managed to read before getting bored. You kids, he says if the conversation drags on too long. You think too much about these things. Gary and Vicky spend most evenings on their porch swing under Vicky's ferns that have grown so large Gary has had to rig up a pulley system to make it easier for her to water them. Down, up, the ferns go, and I'll know from across the street and behind my living room window that Vicky's on her porch. Gary and Vicky drink white wine out on that porch, the bottle sweating at their feet. Gary is usually shirtless, post-run and without a shower. They leave the front door open so they can hear the radio playing inside. If I must walk by on my way to somewhere else, I try not to

look over. I hope the hedge, the fern tentacles trailing down, hide me. But: Hello! Gary bellows. Where you going? Where's the fire? To stop is never to leave, to stop is quicksand, so I say *nothing, no where*, and then head down the sidewalk.

My behavior shames me.

—

When Mr. Roundtree's heart finally fails in his sleep, Adela doesn't seek help right away. Chris tells me she spent the day with the body before finally calling her son, who then called an ambulance. Chris swabs his forehead with his wrist cuff and blows out his cheeks like, Whoa. He does this even though he has seen a lot of people die on his route. He has, he says, seen them drop like flies. He has even watched the police put down the German Shepherd that charged the fence of a house I'd walk by on my way to the coffee shop. The dog would go ear up upon my arrival; he'd jump off the porch and skulk the worn path along the inside of the fence, his teeth bared in a terrible love for me, for anyone who passed.

I once watched Mr. Roundtree fall on the sidewalk when he went to collect the garbage can. I watched him fall through my window, and I walked out on my porch, the kids trailing behind me, three small slams of the screen door. Are you okay? I called to him from across the street. He rolled over onto his back, his large belly heaving. Mommy, the kids cried from behind our gate when I walked over to help him. I had told them to stay. Don't even think about crossing that street, I warned them, and a water meter reader looked up from her work a little farther down the sidewalk. She squatted with the cover pried open on the end of her crowbar and watched. Are you hurt? I asked. Should I call someone? A flap of skin hung loose above his elbow, crinkled and yellow and papery, not really skin at all. Instead of blood dripping from the wound, beads of something clear and viscous, like fat that oozes to the top of the water when you

boil hot dogs. Mr. Roundtree's subcutaneous cells, exposed to both of us. Does it hurt? I asked. He shook his head no. He declined my extended hand because we both knew I wouldn't be able to pull him up off the sidewalk. Go to your children, he said. Let me catch my breath, he said, I can do it myself.

With Adela, it's the lightning storm you remember. The kids cry for you not to go out on the porch, but you do. The flash and the thunder are almost simultaneous, which they know, from you, spells danger by proximity. I didn't even get to one Mississippi, Paul worries, pulling at your shirt, but you go out the door anyway. You let it bang closed in the frame with him on the other side watching you until a flash scares him deeper into the living room. The lightning doesn't fracture the night sky but illuminates it, a blue buzz all around that tastes like metal, like licking a penny. The thunder sets off car alarms up and down Laurel Street. Wow, you hear Adela say over the chorus of honking that never gets in rhythm. You hadn't noticed she was standing on the edge of her porch. It is pouring now. It is coming down on both of you.

After Mr. Roundtree dies, Adela stops sprinkling her lawn with mothball dust. She stops gardening all together. How long had I watched her in that clipped, green yard, a postage stamp space that runs porch to sidewalk, driveway to hedge? First, she would weedwhack the grass. Then she'd take out a plastic spice container, one with a big shaker cap. The label had rubbed off into a white gummy substance dirtied by her fingerprints, but the red-markered X still remained. No, this is not garlic powder, Adela, the mark must have reminded her when she reached for it—where—in her kitchen? Were you worried, Adela, could it even have been possible, that you would have mistaken the pesticide for seasoning? Were you protecting yourself from some baser instinct buried dearly inside of you? There were times when you loved people, sure, but maybe there were other days too, days when you wanted to claw your way out of the world. Did your

mother cry because you scratched other babies? Did you have a tendency to bite? I like to see you spry in your yard; I've been comforted by your silent presence, your persistent puttering with hoses and rusted trowels, with mulch; I received the aloe vera plant you anonymously left on the middle step of my stoop after the birth of my first child, only a small note attached, a recycled Christmas card cut small and folded in half, your *Congratulations!* penned in squared-off cursive, as if you wrote between the erased lines of a ruler. I've seen that side of you—we've all seen it—but then there are the mothballs. There's you standing at the kitchen counter dropping one ball after another into the household blender once used for warm tomato purees, maybe, but that now kicks up an acrid dust, so much so that you seal it off with the rubber lid and give the machine a fierce shake when the blade seizes.

It keeps the beasts away, Adela explained to me one day when she caught me watching. Not a hello, but straight to the matter. Adela, still then in her red nylon skirt and white sneakers, her old-woman hair. I just shake a little out like so, she said, and I stepped to the side because the wind was blowing in my direction.

—

Gary tells me that Vicky wants to come to the book meetings, but he's discouraging her. Why? I ask. Because she'll get bored, he says, the way you guys go on and on. He says she's very emotional. He tells me she couldn't speak to him or anyone after she finished a particularly sad book and that we'd ruin that kind of reaction for her with all of our talk. I can't imagine this sensitivity from Vicky who never hears the word ESCAPE pulsing through every part of me while we're talking under her tulip tree. You're on my list, I yell at Paul in the living room because he has pinched Elliot, who does like to provoke, and made him cry. You're all driving me crazy, I scream as the three of them scamper to the back of the house, laughing, but maybe they're afraid,

too. You're ruining my life, I add after them and then a knock, and I turn to see Vicky on the other side of the screen, a plate of doughnuts in her hand. I thought the kids might want these, she says and extends the plate toward me so that I have to unlatch the door and let her inside. Who wouldn't walk away? Why wouldn't she have walked away?

—

Adela dies nine months and three days after her husband. Chris clipped the obituary for me because he knew I liked her. Here, he said. Behind him, I see the Roundtrees' son coming out of the house, his belly swelled out between his suspenders, a bald head. He moved in to take care of Adela after his father died, to sort through wardrobes of old clothes and drawers of papers. Now he has the whole house to turn out. I often catch myself mistaking him for the original Mr. Roundtree. I'll wave absentmindedly when I see him in the yard and then suck in my breath and remember, no.

Well, I'll be seeing you, Chris says with a small salute. He clangs my gate closed on his way to Mr. Gonzales' house, which has been bought and renovated by a young couple, both periodontists. I'm left alone on the porch to read what I know to be true about Adela: Adela Davis Roundtree aged ninety years, died peacefully in New Orleans, Louisiana on Wednesday, January 30, 2010. Preceded in death by her husband of seventy-one years, Nelson L. Roundtree, II. She is survived by two sons, five grandchildren, six great grandchildren, two brothers and two sisters. It's hard to imagine Adela in that swarm of people. Someone has chosen to print a younger picture of her, a close-up of her face burdened by a pair of thickly framed glasses that I'd never seen her wear in the yard maybe because, by then, by the time I started watching her, she was already content to let the world slip out of focus.

## Elegy

You were not Larry in Luling, Louisiana. You were not yet ours in that woman's living room. We sat on the couch while you stood by the back door, ears folded against your head like birdwings. The racetrack had named you Fair Dinkum Mate, which was hard to say in one breath although the woman tried. Come here, Fair Dink, she said and slapped her thigh. Here boy, she said, wanting to show you off to us. But you stayed by the back door, not caring if we picked you. Her teenage son stood opposite me in the distance beyond the stucco archway that opened into the kitchen. He leaned against the counter eating a bowl of cereal in the dark. I watched him watch you. The woman told me earlier on the phone that you had grown fond of him. He liked to take you out in the back yard to run circles. He'd slap your rump. You'd chase him, your tongue sloppy. When the boy's spoon tapped his bowl, your ears pricked up and then folded in again.

Larry?, I tried.

We had joked about one day owning a dog and naming him Larry. We joked in the different apartments while sitting on the futon, the windows open to the bars and to the busy street and to the library where the homeless man killed himself on the steps, the sanitation workers hosing blood off the cement in the morning. In all these petless places, William and I thought it would be funny to have a dog and name him Larry. Perhaps we didn't know what to do with our desire. We made light of it by turning the dog we couldn't have into something

amusing, into a Larry. But when I called you Larry that night of your adoption, it didn't feel like a joke.

Larry, I tried again, holding out my hand. Come see.

One of the apartment buildings, the one across from the library, harbored a resident cat we'd coax through our front door. She was cream and orange and meant to kill the mice that crawled in the empty spaces between the walls. We probably could have heard the mice scurry any time of day if we listened, but it was at night with the lights off and with the hope for sleep that we tuned in to the scratch of their frantic movements behind the plaster. Don't feed her, the landlord warned us about the cat, or she won't be hungry enough to do her job. She liked the windowsill in our living room the best. She'd perch there in immobile contemplation, her tail hanging down in a hook. She was the kind of cat that when she meowed, she meowed without making a noise. Her mouth yawned open when she rubbed her head against my hand, and her eyes squinched. She seemed to be saying something. What's the matter, William would say when he caught me looking out the window and petting the cat, and I'd say, Nothing. I'd say, Why do you ask?

—

Oh, Larry, that woman and her son, the Luling backyard, it's strange to think you have memories that precede me. The peripheral passing of chain link as you ran happy circles, the crab grass coming up at you, the boy's sneakered feet, I'll never know. Even when you're lying in your bed under the oleander, I wonder what you see that I don't from my place on the stoop. He's digging his own grave, I tell people about the nest you've excavated in the mulch and mud under the tree. They often stop on the sidewalk when they see you. Those who live on the block say,

Hey Larry, and sometimes you'll look up. Their leashed dogs bark and strain and stick their noses between the fence posts with an eagerness that is uncomfortable for everybody.

There's the girl who walks around the neighborhood with a pet rat perched on her shoulders. I'll talk to her and not know the rat is there until it peeks out from her curtain of hair, a whiskered nose emerging from one side, a pale tale flicking down the other. I know your dog, she told me the first time we met. She and her dad pass our house every morning on their way to school. She thinks you look like a deer. She thinks that when you curl up under the oleander, you look dead. Well, I tell her, he is cadaverously calm.

William wants to plant a sago palm in your spot under the tree because it's the only empty place left in the yard, and when William gets nervous he likes to plant things. The pipes rumble beneath the kitchen floor, and I'll know he's out front with his pants rolled up at the cuff hosing new elephant ears and nursing caladiums. I can even tell from the sound when he slides his thumb over the nozzle to scatter the spray.

—

You seemed happy enough when we first brought you to the house. We developed rituals, the morning walk to the coffee shop, a run along the levee. We learned to pet only your head because the rest of you would shed clumps of white hair that gathered in the bedroom corners. Luca, the neighbor, worried you were coming down from amphetamines and horse steroids from the racetrack. Look, he said one afternoon, gesturing to you splayed on the sidewalk. Your long mouth was slack, your tongue lolling onto the cement and your brown eyes, deep pools always, especially impenetrable that day, glazed open but seeing nothing. He's stuck in a K- hole, Luca said. It's withdrawal. But I told him no, you were meditative, dreamy. It's the dog equivalent to walking with your head down, I said. How you learn to walk with your head down, private

worlds unfolding inside but outside nothing. A girl walks with her head down and bumps into people .Oops, I often hear myself say to strangers, sorry.

My mother worried how you would react to the first baby. She read news reports about dogs mauling infants. She thought you could confuse a baby for a rabbit. What about his predatory instinct, she asked me. Do you think it just goes away? But when we pulled to the curb with the new baby in the car, you only lifted your head and then harrumphed back down into the dirt.

It's not like we paid an outrageous amount of attention to you before, so I don't think you felt neglected with the new family arrangement. I think you felt relieved not to have to try anymore. When we rolled the wind-up swing into one room, you got up and moved into another. You barked more often to be let out. Who can blame him? William and I would say to Luca, although secretly we missed the way you used to stand in the middle of the action, if we had a party or were just unloading the dishwasher, and you would remain there stoically in the way, not asking to be a part but not leaving either.

Sometimes I think all Larry needs to be human is a pair of arms, William told me one morning in bed, the baby thank god still asleep in his crib. The sun was throwing rectangles of light around the room that would fade and reform with each passing cloud. We could hear you lapping water in the kitchen and the clang of your rabies tag hitting against your heart tag hitting against your name tag when you lowered your long neck to drink from the bowl. I think I see Larry in every animal, William said.

And then there was the night at the coffee shop when William fed you ice cubes to make the baby laugh. The way you held your head up to snap at the cubes, it looked like you were talking.

I would understand if you confused the arrival of the twins with the men who added the extra room, a real nursery this time, to the back of our house. The construction was hard on both of us, your stomach groaning with coiled anxiety and mine fat with babies. The men were in and out of the house, knocking down walls and tracking plaster dust on long sheets of paper they had rolled out to protect the wood floors. You walked the edges of rooms and sniffed the handles of hammers and then skittered away when one of their hands reached down to pet you. The house was getting bigger, but your world was shrinking. The men tramped past your oleander, back and forth from the door to their truck that played a loud, untuned radio station. They opened windows to air out the dust. Curtains billowed toward you, and doors slammed in secret drafts, all the noise and movement your private terror, your constant pant. You found a small space between the refrigerator and the kitchen cabinet to curl up and hide. You willed yourself to be small, almost invisible, a penny someone had dropped, a Cheerio never swept up.

Even outside, and I know you'll claim this was an accident but there are no accidents, life guns a person toward one end through direct or indirect means, you know that, Larry, even outside, leashless in Audubon park where people flock on nice days with blankets and rollerblades, even there where the laugh therapy group sits cross-legged under the giant oak tree laughing and rocking, rocking and laughing, even there, you found tragedy on the edge of an algae-slicked pond you mistook for grass. I heard the splash and knew it was you before I turned away from the stroller and looked. A boy approaching from the opposite direction also stopped. Together we watched the water ripple out in little backwards waves that disrupted the green scrim you had disappeared beneath. He's okay, I think I told the boy, although I did wonder if you could swim. I could never count on survival instincts with you. We held our breath until you surfaced, stiff legs first like a drowned mule. You bobbed and righted yourself and clambered up

the bank. You slugged back onto shore. Well, okay, let's get on with it, you basically told me. You had cut your back leg in the resurfacing, a slice on your thin skin that trailed a line of blood on the sidewalk so that we had to stop and make a tourniquet with a baby wipe.

Once home, I put the babies—there were three of them now—in their beds for a nap and crawled into my own. I could hear the murmuring of the neighbor eating lunch with a Dutch friend in her back yard, the clanking of her knife against her plate. They were talking about cancer. You know, the one said, it literally eats your brain. It's horrible, she said, and I imagined, as she said this, the delicate way she has of pushing her food onto her fork with her knife. Later, when I went into the kitchen for a glass of water, I found you again between refrigerator and counter, licking, licking, your tongue flat and deliberate; you had licked the baby wipe off the wound and refused to let the blood scab. Your mouth and legs were stained red.

Larry, I said, we've got to put a stop to this.

But we didn't stop.

Stitched and returned to your bed under the oleander, you still caused trouble. The veterinarian had gone on about your teeth, about periodontal disease, its abscessation and sub-gingival calculus, the way a tooth can rot from the inside out. I listened and nodded. There's a lot of pressure to love you at the veterinarian's office. Ned, the vet, sells a self-produced record of songs about dogs by the cash register. He and his Golden Retriever are on the cover of the album, all bare feet and mandolin. When we walk into the office, the receptionists *ooh* and *ahh* over you and call you Old Man and stroke the length of your body with manicured hands that you lean into, traitor. They ask me if you've been eating. They ask me if you're feeling good, as though I have access to your thoughts and would know, as though anyone could know if another felt good. And I do love you, but I refuse to make a display of my affection for them. I also

refused to pay to have your teeth cleaned, which seems undignified and extravagant for a dog, who should be nose deep in the dirt, rolling legs up on the grass. So the day I stood behind Ned in the grocery store line became uncomfortable. I tried not to talk about you—there are other interests in this world—but the woman in front of us had a cart full of food, and the conversation went on until it narrowed into you, your teeth, my guilt. I admitted how your breath does smell like a fish factory. If his breath is bad, Ned told me, it's because his teeth are rotting. Make the appointment, he urged. It's the reasonable thing to do.

But when have we ever been reasonable, Larry? I know you hate the vet. You make me use the leash to pull you out of the van. You resist me all the way up the stairs and through the door. All you want from life is to stop and smell where other dogs have peed, and I pull you away from even that pleasure because I can only stand and wait for so long. Better to let you walk without tether. I started leaving the leash at home, trusting you to follow me to the coffee shop. I let you cross busy streets unfettered much to the alarm of William and other pedestrians. I even started leaving the front gate open in case you wanted to escape your oleander nest for a stroll.

Once you snuck out and followed me and the kids to the grocery store without us knowing. We returned home to an open gate, an empty yard. Mom, how many times have I told you to close the gate? my oldest son scolded me. A man who read your phone tag left a message saying he was standing with you outside the automatic doors and then another message saying he was loading you into his car and taking you to his house to play with his dogs until he heard from me. The kids scrambled out of the van when they saw you in his huge, fenced-in yard. Is that Larry? one asked. There you were, a dog among dogs, a pack running heedless from the front

yard to the back yard to the front again, running so fast your hind legs flew out beneath you when you banked for the turn. I didn't want to bring you home.

Later that week, the vet receptionist called to book your teeth cleaning appointment. She asked if she was talking to Larry's mom, and I said no, you're speaking to Larry's owner.

—

I know you know what I was up to. You had already started to bleed when I walked out the door that night. To meet a friend for a drink, I had told William and the kids. I bent down and took your leg in my hand. I thought maybe you had cut yourself on the thorns of the bougainvillea. Larry's bleeding, I called to William through the screen door, and he said he'd take a look, and so I left. It was a licked smear of red. It was nothing. And around midnight, when my phone started to ring, I didn't answer. I'm allowed to have drinks with my friend, I thought to myself. I'm allowed, I thought, even though we all knew my friend was more than a friend. When the phone continued to ring, I turned it off because I knew. Just like that, I knew it was all over. I drove home without the radio playing, always playing, but not tonight. You didn't lift your head when I pulled up to the curb or when I clanged the front gate closed. The house was dark; you were curled under the oleander, listless except for your tongue licking your mouth, licking your leg. It was not you that I saw in the dark but the movement of your tongue flattening out around your leg. Larry, I tried. I knelt and held out my hand. Come see, I said. You shifted the position of your head in the dirt, revealing a dark pool of blood. Your nose was dry, your legs licked red. Where have you been? William yelled out from behind the screen door. I couldn't see him either, only the darker outline of a body in dark doorway. I've been calling you and calling you for the van and where have you been? he asked, although I think he knew too. I looked at your mouth. The inside pus had festered and oozed out and split open your gums. He's been bleeding all

night, William said. I couldn't take him to the vet, he said. I was calling you for the van. All I wanted was the van, he said.

And there I was kneeling beside you, petting you, the whole length of you, and oh, Larry, it doesn't have to be like this. You've killed him, William says from behind the screen. Mulch hangs from your lips, clotted up in lumps of your blood, and Larry it doesn't have to be like this. You've killed our dog, William is saying from the door, and I want to tell you that there are other ways to be happy. I saw wild parrots rise from the ground the other day. They lifted up all at once, as though blades of grass were ascending. I thought to tell you about it, Larry.

## Dolphin

We had taken the ferry out to the island where there was nothing. A sign, weather beaten and bolted to a pole, warned us to pack water because there would be no place to buy it on the island. There would be one shelter with bathrooms near the dock and that is all. The rest would be sand, sea and relentless sun, if it was sunny, endless gray clouds if it was not. It must have been cloudy or had started to cloud because now you write to Kate that it stormed on the day we went to the island. You wrote, *Ship Island, that's a nice trip. I went there once when Paul was a baby. I still remember the boat ride home and the lightning storm that threatened our return.*

I read the letter on your computer when you two were still getting to know each other. I think this was after the lunch at the Chinese restaurant but before you kissed her on Camp Street. How do I know you kissed her on Camp Street? I read that letter too, the one in which you said you could feel her hipbones. I read as many letters as the kids would give me time to read. I read quickly at our old kitchen table while they packed toys and clothes for their weekend at my house. On instinct, I felt for my hipbones, hidden but there, and then I stopped the comparison at that because, as Vera would say, you get what you ask for. Your mother still talks to me and says things like that, you get what you ask for, maybe as an admonishment for asking for anything.

Kate took her trip to Ship Island with friends. She says she didn't bring a chair, blanket or book. She floated on waves and watched a flock of seagulls hover so still above the waterline she wanted to look for their strings. Her marionette seagulls, the plastic seagulls my father hung from

the ceilings on elastic strings in his sea rooms, the rooms he painted gray in each of his houses as he divorced and moved, moved and divorced. In each house, he painted a room gray and flanked the walls with fish tanks and arrangements of stolen beach grass. Every vacation, he stepped over low wooden fences, disregard sun-bleached warning signs. He would tell me the grass keeps the dunes from eroding while, at the same time, he ripped tall whips of it out by the root. You will remember his sea room when we first met, the one he installed with strobe lights, a storm washing in from the sea, how we laughed at his nostalgia.

Kate goes on to tell you how she was stung on her leg by what she calls a beach bee but what we know as those black flies, thumb-thick and low-circling, that bit us on the dunes the summer we took the kids to the beach. We had thought they were regular flies. We thought they were harmless. She is trying to charm you with her description of her day. You both are trying to charm each other. Her hair is full of salt, her thigh is bee-stung, and then, on the boat ride back, she sees dolphins. *So many people crowded to the side of the boat, she wrote, and at first I only saw three. Many people were trying to see them, but, for some reason, I kept looking in the right spots and moving to the right places on the boat as we moved forward. I counted seven total. The last one I saw came high up out of the water to talk to me.*

Dolphins, those warm-blooded protectors of humans, swimming their safe circles around threatened swimmers. What would she have to say to a dolphin? And how does she know other people on the boat did not also see seven dolphins? Or even eight, nine, a multitude of dolphins? Or maybe she kept seeing the same one or two dolphins rise and fall in the water? These are the questions I would ask if I were not trying to win her over. If I were not putting myself in the head of the person who was trying to win her over. You did not ask her these questions. Although in the future there may be habits of yours that cool her fire, that wave the warning flag and ring the

bell, the way you say no to most things before considering them, the way you part your hair to the side, for now you hide these things—or maybe you *have* changed—and you encourage her private dream of dolphins by writing that dolphin sightings are always meaningful and never accidental. You wrote, *since you saw more than the others, I think this means something big is waiting for you.*

The kids have told me many Kate stories, and some are gruesome. Her father killed himself when she was thirteen. She once saw a man get stabbed in the head. Her mother, whom she lives with, is old and wears glasses and her brother, who also lives at home, is a carpenter who is rumored to be a little off in the head from, depending on who you talk to, drugs or a childhood tether pole accident. She burned her hand on a candle two days ago. She has worked at a video store. To you, I ask nothing. But the children are easy to shake down; they are almost conspirators. The only secrets they know are their own, the quarter they stole, the shoes they hid. Even those they want to tell. If I ask them often enough, they will tell me the sins, mostly made up, they confessed to the priest even though a confession, they say, is the biggest secret between them and God and the priest who promises to forget everything upon hearing, as if that's possible. When I put my ear against the pillow at night, I hear things from thirty-eight years ago. I hear the shushing of the sea. I hear you. But you will say this is wrong. You will look at me with that face I have worn or age has worn, your lips thinned into a single line, your hair receding no matter how you part it, and you will say that I am wrong, but it is you who, in wanting to see nothing, has made inquiry a crime.

So what is left but to sit at the kitchen table you painted black and read your letters. I read your letters while the kids wandered the house, unfocused in their packing, one on the back porch looking for cicada shells, the other two distracted with playing cards. *Whenever I am tired*

*or just because it is nice to, I think about your project,* Kate wrote of the newly-planted canary palm tree you told her about in your last letter. Your plan to lure the misplaced parrots of Jefferson Avenue into our, your, back yard. The street construction started before our divorce. We grumbled about detours, but the worst came when the city razed the hundred-year old palm tree to make room for the expansion. The impossibly tall palm with its mop at the top always busy with birds that we realized, once we paid attention, were parrots. Now you've planted limes and kumquats, the canary palm and a regiment of banana trees to create a new hiding place for them. Kate thinks you should scatter shiny treats in the yard to attract them. She wrote she was walking over with tinfoil, although there is some at your house, third drawer down. She walks from her house to your house, small lizards darting across the sidewalk a step ahead of her. Before each step, a lizard, and then two lizards, and then another behind that one. They run out from the grass beside the road, across the sidewalk and disappear into the bush or the overgrown lawn. Someone has tipped the earth, the lizards streaming across the sidewalk and then back under cover.

When she gets to the house, she will see the trees that block the view of each window, how you placed a scavenged yucca tree in the ground below each window so that, inside, we could all believe we lived in a greener place than a city lot, although you never said that was your plan, and I did not really notice the trees, until I noticed them all at once. I don't remember the day or how it was I came to see them, only that I walked from one room to the next, from window to window, and thought not, that son of a gun, which would have been nice, but, of course. The feeling was what: unforgiving, emphatic. The roach that once crawled out from behind the light switch antennas-first, its long antennas sweeping the walls and straining forward, first one tentacle and then the other, those eerily animate wisps so much more terrifying

than the whole bug that was sure to follow. I know Kate, with her tinfoil treats, will ask me, How can you not love a man who takes such care with trees? But don't talk to me, Kate, about yuccas, those desert weeds, those crowns of thorns, dug out and tossed to the curb by the neighbor and then drug down the road and saved by William. All the relentless growing and nurturing to have to endure. All those times I could *hear* the backyard. Bleeding hearts strapping themselves along links of fence. Hibiscus flowers creaking toward the sun. A black bird lived in the camphor tree, his call the sound of a rusted hinge finally moved.

*Something big is waiting for you, Kate.* And then you wrote that it stormed the day we went to Ship Island with Paul, which was a surprise to me because I don't remember much about the trip. I can imagine the path through the dunes, the sea ahead, the sky gathering to gray. I can call this memory, but I know I am making it up. We probably did not swim with the baby. I know what I wore but only because I remember the picture, now in a box, that you took on the boat either going out to or coming back from the island. I am holding Paul up by his arms. I am helping him move along the center aisle of the ferry because he can't walk yet, although, by the look on his face, you can tell he thinks he is walking. He is sweaty and tongue-out, his shirt unbuttoned. His arms are extended, and his hands grip my index fingers. He is baby turning into boy. I hover over him, two layers of protection, me and the ferry awning, before the real sky.

If there were dolphins swimming beneath the water beside us, I did not see them or I do not remember seeing them. I also did not see or do not remember the wind making waves on the water as we waited for our ferry ride home. I did not see the rain splotching the dock, or your look of worry, if you were worried, which you told Kate you were, when the lightning we must have felt coming stretched between sky and sea and twitched there trapped between the two. I don't remember getting on the boat. I don't know, as we chugged closer to shore, at what point

the view turned from mainly water to mainly land, the way a view can shift without you knowing it. How it becomes impossible to say exactly when it changed. You say we went to this island. You say we took the ferry, and it stormed. And I can remember the warning sign bolted to the dock. I can see the picture of Paul. Before reading your letter, I think I might have said, in a sudden flash of memory, if someone had asked, that, yes, I did go to Ship Island once, with my then-husband and first son, when he was a baby. When he was learning to walk. I would remember the outline of the trip but not the trip itself. And all this worries me because what other voids are there in these clamorous memories? To further encourage Kate, you told her how much you loved dolphins as a child. You told her you made your family call you by the name dolphin instead of William, even though your brothers and sisters made fun of you. Is this true? Did I know this? *There is something about dolphins that is a window into me*, you wrote, *like it or not.*

Yesterday, while planting a tree in the new yard, my first tree, I sensed the dirt moving privately in the pile beside the hole I was digging. I spread the pile thin with my shovel and got to my knees to look. White worms, almost translucent, rolled and writhed, unearthed in the loose dirt and looking for a new place to burrow. If not dirt, they would curl into themselves. Those are just grub worms, you might say to me now if I told you about them. I had to look them up, but you have been seeing grubs for years in our back yard, every planted tree and flower, the grave of every pet. How many times did you walk into the kitchen thirsty from digging, the clink of your glass from the cabinet, the tumble of ice from the refrigerator door, a ribbon of water from the faucet? From where I sat in the other room, doing whatever it is I did then back then, you were just getting a glass of water. I didn't have to look to know what you were doing. And maybe you were only getting a glass of water. But, you had also just seen the grubs in the dirt,

and this I didn't know. I didn't know what you had seen, and I didn't know that you had often seen them, and I didn't even know that they were there, had been there all along, digging and nesting deep in our yard, quietly turning into beetles beneath our soil.

*Yes, a boy turned dolphin,* Kate wrote in the last letter I was able to read. The kids were ready to go. They were gathered around me at the kitchen table and pulling at my shirt. Come on, they said. We're packed, they said. We're ready. *Tell your brothers and sisters to back off,* she wrote. *Strange transformations happen. They happen all the time.*

## Vita

Carolyn Mikulencak grew up in Oklahoma. She now lives in New Orleans with her husband and her three sons and their dog, Donnie.