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Asteraceae

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Asteraceae

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Rachel Lyons

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Dedication

For my beautiful friends and for those who carry heavy names.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the people I love who are my greatest inspirations and influences. Thank you to the Written Arts program for taking this work seriously. And, finally, thank you Mary for all the time, energy, thought and spirit you put into the development of this novella. Doubtless, it would not have gotten done without you. I feel honored and truly grateful to have worked with you.

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I. Golden Flowers

I floated down across the yard. Around me the air was cold and dew still covered the grass. The sun had not yet cleared the hill. Beside me, Phillip's arms and shoulders were bare, and I could feel the tremor of life within them. In the early light of day he looked new and surprising. His eyes reflected the clearness of the air, and the form of his body stood contrasted against the white of the sky. His brow was heavy and his exhales, with each step down the hill, were loud and warm. And they floated too (his breaths), in little clouds around his face. Finally we were leaving, and I knew he was relieved.

Not me. I was still shedding the softness of my bed. And if it were up to me we would have returned there. We would have gone back to sleep. Phillip in my arms, Phillip on my breast...

I turned, in my daze, to look back at the house from the bottom of the hill. It didn't look like the home that I desired, and it was strange to think that I would ever return there. It looked like an empty house. I mean, it looked like a house that had been empty and was meant to be empty forever, a husk of thin white wood and paper-thin window panes that had never seen anything close to life.

"Grace," Phillip was calling because I had lingered at the mailbox too long. I turned but his face had already vanished; he had turned his back to me, and it was the back of his skull which I continued to follow. His shaven head with all its indents.

It was impossible to comprehend how moments ago that very same skull had been cradled within the down feathers of my pillow.

We continued down the gravel road away from the hill, and with a harder ground beneath my feet I began to take stock of my body as its weight shifted from heel to toe. I began to wake up. I looked down at my sneakered feet and across the exaggerated proportions of my thighs and stomach as they appeared stacked below my chin. So this is how the day would begin—quietly and hurried, with Philip leading the way. Here and there silver-specked starlings crowded the road in bundles. The robins were more scattered. And above, on the wires, the mourning doves were who-ing. Phillip passed them by without looking, and they ignored him as well.

This was the beginning of the day. The beginning of our end. To be witnessed by the light of dawn and the clear, cold air which hung lofty above us.

Phillip had arrived at dawn. He had travelled, flown for all I know, from wherever it was he came from to my house perched on a hill. At dawn. He had journeyed miles in the earliest hours of the day, and when he reached my house his boots and pant legs were wet with dew. After shedding them he stretched out on my porch swing, his right arm hanging down, and he slept there through the afternoon.

That's how I found him when I woke up—asleep, half naked, with his legs bent over the armrest so that his kneecaps protruded. His kneecaps were the color of soil and his face, even in sleep, was heavy.

I stood over him for a moment and watched his chest rise and fall. Even with his eyes closed I could tell he was beautiful. And as I looked down at his sleeping body I felt a chasm open just below my lungs. It was simple—an influx of airy space that longed to be filled.

So, then and there, I vowed to love him. I vowed to give him a home and a place to rest. I would feed him and clean his clothes and promise him whatever comforts he desired. But he

didn't need convincing to stay. He stayed one night. Then he stayed a second night. A third and so on. And I wanted him to stay forever.

Phillip didn't want to stay forever. He wanted to find Jamal.

It was very early, and it was blinding to see Phillip in the white light. I had always liked him better in the dark, when I could hold his face right up against mine and see the whites of his eyes turn yellow.

There was a bridge down the road below which we met up with the river. I call it a river but really it was a tributary which eventually flowed into the Hudson. And below the bridge, this tributary was hardly anything at all—it was shallow and its edges were undefined. In the direction of the Hudson the land turned slowly into marsh before falling away completely. Somewhere in the opposite direction, according to Phillip, we would find what we were looking for. We would find Jamal.

“This way,” he said. So we began our journey upstream, and Phillip walked right through the center of the current, his boots two mobile stones for rippling bands of water to frame. He kept his hands hidden in his pockets.

I didn't know how Phillip knew the things he knew. Everything he told me was true because it came from his mouth. Phillip was incapable of anything but the truth.

A search and retrieval. This was his reason for appearing and so, I discovered, it was my fate as well. Once this was over, once he had reached some kind of catharsis, he would leave and never come back. I was sure he would leave as quietly as he had come. I had accepted it and yet it was painful to think about. Besides the fact that I loved him, I had grown so used to his

presence. I had grown fond of dreaming of our intertwined lives spiralling indefinitely into the future.

“Grace.” I was lingering again--when I had seen the way his steps imprinted the water I wanted to make an imprint of my own and so had plunged my hand and spread my palm upon the pebbles below the current. And it was entrancing, the way the watery light danced over my skin making the edges of my hand undefined.

“Jamal,” I whispered his name into the water. Soon, Jamal would take Phillip away from me forever. This, I had accepted. But Jamal had possessed me as well, against my will. And I had no idea where he would lead me or if he would ever let me be. I had observed the pain that the knowledge of Jamal’s death had inflicted upon Phillip. Jamal’s life, as it was slowly unfolding, hadn’t yet proved itself to be so violent. But it was just as oppressive.

There was a timeline:

Jamal is born on the fifth of June, a Gemini, at a Methodist hospital in Minnesota. He is born into a family that is middle class and black.

He has an older sister named Kim. They attend a private school in the suburbs on scholarships—grade school, middle school and highschool.

At sixteen his parents separate and Kim runs away from home.

He graduates and goes to university in Washington, DC, taking classes to become a journalist.

While completing his degree he meets Cynthia, who very soon after graduating gives birth to his first child, a daughter. Needing a stable job he accepts a position with a marketing company.

Three years later, Jamal's second daughter is born.

Jamal travels to Montreal alone, for a business conference. He goes missing and is never heard from again. The year is 2008.

This was information I had collected from old news stories. Phillip supplemented the details of his death, since to the rest of the world Jamal's case was closed. The consensus was that he must have disappeared on purpose, not wanting to be a father nor a husband. Maybe he had killed himself. More likely he set up a new life for himself in Canada or elsewhere.

This was the framework. This was the scaffolding in which Jamal's spirit darted about untethered. Phillip had handed it to me, and in a short time I found myself constructing its interior spaces. I began with an image, one of those darkened scrapbook photos:

Baby Jamal, wrapped up in a yellow blanket, his face wrinkled and perturbed, the melanin still developing deep within the skin. He is resting in Kim's lap, and she's got a gummy smile and pigtails. From the edge of the photo intrudes the large, hairy hand of Mr. -, there to provide needed support for the child's head.

I didn't mean to start at the very beginning and so exalt that time of innocence. But I had been dreaming of children. I had been fantasizing about motherhood, about how nice it would be to have a thing to live for—a little fleshy thing to hold and to nurse. A noisy, animal thing. So it was baby Jamal and his big sister that became my gateway into his life.

Most often the stories stayed immaterial, hidden away among the other thoughts which strayed throughout my mind. They remained porous and were penetrated by these other thoughts, mutating consistently and with vigor. Initially, when I still believed in my own volition, I had intended to write the stories, which I would then gift to Phillip. I thought if I could help fill in the gaps in his understanding of the man who was killed he wouldn't want to leave me, but I discovered quickly that this was impossible.

So Jamal's life was mine, and I kept it concealed. Jamal's death belonged to Phillip, and he had no reservations about sharing that burden.

On both sides of the river the crickets were loud. The birds were louder, and the squirrels made a lot of noise, too, leaping from branch to branch without any concern for concealment. Perhaps I still wasn't fully awake, because each time a new creature sounded its alarm I would flinch. There was a woodpecker in the distance, and I told Phillip to wait and be quiet so that we might spot its red crown somewhere among the gray tree trunks. There were a lot of things I wanted to show Phillip. I pointed out the white wood asters that were growing abundantly. The rattlesnake-root as well. And the lavender turtleheads, which I pulled out of the earth to hand to him.

"Don't they look like turtles' heads?" I asked.

"Sure," Phillip said, laughing. He held the stem for a moment then tossed it aside and kept walking.

They were autumn flowers. Early autumn. Most of the foliage was still green, interrupted here and there by patches of brown, yellow, red. With every breeze a yellow maple leaf would

take flight. Sometimes a leaf would drop without the help of the wind, and then it would fall straight down, twirling all the way.

As we walked we sunk deeper into the earth--the stream stayed shallow but dirt walls rose up on each side revealing the erosion of a different time. Networks of tree roots snaked in and out of the banks, and we often had to climb over the trunks of trees which had fallen, forming bridges over the valley of mud. I followed Phillip's lead. He showed me whether to duck or to scale, approaching it all with such grace and confidence. He was beautiful. I wanted to weave him a sash of goldenrod--golden flowers for a golden man. I wanted to watch the water swirl around his boots forever.

"Maybe we can lay flowers over Jamal's body," he said suddenly.

"Yes," I assured him. Golden flowers for Jamal, too. Golden flowers for Jamal and for Phillip.

Philip was the most beautiful man I had ever seen. His brow was long and heavy beneath his forehead. Below it, his eyes were wide and black. His nose, too, was wide and kind, and it melted into the shadow above his downturned lips. There was something about the gravity around his temples that made him look perpetually on the verge of violence, but this threat was only an illusion.

I discovered him lying on my porch swing, his legs bent over the arm rest so that his kneecaps protruded at sharp angles. His kneecaps were the color of soil and his face, even in sleep, was heavy. I could feel the density of his bones with my eyes. And with my eyes I felt his arms, limp with sleep but full of life.

I didn't wake him. I let him sleep through the afternoon while I went about my day. Around three o'clock I walked onto the porch and found him standing at the banister, his back to the door. That was the first time I saw his back and his shoulder blades (like two plates of armor).

"I've never slept this late in my life," he said, as though embarrassed by that fact alone.

"What's your name?" I asked. This was the first question I asked him.

He told me his name was "Phillip" and turned to smile at me, an endearing smile, restrained enough to leave room for desire. Then he turned and grew fixated again with some point in the distance. I stared shamelessly at his profile but he didn't seem to mind. In fact, he acted as though it were natural for me to stare at him like that--like I was a painter and he was my model. And really I couldn't help staring since he was so beautiful. His face was fixed like stone and yet it was changing. Really, every day from the moment I met him his face was always changing. He was a shapeshifter made of gold, and I could never shake the feeling that if I blinked or looked away for too long, his expression would melt away into nothing.

Finally, after looking out for so long he turned to face me, leaning forward from his elbows. I could smell his earthy breath.

"Where can I get one of those?" he asked, gesturing to the mug in my hands. It was green tea, coincidentally Phillip's favorite.

"I'll make you a cup," I said.

"How about a pot?" he countered. So I made him a pot.

He didn't mention Jamal that first day. There was no one but me and Phillip. For the first day and several days that followed, Jamal did not exist and it was just me and Phillip.

I was introduced to Jamal on a rainy evening. He came while Phillip was still sleeping in the guest room, before he had become my lover. The two of us had spent all morning playing chess on the porch and most of the afternoon in the kitchen making a stew. The rain, which had been falling all day in a calm shower, began to pour down in heavy sheets that burst against the sides of the house. I was enamored with the storm and planted myself before a window where I could watch the vegetation thrash with the wind. Phillip, however, became agitated. While I was watching the storm he was pacing back and forth in the sitting room behind me, and I couldn't help but look at him from time to time. I liked to watch the shape of his face transform as it passed again and again through a gradient of shadow cast by the yellow glow of the lamp in the corner. And over the yellow there were occasional flashes of razor-white lightning that reflected off his black skin. He began to look truly haunted.

“What’s bothering you?” I asked.

“What am I doing here?” he froze in the center of the room and looked around at the furniture as if every cushion had a pair of eyes. For a moment, I swear, he was entirely gone. For a moment I looked not at Phillip but at a husk.

“What do you mean, Phillip?” I asked, pulling him forward out of whatever depths he had travelled to. He rubbed the back of his head.

“I can’t believe he’s out there,” he began, “out there buried in the mud.”

He sat down in the armchair across from me and massaged his denim knees.

“Who?” I asked.

Nothing.

“Who’s out there?” I asked again.

“Jamal,” he said. The name came out hard and perfect like a pearl.

Yes, golden flowers for Jamal, too. A ring of gold around his body. Blades of green grass and virgin’s bower. I lay down goldenrod, purple asters and Queen Anne’s lace. I find a wild orchid and lay it down. I place a flat stone over where I think his head might be. A heavy stone. I paint it with pokeberry juice and write his name. Jamal.

II. I Watch Him Die

Shortly, the river became too deep for Phillip to walk straight through it, so he led us across the stony bank. Walking like that, on the thin strip of rocks between the river on our left and the woody slope to our right, it was easy to forget about the water entirely. I had to watch my feet at all times and plan each step carefully so as not to fall into the slime--a gray layer of sludge which coated every surface that had once been submerged. Some of the stones I tried to use as footing were buried in the stuff, and, beneath my weight, they would come loose and send me grabbing for some low hanging branch or desperately reaching for Phillip’s arms.

“You tryna kill me?” I had fallen forward into his spine without warning.

“We’re walking too fast,” I explained.

“You’re just clumsy,” he said. “The ground’s practically flat.”

I used the sling of a stretched branch to hit him on the head. He smiled at me through the flurry of leaves.

“If you just took bigger strides--”

“Forget it!” I would walk through the woods above.

I climbed up past a nest of slender trunks and the exposed roots of an eastern hemlock. Once the ground was level enough I pivoted and began my trek. There was no sunlight at all yet under the shade of the oaks. Nor were there any clues as to how to move forward through the forest in which some shrub was growing beneath every patch of sky. When kneeling or tilting to the side, a grid of twigs might fold away to reveal an opening. But once that trap had been cleared a different grid would manifest, and new contortions of the body became necessary. There was the feeling of being touched at all times--by some weed in the knees or the shins, some branch at the elbow...what bugs, what thorns would latch onto my shirt sleeves? What spiders would I drag along with me? How many parasites would settle in my scalp? It was too much.

No, I was too far removed from such an enmeshed state to adapt to it now and pretend I could pull myself away at the end of the journey unbothered. My body would itch for days, remembering with a precision my mind didn't have exactly where a beetle had landed briefly on my cheek as I had clambored gracelessly from one fallen log to the next. Someday, maybe, I would allow whatever miniscule creatures so pleased to walk freely across my skin, and I would feel no threat to my stability. I might even feel more whole because of it--like a tree with all its mites and squirrels, all its sheltered millipedes. For now I was too removed...much too comfortable with solitude and cleanliness.

“You’ve given up already?” Phillip asked as I fell in line again behind him.

“Let’s walk slower, please,” I said. “I want time to look at everything, time to take it all in. It’s beautiful isn’t it?”

Phillip stopped and scanned his surroundings. He was still, with one arm stretched out and planted on the joint of a young sycamore, the other free hanging at his side. One foot elevated on a solid rock face, the other rooted in a circle of moss. His chest opened out to the left, round chin tall, wide brow lifted. He was glowing.

“Do you smell that?” he asked.

“Smell what?”

He moved forward again then crouched to look at something in the water: a carcass. A raccoon carcass, half its belly exposed to the air.

Phillip had insisted he would know when we were close to Jamal’s body. And I believed him; he had a nose for death.

I didn’t like the look of the raccoon, nor did I like the sight of the flies swarming above it. I would have given anything to be back in bed.

Our mornings were usually quiet. In the initial moments, when sleep still held his eyes, Phillip could be coaxed into me. If I brought my fingers to his mouth he would open his lips to receive them. The brown expanse of his chest was open to kisses and the wanderings of one or two of my knuckles. While his eyes were not fully open he could be persuaded into softness. Inevitably, however, the harsh daylight would break through the lid, and with it the memories that plagued him; with it the body still closed up in dirt. And then all I had were his shoulder blades and the back of his skull. And sometimes they were so hard that I couldn’t bear to touch them.

Often he wouldn’t speak for a long time. He would stare into his tea until his brow cast a dark shadow over the features of his face. I knew what he was thinking about and yet I couldn’t

bring myself to acknowledge it. I would ask vague questions only like “what’s wrong?” I wouldn’t ask “what aspect of Jamal’s death is hurting you this morning?” a question which might have reaped true answers. I didn’t ask that sort of question because I didn’t like to talk about Jamal. I didn’t want to hear, again, how he had been killed and how his body had been buried. Again and again and again. For that’s all Phillip knew--the circumstances of Jamal’s loss and the hatred that caused his death.

There was a timeline. The materials of Jamal’s life were known.

He is born on the fifth of June, a Gemini...

But this was nothing. What about the way he walked, I wondered. What about the way he felt in the morning. How often did he cut his fingernails? What was the sound of his voice and the nature of its fluctuations? I attempted to discover these things. Infant Jamal, soft and sheltered, quickly grew into Jamal the man. A man on his way to Montreal who had left DC a lot later than planned. It was already dark with four hours still ahead.

Jamal turned the radio off. All the songs had started to repeat themselves, and, besides, maybe silence would be a good thing for his nerves. Of course, it wasn’t silence that followed the music but the sounds of the air conditioner, the engine and the wind. Highway sounds. Four hours left. He rubbed the back of his head and checked the rear view mirror. For a long stretch of road he had been driving well above the speed limit, which was unusual for him. His general rule of thumb was to stay within ten miles over, five if he was crossing state lines. In his life he had been pulled over by the police a total of twenty-nine times. Once for every year of his life. For some reason, though, he felt intense urgency. A desperation to get off the highway and into

his hotel room as quickly as possible. And there was no way he would get pulled over on such a thin, winding highway with a shoulder only once every several miles. On the other hand, the windiness made it impossible to see very far ahead...a car could be parked behind the trees around the next bend and he wouldn't know until it was too late. Well, he thought, whether or not they catch me is in God's hands. He smiled as he thought it. Dismissing things for God to worry about was something he had learned from Cynthia. It was a new motto of hers which she had adopted in the two years they had spent apart between the birth of their first and second child. She had never been a religious woman and when Jamal had asked her, after she relinquished the fate of a lost earring to God's hands, when she had started believing in God she said, "I've always believed. I've just been quiet about it, that's all." He had been surprised. In college they had talked about growing up religious, but usually their conversations were about how the church had exploited their black parents. And they had laughed about the fundamentalists who used to scold them. A lot of things about Cynthia had been surprising him lately. It was exciting. She had changed a lot, but not to the point of being unrecognizable. And so far, since moving back in, things were going well. Jamal reached over to touch the torn envelope on the passenger seat. Cynthia had given it to him as he was leaving the house. She directed him to open it when he got to Montreal, but of course he had read it at the gas station in town. In it, Cynthia expressed her renewed love for Jamal, her gratitude for his renewed commitment to fatherhood, and her hope for their future as a family. Yes, things for now were good. He was eager to call home from the hotel, and he pressed down a little harder on the gas pedal.

I learned his name, then I learned his death. The news reports said that Jamal had gone missing in 2008, leaving his girlfriend and two children to wonder and grieve. Nothing of his was ever found. Not the car he had been driving on his way to Montreal. Not an article of the clothing he had packed nor the shirt on his back. No body. No sign. Such circumstances seemed to suggest that he skipped town. Phillip knew different. And it was from him that I learned of Jamal's death.

“How does someone just disappear like that?” he asked me one afternoon. He wasn't musing on the nature of disappearance, time, nor on the mysteries of a cruel world. His question was a test of sorts. “This man had a whole family, friends, a job...How do you just disappear and no one has a clue where you are?”

I turned my face to the foggy mountain range and didn't answer. I didn't want to talk about Jamal.

“There are people out there who are making sure no one's ever gonna find him. They're making sure no one ever figures out what happened to him.”

His eyes were narrow and sharp. He looked at me, wanting me to understand exactly what he meant. When he found me hostile he turned to the sky.

“You ever heard of the Gallant Brotherhood?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “I bet I'm about to.”

“They're a white supremacist organization,” he began. “Well, they're more of a club. It's small, inconspicuous. They don't advertise what they do.”

“And what do they do?”

“Well, they killed Jamal,” he said and paused. “Made a whole night of it. Got the whole crew involved.”

“Why’d they kill him?”

“What do you mean ‘why?’ Because they had an opportunity to. Because he was black and in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“How do you know all this?” I asked. And I suppose I knew that there was no answer. I had begun to suspect that Phillip and Jamal were somehow linked, and that the nature of their relationship was as impossible for Phillip to understand as it was for me.

The things he knew seemed to come from a wellspring of what could only be called memory. Not the memory of a witness but the memory of someone who has heard a story. Yes, it was as if Phillip was remembering a story that had been told to him a long time ago. A story that returned to him in pieces, slowly over time. I didn’t know any of this in the beginning. I didn’t know that he was incapable of anything but truth and that, in fact, his pursuit for truth was all-consuming and probably would have exhausted him if not for the occasional diversions and pleasures which I provided.

My pursuit was different. I didn’t think it had anything to do with truth. I imagined Jamal as a young boy going to school:

He has the straps of his backpack pulled as tight as they go, and he holds them as he walks through the hallways. He is smiling because he lost a molar the other night and woke up with silver coins under his pillow. He sits at the front of the classroom and remains silent when called upon (He was distracted feeling the gap with his tongue). He apologizes after being scolded and hunches forward over his desk, embarrassed.

While Phillip told me about the evidence of foul play surrounding Jamal's disappearance, evidence which was uncovered and disregarded by the local police, I imagined Jamal as a young boy playing kickball at recess. I imagined him draped in a sheet, trick-or-treating with a friend despite his age. And I imagined him at a florist's shop with his mother, kneeling slightly to smell a bouquet of roses on display near the register.

Jamal remembered how his sister had laughed when a boy sent her roses, saying that roses were corny and cliché. Jamal thought she was too harsh. He sort of liked the smell of them. And he liked the deep red color of their petals. It was too bad about the thorns, though. He wandered further from his mother at the front of the store and weaved in and out of the aisles. What were the flowers Kim had mentioned? he wondered. The ones she said were her favorites? They started with a "D." He knew that. And they weren't daisies. He would have remembered daisies. He smelled the peonies, hydrangeas, and yellow tulips, and he touched the ceramic surfaces of a series of garden gnomes.

"Jamal," his mother called him. "What color is your date's dress?"

Jamal shrugged.

"You don't have any idea?"

"No," he said.

His mother shook her head and turned again to the florist. "Well, white flowers will match anything. And maybe a little pink."

In the car Jamal asked her to remind him of the names, again.

"The woman wears a corsage and the man wears a boutonniere. And you better find out the color of that girl's dress so we can get you the right tie..."

“Grace,” Phillip said.

“What?”

He shook his head then stood and left me to pace around the yard. I watched him from the banister and felt a deep longing. I watched him walk from the road to the oak tree and back, wanting to leave, it seemed, but not knowing how. Phillip walked in circles. Again and again and again.

Signs of civilization were everywhere. Pieces of trash soiled the banks. And the moment I became sure that we had escaped the world, when I felt that all around was wilderness and the wilderness had engulfed us, some new sign would appear. A highway. Above us to the left. The tops of the cars themselves were visible above a metal bumper though we were so far below them that the drivers could never see us. They were loud. And although I refused to look at them I could not help naming each vehicle as it passed, for a semi truck sounds different than a motorcycle sounds different than a sports car sounds different than a van. The trees on the left bent away from the road as if they, too, were trying not to look.

We walked across large deposits of skull sized stones. We passed by pools of stagnant water, murky and warm, where leaves and dead insects were held in suspension. Beside one of these pools Phillip found a stick that had been rubbed clean of all its bark and which exhibited the twisting path of some bug or worm. He used the end of it to scratch the place between his shoulders then carried it at his side, swinging it once in a while to displace some overgrown shrub. We came to a point where it was necessary to climb up on the bank to keep moving forward, and Phillip used the stick to hold back the thorny rose bushes so I could pass through

unharmd. He had simply walked through them, and now was bleeding from a cut which stretched from his wrist to his elbow. We found a rock to sit on, and Phillip put his arm into the water. He grimaced--because of the pain or because of the cold, I didn't know. The thin red line washed away. The water danced through his brown hairs. An elm leaf, half-green, half-yellow, came floating from around a bend and curled around his arm like a bandage. I pulled his face around and kissed his lips. From the water to my neck his hand travelled. It was ice cold, and beneath me the ground was hard.

Before Phillip arrived I had lived alone. My house was big. Bigger, at least, than what I needed. It was a gift from my parents, who thought that I was in the midst of a transitional period. All I needed, they thought, were a few years to adjust to life after graduation. Just a few years in a small town where I could live quietly and focus on my health. Eventually I would get bored of freedom, they thought. And then I would become something. They comforted themselves with the thought that I would become a teacher. Anyone could be a teacher, and certainly I'd be better than average. Sometimes my mother sent me ads for job fairs or recruitment events. Information about training programs. My step dad asked me why I didn't just apply to schools again. I told him I was thinking about it. And I was. I was thinking about a lot of things. My parents tried very hard not to get angry with me but sometimes they couldn't help it. In their eyes I had everything I needed to succeed. A near perfect GPA and a degree from a great school. And, more importantly, I was black, which meant that everyone was dying to hire me. They believed this was true for all black college graduates, but especially true for me, and why wouldn't I take advantage of my position? To them it was obvious. I should simply partake. Partake of the world. But it wasn't obvious to me.

I did not have friends but I saw a few people. Melissa was the woman who delivered my groceries since I preferred to avoid crowds. She was tall, square-faced and white (almost translucent). She presented herself as a woman adept in many spheres--navigation, fitness, time management, childcare, politics, budgeting...she was capable in everything. She was introverted, like me, and was also prone to taking herself too seriously. And she was prideful the way a tulip is prideful. In many ways she reminded me of a tulip. I found her very interesting to look at.

Melissa was a Catholic and an ex-nun from California. Every Monday she would come into my kitchen and stand with her hands on her hips while I wrote a list of the things I needed on a notecard--and this always took a long time because I was forgetful and indecisive. I would offer her a cup of coffee from the pot on the stove.

“No thank you, dear.”

“I’m sorry, Melissa,” I would say. “Next time I will write the list ahead of time. I promise.”

No, Melissa was not my friend but she was a comforting presence. And what I knew about her life I had collected slowly over time.

In a fantasy of mine, we are sitting on the porch at night drinking beer (I imagined her a beer drinker) and listening to the peeper frogs and cicadas which populate the trees. In the moonlight her face shines warmly, and she tells me about a time she accomplished some feat of survival while hiking in the Rockies. I picture her as a young woman--clear-headed and strong. I picture the scene which she describes--the hot sun reflected off a gray cliffside. Her face is red and sweaty. She is scared for her life, perhaps for the first time. The remembered terror flickers in her eyes. And when she finishes telling the story I think about commenting on the nature of

fear, but the sudden presence of a cold wind would make such a comment redundant. Likely, an exchange like this would never happen.

Leslie, a neighbor who lived down the road, walked her terrier past my house twice a day. She had given up trying to be my friend when she realized I didn't care to hear about her son stationed in Germany. Nor did I have any interest in attending her neighborhood potlucks and barbecues. I didn't even want to hear about them. In fact, it was incredibly difficult for me to sustain these kinds of conversations. For a time I would wave whenever she walked past, but eventually even that was exhausting. But I couldn't not look or pretend not to notice her because she, too, was a comforting sight. I enjoyed the skip in her step and the way her ponytail swung back and forth. So when she walked past I wouldn't wave but I would stare at her. I felt bad about making her uncomfortable but I couldn't help it. One day I had entertained myself with the thought of going to one of her parties and seducing her son: For whatever reason, he's back from Germany and he's desperate. I make it very obvious to Leslie and everyone else what I'm doing, and it infuriates her but she does her best to be polite all the same. This wasn't something I would ever actually do, and I didn't have any hard feelings toward Leslie. It was simply a fantasy.

I had no fantasies of Glen, the handyman who never looked me in the eye. While explaining the problem with my stove or pointing out a nest blocking my gutters he would not look me in the eye. I couldn't tell if it was racism or misogyny or both. Maybe he couldn't look anyone in the eye. He called me Ms. - and I called him Glen.

And so there were people I saw but no friends, not even a pet. The first year living this way was hell, and I spent a lot of time trying to convince myself that it was temporary. Soon the

world would open itself to me again. I would open myself to it in turn, and I would find a great abundance of community and playfulness. Lightness and laughter. I would invite people into my home for dinner and dancing. Someday I would have a child and the child would be brought up in the company of friendly faces. And together we would teach them never to take things too seriously, especially not their self. In the beginning I was depressed with longing. But by the time Phillip arrived I had accepted the way my life was looking. I had accepted it for its discretion. His entrance was truly a surprise.

From July into August I slept in his arms, or beside his arm, always close enough to touch. The moonlight that came through my window on those nights was light and alive, and I would watch it swirl upon the rug and dance on the edge of Phillip's wrist bone.

I thought we would last a thousand summers.

As Phillip and I approached a series of modest waterfalls the ground to our right opened up. It was a walking trail--we had converged with some park. We climbed to the path and followed it to the first fall, an unnatural one, a short dam over which the water symmetrically cascaded. Wind, from all sides, kicked up debris and let loose showers of yellow. Once above the dam was all still. A shallow lake had formed before it, turquoise and shadowed within an arc of conifers and outstretched hickories. I threw a rock into the pool to watch it ripple, disrupting the glassy image of some drowned tree. I threw another and another. Each ring grew larger than the last.

"Grace!" I had been wondering when I would hear my name called. Its echo vibrated within the water's surface.

We walked on toward the second fall. And though we heard it always on our left, the trail, for a time, bent away, taking us further into the forest and around a humid marsh. Now the squeals of the birds and jays were the loudest sounds. Now there were leaves on all sides--glossy patches of light, yellow, yellow-green, green and pink. Chicory and the delicate ferns. Sour, wild grapes. (I carried away a handful.) I was happy. The air was cool. The walking was easy. And Phillip was near me again. I looked to him to see if he felt the same, but his face was stone as before. At least the air shared my excitement. The air and the water, the sound of which swelled as the trail turned back toward the stream which, from a distance, twinkled above its bed of rocks. A picnic table floated into view, along with a young white family dressed for a swim. Their conversation quieted as we approached. The adults made every effort to avoid looking at us, every effort to pretend they had no interest in our passing. The children were less ashamed, though, and one of the boys, completely naked with a popsicle in hand, stared unreservedly. I waved at him and he waved back. He smiled a bright blue smile. His mother pulled on his arm and said something about swim trunks. Once past, the sounds of their voices were overwhelmed by the noise of the water as it heaped itself down over a wall of fissured stone.

At the top of that wall the trail turned a sharp right, but we kept with the stream. On the edges the sumac with its purple daggers was too thick, and the slopes were too steep. To move forward we had to weave from rock to rock. We had to remove our shoes and go barefoot. Again, I followed in Phillip's footsteps. I used the same routes he used. I couldn't copy his grace, though. I couldn't copy the nobility of his movements as he used the span of his arms, a boot in each hand, to establish balance, as he stretched his leg, toe first, across the water which held his crystal shadow in its dancing folds.

Phillip, did you ever love me?

There were times I couldn't believe you were sitting across from me, real, in the flesh.

At mealtime I would watch Phillip chew, watch the food travel down his throat (displacing for a moment his adam's apple) and fall into his stomach where inevitably it was broken down, consolidated and pushed into his gut. That his body functioned as regularly and mundanely as mine was impossible to comprehend. There was not a blemish on his face. And never once did he cough, not that I can remember. He breathed as if breathing was his art. He often stretched but the stretches were not therapeutic, they were not to offset discomfort. He stretched so that each muscle could have its turn at life. He stretched in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening. His neck, his hips, his ankles. When he touched the floor the cuffs of his pants crept up, and I could see in full the thick tendons that reached up from each heel--each tan, fleshy heel, ornamented on both sides by those bones the shape of walnuts. His body was perfect and it served him perfectly.

I preferred Jamal's body to have a flaw.

One day, while Jamal was in the first grade, he woke up with a stutter. He had started talking early in life, and his vocabulary was impressive for his age. In fact, his wit and coherence had been a special source of pride to his parents. And though Charlotte, his mother, couldn't keep Jamal from picking up the speech habits of his older cousins, she always enforced 'proper English' in her own home, not wanting to give anyone a reason to doubt the intelligence of her children because of their blackness. Since they were two of the only black kids in their grade, she knew they would be scrutinized. In fact, the scrutiny had already started--Kim was always coming home with pink disciplinary slips for the silliest reasons. One time her teacher had asked

her to carry an attendance folder to the front office, and on the way back to her classroom Kim made a detour through the cafeteria to grab a pack of colored pencils she had left on a table. One of the lunch ladies recognized her as being out of place, scolded her until she cried, then sent her to the principal's office for further retribution. Often Charlotte wondered if sending the kids to private school had been a mistake. Maybe they would have been better off in a place with more kids like them. But she had seen the other options. She had visited the public school in their district. She remembered how, at recess, some of the older boys ran around the playground throwing a tether ball that had snapped loose at the dark-skinned girls and special needs kids. And the monitors had only shouted empty threats from the curb. She remembered watching a white teacher, fresh out of college, poorly demonstrating simple division, while in the back of the classroom a few girls were giggling and ripping apart the carpet by tugging on the fibers that had unravelled. Charlotte had left feeling demoralized and determined to give her children a better chance. But maybe she had made a foolish decision.

Jamal was humming some theme song, playing with his cereal and kicking the legs of his chair under the kitchen table, carefree and oblivious, it seemed, to the fact that he had not been able to say a word straight all morning. Meanwhile, Charlotte's head was spinning. All she could think about was what they would do to him at school. The teachers and the other kids--they would never accept him now, and he could never defend himself. She thought about his father, John. What would he say? He'd be angry probably. He'd find someone to blame.

"Jamal, quit kicking," she said.

Jamal couldn't remember the initial weeks of not being able to speak, and only later in life would he recall the dream in which a monster (skeletal, eyes without pupils, fingerless hands,

colorless skin and a bleeding mouth) had caught and choked him until he woke up. No doubt this vague memory was the origin of his stutter. Still, he couldn't recall the actual loss of his voice nor those first few weeks when he couldn't even say his own name. There had been a speech therapist, Emily--a white lady with red-framed glasses on a silver chain whose eyes always bulged when she was congratulating him on something. "She th-th-thinks I'm ssssss..." he started to say to his mom in the car one day. "She thinks you're smart? I know, baby. She told me you're doing really good. Making lots of progress." "No. She th-th-thinks I'm ssss-st-st...She thinks my head works wrong." Slowly Jamal learned to navigate the problem and trick his stubborn tongue. He learned to say only what was necessary and nothing more. Every word out of his mouth was pre-rehearsed. Every sentence carefully constructed. Eventually the stutter nearly vanished, but these habits stuck with him forever.

Philip and I were silent for long stretches of time. From one bend to the next we did not speak, and all I had to assure myself of his presence were his familiar gestures: his thumbs flicking out to some musical cue I could not hear; his hand, usually the right hand, moving back over his skull; his skull sharp and terrifying; his long hands hanging, the right hand always longing for the skull. I couldn't keep up with him. His strides were longer and more steady than mine. And besides, I was often distracted with the world which we walked through. Often I heard my name called with no love, no enchantment whatsoever. "Grace." Like a failed skipping stone breaking the water's surface.

We removed our shoes again at a shallow point and stepped across to the opposite bank, one that promised easier travelling, using a path of smooth rocks. The sun, at that point, was almost immediately above us, and going from stone to stone like that, each of us alone and

neither of us speaking, I noticed the bones of Philip's foot--wet and golden; hidden from me one moment then out in the open again. I cherished every angle of his flesh.

I don't know when it was decided that Phillip would stay. For two years since leaving school I had lived alone. I had been completely alone and comfortable with my aloneness. I had developed a way of functioning, a way of ordering my space that prevented daily life from becoming too predictable. I might go weeks keeping my towels stacked in the wardrobe beside my bed, then decide that, actually, I liked it best when they were kept in the bathroom closet. Instead of ending the night reading in the armchair, I would change my habit and end the night at the window. I might go months drinking Colombian then switch to Ethiopian and make a vow to never look back. But always I was living in my perfect house. The chairs were perfect beneath the table. The lamp with the scarf thrown over it emitted the perfect light. The universe was always within reach—I kept an easel and paint in the sitting room beside the window in case I ever felt an impulse to throw color on a canvas. And it was always perfect and always changing—and ordering my life according to an illusion of self-discovery gave me pleasure and made it special to be alone, for I was convinced that no one could live as I lived. No one could enter the spaces I had curated and live comfortably within them.

I was alone and concerned only with myself when Phillip arrived. And somehow, though I'm not sure how, we agreed he would stay. And he stayed on the porch first, then the guest room, and finally he slept in my bed. None of these transitions were discussed but they were agreed upon. I did not ask him if anyone would miss him. I did not ask when he would have to leave. I did not ask him to elaborate when he told me he had been travelling north when his car broke down on the highway. I did not ask these things because I knew that no place was

expecting him. And since there was no place and no person expecting him, it was natural that he would stay with me in my home, in which the map of my self was laid out for interpretation.

At least this is how I felt, and in the beginning I was always rushing to clean up little messes that were not actually messes but evidences of some unorthodoxy of my personality that I was afraid he would decode. But Phillip found my embarrassment funny, and to tease me would hold something up and say, looking at the thing,

“Grace, is that you?”

A pinecone on the windowsill. A pyramid of scorched matches in a dish above the toilet. A mug full of used tea bags in the refrigerator door.

“Is that you, Grace?”

Phillip was the most beautiful man I had ever seen. At night when he was tired but didn't want to admit it, he would repeatedly shut his eyes as tight as possible then open them. And each time they opened it was like he was seeing things anew. A repeated waking up. An arousal of the eyes. Oftentimes it was my face he would 'awake' to. And when this happened I would be filled with longing.

“Phillip,” I once asked, “What do you know of Jamal's life? You have told me all about his death, but what about his life?”

Phillip's shoulders turned in and his right hand shot up to rub his skull and knead, knead into the swollen place at the center of his brow.

His name was Jamal. He grew up in the midwest in a part of the country where the summers are wet and suffocating and the winters are gray and full of salt. He looked a lot like his father (so everyone said) who in the summer fixed roads that had been ruined by the winter,

and in the winter laid bags of salt on all the sidewalks. His mother was a dry cleaner all year round.

Jamal was never very close with either of his parents, but as a child his best friend was his older sister Kim. Their favorite thing to do together was direct and perform plays, for their parents and for their neighbors. They used other kids in the neighborhood to play secondary roles, sometimes bribing them into it with money or toys. And in their garage their father built a stage out of plywood. Kim was the better writer, but Jamal was the one who brought her scripts to life; he always played the lead, and he usually played some of the smaller parts as well. In his entire adolescent career he never missed a single line. When he was in a costume he felt sure of himself and full in a way he didn't usually feel. And because he was pretending to be someone else he never stuttered. Kim said this was a sign that he was meant for the stage. Her brother wasn't so sure, but he liked the idea.

Kim had an affinity for stories about kings and queens, while Jamal, when it was his turn to choose a theme, preferred stories about space travel and intergalactic conflict. Usually, though, they didn't stick closely to any genre, and often a zombie or a ninja or even Malcolm X would make a surprise entrance into the fairy king's court. One summer they staged a drama about a "young and dashing" frog prince, as Kim described him, played by Jamal (of course). In the play, the prince is recruited as a spy for the Soviets but ends up falling in love with the president's daughter. In the third act, the lovers steal a time machine from the CIA and use it to fly south and emancipate all the slaves. It was their most ambitious project, and they had to force their second cousin Brianna, who had been staying with their family while her mother was in a treatment facility, to play five different secondary characters. One winter, Kim made up a

version of the nativity where aliens descend on the scene of Jesus's birth and abduct Joseph, forcing Mary to flee with her baby and a wise king. If their mother hadn't spied on one of the rehearsals and forbidden the enterprise, Jamal would have played this king. Kim was always good at upsetting her parents but doing it in a way that made them proud. She was sent to the principal's office a lot for this sort of thing—bullying a bully or correcting a teacher. She liked to “push the envelope” as she said. Offending God, however, was going too far. At church, on the Sunday after their mom's discovery, their pastor pulled the siblings aside after the service.

“Your parents told me about the show you two put together,” he said. Pastor Eric was a tall, beer-bellied man who always sweat profusely while preaching. By the end of his sermons his rag was usually drenched, and he would have to use the end of his tie to dry his brow. It was something Jamal and Kim would laugh about in secret. They could never make fun of him in front of their parents, though, who thought he was a living prophet.

“What about it?” Kim asked. She had an idea about what was coming. Jamal, meanwhile, was mostly thinking about the donut spread and how all the good ones would be gone by the time Pastor Eric was done with them.

“Well I know you kids didn't mean to be blasphemous, but...well you made your mother quite worried for your souls. She wants to make sure you understand the meaning of Christmas. Make sure you have Jesus in your hearts. The story of Our Savior's birth isn't up for interpretation, you see. It's a sacred story. And I know you were just having fun, but sometimes we have to put aside our earthly concerns and desires for the sake of God. It's wonderful that you two like to write and act and make stage dramas. Your talents are a gift from God...” At this point he turned to Kim specifically, cocked his head and put his hands on his knees as if

addressing someone much younger. "I hear you're an especially gifted writer. Your mother tells me that your teachers all say that you've got a way with words. Have you ever thought about how you could use your talents to share the Word of God? God loves it when we use our creativity to shine His light on the world. Maybe you could write another play about Jesus. You could do one of the Gospel stories. This time be more true to the Word. You could perform it right here in church with the Sunday schoolers. How does that sound?"

"Would you pay us?" Kim asked. Jamal's jaw dropped. Sometimes he couldn't believe his sister's nerve.

Pastor Eric laughed nervously. "Well sure! We'd buy whatever props and costumes you need."

"I guess we'll think about it," Kim replied. As she turned to leave Pastor Eric put his sweaty hand on her shoulder and tugged her back around.

"It would be kind to your mother if you apologized to her for that stunt you tried to pull."

At this point Jamal interjected and promised that they would apologize, eager to escape the situation. This wasn't what Pastor Eric wanted. He wanted to make Kim swallow her pride--she had always been a problem child. But Jamal seemed sincerely willing to take full responsibility for the both of them; there was nothing more he could do, so Pastor Eric let them go. For the rest of the year Mr. and Mrs. - tried to convince their children to stage a play at church like their pastor had suggested, and all year Kim made excuses. Meanwhile they continued to work at the park down the street where their mother couldn't overhear them.

The bank to which Phillip and I now clung was shadier than the other. It felt heavier, too. The trees were taller, and some vine which had already turned bright red (Virginia creeper maybe) had threaded itself through the canopy, and the way it clumped in places within the green body looked to me like red blood clots. But I laughed at myself for projecting such anthropomorphic imagery onto the foliage. For all the times I had chided Phillip for being morbid, I really was obsessed with death as well, in my own way. But I couldn't help it. It's natural to be obsessed with death. There was a period, during my first year alone, in which I familiarized myself with several deadly species of flora and fauna which populate the world. One such plant, water hemlock (*Cicuta*), lured my imagination significantly. This North American plant, deceptively similar in appearance to several medicinal and edible members of the Parsley family has been known to kill grazing cows, which is where one of its common names, "cowbane," comes from. But the plant is just as deadly to people. Within minutes of consumption (almost any amount is enough to kill), an alcohol called cicutoxin attacks the balance of the nervous system, triggering a series of convulsions and seizures. At the same time one is vomiting all the contents of their stomach, their jaw may be locked shut. Some people have been known to chew their tongues to mush. The pupils dilate and the pulse quickens. The body, no longer acting according to the direction of a sound brain, twists itself into ungodly positions, as if it is trying to sever its limbs or snap its own spine in half. The effects of the plant are essentially the inverse of the similarly deadly but much tamer *poison* hemlock, which was, according to legend, the method of execution which Socrates chose for himself after being sentenced to death. Members of the Iroquois Nation intent on suicide after some kind of

humiliation were not so forgiving of themselves. They often chose death by water hemlock, which was the worst death imaginable.

I was haunted by the fact that one could simply encounter this plant growing inconspicuously in a cluster near their house. And, apparently, the roots (in which the toxin is most concentrated) taste sweet. I can't say whether it was fear or seduction which led me to learn how to identify the plant by its leaves, its purple spots, its chambered stem and its carrot-like smell.

In a fantasy I am back at Corn Lake walking to the ice cream shop in town with my old friend Thomas. We go the long way--through the marsh behind the trailer park. Casually, Thomas plucks a leaf from a stalk as we pass and chews it, similar to the way I bite the white, tender parts off of blades of grass. In a few minutes Thomas' heart begins to race; he feels funny, tells me it might have been the leaf. I retrace our steps and find the killer, nestled inconspicuously between harmless milkweed and goldenrod. And then it is up to me to try to save him. Because I have studied I am sure of what it is, and now it's up to me to explain to him, as calmly as possible, the fate he is inevitably facing.

What kind of fantasy is this? Not a kind which I am comfortable indulging, but sometimes it couldn't be helped. Sometimes the allure of death was stronger to me than the allure of sex or the allure of love. First it was deadly plants and venomous animals in which I immersed myself. Then it was war and genocide (and this gorge of historic violence was bottomless). My last plunge into the dark side was within the records of a failed utopia in Guyana. It was there, in that tropical plantation, dizzied by the sound of Mr. Jones' voice, that I realized I had reached a breaking point. Mold had begun to creep up my insides.

I didn't remember how, exactly, I was able to crawl out of that vortex. Growing things helped. I purchased several houseplants from the local nursery, starting small, with dracaena and lilies, and working my way up to more sensitive plants like the orchid. Outside I cleared space for a garden. Tomatoes and peppers. Parsley and squash. Rosemary, Thyme, Lemon Balm and Basil. I discovered that I had a green thumb; it wasn't hard for me to know what a plant needed. I simply touched its leaves and pinched its stems and I understood. I understood that sometimes a plant must abort a part of itself, and this wasn't cause for alarm.

Around the outside of the garden I planted sunflowers. They grew tall and they grew strong, and their huge, drooping heads stood guard through the night. In fact, they were standing guard now, back at the house which felt so far away, facing the sun high up in the sky.

While he stayed with me, the only times Phillip and I spent apart were the times when I was in the garden. In the summer it needed lots of care, and I spent long hours within the rows of green, my thoughts oscillating between the task at hand and Jamal's unfinished life. I discovered he was thoughtful, though not very studious. And I discovered that he contemplated death as well.

Jamal was never very good in history class. He had trouble remembering that kind of information--names and dates and places. He studied for most of his tests and still got B's and C's, except for one: the test at the end of the slavery unit. He had aced that one, and he even got a special note from his teacher for how thoughtful his short response had been.

One of the lessons had taken place in the school library, where a special guest had presented a slideshow. The lights were dimmed, and everyone was especially quiet. Jamal listened intently and stared in wonder at a diagram which showed the hull of a ship transporting

Africans. "Packed like sardines," said the man at the front of the room. Jamal didn't know what sardines were, but he was sure he understood what was meant. Then there was a photograph, a black and white image of a man with his back to the camera and his face in profile. They were scars--the mess of thick lines that covered his back. At first, Jamal had thought it was a disease, but the man explained that the lines were scars, and they were put there by a whip. He learned how the slaves were sold and made to pick cotton in the south, and how, later, Abraham Lincoln set them free with the Emancipation Proclamation. The presentation was very long, and by the end, Jamal's classmates had grown weary and anxious to leave. Around him, they squirmed and fidgeted, picking at their shoelaces and tugging on the ends of their hair. Jamal, however, was still transfixed. It all felt very familiar to him. He felt that he had seen it all or heard it all before, and yet he couldn't shake the feeling that he had been inducted into something new. He looked around the room at his classmates, their faces turned toward the floor, the clock, the corner of the ceiling, and realized that the slavery unit meant something entirely different for them. Jamal left the presentation with a heaviness behind his eyes. That night he ate dinner in silence, content to listen to his family's voices swirl around him. Eventually, his mother excused him from the table and told him to go rest. He looked sick, she said.

I tried never to fantasize about Jamal's death but I couldn't help it. The scene was too demanding. Once you give a man life you want to watch him die. You want to be there when he takes his final breath, weak and muffled, barely anything at all. You want to watch as it (the final breath) floats about his face then disappears.

Blood pools in the beds of his wounds. It is warm and reflective, in the dark only distinguished from the sweat by its viscosity. He is huddled on the pavement, each hand spread on the back of his skull--his only armor. The men with their clubs and thick-soled boots come down on him. It is dark. Only the moon's white face is there to illuminate him. Only the moon and the distant headlights. I watch him die a thousand times.

III. Marcescence

I discovered him on my porch swing, his legs bent over the armrest. His kneecaps, the color of soil, protruding. His face, even in sleep, was heavy.

I don't know when it was decided that Phillip would stay. I was alone then one day Phillip arrived, and it seemed natural that he should stay—it was not something we talked about.

“You ever been to the river that crosses under the bridge down the road?” Phillip asked me one afternoon.

“Not in a long time,” I said.

“That's where Jamal's body is buried, somewhere near the banks of that river. Somewhere between here and -ville,” Phillip said.

I felt my body go stiff. Again, he was disrupting a nice moment with morbidity. For we had been sharing a bottle of wine and listening to one of my favorite records.

I turned sideways. “Really?” I asked sarcastically. I didn't want to think about Jamal. Not now. *Please*, I wanted to say, *not now*. Since being inducted into Phillip's realm of obsession I had lost nearly all sense of sanity. As quickly and as abruptly as Phillip had arrived, Jamal had arrived, and at times his presence was more obstructive, more palpable even than Phillip's.

“Near the bank. They buried him out there so that they could have a place to visit. It’s like a shrine to their hatred.”

“And who are they?” I asked. He didn’t notice my shift in mood.

“*The Gallant Brotherhood.*” We said it at the same time, and then he understood. Then he looked at me, really looked at me and saw me shying away from his words.

He stood up. “Is it funny to you?”

I said nothing.

“A black man was killed and you think it’s a joke?”

I couldn’t reply with words. I only stood up to face him so that my eyes were level with his eyes. Very quickly he turned away and pointed his face to the mountains. He remained on the porch, sulking, while I escaped to my bedroom. At the window I kneeled and pulled aside each curtain so that the breeze could flow unobstructed. I held up my hands so that they were framed by the green of the lawn. Brown, soft, small. And then a cold breeze, sudden and unforgiving, cut straight through my chest, and I knew in that instant that autumn had descended. I buried each hand in the opposite armpit and rested my forehead on the cold windowsill.

I wanted my eyes to rest. I wanted darkness. Blackness. Nothing.

It did not come.

Jamal came.

On a rainy evening.

Jamal had pulled his desk chair up to the window to smoke, and rain splashed through the screen against his face. On the sidewalk below, two cops had approached a group of drunk girls on the corner, all huddled under one umbrella. Jamal recognized one of them from his

political science class. She looked funny with her hair down like that, he thought. Eventually the cops left them alone and the girls moved away in the opposite direction. They were still trying to share that one umbrella and doing a bad job of it. Jamal snuffed his joint and turned again to his biology textbook.

Textbooks were good to him. Never before had he enjoyed schoolwork, but now it was his sole source of comfort. He could read sentence after sentence for hours without stopping. He wasn't learning much, though. And on exams he performed the same as he always had. B's and A-'s. Taking notes would have interrupted the flow, so he simply read without worrying about retention. He read so that the sound of the words filled his head leaving no room for any other thoughts. Days began and ended quickly, one after the other.

At university life was dull. Even on the weekends it was dull. Every party was the same. A few times Jamal had tried to get drunk enough to enjoy himself at these parties, but there was never enough liquor. Cheap beers only filled him up and made his head pound. The next day his head would still be pounding, and it wouldn't stop until the evening. It was better to stay in and watch the spider make its web outside his window. It was a fat spider, with long, delicate legs. Jamal had a view of its underside. And from his chair he would watch it creep carefully from thread to thread in pursuit of a fly or a moth. Jamal wondered if the spider could sense a change in the air quality when he would blow smoke at it through the screen. It was there all through the fall. Except tonight it was gone from sight and its web had collapsed in a few places.

I myself had been looking at a spider which had crawled along the wall from beneath my dresser to freeze directly below the window where I was sitting. I lay down on the cold floorboards, my cheek against my palm, and watched it move forward again.

His name was Jamal and he grew up in the midwest. His father was a construction worker in the summer. In the winters he plowed roads and poured salt on all the sidewalks. Jamal never feared his father and counted himself lucky among his friends in this regard. He did, however, pity him. He was unbearably depressing, and Jamal tried to never look at him at all since he was always chuckling under his breath about his misfortune. Laughing to himself sunup to sundown.

Jamal felt pity for his lack of passion. Pity for his dulled senses. Pity for the way anger was the only emotion he knew how to express. When his father wanted to be loving and instead became overbearing or possessive, Jamal would feel shame on his behalf and think how he would rather be anyone in the world over his father. Sometimes at night when Jamal was falling asleep he would think about his father and all the sadness and pointlessness of his life, and in the morning he would sit down with his dad at the table and offer his company and a willingness to talk. But his willingness was either not noticed or not wanted, and his father would only make some comment about the news or ask Jamal if he had talked to his supervisor about working longer shifts at the movie theater yet.

Jamal had different feelings about his mother but they were not exactly the undying respect and awe that he knew he should have felt. She was a good person and took an interest in his growth. But she, too, lived a small, insignificant life.

When Jamal was sixteen she had joined a book club. She explained over dinner how one of her customers had talked her into it. "I told her that I haven't read a book in years and they'd be better off without my ignorance getting in the way," she had said. She made her

announcement the way she always announced things at the table, by first setting down her silverware and crossing her hands in her lap.

“Mom, you’re not ignorant,” Kim said.

“Well, maybe that’s the wrong word but I’ve forgotten how to read.”

“What do you mean you forgot how to read?” Jamal asked.

“I mean I’m out of practice, that’s all,” she said defensively. “How come I can’t say anything around here without you two ganging up on me?”

“Alright now,” his father stepped in, always ready to make his wife feel hysterical. He cleared his throat. “What woman is this?”

“Mrs. Crane. She’s been coming to me for years.”

“She white?” he asked.

“I don’t see why it matters.”

“So you’re gonna join a white women’s book club.” He turned to his children, laughing.

“What do y’all think they’ll read in there?”

“Pride and Prejudice,” Jamal said, remembering how he had actually tried to read that one, read it all the way through cover to cover since Ms. Simons had promised he would like it, and she was threatening to fail him if he cheated on an essay again. But he just couldn’t help falling asleep every twenty pages.

Kim had gasped. “No,” she said. “Nothing that good. It’ll probably be a waste of your time.”

“Speaking of wasted time,” his dad began. “I thought you were gonna extend the store’s hours. How’re you gonna do that if you join this book club? And just the other day you told me

you were too busy to pick up Jamal from work. But you got time to read and go downtown once a week?”

“It’s once every two weeks, and I’ll make time,” she said. And she picked up her fork and knife and cut into her porkchop, meaning she was done talking and she’d like it if everyone else was done, too.

*And to Jamal’s surprise, she did make time. Every other Monday night she would order the family food to be delivered and drive to the library downtown. The first month they read *Within the Cracks*, a memoir about a young woman’s efforts to assist her long-estranged mother with a dangerous hoarding problem. On a trip to the grocery store Jamal’s mom explained to him how the story reminded her of her own mother, who had grown up during the depression and who had had an awful habit of saving things she thought she could repurpose--containers of any kind, paper scraps (including tissue and wrapping paper), string, matches, broken pieces of jewelry, loose buttons, candle wax...She even saved soap slivers that had grown too thin to hold onto in the shower.*

“If she had a tube of lipstick and the lipstick had gotten too low to use, she’d take a nail-filer to dig out whatever was left and save the tube in a box in the basement. And there were stacks of boxes like that, all of them full of junk. But that’s not the craziest part. The craziest part is that she wouldn’t even throw the lipstick away. She’d scrape that little bit off into a mason jar full of a bunch of old lipstick that had melted all together.” His mother laughed and sighed.

“Isn’t that nasty? My mother was a crazy woman, for sure.”

*The next book was called *Be the Death of Me*, a novel about a woman who becomes a cave explorer after a failed suicide attempt, his mom’s review of which had been scathing. In*

fact, she had hated the book so much that the other women let her choose the next one. Kim helped her pick it out: Yellow Hair, a novel in which a young black girl takes a job caring for an elderly, blind, white woman. Shortly after beginning this book, Jamal's mom invited a new friend to the house for drinks. Kim was out of the house with a friend and their dad was visiting his cousin in St. Louis, so only Jamal had been around to meet her. Her name was Linda. She had big curly hair, pearl earrings, a round gold watch, intensely blue eyes and big pink cheeks. His mother offered Linda a glass of wine, and Jamal followed her into the kitchen.

He teased her. "Since when do you drink wine?" For as long as he could remember his mother only ever drank mules at home and ordered whiskey sours elsewhere.

"Why don't you leave me alone, Jamal," she had said, pouring two glasses of red from a dusty bottle.

"That woman doesn't give you the creeps?"

"I said leave me alone."

"She looks like the type to poison her husband."

"Jamal!" she shook her head. "The torment never ends with you."

"I'm just playin," he said.

"Go play somewhere else."

But he didn't want to go somewhere else. He thought it was funny that she had a new friend. And he wanted to see what kind of person his mom had attracted. And so he stuck around for an hour or two, making his presence felt. And though he couldn't remember exactly what was said that night, he knew he had really given Linda a hard time. At some point he had brought up a few prominent black musicians and politicians whom she had never heard of. After she said

she had lived in the city her whole life he asked about parts of town which she had never been to, parts of town where his own parents had grown up. Then he prodded her about Yellow Hair, and in one of her observations she had attributed a different novel to the wrong black author. Linda herself had been mostly oblivious to the humiliation she was being subjected to, but Jamal's mother was not. Once Linda had gone she questioned her son.

"Why'd you have to do that? Huh?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. You love to torment me." She shook her head and carried the smudged glasses back into the kitchen. Jamal followed her.

"I'm sorry you made friends with a racist, mom. That's not my fault," he said and smiled.

"You don't know anything about her," she replied.

"I know she probably just wants to be your friend cause you're black." He watched her rinse the glasses and place them on the drying rack. "She probably thinks it's cool. But she'll never really care about you."

"I don't need her to care about me," his mother said. "And she treats me better than you do." Then she left him in the kitchen alone, sighing as she passed through the doorway.

It was true; he liked to bother her. He didn't know why. Jamal had always tried to love his parents. He tried to admire them because they were black and had grown up in a country which hated them and wanted them dead and which had only recently begun to try to hide this truth. But what did that mean, really? Should they be his heroes simply because they had survived? What of them survived, he wondered? Their bodies? Even their bodies were hunched and knotted. Even their bodies were half dead...

“Grace!” It was Phillip. He was surrounded by wine-colored flowers. Fragrant Joe Pye weeds.

We had followed the river into farmland. We could walk beside it here, across a cultivated lawn, while keeping the water always in our sights. We walked over plantain and dandelions. Unkempt Mugwort bent toward our hips. I could see the tops of houses to our left.

We came to a wall which had been built right up to the edge of the water, and we crept around it. To the left, in a column stretching up the middle of the stream, long, brown, leafy weeds grew parallel to the water’s surface, just below the surface. There was something very regal about them--they swayed slowly with the current; they were patient. Just beside them, a bed of bright green moss caught my attention. It looked soft to touch, and I would have waded out to feel it if not for Phillip ever beckoning me forward.

He was growing more and more agitated as the day waned. Sometimes he would stop and look around, but he wasn’t looking at the changing trees or the way the water rippled. He wasn’t looking at the blue jays swooping from branch to branch. He was looking for Jamal. For a sign of Jamal. His shoulders were tense. I suggested we take a break.

We stopped to rest on a dry bedrock that was wide enough to stretch out on. Similar rectangles of hard earth composed the riverbed, and most of their surfaces were covered in green swathes of algae which, when surfaced, turned a slimy, mucousy yellow. On the rock where we sat the algae had dried in clumps like lichen. There was moss, too. Dead leaves and cracked acorns. From a crevice in the stone grew the heads of a yellow Bur Marigold, the leaves of its stalk draped in petrified slime. Driftwood which had snagged to the bottom of the river was

draped in slime, too. There was a bridge ahead which we would soon pass under, and it was flanked on either side by maples.

I motioned to Phillip to come closer and lay his head in my lap. He had sat down at a distance from me, close to the edge. He looked troubled. He scratched his head.

“Phillip,” I called. He turned to face me, but he was far away from me. Farther than he had ever been.

We kept walking.

We walked until the farmland gave way, again, to the forest.

I went slowly, ignoring Phillip’s calls and provocations. I ignored him completely and turned my face to the wilderness.

He walked backward to me, held my elbow in his hand.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“It’s almost dark, and we’ve been walking all day,” I said. “Are *you* alright?”

“We’re close, I’m sure,” he said. And then he leaned forward to kiss me.

Even after he had pulled away, I felt the weight of his lips on my forehead. I felt it right in the center, right over the spot which longed to be split open so that it could release all the matter which had been piling there behind it, like a cattail folding open at the seam. And now, after getting a taste of what that might feel like, my head began to throb. We were moving through a forest of shadows. I searched out the sun among the leaves and stared straight at it. Closed my eyes to see its stain on my eyelids. Red and razor blue, then fuchsia. I opened them and saw a pile of bricks. I saw a row of bricks, frozen in a slow process of toppling, a process of falling down a hill beyond the bank. Above them, standing among a sea of deep green periwinkle

leaves was a small tree, low to the ground, flat-topped and dotted with blue berries. It was alone and foreign among the towering yellow maples which encircled it and which caught the sun and suspended it in their lofty canopies. It was shaded and foreign. I wondered who had planted it. Who had lived in this pile of bricks and planted such a tree here within the wilderness. If not for Phillip I would have climbed that hill and touched its bark, squeezed its berries between my thumb and index finger to see the color of the juice which the birds had left untouched. Likely I would have found other signs of humanity there, sprawling and decaying under layers of fallen leaves. I might find what are called ruins. Ruins meaning those constructed places which humans have left behind but which have been allowed to remain and transform according to nature.

I knew of many ruins in the Hudson Valley. The large and cliché places like the old asylum and the children's amusement park were all protected by twenty-four hour security presence and cameras. But there were smaller places, owned by regular people without the means to prevent anyone who wouldn't heed a "NO TRESPASSING" sign from exploring. A few years ago I went to one of these places.

I found the country club at the end of a long residential road which carried cars up into the southern hills of the Catskills. There was nothing on the road but trees and houses, and while driving I felt like I was plowing further and further into nowhere. Then, without warning, the grounds came into view on my left--unassuming and camouflaged. Easily, I stepped over a chain which blocked the entrance to the property and, from there, moved inward, weaving through the lanes between the sunken cabins whose doors were unhinged and whose roofs were sliding loose.

Peg Leg Bates' Country Club was once a resort for black people who sought an escape from the city. It was composed of rental units and a nightclub where those on holiday could hear live music and watch dance performances by Peg Leg Bates, a self-made entertainer who had lost a foot at the age of twelve while working a cotton gin. In the fifties his club was the largest black-owned resort in the country. But like many other black businesses of the time, the prosperity didn't last once white places started integrating. Peg Leg Bates was forced to sell the club in the eighties, after which only a portion of the resort stayed open.

Not long ago, while inspecting damage to the property, the new owner was killed in the midst of a big storm--reportedly, some piece of a cabin had ripped itself free and crashed through the windshield of her car.

The cabins before me were long and gray. Through one of the windows I saw a mattress curiously flipped on its side. It was surrounded by other materials which I was too spooked to name. I pulled away and walked on.

There are layers to ruins--a stratification of secrecy. I have learned not to look beyond the exterior, content to discover the ways in which wood panels warp and foundations wash away in mud slides. The shadowy interior spaces are more forbidding. They return to dust more slowly. They decay slowly and peacefully. To open the door of someone's old bedroom and rummage through the forgotten things there is to bring pain into its process of dying. At least this was how I felt wandering around that old country club thinking morbid thoughts, wondering where that woman died...wondering about the ghost of Peg Leg Bates. These places are swept clean by the wind every night. Washed clean by the rain every spring. Picked clean by carrion birds and rodents and bleached clean by the summer sun. But we see the leftover things and attach

memories. We muddy it all with fear and perversity. And we bring the ghosts back from their slumber to haunt, again and again and again.

The cabins had reminded me, in a way, of Corn Lake Lodge.

Corn Lake Lodge, which was thousands of miles away.

I remembered the wallpaper in my room--moose and bears embossed between thin lines. They reflected the moonlight silver-green.

I remembered my mother's silhouette, in the kayak, paddling back from her journey around the island.

The fish that would end up dead on the shore, lodged between rock and rock, their bellies bloated and pale. Sometimes we could smell them yards away but not up close--the wind swirled in mysterious ways.

I remembered Thomas' bare feet. Usually bare. Brown. Speckled with white from scabs picked away. His ankles ashy.

I remembered Thomas' smile through the glass display in the candy store.

Thomas' smile through the pine needles.

I remembered walking everywhere, from the pier in town to the beach, from the trailer park to the lodge, from Thomas' yard to the park.

One day we borrowed a paddle board from Mr. -- who owned the Lodge. Using canoe oars, we paddled, sitting, across the canal to the island. We played "would you rather" on the way.

"Would you rather have your head on backwards or have ten big toes instead of fingers?" I asked.

“Head on backwards. Would you rather have every time you fart be really loud or really stinky?”

“Really stinky,” I said. He pretended to throw up off the side of the board, and I pretended like I was going to push him into the water.

We landed the paddle board on a peninsula of the island and pulled it up onto the shore so that it wouldn't float away while we explored. The forest on the island was much more overgrown than the one we were used to, and we each sustained several cuts from moving through the shrubbery. We might have given up and turned back if we hadn't caught sight of a metal camper lying on its side several feet farther. We couldn't have asked for a better prize.

After pulling aside the branches that had begun to bury it, we clambered into the camper's body. Inside, it was dark, and the only light that came through the two sky-facing windows was amber and clouded from the grimy, yellowed panes. Torn curtains fell down into the space. The synthetic stuffing of a few cushions had been strewn about by animals, along with many acorns and scat. There was some silverware thrown about. A few pots and pans. Two fishing poles in the corner. A flashlight that didn't work. And on one of the walls, the one which was now our floor, a map of the great network of lakes of which Corn Lake was the largest was spread and decaying. It smelled like a rotting animal.

“Do you ever think about how you're gonna die?” Thomas asked me.

I shrugged. “Sometimes.”

“I don't ever wanna die,” he said.

“Well I don't wanna die anytime soon. But when I'm old I'll probably get bored of life so then it won't really matter. Everyone dies.”

He was pensive. "I'll never get bored," he said. "I want to live forever."

"No you don't," I argued and rolled my eyes.

"I'm serious! When you die you have to mean something, and I don't want to mean anything."

"I don't know what you're saying," I said.

"I mean...when you're dead people talk about your life like it's important. Like you had a purpose in the world. Like when Ashley's sister got hit by a drunk driver everyone said she died too soon and it was wrong 'cause she had really good grades so she had a lotta potential, and that's why we need more police on the highways. And when my neighbor Doug died from an overdose they said he was depressed 'cause he lost his job and that's why he started shooting heroin. When Mrs. -- killed herself they said it was 'cause her husband hit her, and he probably hit her 'cause he was a drunk. They make your life small. They make it mean something for themselves. But if you never die they never get to say shit about you. You can do crack and they don't get to call you a crackhead 'cause you're gonna live forever! Think about all the slaves that died. All they are now is an example of how evil and racist America is. That's all they get to be. People think that's right. They think that's how the slaves would've wanted it. Well I don't think so. If you don't get to live forever you should at least get to die in peace without everyone talking 'bout your life like it's a book. I don't ever wanna die."

What happened to Thomas?

Phillip only asked about my past once. We had made a picnic on the lawn, and it was very sunny. I remembered I had needed to squint to see Phillip. Through the slits between my eyelids, outlined within the glow of the sun, I could see him marvelling at the horizon.

“What kind of childhood did you have?” he wanted to know. And I was shocked because until then neither of us had asked these sorts of questions. I didn’t ask him about his childhood because I knew he had no life outside of me. He didn’t ask me because he had no interest in my life outside of him--no conception of it, more like. At least, that’s what I had thought.

What kind of childhood did I have, I wondered?

A quiet one. One where I was the only child. Where I would wake up in a big house in which my mother was already reading the news in the kitchen and in which my step-father was asleep and would be asleep until five, at which point he would wake up for dinner (often take-out), play a game of scrabble with us, have two cups of coffee, then leave to the emergency room for his overnight. It was a childhood in which I tried on many different costumes--I took dance lessons, became a girl scout, played soccer, learned to draw, auditioned for theater, took karate lessons...It was a childhood of confusion in which mine was the only black face I saw regularly. Friends would ask, are you adopted? And I would say “no,” and then they would want to know which of my parents was the fake. But aside from that consuming problem of displacement, there were no problems. No deaths, no financial stress, no conflict, no bullies. I spent a lot of time alone, scrutinizing the mirror one moment and pretending I didn’t exist the next. And in my opinion, none of it was all that interesting. None of it was worth dwelling on. Doubtless, I was psychologically scarred by growing up in a place that was obsessed with my blackness on one hand and, on the other, preferred to pretend I was white. But I was no longer interested in the effusions of such scabs. It was everything and it was nothing at the same time. There was only so much unwinding I could do, so much digesting before I found myself at the foot of a pile of my memory’s excrement whose entire mass was beyond the scope of my vision.

Many times I was tempted to climb it and map it all out. But then what? My life would remain. The parts of myself which had been molded against my will would remain.

“I grew up in a suburb of the midwest,” I began. “I was an only child and my parents were white and wealthy.”

“That’s all you got?” he teased.

“There’s not much else,” I said and turned over to my stomach to give my eyes a rest. “Every summer my mom and I would rent a cabin on Corn Lake and spend a month away from home. That was always my favorite place. It was the only time I’d get to see my friend Thomas. We would wander around all day together.”

“Are you still friends?” Phillip asked. He was looking at me now, no longer the mountains.

I shook my head. “I stopped going once I turned sixteen.”

Corn Lake was a big lake with many sprawling bays. The shore opposite cabin 17, the secluded cabin my mom and I stayed in every summer, was that of an island. No houses dotted its borders. No docks stretched out into the waters which surrounded it. Only trees and long stretches of aquatic weeds. Directly across from us there was an eagle’s nest perched high in a pine whose branches were a testament to the storms it had weathered. From the window behind the green-striped couch of the main room, the nest was just a dark shadow, one of many within the mass of overlapping bark. With my mother’s binoculars, though, I could see its contours. I could watch the herons and the egrets. I could count the plates on the turtles’ shells which sat on the ends of logs extending above the water lilies.

My mother could circumnavigate the island by kayak in just under two hours, which, during my first two years, she would do alone every morning before I woke up. Later, I was old enough to kayak along with her. (When I was fourteen we did the journey in a canoe, and I toppled us into the lake trying to fish a snail's shell out of the water.) For breakfast, after the morning's exercise, my mom would make me oatmeal with berries, and eggs with peanut butter toast for herself. At Corn Lake she let me drink coffee, which she was brewing from dawn until dusk. I believe we learned a lot about each other by simply observing each other's body language. When we spoke it was usually to share the dreams we had had the previous night. Sometimes I would ask how she was enjoying her book--she always brought one, large book to start and finish. And sometimes she would ask how my friend Thomas was doing.

We would stay for a month. My mother packed lightly, only the necessities and one week's worth of clothes. And as I got older and began to accumulate stuff, she would ostracize me for taking up the entire trunk with my belongings while her luggage fit on a single car seat. To my mother, Corn Lake was a place for detox. It was a place to shed all the ornaments of the modern, urban world and rediscover the true self. A place for unimpeded thought and deep breathing. I never questioned my step-dad's absence at Corn Lake. And only in hindsight did I understand how his presence would have made such a ritual impossible. I was only allowed to accompany my mother because of an agreement we had, one which we both adhered to assiduously: I would never complain of boredom and, in return, she wouldn't police my actions as long as I was present for breakfast.

My whereabouts were never a complete mystery, however. My mom could be sure I was with Thomas, at the very least. And this fact alone was enough to offer her some comfort, because he had proved himself to be a resourceful and experienced young boy.

I was very much in love with Thomas. From the moment I saw him riding past in the bed of his dad's truck, I was in love.

I was ten years old at the time, and I was waiting on the curb outside the grocery store in town when they drove by. Thomas was sitting against a crate with one arm stretched into the open air. Ever the performer, he was chewing on a blade of wheat-like grass and wearing a cowboy hat, which he tilted very deliberately in my direction before disappearing beyond the intersection. My love for him was above and beyond my occasional school crushes which were silly in comparison. I would have traded them all for a single kiss from Thomas's lips. A single touch, even. Though I never revealed my secret.

Thomas's family was black and relatively well-off compared to other families in the area. They owned a bait shop just outside of town that serviced a large local and seasonal population including everyone on Corn Lake as well as several other lakes nearby. For non-fishermen their shop doubled as a convenience store. They were also famous for the homemade donuts they sold on the weekends. Thomas' mother was a beautiful, kind woman, and she would always save me two chocolate donuts with sprinkles, my favorite. Thomas's father, whom I only met once--he was usually in the office whenever I came to the shop. I remembered him wearing a baseball cap with a frayed bill, an ironed linen shirt and well-fitting blue jeans. His face was flat and square and dark. Dark and mean. He scared me, and I could tell he scared Thomas, too. Not because he looked violent. I had seen violent dads. My soccer coach was violent. If a girl did something

wrong his face would turn beet red and he would throw his arms into the air and swing them around wildly. Thomas's dad wasn't like that. Thomas's dad was calm and deliberate. He acted as if he comprehended things immediately, like the world before him was simply a page to be read. And because he had complete self control, because his body was so regimented to his will, he dominated everyone and everything in his presence. He was completely kind to me and did everything in his power to make me feel accepted. He called me "Ms. --" and told me I was welcome in his home or his shop anytime. Still, I was scared of him and so was Thomas. Thomas called his father "sir."

We usually spent the days outside, away from our parents, always together. We would go from the pier in town to the beach, from the trailer park to the lodge, from his yard to the park. Each of these places was sacred to me. Each one had a special hue. Thomas on the beach was a fisherman, focused and careful, biting his lip and cursing under his breath. Thomas on Main Street was savvy and popular; he knew the owners of every shop and they knew him. Each place was its own world, and Thomas ruled them all, as far as I was concerned.

But, really, our friendship blossomed in the spaces in between, for we walked everywhere, and everywhere was far and everywhere could get old very quickly. We walked on the road, through the marsh, on the gravel trail, on the shore. We cut through the woods. The woods were overrun by a shrub with toxic roots, so there was not much growth for us to dodge. Between the towering trees we found open spaces, clearings with stones and logs perfect for sitting. And those spaces were kind to us.

The leaves liked to be searched, and they offered up beetles and rusty bottle caps for collection. The birds liked to watch and be watched. And the flies, usually relentless, left us

alone. On our journeys through the marsh, the cattails leaned forward toward us. Garter snakes would slither out from between the reeds to slide past our feet in salutation. And from the waves beyond the shore large fish would leap as we travelled past. We played hide and seek with the deer and had staring contests with the youngest among them.

Together, Thomas and I learned how to talk to the trees, how to ask a question, any question, and wait for an answer. There was always an answer, though sometimes it was hard to decode. Over the years, most of what I learned about Thomas I learned from the questions he asked. I learned that he stuttered when he was nervous and that was why he had never made a move on a girl; that he had an older sister who lived in Arizona; and that he wanted to make movies. I also learned that he was afraid of ghosts and that one time a ghost had followed him around all day. When I asked him to describe what it had looked like, he couldn't quite explain. "Like a reflection," he said. "Like when you see a mirror out the corner of your eye." I asked if he was afraid of ghosts and he said "yes." I was jealous that he had seen a ghost. I thought it made him special, and I often suggested that we go ghost hunting near the abandoned mine--there were rumors that it was haunted. But he was too scared.

Now the moon was reflecting through the trees, and it made the rocks sharp. I didn't know where we were. It seemed we had wandered into a junkyard. On both banks I saw metal figures, some with recognizable forms—a car, a grill, a bedspring. Others were truly monstrous, with imposing spines and square faces, protruding claws and other strange appendages. Phillip and I walked toward a bend in the river where the sky lit up a wide stretch of water beyond which we could not see. Whether the river turned right or left after this point, we didn't know.

As we got closer the junk spilled out into the current, which had slowed and grown shallow. The skeleton of a vacuum was snagged to the bottom, and the water made its way around and over its rusted tubing. Across the water, bent among tall stalks of some aquatic grass, the remains of a construction crane loomed. Further upstream was the carved-out shell of an old truck.

I made us stop again to rest and reclined against a tree trunk.

I looked at the stars.

I stared at the stars and the stars stared back. I closed my eyes and they were still there, the stars, now blue, now red, now gold.

I opened my eyes and tried to find an image among the clusters, searching for a seashell, a trident, a bird in flight....

Nothing came.

Phillip came. On a beach Phillip walked ahead of me with one arm stretched out. One hand on his skull. He was the most beautiful man I had ever seen.

He was black. His face was like the moon and stars.

How should I describe my love for Phillip?

I wanted him to stay forever.

He hated me because I wouldn't let him leave. He began to ask what day it was.

The only day of our lives.

"It's today," I said. "The only day of our lives."

But he wasn't satisfied. Across from me at the table his eyes were flickering. His hands were folded up in front of his face. What was he thinking?

I wanted to touch his shoulder and make him soft again, but I had to let him stiffen. Maybe he was thinking about his mother. I knew she was dead or the same as dead, though he had never told me this. I knew his mother was dead as well as his father. He was alone in the world except for me. I looked at him across the table.

His face was reflective like a pool of water.

Jamal levelled the tower with his hands. Then he started again, using a styrofoam cup to make round bricks of the sand. The tide was creeping up to where he was working but he didn't seem to notice.

"Jamal, come over here, I'll show you how to start a fire," his father called.

"He's too young for that," said his mom. "Show Kimberly."

She shouted for Kim, who was at the water's edge, chasing the waves in and out; but she wasn't listening. Jamal looked up at his parents when he was called a second time. His mother was wrapping herself in a fleece blanket and his father was making a teepee of the wood they had purchased. They were in South Carolina on vacation, the first vacation of Jamal's life.

He ran up to the fire pit and let his mother brush the sand from his skin and pull a sweater over his head. It hurt a little bit--his head was still tender from the cornrows. It was his first time wearing braids. And when he got them it had hurt and he had cried, but it was better now. He crawled into his mother's lap and looked at the horizon, or what he thought was the horizon, since the line between the ocean and the sky had vanished.

From the left a group of white people walking the length of the beach appeared. They looked like a family. Two women walked in front with a dog at their side. There were three adult men behind them and a few teenagers. Skipping beside the group or hanging off the arms of the

adults were several children of varying ages. Near the back of the procession walked an elderly couple. They moved slowly.

Kim, seeing that her dad was making a fire, came up from the water to join her family, and in her stride she crossed paths with the grandparents. The old man followed Kim as she passed, beginning with his eyes and then with his legs. No one noticed, at first, that he was pulling away, except his wife who, without his support, seemed unable to move forward.

“Earl,” she called in a frail voice. He didn’t hear her. He walked until he was near the fire. He looked at Jamal in his mother’s lap. He looked at Jamal’s father. All the while he seemed like he was dreaming. He wore an empty, childlike grin.

“Earl,” she called again. The rest of Earl’s family grew quiet and turned to watch.

“Niggers on my beach,” the man said. “I don’t believe it.”

Leaving behind suddenly what he was doing, Jamal’s father moved closer to the stranger, then paused. Jamal was sure he would have put his hands on the man if not for the threat of his family in the background.

One of the women from the group was coming forward. “Dad,” she called. “Come back here.”

Kim hadn’t made it all the way to the firepit, and when she had heard what was said she had turned to face the man and now was frozen in place.

“Kim,” Jamal’s mother beckoned to her desperately. Then she called on her husband, “John,” to do something.

But it was too late. Seeing little Kim standing there, just within reach, the dreaming man could not help but put his hand atop her head and drag his fingers through her nappy hair.

There was a lot of movement, a lot of noise, and Jamal couldn't quite understand what was going on around him. In her flight, his mother had pushed Jamal from her lap, and when he got up again the old man was being led away. His daughter was dragging him by his wrist, and she was saying "sorry, so sorry" over her shoulder. "He's losing his mind," one of the men said. Jamal's father was saying things too, but it was all very confusing.

"Pack your things." Jamal watched the man rejoin his family and take hold of his wife's arm again.

"Jamal, pack your things, we're leaving." His mother's voice was sharp, nothing like the sound of Kim's sobbing.

I looked at him across the table. His face was reflective like a pool of water.

He never shared his thoughts and he never gave me the satisfaction of being angry. Nor excited, nor depressed, nor in love. He was only ever soft or hard.

I wanted him to stay forever.

It repeats in abstractions and repeats. The gray mutt that wandered around the lodge is still wandering, sniffing out scraps in the early morning. Dead fish litter the beach, belly up and bloated. Thomas's scabby feet are bare, always bare, and his laughter is startling. I swallow an earthworm at Thomas's prompting. I choke and cough it up. The loons are wailing. The rednecks in town and the rednecks at the trailer park turn to look at me as I walk past.

There is a moment of silence just before the trees' answer.

The sound of my name expands in Thomas's mouth.

"Grace." Phillip was calling. He was up in the trees.

Someday I would take Phillip to Corn Lake during the winter and we'd walk across the ice to the island. I would show him all the places I used to go.

"Phillip, do you have any scars?" I asked him one day. I was watching him dice an onion.

He looked up from the cutting board at me. "Not that I know of. Do you?"

I began with my shin.

"Here's the mark from the time my foot slipped between a subway car and the platform."

My knee.

"The corner of a glass coffee table."

Stomach.

"I burned myself on the edge of a dutch oven."

Eyebrow.

"Split open by a softball."

That night he would kiss them all, in that exact order.

"Grace," Phillip shouted. He was far ahead of me in the dark.

"Yes, Phillip," I said. "I'm coming."

Phillip was beautiful, and I wanted him to stay.

On some mornings Phillip would start to leave my house, and I didn't know where he was trying to go or if he would ever come back.

"How do I look?" he would ask, standing at the threshold. He said it to tease me because he only had three outfits. There was a mirror mounted beside the front door in which he would

make faces at himself before stepping outside. Not the usual kinds of funny faces. He did facial acrobatics, willing distortions of the very tissues that held his jaw or eyeballs in place. It looked painful to me, and part of the pleasure he received from this activity came from my grimaces. But it was scary, the way he could shrink his neck then stretch it to the ceiling; the way his eyes would bulge and the blood would pool into his cheeks. Often he would hold a pose for so long I feared he might be stuck that way forever. But always there was a loosening and a familiar laugh.

“I think I look okay today,” he would say.

On some mornings Phillip was silent. Sometimes I simply couldn't reach him.

“Where did you come from?” I asked. This was the first question I asked him.

We were standing at the banister. We looked out at the distance where the dark blue mountains held the sky. I stared at his profile--his long, troubled face.

“West of here,” he said. “I broke down on my way to the coast.”

I watched his mouth move while he spoke, watched his lips pucker slightly around the word “coast.” Every word was like a pearl.

Sometimes he would try to leave but he could only pace around the yard. From the garden to the porch steps. From the mailbox to the tree.

“Grace.” I found him kneeling on the ground. Each of his hands was spread atop a blanket of dead leaves. He was very still. I knelt down beside him and put my hands out next to his. The earth was ice cold and a bit wet.

I sensed that we had arrived. Phillip's knees were dug deep in the earth, and his head was hung low so that I couldn't see beyond his brow. Wrestling above us I heard the squirrels.

Somewhere below, closer to the water, leaves were turning over in a thin band of wind. Leaves, dead and paper-thin, turned over around Phillip's knees and grazed his hands. I said his name and he said nothing. Should I touch him? Put a hand on his shoulder? Would he soften or stay solid? I couldn't tell. For the moment I would let him be.

There was nothing special about the spot. The dirt below our hands was like the dirt around us, loamy and brown. I saw that the trees were young and thin. A few held their dead leaves still. These were orange, and they danced with the sunlight.

Around us, bright dandelions grew in patches. I collected several, using my shirt as a pouch, and carefully tied them into yellow crowns. I placed one crown on Phillip's head. I placed the other over the earth where Jamal's body lay. Golden flowers for a golden man.

"Jamal," I whispered his name into the earth.

The mutt is still wandering, sniffing out scraps in the early morning. On the edge of the driveway, fragrant and limp, the dandelions are piled high. We had to pull them all. Thomas' father had seen him blowing the seeds, so he had made us pull them all. The smell lingers.

"They took his wallet. Took his keys. Shone this light in his face and interrogated him, makin him think he was under arrest. They took his shoes and made him walk barefoot. They stripped him and beat him. Took turns beating him and took turns cheering each other on. They beat him to a pulp and then watched him bleed out in the dirt. Not an ounce of mercy. Not an ounce. They watched him bleed out, crying for help, and then they buried his body in the woods by the river."

Phillip was pacing back and forth in my bedroom. His words were falling from his oyster mouth like labored pearls upon the hard floor.

I couldn't see what was ahead of me. Beyond the deep blue of the sky there was no color, no light whatsoever. I walked with my arms outstretched. Next to me, I could hear the water making its journey. Echoing in all the other places, crickets, toads and bats. From a far, far distance came a low hum which resonated deep within my chest. My own feet were hidden from me. My hands, inches from my face, were formless shadows. How I moved forward, I didn't have a clue. I only knew that I was moving because even in the darkness I could make out tangles of lines in a spectrum of gray. Great mountains of lines which criss-crossed and ravelled continuously above me, beside me, ahead of me. Either I was moving or they were.

I wasn't afraid. I had never been afraid of the dark. When I was very young, I would sometimes crawl into the corner of my parents' closet and envelop myself within the overlapping fabric of my mother's dresses. The only light came from a slit in the sliding door, a thin crack of yellow. It was a safe place. A place of calm and comfort. One day my mother opened the door on me without warning. She flung it aside and pulled back the dresses all at once. Light surged into my quiet corner, exposing my small body, knees hugged tight to my chest, chin buried deep within them. The light crashed in and revealed, to my horror, a peeling, moldy water stain that stretched up the wall from the floor to the ceiling. It looked like an imprint of death, and I had never been so terrified in my life. I cried all morning and my mother couldn't understand why.

I wondered when Jamal realized that he was going to die. There must have been a point, sometime between the initial encounter with his killers and the final seconds of his life, when he knew. This goes without question. But, I wondered, was there a moment when he understood

why? They hated him because he was black. Jamal must have known this. Such knowledge, for us, was intuitive. But, I wondered, was there a part of Jamal that wanted to know why it was happening to him, at that moment, and not some other black man? Did he think back on his life and search for some sign that would make it all make sense? Some sign to illuminate and close the circle?

The summer before Jamal's eighth year in school, Kim declared that she was retiring as a playwright. She was too old, she said, and way too busy. But Jamal had developed a crush, and he begged Kim to do one more show, another romance, and design it so that he would get to kiss the new neighbor. It wasn't hard to convince Kim since she had secretly been fantasizing about one final performance, better and more striking than all the others. For a month they worked every night.

For this play, Kim wrote a soliloquy which remained with Jamal forever. He played a cyborg cowboy on a mission to avenge his creator. At the close of the performance, just before taking his final breath, with grease (soy sauce) dripping onto the plywood stage from a gunshot wound in his side, and lit up by the flashlight his sister held at the back of the garage, Jamal had delivered the following lines:

"I no longer believe in the promise of America. Where is the life I searched for in these great plains? I see nothing but hate and destruction. No, I may not have a heart, but at least I have a soul. I curse the living, now and forever, and welcome the cold embrace of death."

Phillip and I stared up at the stars. I closed my eyes and saw them still, throbbing multi-colored in the black.

“What do you see?” I asked him. This was the first question I asked him.

“I see the mountains, slate gray and proud,” he said.

He leaned toward them from his elbows, and I stared shamelessly at his profile. His face was reflective like the moon and stars.

“Grace.” He called my name.

The river was full of leaves, floating toward me like paper boats. I kneeled at its edge and plunged my hands into the current. The water was ice cold, cold to the bone, the sharp feeling of which spread quickly up my arms and down through my lungs.

We had left at dawn, I remembered. We had left and found the river. We walked against the current.

He was ahead of me on the trail, stepping loudly through the heavy-headed Joe-Pye weeds whose smell reminded me of my bedroom, or, more specifically, my bed and the pleasures we had found there.

We remained for long stretches of time. From one bend to the next we did not speak, and all I had to assure myself of his presence were familiar gestures: His hands travelling in and out of his pockets. His right hand feeling the back of his skull. His strides were long and steady.

We took off our shoes at a shallow point and stepped across using the flat river rocks. The water was ice cold, cold to the bone, the sharp feeling of which spread quickly up my legs and into my gut. I noticed the bones on the top of his foot--wet and silver in the moonlight.

We were in a different place than we had been.

“Grace.”

I turned away from the water to follow the sound. In the forest, towering above the knotted shrubs, there was an old beech tree with thick, muscle-like tendons making up the base of its trunk. Its ash blue bark was stretched smooth, and its branches spanned the sky. Its leaves had already browned and curled, but they remained attached to their twigs. They might remain throughout the winter--young American beech trees have a tendency to hold onto their dead leaves. Some oaks and hornbeams do as well. The phenomenon is called "marcescence." No one really understands why some species fail to drop their leaves in the cold. There are theories, though. For example, keeping them could deter deer and other animals from eating the budding twigs come spring. Maybe they were saving the leaves for warmer weather, when, once dropped, the organic matter could decompose and provide nutrients for the roots. There were many speculations.

I dragged my hand across the surface of the tree before me, cold and damp.

We had arrived somewhere, it seemed. Though I did not see his face nor any part of him. Should I call his name? I wondered. Would he appear or change shape? For now I would let him be.

I loved finding marcescent beech trees in the winter. The leaves are the color of amber, stiff and delicate. They whisper in the wind. Strange trees that won't let go. Even the bark holds on for ages, making it perfect for the engraver. Technically, the bark flakes away slowly as dust, not unlike human skin.

Ahead of me, through the lattice of tree limbs, I saw a sycamore stretching out over a stream. Bare and strong, its frame held the sky suspended. And below, the water looked still. I

approached and saw at its base the pieces which had fallen. Nothing and no one else was around to see how, in its season, the sycamore had shed its bark in scrolls.