Spring 2021

The Shadow Hoop

Celia Mara Buckley
Bard College

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The Shadow Hoop

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

by
Celia Mara Buckley

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The Shadow Hoop

Stories & translations

Celia Buckley
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Notes on Translating Samanta Schweblin

Samanta Schweblin was born in 1978 in Buenos Aires. Influenced by artists in her family and entranced by literature since she was very young, she began writing at an early age and went on to study film at the University of Buenos Aires. Her books include Pájaros en la boca (2009), Distancia de rescate (2014), Kentukis (2018), El núcleo del disturbio (2002) and Siete casas vacías (2015), several of which have been translated into English by the American translator Megan McDowell. Schweblin’s stories have been published in multiple anthologies, and English translations have appeared in The New Yorker as well as Granta magazine which, in 2010, named her one of 22 of the best Spanish language writers under 35.

I first came across Samanta Schweblin in a class taught by my professor José Julio Cisneros Merino called “Cuento Fantástico” at the University of San Francisco Quito. Most of the works we read were by Latin American authors, and Schweblin’s name was among a cohort of Argentinian writers of the fantastic tradition: Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Antonio Di Benedetto, Mariana Enríquez, and Luisa Valenzuela. Though fantastical literature may be perceived as a mode of escape from harsh circumstances—in Argentina, we can pinpoint the military dictatorship in the 70s and political turmoil, the economic crises, and the rise of neoliberalism—it actually functions as a visceral entryway into interpretations and reflections of these issues. Schweblin’s work draws from this point of structural and systemic examination, while she centers individuals and delves into their personal psychological worlds.
I was instantly attracted to how Schweblin plays with some of the most terrifying scenarios yet situates them gracefully in familiar realities, or rather locates and amplifies the strange terrors of these realities. In her collection *Pájaros en la boca*, both the title story and *Mariposas* wrestle with horrifying forms of loss and transformation within parent-child relationships. The presence of animals in these stories disrupt and challenge family roles and put into question the ways in which we love, nurture and witness one another.

In my work I explore the parts of me that are always looking for the fantastical and the surreal in the everyday, the magic in the mundane. From the time I was little I found myself gravitating toward the unsettling and disturbing, as I watched and read Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline* and Tim Burton movies and found other ways to be afraid. This gravitation, especially elements of which are entwined with childhood and adolescence, has drawn me to Schweblin’s work. Her matter-of-fact and colloquial language, in tandem with her attunement to the material and sensory experience of the world, allows for the disquieting elements to merge with and amplify the uncanny and gruesome nature of the ordinary.

Through the combination of my own work and my translations of Schweblin’s work in this project, I have tried to engage with and integrate multiple sides of my relationship to language and to create a multi-dimensional collection that illuminates many possibilities and sources of inspiration.
Caliper and the Magician

Caliper’s father forgot to pick up the cake before the start of the party. It would be a white cake frosted pink, with raspberries lining the edges and *HAPPY BIRTHDAY CAL!!!* in red frosting on top. Laurie was planning on placing seven candles in the cake to mark seven years of Caliper’s life. She’d been a miracle baby, born with underdeveloped lungs and small enough to fit in her father’s hand. And though they watched her grow in a box until she was strong enough to be brought home, she is not a sickly child. In fact, Caliper is almost never sick and bears no trace of her early entrance into the world. She has withstood, tearlessly, scraped knees and papercuts and rugburns, even a hairline fracture in her ankle. She is a robust child who always lands on her two feet.

In the living room, the children wait in a semicircle on the rug, legs criss-crossed as they twitch and shift with excitement. They wonder what he will look like. Will he be wearing makeup like a clown? A clown, no, we hired a magician, Laurie clarifies.

It is Caliper’s birthday but Mina is in the center of the semicircle putting on a show, doing cartwheels and backbends. Her mother Meg watches proudly from across the room while the other mothers’ faces crinkle to hide their irritation, what a show-off—no, it’s not the girl they’re annoyed with, it’s her mother for making her like that, letting her swallow up all the attention on someone else’s day. Laurie, Caliper’s mom, sits on the edge of her seat wearing a pinched smile until she sees one of Mina’s feet, with those tiny red toenails, go sailing toward a boy’s face.

She jumps up and says, “OK, that’s enough! Let’s all sit down, he’s almost here.”
The magician isn’t often hired to work at birthday parties. He’s had the sense that with every year and each new generation, magic is less sought after as the central event for children’s birthday parties than, for example, iMAX movies and Wii games and laser tag and Frankensteinish labs where bear-shaped sacks come to life with a good amount of stuffing and money. The magician has tried rabbits and doves; he’s procured roses for women in the park; he’s made a murmuration of cards and pulled the right one from the flutter. He’s never disappointed an audience, but he isn’t satisfied.

“Do you know of any good traveling petting zoo companies for parties?” Caliper’s mom had asked the magician.

“No,” he said, “But I can make animals happen.”

“Make them happen? What does that mean?”

“I’ll make them happen.”

The magician arrives with a snake wound around his neck. Or is it a snake? It is both snake and not-snake. Diaphanous; milky, almost: you can see its organs floating around with the pulse of the snake’s slow shifting, the grey-pink impression of a mouse moving through the digestive tract. Slung over his arm is a bird cage holding a cockatiel, yellow-white with an orange spot on its head, fading in and out of view like the glow of an uncertain neon sign. And behind him, attached to a seemingly endless leash the magician wears around his wrist, is a mink. Its tail flicks around like a milky rope and as it hops along it becomes clear that the most solid parts of its body are its red eyes. And its pink nose, which trails along the floor, sniffing furiously.

Laurie’s large smile stretches too wide when she opens the door for him, and then it fades into something else. Welcome! She says. He hardly speaks, just nods his head and makes soft noises with his
mouth only the animals seem to hear. Laurie swears she sees the furry one on the ground stamp its paw defiantly as though it doesn’t want to be there.

Mostly mothers, the group of parents sit off to the side around the table of grown-up snacks and glasses of wine. They perk up when he walks into the living room, sweeping their arms over the circle of children and pressing their fingers to their lips to shush them. Meg thinks the magician looks like Johnny Depp. Then he turns to the side and he doesn’t look like Johnny Depp. Then he looks like him again, just for a moment. He has a mustache, one that curls a bit at the ends. Hasn’t anyone told him that’s not the look for a children’s birthday party? He looks like a porn star from the 70s and his pants are too tight. But she clacks her way over to him and offers him a paper cup of wine which he refuses politely with a swish of his hand and a soft smile. Olives? Cheesy crackers? We’re ordering pizza, too. And then there’s the cake of course. No, no, no.

The adults hardly notice the animals. It’s like they can’t see them. But they can, can’t they? They’re not invisible, just not totally completely there-there. The magician made them happen. The kids love them. Kids are less afraid of things than people think they are.

The magician doesn’t say happy birthday, doesn’t say anything. He just clears his throat and situates himself in front of the children who barely look at him. Their eyes are electric with awe, tracing the animals’ every move. The mink rolls its eyes. The cockatiel seems to be blushing. And the snake has been staring at Caliper like it knows that it’s Caliper’s special day, like it knows her.

With the eyelet of his boot the magician swiftly opens the birdcage and the cockatiel shakes its wings and flutters out of the cage. She makes her way around the room and gives each child a kiss-peek
on the forehead. Some of them laugh, others scream. The mothers talk among themselves and chuckle with amusement as they finish their cups of wine.

The snake weaves around the children and settles next to Caliper, who stiffens as the snake eases itself over her lap and loops around her shoulder. Laurie and the other mothers tense up, their eyes widen, but they relax when they hear Caliper giggle.

“He’s purring like a cat!” She shrieks.

The snake clings to her and shuts its grey eyes. Everyone’s attention has turned to the mink who seems to be having a staring contest with Mina. The mink sits squarely in front of Mina and flicks its tail. It sneezes and the eye contact is broken, or the mink has lost interest, and swivels its way back to the magician’s feet. Everybody claps.

A small pool of spilled wine has trickled down from the table. The mink laps it up and a shiver runs across the see-through hairs on its back. If you look closely, you can see the thin red stream of the wine winding through the mink’s esophagus where a whitish hairball shifts.

The cockatiel settles on the broken grandfather clock, its head tilted toward the table of mothers. Sweetie! Sweeeetie! It repeats, after the mothers. It looks bashful up there with its reddish cheeks, its feathers limpid seafoam. The mothers shift between their conversation and intervening with the children. Charlie is picking his nose. No no no, do NOT wipe that on the rug!

Laurie keeps looking anxiously through the window, hoping to see the family’s red car among the silver and black.

“It’s just like, where are you?? You know?” Laurie says, tapping her fingertips on her head to show how spacey her husband’s mind is.
“I get it. Before Roger left…” Meg starts, and Laurie can almost see the other moms’ eyes rolling in disbelief that Meg is talking about her husband again, especially right now.

She goes on. “You never knew if he was listening. Everything I said seemed to slip from his mind in seconds. Seconds! I didn’t get it. Remember me? Remember your two kids? Helllooooo?”

Laurie shakes her head. Her eyes are fixed on a space beyond the windows, and she says, “It’s the small things. It’s the small things, and then it’s the big things. Forgetting the parent teacher conference. Now the cake. He works too much, he works too much. He works so hard. But you know,” Laurie says, lifting her cup to her lips, “I can’t help but wonder about his boss. It’s like he’s at her every fucking beck and call. I get it—it’s his boss. But one second it’s a work thing, the next second she’s talking to him about her personal shit. That’s what I think anyway.”

The other moms are silent for a moment. One offers her hand on Laurie’s shoulder. Another pours her more wine.

“Men are so fucked,” Meg says.

And then they remember the animals.

“You know,” says Meg, pointing to the mink. “That one looks off to me. Emaciated or something.” She squints, noticing the bobbing light that seems to travel from the lamp across the room and through the mink.

“They’re pretty bizarre,” another mother admits.

“But also beautiful,” someone says.

Across the room, the magician turns slightly towards them, then quickly looks away.
Meg sidles up to the magician who doesn’t look at her until she is only inches from him. He is staring at his unlaced shoes. When he looks up, his eyes are beautiful, but they seem to both sink into his head and leap out at her.

“So, how long have you been doing this whole act?” she asks, her voice strained over the sounds of the children as though she’s shouting in a crowded club.

The magician stares at her blankly.

“What?” he says.

“How long have you been doing this? She repeats, gesturing at him, at the room, the animals.

“Doing what?” Boyishly, he flicks some strands of black hair from his eyes.

One of the boys, Charlie, bumps into her knee which jostles her cup of wine, and beads of it jump onto her white shirt.

“Ugh, fuck!” Meg turns to grab a napkin from the table. When she turns, the magician is busy mediating an interaction between Josie and the cockatiel who has just landed on her knee.

The magician, whose face darkens with a hint of purple as he reaches both hands into either of his pockets, is better off existing namelessly. Without a name, he need not make a case for himself. He feels less responsible for his tangled, but glossy, dark hair, most of which hides beneath his purple hat. His fingers are long and thin and crumpled into fists when he pulls them from each pocket: when he unfurls his left hand there are three milkish blobs with tails whisking about, and in the left a larger blob. A frog, or a toad. White warts line its crown, it lets out a yowl and leaps across the room, landing on top of Charlie’s head and then onto Josie’s before he notices. The three mice lift from the
magician’s palm into the air, spinning in a circle with sleepy eyes. They move like this, gently, across the
room and into the hallway and do not return until later when everyone has already gone.

The magician opens his mouth like he is going to make a long-winded speech, or maybe he is
about to sing happy birthday to Caliper. Instead, a gutteral sound emerges from his mouth, so low it is
almost unheard, but it fills everyone’s insides, thrumming across their ribs, filling their throats from the
inside out and making their tongues roll.

The sound goes on forever, it feels like. The adults sit there, stunned with the noise flowing
among them, their eyes becoming CDs. The children seem unbothered until Caliper’s face falls white.

When Caliper’s father returns with the cake in a tall white box, as he pushes the door open
with the weight of his back so as not to disturb the wobbling tiers, trying to be quiet so that he can
maintain the surprise, he feels that something has changed. The house is quiet—no children are
screaming, he can’t even hear the mothers talking—yet there is an indescribable sense that it has been
churned, aerated though there is no breeze, as though thousands of bubbles have concentrated in the
hallway, up the stairs, multiplying in every room. He feels, suddenly, that he should leave. But he can’t,
because it’s his daughter’s birthday and the cake is in his arms, and soon she will see him and pull at his
legs and try to climb him like a tree. He lets the door close softly behind him, the last crack of twilight
escaping.

Where is Laurie? She should be here, shaking him in the way she does. She will be relieved that
he is here, just in time. He calls out her name again, swings his head into the living room. The floor is
covered in wine, piles of feathers and streams of plasticky shreds that look almost like snakeskin, but
smoother. What a mess, he thinks. It looks like the aftermath of a pillow fight or the shrapnel of color-drained pinata. LAURIE! He screams, only to hear the name boomerang back to him, a contortion of his own echo. Laurie! Laurie! Laurie! His eyes meet the landing at the top of the stairs where a blushing ghost bird watches him, squawking his wife’s name over and over.

This is when he sees the children floating above him. No, they are whitish and bloated images of children, almost projections. They bounce around the ceiling and roll into each other. Their eyes are lit up, they are talking and laughing but no sound comes from them. He sees the little girl Mina doing somersaults on the ceiling, he sees Charlie sitting with his legs crossed but he is upside down with his eyes closed, Josie whispering in Tuesday’s ear while Jonah and Marcella tug on each of Caliper’s arms. When she catches sight of him her mouth stretches wide: Daddy! Daddy! She shakes the other children from her and he can tell that she is using every ounce of strength to push herself down from the ceiling, but with each step her feet slip along the air. He runs to grab her feet which feel nothing like feet and though they look made of cement they are airy and loose. He tries to anchor her down but the upward force is so strong, he worries if he tugs too hard she will shoot through the ceiling. The other children can’t do anything but watch. Caliper’s father lets Caliper go gently, still trying to grasp her wispy hands, and watches her flatten against the ceiling.

For a moment, all he can think of is how he forgot to buy balloons. Maybe if he leaves again and comes back, this will be reversed. He doesn’t want Caliper to see him cry. But the children’s eyes are fixed on the cake box, and so he opens it and sees how their faces glow with hunger. Numbly, he grabs the cheese knife from the table in the vacuous party room and cuts eight large slices. Each child
eats their slice from his hands which stretch skyward. He watches the cake become not-cake: he
watches each bite slide through the childrens’ worm-like intestines and into their sugar-swollen bellies.
On Friday nights, there are meetings held by a group of girls who aren’t afraid of the dark.

It’s called: Girls Who Aren’t Afraid of the Dark.

When Alice arrives, she finds an empty hallway with peeling walls and warping linoleum, the built-up hair and grit in the cracks exposed, leading to a boarded-up door. It’s on the other side of the cement, Payton had told her. To Alice’s right is a blunt and unfinished cement partition, around its corner a black doorway with a hidden step, and as Alice’s left foot falls into the air for just a moment before she meets the ground, she feels her stomach spring to her throat.

Alice learned about the club not long after her older sister Charlotte stopped eating dinner at home. More and more, Alice found herself spending time in Charlotte’s empty room, which took up the whole attic of their house and was swallowed up by a mattress that sunk like quicksand, where Alice sat for hours, staring at the photos pinned to the slanted walls. It was Payton, Charlotte’s best friend, who told Alice in her raspy voice and with a flash of glitter in her dark-ringed eyes, to go to the basement door around the back of the town Women’s Club on Sunday night.

What had Alice’s sister told her? Boys like girls who aren’t afraid of the dark. That didn’t mean much to Alice until she was about 12 and things went dark, and she was afraid. She didn’t want to be afraid anymore. But she wasn’t afraid of the dark, she wasn’t. She loved the dark: she sat in it, let it swallow up her backside, pressed her knees into it. She traced it like you do familiar objects, a well-known floor pattern, a rug.

She imagines what the club name could be code for. What do people do in the dark besides have sex and do drugs? She wonders if she should even go. Maybe the name is an affirmation, a mantra
you tell yourself like: I’m not afraid of the dark, I’m not afraid of the dark, I’m a girl and I’m not afraid of the dark.

But she finds that the dark is not what she ever thought it was. Her skin prickles when she enters the room, where the air pressure is slightly different, looser in some parts, knotted in others, like walking into invisible netting. For a moment she feels her eyes are closed. The space beyond her is thicker than black and proves itself to be a material thing, a substance that you can run your fingers through, something between thread and clay, like putty, yes, stringy putty. The dark is both salty and sweet, like sweat, slick and clammy and hot.

Alice forgets how to act in the dark. It’s as though her body isn’t even there, yet she is aware of the others around her. Warmth emanates from them.

Something like a feather brushes along her inner thigh. It feels lighter than a faint breeze, but it makes her jump.

“How does it feel?” a voice asks. The voice is neither her sister’s or Payton’s. It is neither young or old, and it is impossible to tell if it is close or far away.

“It feels...nice, I think,” Alice responds, without fully registering whether or not the question was meant for her.

Her eyes never adjust, but impressions of thermal shapes drift across the black screen of her eyelids. Larval forms the color of singed lemons flit by like those misshapen fall leaves that are both animal and ghost. She sees an undulating yellow spiral in the center of her mindscreen, then a purple heart crumpling, but trying to define the slippery shapes is like trying to trace a moving flame.
She thinks, suddenly, of the pictures on Charlotte’s bedroom walls, the ones that look like they were taken by disposable cameras. Charlotte only appears in a few of them; the others she probably took herself, those which are filled with girls Alice doesn’t recognize, the ones that seem pulled from parties or at the very least, lightless rooms where plaid and grainy figures are hardly distinguishable from the dark backgrounds. In the photos, the flash catches onto the shiny parts of the girls’ faces, their shin bones, belly button rings and whitish teeth. Their eyes are always slightly bloodshot in the pictures. Fuzzy halos of energy radiate from their bodies.

The lights come back on and Alice realizes that she has been here before; the room is simultaneous, it is every place she’s ever been to. Everything she sees reminds her of something else. The couch is yellow like the one at her grandmother’s house, but when she blinks it is its infrared inversion, purple, which revives a crawl-space from her memory that seems to be made of phantograms rather than real objects. She could swear that just a few seconds before, Charlotte was right beside her, but they were small again and in the bath. She’d felt wet, stringy hair graze her shoulder, hadn’t she? The faded wallpaper shape-shifts: pink paisleys swim around the surface and faintly green images of them float toward her, but the paisleys twirl into zebras and then fish.

Someone’s face is only inches from hers, but the face is nearly featureless, superimposed with blueprints of the images that were just floating behind her eyelids. The person’s head is like a big, speckled egg, flecked with acidic shapes. Their breath seeps into her skin. She stares so hard that the room around her begins to dim again as she tries to decipher the figure before her. It grows darker and darker until she hears the snap of a camera’s flash. The darkness, and her face, is absorbed by the radial burst and for a sliver of a second, everything is bright.
Butterflies

Translation of “Mariposas” by Samanta Schweblin

You’ll see what a nice dress she has on today, says Calderón to Gorriti, the color goes well with those almond-shaped eyes, you know; and those little feet...They are with the rest of the parents, waiting anxiously for their kids to come out. Calderón talks, Gorriti watches the doors which are still closed. You’ll see, says Calderón, stay here, you have to stay close because they’ll be out soon. And how is yours doing? The other one makes a gesture of pain and points to his teeth. Oh no, really? Says Calderón. And did you tell her the story about the mice...? Ah, no, you can’t with mine, she’s too smart. Gorriti watches the clock. Any minute now the doors will open and the kids will rush out, laughing loudly in a tumult of colors, some stained with paint, or chocolate. For some reason, the bell is late. The parents wait. A butterfly lands on Calderón’s arm, and he hurries to trap it. The butterfly struggles to escape; he holds the wings together by their tips. He pinches tightly so it doesn’t escape. Just wait until she sees this, he says to Gorriti, shaking it, she’s going to love it. But he pinches it so hard that the tips of its wings stick together. He slides his fingers down to check if he has marked it. The butterfly tries to jump, it shakes, and one of the wings opens halfway like a piece of paper. Calderón regrets it, when he tries to immobilize it in order to see the damage better, he ends up with part of the wing stuck to one of his fingers. Gorriti watches with disgust and shakes his head, makes a gesture for him to toss it away. Calderón lets it go. The butterfly falls to the floor. It moves clumsily, tries to fly but it can’t. Finally it is still, shaking one of its wings every so often, and doesn’t try anything else. Gorriti tells him to stop with
that and he, for the butterfly’s own good of course, steps on it firmly. He can’t manage to move his foot when he notices something strange happening. He looks toward the doors and, as though a sudden wind has broken the locks, they open, and hundreds of butterflies of every color and size rush over the waiting parents. He thinks they will attack him, that maybe he will die. The other parents do not seem afraid; the butterflies only flit around the two men. One last one crosses behind and joins the rest. Calderón stays watching the open doors, and past the glass of the main hall, the silent classrooms. Some of the parents still crowd in front of the doors and scream the names of their children. In just seconds, all of the butterflies fly away in different directions. The parents try to catch them. But Calderón stays still. He cannot bring himself to step away from the thing he has killed, afraid, maybe, to recognize the color of his daughter in the dead wings.
Blood Sisters

I.

Florence invites Mona to meet her at a small cafe in a neighboring town, where they sit ensconced in the hook of a bay window. The streets are patchy with ice, the sky dense with impending snow. She buys Mona a couple of different desserts to share but doesn’t touch them, just sips her tea and asks Mona question after question.

She asks Mona about school, if she has a boyfriend, if she’s ever been with boys at all. She asks what her friends are like, what it was like to know Claudia when she and Mona were children. She asks about her experience with children, babies. Her time and place of birth so she can calculate her natal chart. How much she charges per hour, when she’s available.

As they talk they find they both yearn for springtime and travel. They both love cats but do not have them. Mona feels that Florence is very easy to talk to, and she almost wishes she could be her mother, if that could even be possible. Florence looks younger and older at the same time, but she cannot be more than thirty-two. Her face is clean and smooth and she emits a glow like she has been somewhere warm, the skin around her eyes speckled with sunspots and cinching nicely when she smiles.

Mona sits with her legs tensed up and crossed but she wants to relax, wants to be as easy and light as she imagines Claudia was when she talked with Florence, as comfortable and confident as Florence herself, who seems to sink into her seat, unbothered by the clatter of the cafe and traffic sounds, her eye contact almost never peeling away.
When they part, Florence pulls something from her bag. It’s a book. She hands it to Mona.

“I wanted Claudia to have this,” she says, “but I think you will enjoy it just as much.”

The cover is red and white with a pixelated image of a sheep hanging upside down in a slaughterhouse, its head disappeared into a bucket. The text is strange, all spaced out and fragmented, a mix of numbers and words in all-caps scattered about. The poems inside—are they poems?—seem to scream at her. On the back is a black and white photo of the author, a woman with glasses and frizzles of hair. As Mona flips through the book on the way to her car, she catches a few words: PUSSY, MINDFUCK, AMBROSIA. On one page there is a poem in the shape of a cross.

Mona leaves the book in her car. It gives her the creeps. Even if she never reads it, she realizes that one way or another she will have to return it to Florence. And she will: Florence seemed to really like her, and she already invited Mona to meet the baby next week. She feels she has passed some kind of test, at least the first one. Perhaps it’s just a job, but she has the sense some sort of gate has been opened.

II.

The baby is crying. Mona can hear it from the mudroom where she stands waiting for Florence to open the door. She’d parked her car and walked up the snowy hill to the side door—or was it the front door? Is it the one with the blue door? She’d texted Florence, worried that her phone had directed her to the wrong house, a numberless house. There was no reply.

The road on which the family lives is winding, demanding several left turns, and wooded with a large breath of space between each house. Mona’s car shook the whole way there as it tread over the
building snow. She’d passed a house plastered with American flags, and another that looked purposefully handmade as though from several cardboard boxes, dark board-and-batten with a prismatic peak in which models of world war 2 bomber planes were displayed. She caught a sliver of another house, far off in the woods, that looked made of glass. One stretch of the road was dotted with the shells of abandoned barns, their sides collapsing into nothing, brittle vines hanging from the edges like sad, tired hair.

Mona clasps her hands together. She adjusts her weight. The sound of the crying disturbs her. It comes in plaintive bursts and she can tell it is a strained, hot-tears kind of crying. She decides right then that she will never have children. She scans the mudroom floor where she stands, watching the speckles of dirt mix with melting clumps of snow. Leaning against a pair of hiking boots is a long, spotted feather.

“Coming!” Mona hears Florence’s voice calling.

When she opens the door, Florence looks different. Her skin is dust-pale with the slightest hint of jaundice and her blue-green eyes seem more faint than Mona remembers. Without the scarf and layers she wore the day they met last week, Mona sees how thin she really is. One would never guess she’d had a child in the last couple of years. Her clavicles stick out above the neckline of her shirt, her cheekbones are more prominent than they were before. She doesn’t quite say hello but grins so wide that deep divots form on either side of her mouth. She pulls Mona into a tight hug that forces their ribs together. Her eyes move up and down Mona’s figure and bounce around her face.

“It’s so nice to finally see you again!” she says, leading Mona through the kitchen. Her eyes fix on Mona’s feet and she quickly adds, “We’re a no-shoes type of home.”
“Oh, sorry...” says Mona, blushing slightly, and her boots tumble softly into the mudroom, disturbing the feather.

A man hovers on the other side of the kitchen counter, over the baby whose seat is set up between two barstools. Brown waves poke out from his beanie and he wears a wool sweater and cuffed jeans. His smile is sweet, warm.

“Guy’s my partner,” Florence explains to Mona, and turns her attention back to the baby, who has taken a moment’s break from crying to acknowledge the new presence in the house.

Florence explains how they aren’t married because she doesn’t believe in marriage. The pair moved to Linkville after Florence got pregnant. It was time to finally settle down somewhere after they’d jumped from Bali (where they first met) to Reykjavik, to somewhere in the Andes and back to New York.

“Anyway, this is June,” Florence says, beaming at baby.

Mona waves at the baby until her hand gets tired, smiles until her mouth can’t anymore.

“Oh, I know, it hurts. It hurts so much! Yeah. Aw, yeah,” Florence says to June, whose mouth is full of teeth as she throws back her head, crying as she keeps an eye on Mona. Guy waggles his finger over the baby’s face and into her mouth, she chews on it for a moment and becomes calm.

“She’s teething,” he says. “It’s been really difficult for her, hasn’t it, Junie?” he asks the baby. He has an accent, Australian maybe. He feeds the baby a glass of green juice. The baby’s eyes are fixed on Mona as she drinks. She continues to stare at Mona as her face calms from red to white with a soft blush in her cheeks. June’s lips are perfectly pointed, almost heart-shaped, and her gaze is amazingly serene. The eyes, a distilled blue, tug at the inner corners of Mona’s chest with the way they say so
silently: I see you, I know you. June is unfazed by Mona’s cooing, and she simply turns her head when appropriate in order to follow Mona with her eyes as Guy picks her up and shifts her over to Florence, who places her on her hip.

The house is small and square but light-filled, and would feel like a seaside house if it weren’t for the elevation, the mountains eye-level from the back windows, the thickets of woods on the property. On the mantel, Mona notices some type of altar arrangement: several tall candlesticks, flat stones stacked upon one another, a piece of silk cloth on which there lay a bundle of twigs and leaves, it seems, for burning. There is a bird’s nest made of twine and sticks and a thread of blue ribbon, holding a tiny rodent skull. On the bookshelf there is a large jawbone studded to its ends with teeth.

Turkish rugs of washed and faded colors, and smaller rugs and runners with pastel geometric patterns each have their place in the small house. In front of a slim piece of wall dividing the hall from the kitchen, a large pink plume sits in a vase atop a little stand. There’s barely any art on the walls, only a piece at the opposite end of the living room, a painting of two women. Sisters, maybe twins, with black hair and seashells over their breasts.

The baby’s room, the floors of which are green, is smattered with mirrors and furs. On the wall hangs a fragment of a cowhide, on the floor lay a very small sheepskin rug. A wicker rocking chair sits in the corner, a changing table dressed in beige linen against the wall, and the cradle. All of the toys are wooden. There are toys that look made for counting and ordering shapes. Another set resembles Russian nesting dolls though they are faceless, each one a muted color. It must be the innermost doll—reddish and curved, about the size of a bean—that is lying off to the side. The largest, the faded lilac mother, is split in half, the colored rings of the other dolls showing inside of her.
The dresser is made of burnished mirrors. The baby toddles over to a side of the dresser and presses her hands into her reflection, laughing gleefully at her image.

“It’s your twin, isn’t it, Junie?” says Florence to the baby. She and Guy are entranced, watching the baby rock back and forth as she paws at the dresser.

Mona, looking out the window and into the yard which is bracketed with birch trees, notes that the snow is getting heavy.

There is silence, and then without prompt, Florence rolls her eyes and says: “Everyone’s just so afraid these days. Afraid of catching a cold, afraid of getting sick, afraid of being in pain. Suffering is part of life, you know? We can’t just live in fear of being ill and dying. We have so much more power to heal ourselves than we are taught to think...”

Mona is unsure of how to respond, but she isn’t given the chance, anyway. Florence has pulled out her breast and June has waddled over and begins feeding. Her areola is large and patchy.

“When you’re sick,” Florence says, “You lose your body to the world in a sense, like it gets loaned out. People think they have this right to it. And you become some alien version of yourself, and you never forget that feeling. It’s the same with having a child....

“I just want my body back,” she says as she squeezes a few drops of milk from her breast into a very small cup Mona hadn’t noticed sitting beside her, one that looks made for drinking tea in Japan.

“It’s like, my tits are so huge now. And I am not a big-breasted woman. I don’t even cycle anymore...I envy women who menstruate,” and she gives her, Mona thinks, a pointed look that makes Mona’s ears hot, and she feels suddenly that she is being studied.
“Is everything okay?” Florence asks, resting a gentle hand on Mona’s arm. “It seems like something’s bothering you. I think the milk will help...maybe it will connect us in a deeper way. We don’t let just anyone into our home, you know. Now that you’re here I think you’ll see we do things a bit differently...”

She pauses.

“It was lonely at first. Friends have drifted away. We don’t see our parents anymore. But really, we are so much happier without them, without their judgements. Just us three. And hopefully, soon, four....” Florence puts a hand to her heart. “I was really so sad to see Claudia go. She was so lovely, so open-minded. We fit so well together. When you welcome someone inside, when they start taking care of your child, they become family. But when she mentioned you as a possible replacement, and spoke so highly of you, I knew we could trust you. I could almost feel you through her, feel the connection. And looking at you, I just know. Something in your eyes. Do you want to be a part of the family?

She looks at Mona, then returns her gaze to her own chest.

“I really believe that if everybody just drank breast milk, we’d be more advanced as a species. It’s magic,” she whispers again to the baby, “magic...No, really, they’ve done studies on it.”

Mona doesn’t know what to say. She looks through the window so it doesn’t seem like she is ogling Florence’s chest.

“Look!” says Florence. Mona looks. “See the way she looks into my eyes? We communicate through my milk. Here, try some.”

She hands the half-full cup of milk to Mona.

“Why are you giving this to me?” Mona asks, surprised by her own tone.
“It’s sweet, I promise. Guy loves it.” Florence and Guy share a smile.

Gingerly, Mona puts the little cup to her lips. She can feel the milk’s warmth before she lets some slip into her mouth. It tastes like cucumber.

“So?” says Florence, smiling like she’s presented Mona with birthday cake. Mona nods like she’s looking for the words to describe the exact combination of every hint and note in the milk.

As Florence pulls June from her chest, Mona catches a mark trailing down between her breasts, made up of many tiny pink X’s. Florence shrugs her shirt over herself and the scar is no longer visible.

“So what do you charge?” Guy asks Mona.

“Oh, you know, maybe like fifteen an hour, but I’m flexible, really, whatever you’re comfortable with.”

“We pay all our babysitters thirty an hour. Seems more fair to me,” says Guy.

“Wow, that’s great, thank you.”

“What are you doing this Friday?” Florence asks Mona. She turns to Guy. “You’ll make a res at that Indian place, right baby? The one with the paneer I like. Make it for seven...no, seven-thirty. Oh, and have you taken your gut thing today?”

Guy smacks his forehead. “Forgot again,” he says, laughing. He opens the cabinet above the stove: the three shelves are stuffed with dark amber bottles, tinctures, jars of green powder, multivitamins and one big container labeled **GUT**. As Guy twists off the cap a mildly fishy smell fills the kitchen and he swallows a capful. Florence is watching Mona, watching Mona watching Guy. Mona catches her and then makes a silly face at the baby.

“Friday,” says Mona. “Yeah I can do Friday.”
Florence and Guy explain how to put June to sleep. They swaddle her in furs and silk and put on an essential oil diffuser and ambient music which sounds like floating through space.

“Just whatever you do, no screens around her please. There’s already too much stimulation in the world. I want things to be simple for her. Please, like, avoid going on your phone, you know?” said Florence.

“Of course, yeah. Phones are so toxic,” says Mona, feeling her own phone tight against her skin.

In the corner of Mona’s eye, something moves on the floor. A disk with a little blinking light. It works its way around the room, tactfully avoiding the edges of furniture before it hits anything and whisking around bristles as it goes. One of those robot vacuum cleaners. Somehow it disappears up the stairs, or around another corner.

Despite the snow, Mona makes it home safe. But Florence is stuck in Mona’s mind, especially her tireless eyes, and that night, her sleep is ridged with dreams.

In the only dream she remembers the next morning, she is driving down a curvy road that braids together with other smaller roads. It’s just past dusk, and the treetops blend into the sky, the clouds still visible in the dark but only milky impressions. She weaves around corn fields where brittle stubs poke up through a layer of snow. To the right, a line of trees divides the field in half so that one side appears dark and wood-slashed, the other blank.

There is something on the side of the road ahead. Mona slows her car down. A deer—or two. Something reflective hovers over the body. For a moment Mona thinks she is watching the deer’s spirit being pulled from its broken flesh by the moon.
There are always more there, waiting to cross. Mona checks left and right: both sides are clear, white and flat with snow. A figure is bent over the deer, a blonde woman in a luminously white hat. Her tawny hair looks yellow in the moonlight. Mona catches the woman’s profile for a moment. Perhaps the woman hit the deer with her car: now she is kneeling, praying, or tending the wounded body. But there is no other car in sight.

Even as Mona pulls away and watches through her side mirror, the woman never turns to recognize she is being watched. She is fixed on the body, entranced in her own hands.

III.

Florence had a craving for sushi, she told Mona, and so she and Guy decided to go to a Japanese place instead of the Indian restaurant for dinner. Guy wears a shiny navy jacket and Florence is wrapped up in a maroon shawl over a snug black dress. Her eyes are done up in coal-black powder, her lips so red they are almost black.

Florence beams when she sees the way Mona looks at her, her eyes seeming to have shifted from their slippery green tone to a warm gold. She tells Mona to help herself to anything in the kitchen, and she and Guy leave. Mona fixes the baby on her hip and they both watch through the window as the black car drives down the hill and into the night.

Mona gathers June in her soft wrappings. She turns on the Space Sounds CD and watches June lull herself to sleep. Florence and Guy had told Mona that she always sleeps through the night. It would be easy, like she wasn’t even there.
She pads around the baby’s room, catching the sight of her legs shifting in the mirrored sides of the dresser, on top of which there are trays of small perfume bottles and essential oils, yellow candlesticks in brass deer-shaped candle holders. She pulls out her phone, scrolling through her friend’s updates of a party that is happening in the town over. The dark edges of the house and the feeling of missing out creep in on Mona. She slips a finger into June’s half-opened fist and the baby’s fingers squeeze around her as one of her eyes slides open. Her eye seems to look at Mona for a moment, then it glazes over and closes again.

She wanders into the bathroom which she finds at the end of the narrow hallway past the baby’s room. The floor is black and shiny. The tiles look like they are made from obsidian and they run from beneath Mona’s feet to the wall above the sink where a large, round mirror is situated. The rest of the walls are cool grey concrete. The dampness in the bathroom clings to the stoney material, and she breathes it in: chalk-cold, dusty, like malt. A slow plinking comes from the shower. Single drops fall from the faucet almost continuously. In the bathtub is a sizable chunk of raw amethyst, its jagged points shooting out in every direction, and what bits of light there are in the dim room seem to cling to the crystals, reflecting off of the white porcelain and iridescent tessellation of dark tiles lining the shower walls. Maybe it is the plink...plink...plink of the droplets, or just the nature of being in a bathroom, but Mona has the sudden urge to pull her pants down and sit on the toilet. Nothing comes out of her but she flushes the toilet anyway and goes to the sink to wash her hands.

Looking into the mirror, she finds herself attractive. Something about the ruddy fullness of her cheeks today, like they are hydrated and newly pinched. Her hair is almost as black as the tiles around her; if she squints, she almost appears a floating head in a black mine. Suddenly it seems like velvet to
her, her skin silk. It would be nice if she could leave early enough to go to that party. Maybe she should—she doesn’t feel this pretty everyday.

There is no soap, no towel either. In the cabinet under the sink there are no more rolls of the thin, brownish toilet paper she’d used to wipe herself though she was dry. She glides one hand along the edge of the mirror and finds that it is not plastered to the wall, but it is only a cover, like a cabinet door. She nudges it open with her finger and she finds the inside is concave, cement like the rest of the walls around the tiles, deep and crater-like as though it is a moon mould. Though it would be an inverted moon mould, because there are smaller craters within the large crater beyond the mirror. They have little ledges inside them, each holding different products. A much brighter light clicked on when she opened the mirror cabinet, and little lights within each of the smaller craters, illuminating every product. There are vials of oils, some with herbs and gold-leaf floating in them. Bottles of serum and pots of cream. Mona is most drawn to the line of lipsticks in their sleek cylinders. There are many colors: a very orange red, a soft pink, mauve, grey-toned purple, a very orange orange, a taupe pink, and a deep red, among others. They are each stamped with their particular names: TANLINE, MIDNIGHT, HOLY SUN, PERSEPHONE, MUDDLE, FANG...

Mona feels like a makeup saleswoman as she tests the colors on her wrist, making a rainbow of them. They sink into her skin, each one bringing out a different undertone of her complexion. She decides to try on the very orange orange, HOLY SUN. With her finger she dabs some on her lips, then blots some off, pressing her lips to the back of her hand several times. In the mirror, she makes a pout and notes how the orange brings out the warmth in her eyes.
Pulling the mirror toward her again, she finds she missed a cluster of bottles pooled at the curved bottom of the moon shape. Orange with white caps and blue and green pills inside of them. Two or three white pills are loose, sitting there. Mona picks up one of the translucent bottles, and then another one. Each says FLORENCE WILTER. How could somebody be taking so many pills? Mona wonders. Some of the names are familiar, others not. She puts the bottles back and closes the mirror.

She has always enjoyed a touch of fear, like cold fingertips whisking around the surface of her skin. As she makes her way to the second floor, she plays that game with herself, the one she’s always played while walking up stairs at night: she lets herself imagine that something is right behind her, moving with her. In the middle of the staircase time is suspended; there are so many steps below her and just as many ahead. White slats of bone. Don’t rush, she tells herself, over and over again. If you rush, you entertain Fear and Fear will take over. The sound of your footsteps will drown out all the other sounds and impair you. The thing behind you (don’t turn around), that thing that feels like a cool and slanted wall of rain, will close in. Go softly, quietly, do not rush.

In the main bedroom, where Florence and Guy sleep, the bed looks perfect as though no one has ever slept in it, ever crinkled the sheets or sunk deep into the pillows. Every edge of the bed is crisp and cream-colored minus the reddish throw. A faint musk smell drifts from the bed, which makes Mona feel sleepy. Heavy, she lets herself fall onto a chair in the corner of the bedroom. She drifts into a light sleep that lasts only a few minutes but feels much longer. When she wakes up and checks the time, her phone says 8:04 PM. Florence and Guy won’t be home for another two hours. She wakes from a chill that runs over her arms which lay crossed on her chest. Cold air slips through a cracked window at
the opposite side of the room. A sort of euphoria tangles in her gut and she decides, without hesitation, pulled by the musk smell which has grown stronger and tickles her insides, to sprawl across the bed.

She touches herself and plays with her hair. She twists it into two rope-like twists, lets it unfurl and fall through her fingers. There’s so much of it! As though it has just appeared around her, she breathes it in, sighs through it. Its abundance wraps around her like a protective, silken layer. She remembers when there was less, when she was younger, when clumps of it piled behind her bed like balled-up cobwebs that had been rolled in soot. The other strands she’d pulled from her scalp, well, she tied them around her tongue and eventually swallowed. She did this absently, and all the while she was completing her sixth grade math homework and reading books about children who were demigods and wizards. She quit in middle school when the whisperings and laughter of girls around her became impossible to ignore—those who purposefully stood behind her in line as they walked from class to class to get a better look at the shiny bald spots that were forming. But now: so much of it, almost too much.

How did she get here again?

She remembers Claudia, who must be in California by now. Claudia, who had called her a few weeks ago, knowing things had been tough for Mona’s family this year, knowing her father had been laid off and her mother’s hours at the grocery store were thinning. She offered her this job and Mona thanked God and knew she’d be stupid not to take it. She imagines Claudia walking through the rooms of this house, cradling June in her arms and noticing how good-looking Guy is and being paid hundreds of dollars to silently roam and whisk her hair around her hips. But she’d become somewhat of a shadow-figure to Mona, now that Mona was occupying the shape where Claudia had been.
As children, they’d been neighbors on Rudd Court and inseparable, constantly jumping over their shared fence into each other’s yards, building complex fairy houses and eating cheese sandwiches and milky tea with their dirt-worn dolls. Claudia was homeschooled back then and didn’t seem to have any other friends; Mona learned from her mother years later that among Claudia’s parents’ many strong opinions, they firmly held onto the belief that most school systems were corrupt and would stamp down their daughter’s spirit. For a long period of time, Mona’s other friends were convinced that Claudia wasn’t real, that Mona had made her up. If she was a kid, why wasn’t she at school? When Mona invited other friends to her house in hopes of introducing them to Claudia, Claudia hid away, too injured to be seen or too jealous to share Mona with anyone but herself. As far as Mona’s friends were concerned, Claudia might as well have been another one of Mona’s fairies.

Claudia was a feral child, fierce with her love. When she saw Mona she pulled her into hugs that were so tight they pinched Mona’s ribs. She’d kiss Mona’s face all over if they hadn’t seen each other for more than a day. She was like this with animals too, trying to capture them and douse them in the overflow of whatever she was overflowing with. She rolled in the mud with Mona’s dog, she dug at the little bits of crust in the crescent of her cat’s eye, and she tried, relentlessly, to catch butterflies and mice with her bare, rough hands.

After Mona’s parents split and she moved into an apartment with her mother, she lost touch with Claudia. It was good timing in Mona’s mother’s mind: she didn’t like Claudia’s fixation with her daughter, the way she’d catch her standing on the other side of the fence staring into the house until Mona could come out and play. The final straw had been the bloody slit she’d found on Mona’s hand, which she learned Claudia had made with scissors, and an identical cut on her own hand. Claudia had
made Mona press the wound to her own so that their blood would mingle and they could be, in some way, real sisters. Mona had cried and cried, throwing herself on the floor and swishing spit in her mouth until it turned to foam and she let it fall from her lips and begged her mother to let them be together again.

Claudia would eventually fight her parents in a battle to join the other kids at school, and she would win. On Mona’s first day of high school, there she was: Claudia, a sophomore. Mona thought she’d never seen something so beautiful and shocking as Claudia standing there against the lockers, laughing with a group of puppy-eyed boys. That red hair: now long, down to her hips, and smooth; those sunlit algae eyes shimmering and vibrating. But she had been altered, groomed. Her once snaggly smile had been flattened with three years of braces, the mismatched outfits Mona loved now closeted and curated into ensembles neither too modest or flashy but pretty, flouncy. No more scabby knees or lines of bruises or dirt beneath her fingernails. She’d invisibly slid from girlhood to womanhood without Mona being privy to the ridges and bumps along the way, and her new form was inconceivable. Where had all the frayed edges disappeared to, where was that sense of danger and mischief?

They stayed distant friends. By the end of Claudia’s time in highschool, all Mona knew about her was that she wasn’t going to college and that she had a boyfriend, some guy a few years older who lived in California, and now she’d gone off to be with him. So something was still wild about her after all, but in a different way, not like before.

She rises from the bed and smoothes the sheets, fluffing the place where her impression is. She moves to the living room and settles on the edge of a large armchair, half-expecting to be called back to
the baby’s room with the sound of crying. But the house is quiet, a warm sort of quiet that gives Mona the sense that it is very well insulated, as though with a cloud-barrier muffling the inside from the outdoors. Through the windows Mona can see the trees swaying in the wind and imagines the rubble noise they would make if she could hear them creaking. Her eyes are fixed on the bookshelf, which seems artfully built into the wall, its white edges bonded smoothly to the white molding.

She approaches the bookshelf and glides a finger along the spines neatly arranged on the first shelf. Like an electric shock, the sudden buzz of her phone in her pocket makes her jump. A chain of messages pop up from two of her friends who are at the party. They flood in all at once, some from ten minutes ago, some from an hour before. One is a picture of the two of her friends, Lise and Zoe, smiling on either side of the boy she hoped wouldn’t be there tonight. A slight acidic feeling moves through her chest and, without answering the texts, she pockets her phone again.

The books in front of her have odd titles, Mona thinks. They seem like self-help books but less generic, some of their titles obscure or alluding to lifestyle practices unfamiliar to her: *Transformations Through Bone and Blood; Ionization of the Chakras; Mineral Work and Energy Sources in the Body; Finding Your Highest Self Through Blood Work; Animal Transformations and You.* Others were smaller, almost pamphlet-sized: *Holistic Healing of Hemovenitis; Bloodsharing and Hemovenitis; Alternative Protein and Energy Sources to Treat Hemovenitis.* Hemovinitis? Mona has never heard of the disease. Someone must be sick, she thinks, and remembers Florence’s orange pill bottles in the cavernous bathroom cabinet. Her questions are interrupted by more notifications from her phone. Each time it buzzes she shudders with guilt, feeling as though any communication from the outside world is a violation of the home’s sanctity.
June is crying, pained, feverish cries. She cries harder when she sees Mona: that shock of dark hair is nothing like her mother’s. Her tiny, hard body flails when she is picked up; she settles, Mona’s hand cupping her silken head. The thin layer of hair is almost non-existent; smoothing the strands feels like sliding your fingers over a glass ball. It seems to end as instantly as it started: June’s eyes shut again without a flutter, and Mona sets her in the cradle again.

In the kitchen there is nothing to eat. In the fruit bowl, only a rotting banana. The other fruits in the bowl, Mona finds—an apple, a pear, a mango—are hollow, made from wood and painted to look perfectly ripe. Opening the cabinets, she remembers the endless supply of supplements and vitamins. An alphabet of them, many with long names. Their collective smell is a waft of straw, root vegetables and salt.

The fridge is filled with jars of pastes, fermented and pickled things floating in juices, vegetables. A wilted head of cabbage, thin yellow and purple carrots, radishes. There is a large tin which she tilts to read the label. It says **PLACENTA**. She opens the tin and finds the blood-tinted capsules, sniffs the meaty iron smell. Placenta could almost be the name of another lipstick, she thinks. She imagines a line-up of colors:

**PLACENTA, ROSE, HEARTTHROB, SUNBEET, LICORICE, RUST, WINETOOTH, PIT, SMOLDER, SLASH, SNOG, RIBBON, ACHE, SHRED, FESTER, BERRY FUN, CLOT, MIDNIGHT KISS, DELIGHT, BITE, SNAG, PINE, WANT, FEVER, RUN, LOOP, JAM, CYRUS, CYPRUS, MEGA, WISH, HAUNT, LIPID, ROT, DELVE, DOVE, FAINT, LOCK, JELLY, WIND-UP, WITHER, HINGE, DEEP, BEGONIA, SLIP, DOVE, LOVELY, CRUST, SIDEWAYS,**
SHOCK, MELANCHOLY, CARDINAL, SIXTEEN WHEELER, RUST BUCKET, FRIDAY, SISTER, FERIC, JEWEL, THICKEN, ROVER, KINDLE, OXIDE, HIDEANDSEEK, ROOT, LOVER, SUNDAY, UPSIDEDOWN, CHASE, WHISTLE, KEEPER, STYE, CINNAMON, ARGYLE, SAFFRON, ANGEL, STUMP, TOIL, WED, CHICORY, JUNE, GRIMALDI, POCKET, CHERRYPINCH, POTHOLE, SIMMER, DOGWOOD, VARSITY, TRUTH, CHAMBER, PRETTY DEVIL, CONTUSION, HARVEST, PRECIPICE, FESTER, DEVOTION, ROIL, RUSSETT, VALENTINE, SUPINE, RUGBURN, ON-THE-ROCKS, TWISTER, GRIN.

Her fingers float over the capsules, she picks one up and rolls it between her fingers. The rusty smell makes her mouth water. It reminds her of pressed, cold dirt, of cool sand between her toes, granules of sweet dust. She knows it is wrong but something deep in her core has made her want to press it to her tongue and so she does. Salivating, she lets it sit there until the glycerin shell softens and the taste of red meets her mouth. She can’t place the flavor of it, as though it is some kind of rare wine. It rolls into little balls between her teeth, the casing slides down her throat and before she fully swallows she places another one in her mouth, then another, another. The tin is half empty by the time Mona realizes what she has done and scrambles to close it, placing it exactly where it had been in the fridge.

Her otherwise empty stomach grumbles. She lets out an unsatisfying, metallic belch.

She feels a pinching between her legs. Then warmth. She hurries back to the bathroom, sits on the toilet and finds the reddish brown stain in her underwear. A fragment of a clot has been squished
between her legs: her inner thighs mirror each other with the stamp of a bloody inkblot. POPPY, JASPER, RHUBARB, ARSON, GARNET, BEETROOT, RUBY.

She wasn’t expecting her period to arrive this soon. There is nothing to stuff inside of her underwear, no temporary fix. No tampons, no pads in the cabinet or under the sink, none in Florence’s drawers, and so she hikes her underwear up and waddles from place to place, careful not to sit down for the rest of the night. Anytime she turns too suddenly or breathes too deeply she feels a spurt of blood and reaches into her underwear to scoop it away, smearing it on her skin to let it dry.

That terrible crying again. This time, when Mona sets June back down in her cradle, she finds her hands have marked the soft, worn blankets with remnants of dried blood.

When she finds her way to the living room, her eyes settle on the bookshelf again. Where the right side of the bookshelf meets the edge of the mantle is a crack, an opening. Mona traces the edge with her fingers and the bookshelf moves easily, and suddenly it is a door to a black room.

The room looks like it doesn’t belong to the rest of the house. It is cold, and Mona thinks for a moment that she’s stepped outside, but it’s too dark to tell. The windless air is filled with a putrid, rusty smell. Feeling the walls for a lightswitch, her fingers find nothing. As the bookshelf-door softly closes behind her, the only light source is a single candle burning in the far right corner of the room, hardly a stub of wax. As her eyes adjust she makes out a crack of light in an L shape, a door on the opposite side of the room. An entrance, and an exit, that she didn’t know existed.

She catches the glint of something hanging in the middle room and thrusts her hand into the dark. A thin chain: she tugs it, and within a few staggered moments a greenish overhead light flickers on.
Something large has materialized before her. Her hand flies to her mouth, realizing it is the source of the smell that has twisted her insides.

The deer hangs against the wall, its limbs stretched out in different directions. It has only three legs and a socket where the fourth leg once was. The deer’s belly is white and bloated.

Mona has never been so close to something dead of this size. It is both repulsive and humbling. Covering her mouth and nose with her shirt, she peers around the side to find that the stomach is split wide open, the rib cage carved clean, the contents emptied from the belly. Remnants of a loose, pink sac hang from the slit like torn and withered cloth. Trying to justify the situation, Mona imagines that someone has harvested the deer’s organs. That seems normal enough for this cold, rural area. Ethical, a delicacy even. But at her feet she finds the mangled pile of brownish innards, something twisted among the clot-like parts. Beneath the deer’s hanging hooves is a tin plate holding the curved, pinkish form of a deer fetus, its legs matchstick-thin, its unformed hooves not unlike the crescents Mona bites from her own fingernails.

It is not the rotting deer or its unborn baby or that awful smell that disturbs her the most, but the thing on the wall behind the deer, some kind of weaving made of hair. The hair, she knows instantly, is Claudia’s. She must be in California by now, isn’t she? Mona tries to picture her there in the sun, maybe on the beach. But she has the distinct sense that her friend is not there.

Had Florence cut her friend’s long, red hair? *I’m an artist*, Florence had told her. She had evaded Mona’s question of what kind of art she made. They are experimental people, innovative people who seem to know more than she does about art, about health, about being, she thinks.
But when she steps closer to the hair and shines her phone’s light upon it she finds that some clumps of the hair are attached to a thin layer of skin. Too late, she thinks, too late. She feels frozen in place, and though she has been surrounded by silence her ears are ringing.

Everything inside of her constricted, she leaves the green-lit room and closes the door so it is just a bookshelf again. She can almost see, in her inner mindscreen, the glycerin casings of the placenta pills dissolving with the red paste of their contents in her stomach.

The two women in the painting who were twins before no longer look like twins. If they are, they are fraternal. Mona swore they both had black hair and seashells covering their chests but now only one of them has black hair and is taller than the slightly rounder, red-haired one, and there are no shells but inky branches fractallling over them, originating from a tree that stands between them. She stares at the painting until black fuzz-balls appear in front of her eyes and everything within her peripheral vision blurs. She presses both hands into the glass of the frame to steady herself, but she pushes too hard into the thin, old glass and it breaks, and when she pulls her hands away they are bleeding.

That terrible crying again. This time it sounds more distant, less pressing. Still, Mona makes her way to the room where she finds the cradle empty. She looks frantically around: behind the mirrored dresser, the chair, among the toys and in the closet. June isn’t in the hall or the bathroom, where the tub continues to plink.

“June!” She cries. “June, July, August. May...December, Monday. June, la la la la la...Baby June, where are you?”
She is blood-drunk. Sitting there, cross-legged on the floor, she recalls one of her own
babysitters from years ago. Her last name was Silverheels. Her first name...it started with an A, but
Mona cannot remember it. And was she wearing silver heels or was her last name really Silverheels? On
the first and only night the young woman came to watch Mona, she'd drawn her a bath after dinner.
But she'd left the bathroom and returned drunk, and the water had turned cold and the drain had
sucked half of it down and Mona was sitting there, wrinkled and shivering. And Silverheels hit the
floor hard and fell asleep, and the red from her crushed nose crept between the cracks of the tiles.

She starts naming colors again, and moves from words she aligns with red to all of the other
colors she finds in the house, and all of the pieces of furniture, too. The chairs become WARTIME,
HORNBEAM, UTTER, SHAWL, TEABAG, BROADSHOULDER, SIMON, ELOISE, FORKED
ROAD, MISTER, TIMEWARP, LEMONBALM, LOAFER, STEWARDESS, LIVER. Her hair is
COMET, GUTTER, WIDOW, PLANE, SLIVER, HALFTONE, JOLT, FOSTER, BLINDING, JET;
BEFORE, OXYGEN, ELDER, TORNADO, PAINT CHIP, MUSTER, LOBE...

She runs her bleeding hands along the walls of the living room, the hall, the kitchen.

The baby is crying again. The sound throbs in Mona’s ears, fills up her throat, rattles from her
chest to her stomach to her toes. Blood trickles down her legs with nothing to catch it. Her pants are
sticky with it. She must have taken them off a while ago...they are balled up beside her, tangled with her
socks. There is blood beneath her fingernails, the wet pointed ends of her black hair are
blood-blackened. The wailing that whips around the room, as circuitous as the red, breathy streaks that
make the white walls concave, finds its way inside of her. She cannot extract herself from it, or it from
her, the swells of white-hot sobs, because it is her who is crying, bloodied, waiting for the parents to come home.
Devil’s Night / The Scarecrow

For lack of a better word, we’ll call it a scarecrow. According to my mom it’s stood on Ms. Pawling’s lawn since before I was born. Maybe even before Sam was born. The thing’s tough, durable. It doesn’t have the friendly look that most scarecrows do: no plaid shirt or overalls or triangular nose. It has hard straw pigtails that stick out from either side of its rough, maybe-melon-maybe-basketball head, and it’s dressed in dirty long johns as a baselayer for its ever-changing rotation of costumes. And it’s wildly tall—I swear to God!—at least seven feet tall. I’ve always wondered why it’s there—Ms. Pawling doesn’t have much of a garden, and there’s no crows to scare. Why Ms. Pawling installed a scarecrow in her yard in a Connecticut suburb after her husband died was a mystery to all, but most have accepted the scarecrow as an immovable thing, somewhat of an uncontroversial town statue, maybe a little pitiful, but it’s earned its role as a relic. Of course, there’s been talk that it’s really her husband’s corpse: that Ms. Pawling erected his body into this undead thing whose tube arms inflate with the wind and sway in a half-dance, whose cracked smile follows you down the street.

It stands at the intersection of Bellevue Ave. and Bay Ave. and it isn’t something I’ve ever particularly enjoyed looking at when we drive by on the way to school, but I can’t keep from glancing at it every time. On the fourth of July, a white scraggly beard is tacked to its face and it wears a stars-and-stripes suit and a tophat. Large fluffy wings and a halo loom over it come Christmas. Some kind of angel, in a long white dress. On Valentine’s day it turns into a crooked cupid, a blunt wooden arrow slanting toward the street and that smile looking particularly mischievous. Easter I find the most disturbing, when the scarecrow is dressed as a bunny, wire whiskers sticking out from the sides of its
face and two floppy ears, a basket of colorful plastic eggs slung on its lumpy arm. Its Sharpie-made facial expression remains human still, or almost human, forever a far-off pleasant gaze that seems morphine-induced.

I’ve heard my mom say that objects have different personalities and intentions, that they’re not just things, but beings. She dusts and cleans the few items arranged on the mantel in our living room often, handling them daily like special guests. Sometimes certain things cannot be touched: our mailbox, a lampshade, a glass of water. A book that seems fine on one day is off-limits the next. I’m not sure what changes in them, but it’s like they become holey and let things through and they become possessed, or re-possessed, or something. Most of the time it’s only temporary, of course. My mother leaves them in the rain or under the sun and brings them back inside when they are Good again. Other times, as the tag on the box in the hallway closet says, some things are almost forever categorized as Bad (spelled out by the label maker, which was redeemed after it did its time curing in last summer’s heat).

“But he,” she said one day as we passed the scarecrow in the car, “is Good. I just know it. I like to think of him as the protector of our town, some kind of angel watching over.”

I didn’t know scarecrows could be he’s.

My dad and Sam say I’ve inherited my mom’s way of getting spooked about things, about people. My friends Gabriel and Mac and me, we used to play Spies, a never ending game where we’d find long and complicated reasons for why we saw and heard the things we did: why there were so many red cars passing through our neighborhoods (we were being stalked by foreign nuclear physicists), why Sylvie Blee always had the same exact lunch everyday (if she ate anything other than cheese sandwiches and juice her braids would fall off her head and her skin would start burning), why
there were bathrooms at school just for teachers (inside, there were mazes that led to chambers only
certain teachers could get to, where the walls were studded with gargoyles). Of course, we’d thought
about the scarecrow, but we’d never tried to investigate further. I think we were all too afraid of what
would happen if it was disturbed. Gabriel and Mac were pretty sure it was mummified Old Man
Pawling on a stick. I didn’t buy it. Still, I wasn’t so sure that if it fell, the ground wouldn’t crumble
beneath it. Part of me still wonders.

Devil’s Night is what we call the night before Halloween in our town, when kids run through
the dark dressed in black with hats pulled over their heads in hopes of getting to smash a few eggs on
Principal Meyer’s house, or send ribbons of toilet paper over the hedges and trees on their crushes’
lawns. On Halloween day, most houses are trashed. People get pretty creative with it, planting
baseball-sized globs of bubblegum on the windshields of family minivans, goo-ing mailboxes shut with
putty-like concoctions and graffititing fiendish characters all over garage doors, ones with long pronged
tongues and X’s for eyes.

My brother Sam has decided that this year it’s time to make use of my size and more
importantly, my speed. He and his friends have a Devil’s Night plot that’s different, something better
than the usual crap people do, but he won’t tell me what it is yet.

I know that I’m small. It’s an unavoidable truth. No one lets me forget it either, especially not
the girls at school (most of whom tower over me). When the girls became giants they started thinking
they had the license to whisper things about me as we passed each other in the halls, like I couldn’t hear
them. (“Ricky’s so adorable!” and “I just want to put him in my pocket...” and “I wonder if it’s big?”)
But it’s undeniable that I am the fastest kid in my grade. Even though high school’s a few years away, my dad always says that I should try out for varsity track, that I’d blow everyone out of the water. Sam is really the family athlete, more for his strength and coordination than speed (I’m faster than he is) but he’s never had to deal with being small for his age. He’s always been tall, with a bowlegged loping walk and arms that can graze the netting of any basketball hoop.

Everybody loves Sam: his coaches, his teachers, the neighbors. He’s always had loads of friends and he’s a good brother. But now that he’s fifteen things are a little different, like, he isn’t as patient as before, and he’s not at home as much and when he is I always have the feeling he’s about to leave. We used to play soccer at the field near our house a few times a week, but now he’s always with Zeke and Marco. Whenever I ask them what they’re up to, they just shrug and smirk.

Halloween happens to land on a Saturday this year, which means that Devil’s Night is on a Friday, which means that the teenagers will have this extra charge to them, more than they do on normal Fridays. Mac, Gabriel and I see them flooding out of the high school everyday on our way home. Some of them take off on skateboards and head down the big hill toward the strip of town where there’s Pizza 3000, a coffee shop that’s always changing hands, a park, and not much else. A lot of them end up congregating in the park until it gets dark and sometimes even after, I think, and when we pass by on our way home it always feels as though they can’t see us. Sam hangs out there with Zeke and Marco and sometimes girls whose names I don’t know. They’re there on Friday after school, only a few hours before Devil’s Night. I wave to him from far away, and he motions me to come over. Mac and Gabriel wait on the outskirts of the park while I go to meet Sam, who’s bouncing from foot to foot excitedly.
“Okay, here’s the plan. You’re coming with us tonight. You’re really fast and we could use you. We’re doing something different this time.”

Behind him, Zeke and Marco and some other guys I don’t recognize are laughing, while the two girls beside them chew on the straws of the frothy coffee drinks they are holding, looking at me like I’m a small animal. The girls don’t seem to know much more than I do about Sam’s plan. I don’t ask any questions.

After dinner, Sam rifles through my clothing and tosses me black pants and a black shirt to put on. We leave the house at 8 PM and from the doorway my mom sees us off with this look of regret on her face. Sam, carrying a small fold-up step stool, leads Zeke and Marco and I on the small backstreets toward, I think, the center of town.

“Where are we going?” I keep asking, but they won’t tell me.

We approach the intersection of Bellevue and Bay and I can see Ms. Pawling’s house, square and dark with its red shutters, and a pale cloaked figure in the middle of the garden.

I forgot to mention what the scarecrow wears on Halloween. It changes each year. Sometimes it’s dressed as a witch, green paint smeared on its face, a broom leaning at its side and a pointy black hat on its head. One year it was Elvis (we think) with a shiny jet-black coif, a leather jacket on and a cardboard guitar taped to its front. But tonight it is completely enveloped in a white sheet, the melon head hidden away and two holes cut out for the eyes. A ghost.

I’m wondering what they could possibly have me do to Ms. Pawling’s house when Zeke opens the paper bag he’s been holding and pulls out a lacy clump. It’s what I think is women’s underwear.
“Whose is that?” I ask, but Zeke is too busy holding the underwear and bra by their stringy parts about two feet away from his face, like some many-legged, watery specimen.

With a look of slight shame and disgust Marco says, “it’s Angelica’s.” That’s Zeke’s step sister. They all start laughing. Blood rushes to my ears.

“So you’re gonna strip that sheet off the scarecrow and put this stuff on it, alright?” Sam tells me, holding the underwear. “But you’re gonna have to be quick. Oh, and also,” he pulls out the step stool and hands it to me.

“You’ll definitely need this. That thing’s tall.”

He flicks the wraparound elastic that’s attached to my glasses and gives me a one-armed squeeze. Holding the stool, which is pretty light, my arms hang as though it’s made of iron, and I can’t seem to move.

“Uh, Sam, I don’t really....”

“Go go go!” Sam says, and gives me a push into the street.

He and his friends duck among the hedges behind the sign on the corner that says “Saw Springs Apartments” and I run across the street. In less than a second I’m in a ball in the grass on the side of Ms. Pawling’s slanted back lawn by the stone steps, on the other side of which there’s a narrow strip of grass leading to the front yard.

My hands are shaking as I crawl up the slight hill toward the garden. The grass is unkempt, at least a foot high, so it’s no struggle to stay hidden. I crouch down, my clammy palms dampening the lacy bra and underwear Zeke stole from his sister’s drawers. I can hear Sam and Marco and Zeke laughing from across the street. I keep looking back at them. As they pop up here and there from their
hiding place, the light that’s projected onto the sign washes their faces in a demonic glow. Sam motions for me to go on but I’m frozen, looking at the sliver of a moon that hangs right above the chimney of Ms. Pawling’s house. *I could just crawl back down and run home.* It isn’t too far away. I don’t have to do this.

I’ve never seen Ms. Pawling up close. I’ve only seen her in flashes through the car window watering her garden or folded on her knees with large gloves on. She seems old and fragile. And she’s always alone, never a kid or grandkid around.

Her lawn is studded with whirligigs, plywood cut-outs of characters like Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Alvin and the Chipmunks. They’re hand-painted in the same style as the face on the scarecrow, and they’re freaky as hell. Looking at them makes me feel cold. The October wind spins their wooden limbs around: Mickey’s white hands are waving, Donald Duck’s legs pedal a unicycle and the chipmunks’ hips shift from side to side. There’s something sad about them, these versions of old cartoons stuck on the lawn, watching the neverending traffic at the intersection. But in a way, I think, hearing my mom’s voice in my head, that they’re kind of sweet.

I look up at the ghost. It’s so much worse, really, the endlessly tall figure looming over the slope where I’m crouched still, with the features I know so well left unexposed. I can’t do it, I think. It’s too fucked up. This whole thing. The sheet moving creepily in the wind, the same wind making the whirligigs spin faster and squeak. I finally get myself to move—there’s something worse about being so still, like I’m a mouse waiting to be scooped up by a hawk. I reach the feet of the thing, stretch out one hand to touch the end of the sheet. It’s not as bad as I thought.
I look to my right. The lights are out in Ms. Pawling’s house, except for one glowing from a narrow window by the stairway connecting the first and second floors. I check to see that I still have Zeke’s sister’s underwear in my hand, which has grown numb from gripping so hard. I make it under the sheet that billows all around the scarecrow. Its feet are planted in brown loafers I never noticed it was wearing before, on a soapbox-type block of wood about two feet high. I see the cream-colored long-john bottoms, but the body looks different, not lumpy like I’ve seen from the street.

_Crap crap crap_, I’m thinking, _crap_, because there’s no top to the longjohn set, only skin, and in the darkness I’m eye-level with what must be a belly button. Wrinkled skin fills my vision, and—holy _teets_!—there are breasts, delicate and long and crinkled like balls of paper hanging above my head, and a set of eyes peers down at me. That’s when I see the chest move and hear laughter—low, shallow, gentle.

The laughing stops as I fall back. The sheet catches me and suspends me mid-air for half a second and I’m face to face with Ms. Pawling, her eyes wide, almost popping out of her head, and she starts to scream. Our screams tangle together, trapped in the moonlit sheet, and for a moment it’s as though we are in the smallest pillowfort until we tumble down the lawn. My fall is almost soft until Ms. Pawling lands on top of me and the air is wrung from my lungs with one hollow thump.

“RICKY!” I hear Sam scream.

I turn slightly, my cheek to the ground, to see Sam’s long legs loping over. Without looking back at Ms. Pawling I spring out from under the sheet after batting it around like a cat. I feel myself suck in air; I must have been holding my breath. Sam’s already pulled me across the street, stopping a couple of cars on the way. I feel like what I imagine it feels to be a dog shocked by an electric fence. My legs have gone numb, too. Ms. Pawling is not there. The sheet is flat. The one light that was on in the
house has been shut off. I sputter, trying to get Sam and Zeke and Marco to understand what’s happened but I can barely gesture.

“NAKED!” I say again. “She was naked. I swear, you guys!”

“RickyRickyRickyRicky,” Sam says, placing both hands on my shoulders. “Sometimes, in the dark, things look like other things. Things they shouldn’t. And you’ve got a big imagination and, you know, you’re getting older. I mean, Ms. Pawling’s a little old for you, but—” Marco and Zeke start cracking up and then Sam, who’s had his concerned face on, loses it too.

Sam would have never made a joke like that last year, before he started hanging out with Zeke and Marco. I don’t say anything; instead, I drive my head into his ribs full force. I almost knock him over but he grabs both of my shoulders and pushes me down and I bite the fleshy insides of my cheeks to stop from crying, rubbing my tailbone. He lifts me up with one arm and grabs both of my shoulders, rattling my brain with a few rough shakes.

“Look, Ricky, I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. But whatever the fuck that was over there,” he says, gesturing to Ms. Pawling’s lawn, “You gotta forget about it. You’re always demonizing people, making people into things they’re not. Like, remember our neighbor you tried to convince everybody was a Russian spy? Or thinking that lunch lady was putting rat poison in your food?”

Zeke and Marco have already walked away, not seeming to care that Sam and I are fighting. I take a sharp breath in.

“Sam, please...I’m not crazy, why do you always have to act like I’m crazy?” I can feel my face burning.

“Maybe you’re crazy, maybe not, I don’t care. Just shut up about it and don’t tell mom, ok?”
He turns and starts running to catch up with his friends.

The smaller he becomes the more I realize it isn’t worth trying to get him to believe me, and I wonder for a moment if maybe I am crazy, if I’m trying to make something innocent into something evil. Somehow, the underwear is still balled up in my hand and I let it fall onto the sidewalk.

“Bad, Bad, Bad!” I tell it, and spit on the lacy pile.

When I look over at Ms. Pawling’s garden, the scarecrow is there again, reassembled with its white sheet and two holes aligned as they were before. I wave at her. The sheet moves only slightly, tickled by the wind.
POODLES FOR SALE

Wayne Manns stood on the slanting, sun-chapped stairs of Rudy and Joanna’s ranch. His face was puckered and rough, as though whatever makeup or mask he’d worn on-screen had been rubbed off with steel wool.

“You signed a goddamn contract!” he spat out at Rudy. His fingers tugged at the ends of hair poking out beneath his hat.

“You’re hoarding thousands of dollars worth of dogs for yourself, and for what? Fuck, we gotta get better about background checks.” He gave a sidelong glance to his assistant standing a couple of yards behind him, who was watching guard, anxiously peering toward the backyard every few seconds. Wayne kicked the ground and spat out a tobacco-yellowed glob.

“Please don’t take her, please don’t take her,” Rudy kept saying, “You can have all of the babies back if you just let me keep her.” His lips were trembling.

Queenie was stuck at his side, seeming larger and more loyal than ever. Rudy tucked two fingers beneath her red collar. No one could convince him he’d find something like this again, a connection so magical and unadulterated; Rudy had never been more at peace than with Queenie, the standard poodle who, he was sure, had surpassed his conceptions of what love could be.

“I don’t know what the hell you’ve been doing around here with all these dogs, but I got a bad feeling about it, ok? So you’re gonna give us the bitch, alright?”

“Don’t fucking call her that!” Rudy shouted, clasping Queenie’s long ears in his hands. He’d shifted over so that she sat between his legs.
When Wayne and his assistant drove up to the ranch, Joanna and Rudy were sitting on the porch reading their respective magazines, a rarity as of late, though of course with Queenie hanging over Rudy’s lap.

Now Joanna’s head was in her hands, in disbelief that this was her husband, ashamed and relieved that finally someone else was seeing what she’d been seeing for too long.

Months before, she’d been skeptical when Rudy told her of the infomercial he’d seen, in which a small man named Wayne Manns who wore high-waisted pants and a hefty buckle that looked like it was made of pure gold, stood squarely in the center of the screen and insisted that it would be life-changing: starting your own micro-breeding business. If enough dedicated people could get involved by initiating their own home-based dog breeding, he asserted, we could really change the game. Wayne Manns described how shelters were all the rage these days with young people, that everybody wanted to adopt mutts of unknown origins while there was a decline in pure-breds. In his calm, assuring yet passionate voice he said that misinformation was being spread about breeding everywhere you went, that people were creating dogs with birth defects, that some dogs were turning out with more wolven features and that in some cases there were pups with extra nubs for wings that may or may not have ever grown in. Used the word “demonic”. Crude illustrations cast in a ghoulish grey tone appeared as he described the myths, ones of pugs with fangs; too-long dachshunds that looked like they had been pulled through black holes and stretched like taffy; hounds with piercing red eyes. These images were slashed graphically with red X’s.

“Wrong!” said Wayne. “Lies, all of it. It’s only 1% of all dog breeding nationally that results in deformities like these, but nobody ever tells you that. It’s bad breeding that’s the problem. Don’t be
fooled. The truth is, pure bred are in danger. But with our 1-year plan, you can make a difference in preserving and honoring the uniqueness of one (or more!) of five breeds that are especially in need right now: the Foxhound, the Rat Terrier, the Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, the Beaglier, and the Standard Poodle.”

Would poodles go extinct? Rudy wondered. His eyes were glued wide to the screen; Joanna caught a shimmer in them when a picture of a healthy black poodle swallowed up the whole screen. It was running in perfect circles around a green lawn.

“Isn’t it really true, though?” said Joanna, not looking up from her new project: a white shawl with pale pink hearts. “I’ve heard chihuahuas die in childbirth all the time ’cause they’re so friggin small. And pugs—they can’t breath because of the way they keep breeding ‘em.”

“I don’t know how I feel about this guy either, Joanna, but I think he’s got a point. You never see poodles around anymore. More and more of those doodle-things that are barely even poodle, God only knows what they are!”

He was thinking of Shelley, his childhood poodle who was hit by a Mustang and died right there in the street in front of the house. Mustangs triggered him ever since and the sight of poodles flooded him with memories of Shelley. Once in a blue moon if he saw someone walking their poodle on the street he’d stop them and indulge in several minutes of petting. On his phone he kept a folder of photos he had made Joanna take, ones with his arm wrapped around strangers’ poodles, which he looked back on fondly.
It was a fixation with the texture, Joanna once thought, that must have drawn Rudy to poodles. Their fur—what was it? Curls softer than a baby’s blanket. Sacred as the nativity lamb, it seemed, to Rudy. Something divine: a velvet-plush wonder. Rudy had been a child who always asked for more whipped cream on his Swiss Miss, and in his late fifties, still did. He liked comfort, he was sentimental and nostalgic. In the mornings, he still read the comics in the paper as he toyed with his scraggly beard and nursed a cup of coffee (which was mostly creamer) until it turned cold. He slept with three pillows: two under his head, and one held close to his chest like a lover. Though lately, of course, he’d been sleeping with Queenie in the living room, after Joanna put her foot down and said the dog couldn’t be in the bed anymore.

Rudy had always wanted a dog. Joanna wanted children. They had neither, but they did have several chickens in the yard, whose chicks Rudy cupped in his hands and pressed to his cheek until the hens came after him, pecking angrily at his ankles. From several feet away, Joanna watched lovingly, sprinkling feed in the coop as her husband cradled the little yellow puffs.

Though he’d poked at Joanna all throughout their 25 years of marriage, trying to convince her to at least consider the possibility of welcoming a poodle into their home, Rudy had let up in the last few years. Joanna tried to compensate with her cooking, making lemon-meringue pies, cloud-soft loaves of bread and rich, meaty stews. Rudy accepted the poodle-themed gifts Joanna brought home from estate sales and craft fairs, even though at times they felt like a tease: on the night table next to Rudy’s side of the bed there sat a porcelain poodle lamp, on the kitchen table there were poodle salt and pepper shakers, above the couch hung a portrait of a pink poodle sitting on a green lawn.
There was something demonic about poodles, Joanna thought to herself. The way their owners pampered them like they were part of the royal family, painting their nails and tying bows around their necks, grooming them with sweet-smelling shampoos that must cost a fortune. Dog shows made her skin itch: how could people take themselves so seriously, circling the blue matting of the arena with their chins held so high? Oh, and the way people touched their dogs, pinning their tails up and holding their throats to keep them straight and still as though they weren’t animals, as though they weren’t beasts who could turn on you at any point.

When she was nervous or bored, Joanna found herself fingering the crinkled hook-shaped scarf which was folded into the pouch of skin above her elbow. Animals had never come easy to her, especially not dogs. As a little girl, she’d approached a neighbor’s German shepherd, the one her mother had told her never to mess with. She’d been wearing her new blue dress, the one her mother had stitched three flowers on across the front. The dog had lodged his teeth in her arm, though its owner insisted it was a playful bite. But Joanna had been inconsolable for the rest of the day, and she couldn’t sleep without seeing the shepherd’s jaws, those two fangs thrusting toward her like long, calcified stalactites.

Joanna was no stranger to obsession. The texture thing she saw in Rudy’s love for poodles was comparable to her love of crocheting: Joanna’s hands were always moving with yarn, and this had resulted in the red-white-and-blue crocheted curtains that hung over their short windows, the floral tablecloth, the purple living room throws and of course their bedspread. Rudy—who shrugged off the itchier blankets, spilled soup on the tablecloth and then got frustrated with himself—tolerated all of the yarn and lace because he loved Joanna more than anything, or at least that’s what she thought.
Joanna had never seen Rudy throw himself into something with such passion in a long time, and though she couldn’t put words to it, something about the whole thing made her insides twist. If it weren’t for the money that was promised to come from it, she might have made Rudy stop.

When a shiny-faced young guy who introduced himself as Wayne Manns’s assistant arrived in a van holding a mesh carrier with a small bulge squiggling inside, Joanna knew she’d lose some part of Rudy.

Queenie was ink black with handfuls of curls foaming from her hard, lean body, and she grew quickly, tripling in size within the first few months. Her limbs lengthened and she learned to carry them proudly, swiftly. Each black nail was hard and calcified as ivory and their imprints were everywhere, among clods of dirt in the yard, etched into the wooden steps and the doormat, on the carpeted floors of the living room, the rattan edge at the foot of the bed where she perched, waiting, looking at Rudy expectantly. Her long feet sprang together when she ran, the grass torn and streaked with her running trails.

Rudy worshipped Queenie, pampering her daily.

“What’s the point of all that?” Joanna would ask as her husband knelt down at Queenie’s paws, lacquering each nail with red polish. He’d also taken to giving her haircuts, carving her body so that the shapes of her toned legs were apparent, her ankles were accented with poufs, and the delicate region beneath her tail was clean and smooth.

As she grew, the dog house that Rudy had built in the backyard seemed to shrink, and he suggested Queenie start living in the ranch with him and Joanna.

“Come on, Jo, we have plenty of room!” He said.
It didn’t matter how many times Joanna said no, because one day she came back home from Angelita’s, her arms hung with bags of food, to swan-necked Queenie staring at her from the couch, on top of the blanket of pink and red crocheted medallions.

“Off the couch!” she shouted, but Queenie stayed put, until Rudy walked into the room and Queenie leapt from the couch and stood on two legs, with one arm on each of Rudy’s shoulders.

“Look what I taught her! Isn’t she amazing, Jo?”

Joanna shivered at the length of her. Her neck turned blotchy with the beginnings of hives.

Seeing Joanna’s face, he tried to explain, “I think she’s getting sad out there in the backyard, all alone. I can’t take it, really, seeing how lonely is when I’m not with her.”

The van with the shiny-faced assistant arrived again one day with a male poodle and he corralled Queenie and the male and they did the thing. Rudy was glad that part was over. He looked away when the young guy ushered the two dogs together.

The assistant showed up again when it was time for the birth, but Rudy insisted on being the one to hold Queenie during her labor, to rub her belly and help pull every pup from inside of her.

“I just don’t think it’d be good for her, you know? She’s not too comfortable with other people yet, can’t even get her to warm up to Joanna,” he said to the assistant with a hiccup of a laugh, “so I think it’d be best if you showed yourself out and let me handle this.”

“Look what we did! Look what we’ve made!” Rudy said when the tenth sticky baby slid out of Queenie.

“Ten! Ten! No one ever hears about ten in a litter, that’s rare. You’re a special girl.”

Joanna had left to see her mother that day, and returned, horrified at the sight of the group.
When they reached seven weeks it was time to start putting the listings in the paper, but Rudy couldn’t bring himself to do it.

“This was part of the whole deal, Rudy,” Joanna said. “You have to let go.”

Rudy became a nervous wreck. He threw himself into pretending it was really a business like he’d promised Joanna. He took pictures of the pups with pink ribbons tied around their necks which he printed, but they still sat in a stack in an envelope on the counter, never to be sent to the paper. He even poodled the hedges in front of their house, sculpted them into broad-shouldereded dogs complete with ball-things on their tails. He painted a pink and white sign that said: POODLES FOR SAL, but kept putting off painting that last E, saying it wasn’t good enough to be posted on their lawn yet.

The contract Rudy had signed and sent in to Wayne Manns stated that each micro-breeder must successfully impregnate their bitch at least once a year. If twice was possible, even better. No puppies were to be kept unless the breeder was willing to pay $999 for any they decided not to sell. Outreach and branding, Wayne said in his weekly check-in calls, was important, and it went beyond advertisements in the paper and knocking on doors. The second your bitch gives birth, you gotta be making a hundred calls a day, Wayne said. But Rudy never made any calls.

Joanna stopped crocheting. She slept turned away from Rudy and ate dinner alone in front of the TV, leaving a plate for Rudy every night which got cold, to be nuked when he got back from buying this and that for the puppies or hovering over them and Queenie in the den which had been converted into a poodle nursery.

“You could never give me what I wanted most,” Joanna said to Rudy one day, “a child.
And here we are, with all these little dogs. All these babies, not one of them human. They should be grandchildren. They should be wearing little matching sweaters made by grandma. You should be taking them to the park like people take their little human babies. We should be making them chicken pot pie. I never wanted this. I never want to buy another goddamn pack of that expensive formula again. They were supposed to be gone by now. I want them gone.”

She looked like she was about to cry. “And I want her gone,” she said, pointing to Queenie.

“She made all of this,” she said, her hands jerking all around like broken-winged baby birds.

Queenie looked at Joanna with her black eyes as she spoke and flinched when she flung her arms around.

“Shh, come on,” said Rudy. Queenie flicked her head toward him. “You’re scaring the poor girl.” He loped over to Queenie and stroked her head slowly, gently, and Joanna shook her head and laced her fingers together, letting her hands fall over the impression between her waistband and naval.

From that point on, Queenie and Joanna allowed their relationship to be what it inevitably was, an almost-rivalry. Joanna no longer offered her forced smiles or tried to make Rudy anything special to eat. She started crocheting again, but it was difficult because the texture of the stitched yarn reminded her of Queenie’s fur, and so she tried embroidery. On small hoops she embroidered scapes with pink-leaved trees and lone birds, and bucolic still-lifes where buds were placed in simple china vases and it was always tea time. Mainly, she liked the feeling of repeatedly jabbing the needle into the tough, taut fabric, until her fingers grew tired.

Queenie glowered at Joanna with her hard snout, her slender front legs stretched out before her like an ancient sphinx.
Rudy kept his calls with Wayne Manns short and sweet. Yes, I have a bunch of interested buyers, someone’s coming today to see the pups, pretty soon we’ll need to get Queenie, you know, gotta get her more puppies, Rudy assured him. But the money wasn’t rolling in. So, what’s wrong with them? Wayne Manns kept asking. Something not right with the litter? Wayne Manns took it upon himself to send what he deemed more promising buyers to Rudy, who closed the crocheted curtains and gathered the puppies in the bedroom where he made Joanna hide as he pressed his ear to the door until he heard the people walk away. They never showed, he told Wayne Manns.

Some of the only people Rudy allowed in the poodle pen were two women, maybe sisters, maybe twins, one bouncing a toddler on her hip. When she saw them coming up the drive, Joanna grabbed Rudy’s arm and said,

“Please, Rudy, you know that man will come and take all the puppies away if you don’t let someone else see these freakin things. You’re hogging them! Don’t you think that’s kind of immoral? Didn’t anyone teach you to share?”

“They’ll never find a better home than here,” he said. “They should be with their mother, with us. They can’t get this kinda love from anyone but us.”

“What do you mean, us? You know I’m not equipped for this kind of thing. I’m getting old, Rudy. You’re getting old. Can’t we just be old together?”

The puppies were uninterested in the women. Maybe it was because they looked so similar and the puppies didn’t like it (though the puppies couldn’t know that they themselves looked similar, too). Maybe it was because of the competition they smelled when they saw the fat baby perched on the slightly taller lady’s hip, the baby whose foot Joanna pinched. Queenie perked up when she heard the
women’s clipped laughter and their cooing over her puppies, and the sound of the baby who started
crying when Joanna tickled her. Joanna offered the women tea, but one of them lifted the thermos she
had strapped over her shoulder to show she already had tea as the women said in unison:

“We already have tea.”

Queenie came trotting over a leapt over the pen and dove her snout into the pelvic bone of the
shorter woman. It made a bone sound. The woman jumped and Queenie jumped, the woman backed
away and Queenie lunged toward her and suddenly she was on top of the woman, who wasn’t
laughing. Rudy shouted and took hold of her collar as Queenie slid on paw over the woman’s cheek,
leaving a red streak of dirt. Joanna and the other woman helped hoist her up from the ground. Rudy
dragged Queenie back to the doghouse, striking her hindquarters softly to scold her. Joanna offered the
women tea again but they hurried off to their boxy, cream-colored car.

The one with the baby sat in the passenger’s seat with the baby on her lap. From the front lawn
Rudy saw the two women kiss and he thought, well maybe they weren’t sisters after all.

Others who came to see the dogs included a man with a thin, curly mustache who wore a suit
the color of a rotting eggplant, who mesmerized Queenie and the puppies so much (Queenie moved
each one by their scruffs and placed them in a line for the man, who she watched expectantly, excitedly)
that Rudy had to get down on his knees in the mud and hold Queenie by the ankles to keep her from
following the man, who was unimpressed, back to his car. She tugged and yapped and tore her jaw open
at Rudy in a way he’d never seen before and he watched her, equally horrified by her reaction and
relieved that the man didn’t somehow capture her.
“Let’s go inside,” he said, and dragged Queenie into the house, leaving Joanna deflated in the yard.

Joanna discovered new things each week that were wrong with the house. The gutters needed cleaning; carpenter bees were drilling holes in the eaves; there were mice in the walls, possums under the porch; the brown cloud of a water stain was spreading across the ceiling; the weeds were out of control; the whole place needed a good power-washing.

It had been Rudy who built the house, not long after they’d met at the diner Joanna’s family had owned where he often stopped for lunch between jobs (and which had been shut down after a mouse infestation, and never resurrected) and where she’d worked as a waitress. That was when Rudy was an established handyman in town, when his forearms were sinewy and strong and sawdust stuck to their hairs, when his boots were scuffed and sturdy and Joanna could see how soft he was inside.

Rudy was neglecting the house as much as his own body (even Queenie’s nails were cleaner than his: black dirt was lodged beneath them from digging up anything in the yard that might hurt her paws, and he had acquired “that smell” as Joanna said, one that Rudy couldn’t detect on himself or Queenie but allegedly they shared).

“You’re not a man anymore,” she said to him one day, with a look of disgust at his slobber-marked black t-shirt. He sat there blinking.

Most mornings, Joanna rose from the bed before Rudy did, often woken up by the sound of Queenie’s nails on the linoleum floor in the hall.

“What do you want?” She’d ask, and Queenie would stare back at her as though to say,

“What do you want?”
Joanna whacked Queenie softly on the head with a rolled-up newspaper. This turned into somewhat of a habit. It was her head, then it was her hindquarters, then it was harder, and harder. It was when Queenie was in the way, or standing too tall, or licking the sofa, gnawing on the couch, barking, sniffing the food on the table, or watching Rudy in a way that didn’t sit right with her, or when she was just standing there at all, waiting. Joanna hated the way Queenie waited for Rudy as he came and went, and he hated how they reunited, the saccharine pitch of Rudy’s voice, the long sigh he gave when he bowed down before her and held her in his arms.

“Out! Out!” Joanna would yell, and use whatever she was holding—a broom, a plunger, a carafe of iced tea, or her own feet—to force Queenie down the steps and into the yard.

Joanna set aside a small fraction of her monthly pension to buy her weekly lottery tickets which she played at the dining room table, scratchings falling to the floor in a pile of confetti-ash. In a rare few moments when Rudy wasn’t watching her, Queenie hovered over the scattering of dust, sniffing, and mindlessly, Joanna swung her heavy-soled shoe into the soft curve of Queenie’s side.

Rudy came running when he heard the yelp, and he smacked Joanna where her ear met her cheek.

“How could you do that to her?” he shouted, kneeling down to console Queenie as Joanna held her face in shock. Rudy had never touched her like that before.

The day before Wayne Manns and his assistant showed up at the ranch, and after weeks of no clean laundry, Joanna was carrying a stack of fresh sheets to the bedroom.

When she swung open the door her breath hooked itself inside her throat.

“What are you doing?” was all she could manage, though it was barely a whisper.
Rudy didn’t hear her at first, and she didn’t check to see if he ever looked up, but she knew what she had seen. He was enveloped in Queenie’s fur, right there on the bedroom floor with her, stroking her belly down to the barest part where pink skin showed through.

In the shower, Joanna tugged at the stubs of hair under her arms. She contemplated her razor and imagined the hair growing long, long, long, curling into an endless, brindled stream that wrapped around her body and met the blooming tufts of hair from every other part of her. Her silver eyes and pink lips would still show, her nails would grow and harden into pointed tips and her hands would be bristled and padded and tough. She would splay out on the carpet, the couch, the bed and roll through dust and gravel and nothing would bother her. All of her hair would be infused with her scent: magnolia flowers and brine, nutmeg and a touch of earth. The summer rain would mat her coat down, her skin almost invisible beneath the fur, and she’d shake herself off and try to bite her own tail and she would chase down Rudy and paw-print his face with mud and he would love her like he used to.
Old Skins

The onions that grew in her family’s backyard, my best friend Elise once told me, were more potent than any other onion I’d ever encountered. We were crouched down in the small greenhouse in the Fust’s backyard during one of the final days of our freshman year of highschool, and Elise was harvesting a few bulbs. The onion smell hit you the second you walked into the greenhouse, even then, when most of the onions were still buried in the dirt.

Elise told me that when they were cut open it was like the most powerful onion smell you’d ever experienced times ten, and they’d cause painful tears in the eyes of anyone nearby the second their first layers split. They weren’t the kind of onions used for cooking the average meal, and in fact, the onions the Fusts grew would only be used every five years. That was how their growing pattern worked: they lay dormant for a while, and then slowly began growing, but by every fourth year their growth tripled in speed and they multiplied like houseflies.

They were unusual looking, not like the typical purple, yellow or white onions we kept in a bowl in the kitchen at my house, the ones whose crisp paper wrappings shed like the first slow-falling leaves of autumn. After prodding the dirt she wiggled one out by its white sprout and held it up proudly. It was sheer pink and elongated, shiny and marbled with whitish swirls.

I pinched my nose.

“It looks like penis!” I said to Elise, laughing, but she looked at me like I’d said something very wrong.
“They’ve been in my family for almost two centuries, Lila. We’ve been keeping these alive for generations. My dad and his brothers are the only ones left on the whole planet with this exact breed of onion.”

That couldn’t be true, I thought, but I didn’t say that aloud cause I didn’t want to offend her again.

“And besides,” she added, “how would you even know what a penis looks like anyway?”

“Of course I do!” I said. I’d seen plenty of pictures of dicks.

“Yeah, but you don’t really know what one looks like. I’ve seen a ton on the nude beach my family goes to in Germany.”

“So you’ve seen your dad’s dick? That’s disgusting.”

“Not my dad’s, Lila. He doesn’t come with us. Doesn’t like watching other guys look at my mom. You’re not missing much, though. Penises are like, really ugly.”

“Like long mushrooms,” I said, fingering the dirt-clotted roots of one of the onions in the small pile. “Or deep sea creatures. Or these onions.”

She squinted at me. I saw her mouth twitch—I knew she wanted to laugh, but then her face fell serious again.

“These are sacred. If you say that one more time you better get out or your shitty energy will get all in the dirt and the next batch will be bad.”

I stifled my laughter and tried to keep my mouth shut from that point on.
Each day, more appeared in the greenhouse, practically bursting from the dirt like impatient newborns, and the Fusts took turns gathering crate fulls of them and stored them in the shed. The smaller batches that erupted annually were sent back to friends and family in Germany who anxiously awaited their yearly package. The trip overseas was no concern because the onions were practically self-preserving, keeping for months without refrigeration.

I didn’t know what the Fusts used their proliferation of onions for. Maybe Elise and I were too young to grasp the business of it all—whatever happened five years before when we were no older than ten years old, the last time hundreds of onions were pulled from the dirt of their small greenhouse.

But there was so much else going on around the Fust house at all times that the onions rarely distracted from everything else. We travelled from room to room and around the yard. We layed in the plush coating of summertime grass that made pink impressions on our elbows and calves and made us itch: there, we sank until the sky turned dark blue and hordes of mosquitoes came for our skin like buzzards. Elise and I were busy planning our futures together, deciding what colors the walls of our kitchens would be and how many children we’d have, and other plans that involved no kitchens and no children. We listed and rated and analyzed the boys in our grade, considering who’d finally gotten taller, who’d grown a pubey little mustache, who was in a band.

We sat in her lofted bed with warm honeyed cups of milk. A baby’s drink, I thought, but fitting in a house where childhood seemed suspended. It was in the way the chairs whimsically mismatched; how an uneven sheen of gold was layered on the walls of the dining room, and felted dragonflies strung with tiny lights outlined the doorway connecting the foyer to the living room.
We didn’t spend much time at my house. I liked the way the world shifted from inside the Fusts’s, how small and distant my faded taupe house looked beyond the long stretch of yard between our houses, how the nights stretched on for longer, lights stayed on longer. The low thrumming of her father Karl’s guitar could be heard all around like the house’s heartbeat.

* * *

Lyle was a French exchange student who spent that summer living with the Fusts. He was quiet and lean with many dark moles on his face, neck and arms. He was tall and kept to himself, always bent over a book or hidden in his room in the attic, and Elise was in love with him, at least for the summer. She used what French she knew to flirt with him but he was never amused; she whisked freely around him, jumping at him from behind, flinging her arms around his neck which he awkwardly shirked off. Angelique, her mother, became even more girlish than she already was when Lyle was there, rustling his hair like a dog, doing contortions in the hallways and handstands in the kitchen. Between his dark sidelong glances she glided into splits and flexed her feet over her ears for him.

Lyle spoke English but didn’t show it off much apart from some mumblings here and there. I’d fumbled around him since the moment I’d met him when he kissed me on both cheeks and I’d stood there, confused at the greeting. His presence made me question my own at the Fusts’s. Light-footed Elise and Angelique made me a misshapen form, too slow to keep up with the circuit which spiralled around Lyle.
On a July night that summer I looked through my bedroom window from which I had a clear shot into the bathroom of the Fusts’s attic. I recognized the green thread I saw through the clover-shaped window as a limb of the spider plant that spread across the floor, tendrils of it grazing the tub. I should have been sleeping, but the clover-shape was open and aglow. It was a habit I had, looking at their house lit up in the dark. I looked past their towering garage full of cars—so tall it had a fire escape from which I could see Elise’s cousin Marques hanging, doing pull ups from an iron bar.

I looked past Marques, past the garden and through the attic window. I saw a figure with long blonde hair. At first I thought it was Angélique, then maybe Elise: their straight posture and height were almost exactly the same. The shoulders of the figure on the left were too square, the profile’s nose too severe to be Elise’s. It was Angélique’s bouncy way of moving, too, that became clear in the warm light of the bathroom. She stood by the tub, then ducked down, completely disappearing. Her head bobbed back up and it was then that I noticed the other figure sitting on the edge of the tub, only a puff of dark hair at the edge of the window. A man, I thought. Or a cat. But it couldn’t have been Karl, who was balding and too large to be so out-of-view.

I knew the bathroom well from the times in which Elise would lay shirtless against the cold tile floor while I inspected every bump on her back and made extractions until dots of blood rose. She did the same to my face. Her brows knit together, her pupils grew large when she zeroed in on an imperfection and I trusted her hands, like a sister’s, but especially because they were hers and she was skilled at handling all things precise and small, like removing the impossibly small fragments of glass which now and then rose to the surface of the scars on her forehead. They were pieces of windshield glass from one of the accidents. Angélique had been driving. The pieces were embedded in there, some
more deeply than others, but the doctors told her that her body would reject the fragments with time. Each piece was no bigger than a crystal of sugar, but I tried not to gag when she held them to my face.

Blotchy and raw we’d reappear downstairs to eat pasta with butter and cream. Angelique, who always noticed the angry red marks on our skin, would tell us we were mutilating our bodies. We ate while Elise and her brother fought and tangled their legs together under the table and then I would return home, following the stone trail linking our yards through the dark.

Whatever I’d seen in the bathroom that night was unnamable, and so I thought of glass and lancets, the removal of splinters and peeling curls of dried skin, the dirt that gathered between the ridges of my heels from walking barefoot every summer day and how good it felt to scrub them clean in the sink each evening.

And I thought of Marques, who was a phantom that night, hanging from the bars, silent as the end of his name. Washed with the light cast from the garage he looked like a long white bat, hanging there. Marques was in his late twenties and was constantly doing something physical around the Fusts’s house, taking any excuse to do it shirtless whether it was mowing the lawn or helping Karl with repairing the family’s collection of cars. Like Lyle, he’d stayed in the attic room of the Fusts’s house for a couple of months. But the Fusts liked his knack for fixing things, and so they gave him the garage apartment and he never went back to Europe.

In the summer he tended the jungle of a garden the Fusts cultivated in their backyard, full of large-leaved plants and night-blooming flowers. Marques had a slyness to him and a light, buoyant attitude toward life. He’d joined a small improv circus troupe and prided himself on the magic tricks he learned. He procured pieces of cake and small white mice from his ass crack and liked to hide behind
corners and other places to snag reactions from people. The skin around his eyes crinkled like foil when he smiled, his smiles like long, flat V’s. When he smiled wide it was shark-like, and his mouth seemed to be filled with more teeth than there should be. His smile lines were deep-set. In some ways he looked older than he was. I learned later that his name was spelled Marques, which made more sense than how it was pronounced: Mark. Marques matched the haze of his smell: some mix of leather, car grease, and cologne.

He didn’t have a New Jersey license but the Fusts let him take their cars out. I’d see him pass cars on small winding streets around town with ridiculous speed and jump over speed bumps like hurdles. I’d only been in the car with him once, with Elise, because he insisted on dropping me off at my house around the corner even though I usually just walked home through the yard. Marques took a whole loop through town. When my mother saw the slim red Jaguar pull up in front of our house with Marques’s snaggly smile and dark smudgy eye makeup leaning out of the car window to greet her, she looked at me and said firmly: “Never again.”

She didn’t like Marques’s makeup or his shirtlessness, the way he could be seen from our house doing cartwheels and contortions in the Fusts’s yard, but she especially hated the fact that he was at least twelve years older than Elise and I. She told me many times to be careful around him and to keep my distance. My mother was direct with me but would never take it upon herself to confront Marques or any of the Fusts. I could see her shrinking away at the idea of getting too close to that house like a child at the zoo, afraid that the monkeys or lions would pull her into their habitats. My brother Will called the Fusts the “Eurofreaks”. My mother told him “eccentric” would be a nicer word, but I knew she agreed with him.
“Lila,” she said once, after I’d spent three nights in a row sleeping at Elise’s house. Will and I were sitting at the table across from my mother, both poking at the pudding she’d made from a little box. I pulled the congealed layer of chocolate skin from my bowl with two fingers and laid it flat on a saucer. Her eyes had a sadness to them and wrinkles I hadn’t noticed before. She looked older. “Are we really so boring here that you have to run off to that house all the time?” The “we” she was talking about was herself and my brother Will, who didn’t seem to care if I was home or not. I felt sorry for her but it was true. I was restless at home.

When I was with Elise I felt like something was always about to happen, good or bad, but something. At her house, food tasted brighter and more interesting even if it was simple. It was the way they ate, having dinner at late hours of the night even if there was school next morning. And it was what they ate, too: big meals made of many tiny foods like pickles and small hot dogs and olives and fragrant sauces and miniature pies all surrounding a thick stew or rack of meat. They took their time, sitting at the table for well over an hour as though there was never anything worth rushing for.

Angelique sat looking satisfied as she watched us make the food disappear. The food felt endless and seemed to never fill me up. I always wanted more. I wanted to be at that table for every meal, sitting there and waiting long after Elise was finished and her brother Mo had gone back to his videogames upstairs and Karl returned quietly to the record room where his guitars waited for him, hanging on the wall.
For many years Angelique was a professional dancer. It could be read in the hardened muscles
of her calves, thighs, and arms. She wore colorful jumpsuits as she ran around town, up and down the
spiral staircases of the municipal buildings. She was nearing the age of fifty but looked no older than
thirty-five. Her skin was taut and almost always glimmering with a sheen of sweat, and she seemed to
be continuously in motion.

With me, Angelique was generous and welcoming. She invited me to stay for dinner, to go get
ice cream with the family and brought Elise and I shopping. She loved animals and cared for the many
different pets the Fusts kept over the years, the fish, the rabbits and birds, the rats.

She ate a lot of meat. Meat, and diet coke, but never too many carbs. Her body was hard and
fatless from all the hours she spent swinging around the steel pole installed in the center of the round
room at the front of the house, with its bay windows, red velvet couches and waxed floors. The way she
was able to maneuver herself around the pole was at times unbelievable: in six-inch stilettos, her long
hair hardly sweeping the ground, her arms moving through the air as smoothly as through water.

I had the sense that Angelique, like Elise, was a person of extremes. The tone of one day could
be made up of layers of clothing and scarves, childlike bundles of fluff in cloud-lands where furry
creatures sprung into your palms. On another day, it was a world of leather and glass, red and
diamonds and black, black, black. Vanilla ice cream. Pearls and bones. Shredded meat from smokey ribs
stuck in her teeth. A cup of milky tea. Warm hands that could grow cold as tines.

One night when I was sleeping at the Fusts’s, I was woken up by the sound of thunder and the
flashing pulse of heat lightning. Thirsty, I slipped out of Elise’s bed and went downstairs. The
reflection of the rat cage, which sat in the hall beside the staircase, was dark and wobbly in the mirror.
by the mantle. Rapid clipping noises and other twitchy sounds came from the cage, all the more
unnerving between the flickering of the storm.

I saw the first marshmallow at the foot of the stairs. There was another one about three feet
away, then another on top of the mantle. Another on the railing and one on the dining table and one
on Karl’s amp. I picked up a piece of what I’d thought at first was rat shit and placed it on my tongue.
It melted quickly. Chocolate.

A rattling of pots and pans emanated from the kitchen. Angelique was there in platform
slippers and a slip dress. I saw her reflection in the mirror that sat outside one of the kitchen doors.
Something red was trickling down the front of her dress. There were tiny hot dogs arranged on a plate
which she slathered in yellow mustard and ketchup, chasing each one with a spoonful of relish and a
wash of red Diet Mountain Dew. There were crumbles of cake on the floor. She took chocolate syrup
straight from the bottle followed by whipped cream. I watched her put raspberries on each fingertip
and watched them disappear one by one into her mouth. There was oil heating up on the stove.
Angelique took the saucepan of oil off heat and let it cool on the counter, dipped her hands in the pot
and ran them through her hair, massaging her scalp, and did the same to her legs and arms and then
stretched one leg up on the highest shelf, and wow they were so toned it was crazy, she ate a whole
banana in about fifteen seconds and downed a glass of milk with a sleeve of cookies and crackers with a
can of Easy Cheese. From the fridge she took the leftover spaghetti and meatballs we’d had for dinner
and ate it cold with her fingers which she licked clean one by one, and then with the butt of a large
knife she pounded a little bag of two or three tiny pink pills and snorted the whole pile of powder. It
must have been some kind of emetic. She stood there with the light from the open freezer casting a
ghostly glow across her face for several minutes until her gaze resembled a spiral-eyed animal in a nocturnal trance. Dry-mouthed, I stood there in awe as she fell on all fours and crawled through the kitchen’s other exit toward the bathroom in the little hall. With the smallest stream of water I filled my cup at the kitchen faucet. From the bathroom came violent gagging, coughing, vomiting, and then silence.

* * *

Not long after seeing the figures through the bathroom window I was at the Fusts’s with Elise one night as she was in the bath and I sat reading a book for our English class on the toilet.

“Could you get me a towel?” she asked.

“Give me a minute,” I said, shifting my weight uncomfortably, tossing my wad of toilet paper in the bowl and not bothering to flush. In the second-floor bathroom where we were, there were no towels, and I realized I’d have to go to the linen closet in the attic which was, for that summer, Lyle’s.

“Ugh, do I have to go all the way up there?”

“Please, can you hurry? The water’s getting cold,” said Elise.

In the half-second I stood at the top of the attic stairs I had a clear view through the hinges of the bathroom door. I gathered several things. First, Lyle, looking directly into my eyes. Then his body, naked on the edge of the tub. His torso, his legs sticking out, and a head of long blond hair between them. Angelique, kneeling on the tile, ass perked up on her heels, her curtain of hair sweeping across her back. The spider plant crawling towards her skin. Lyle, seeing me. The smell of soap and bath salts, his long toes, that extra set of nipples, or maybe they were moles, on his chest. His legs sticking out.
The head between them. I grabbed a towel from the linen closet and ran back down the stairs to the other bathroom where I found Elise examining her feet in the tub.

“There you are!” she said. “Why is your face so red? Did you see Lyle?”

“Well, yes” I answered, “with your mother.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, focused on peeling the gummied calluses from her toes.

“Like, together,” I said. “Like in the bathroom doing something, naked.”

Elise looked at me for a long moment, her face drawn, and flung her arm out for the towel but I was empty-handed. I brought her the robe from her room. Standing there naked and shivering, I realized how tall she really was and how her ribs seemed to push through her sides like fingers under cloth.

“Can you please leave?” she asked as she pulled on the robe, ushering me towards the bathroom door before I could respond.

I let myself out of the house and passed through the garden where large moths ate aphids and other pests. There were dozens of them flapping over the big-faced dahlias, lilies and coneflowers, white moonflowers and orchids making a moist, sweet smell so strong it felt like an assault. I stopped to watch the moths and realized they must have been the cause of the humming I heard from my bedroom at night, a thrumming feast.

I heard the waxy sound of shoes on the wet grass behind me. Warm hands grabbed me by the waist. I drove my elbow into the body behind me—it was Marques.

“Fuck!” I screamed, and he let go.
Marques was bent over, holding his side in pain but laughing all the same, and I took off, walking fast until I reached my bedroom door.

When I made it home I felt my thighs shaking. I thought, is that how those things happen, in white attic bathrooms with curtainless windows? I would—could—never. I imagined things like that in low-lit bathrooms filled with stoney basement smells, bathrooms with black grit and red paint-slashings on the walls. It would never be me up there, crouched over, naked, dark hair swishing.

It happened too quickly for me to know if Angelique had seen me standing there. So what—did they return to their respective bedrooms, Angelique wrapped in a towel like she’d just emerged from the shower, Lyle with his unsmiling face? Who would he tell about _Angélique, la maman_?

I called Elise until she blocked my number. I called the Fust family phone which went unanswered most of the time, except for once when Elise’s little brother Mo picked up but Elise must’ve come and tackled him, because I heard bits of yelling about not answering the phone if it was “her number”, and then the line went dead. Hearing Elise’s voice made everything inside of me constrict; for a moment I felt a wash of hope, excitement, and then just _you bitch_.

Lyle flew back to France at the end of the summer and we returned to school. I saw Elise laughing with boys I didn’t recognize in the hallways, boys who must have been older, with broader shoulders and real stubble. Maybe by then she’d forgotten about Lyle, or had at least moved on and would quit blaming me for her own screwed up mother.

From my bedroom window I tried to catch Elise moving through her house.
At school she looked past me. Wearing dark tights, a big leather bag slung over her arm, her nails were as hardened and sharp as the face she wore when she looked at me. I’d only seen this side of her in small doses before—the way she’d go silent for several minutes if I said something she didn’t like, the disapproving looks she’d shoot me. But those moments were fleeting and melted away as fast as they occurred, and soon enough she’d be linking arms with me, braiding my hair, and we’d be walking home together like always. I answered the phone immediately whenever Elise called. Didn’t she know I’d forget it all for her, I’d pretend it had never happened, that Lyle had never even existed?

I knew it wasn’t really me she resented. It was an entanglement of shame and horror at the fact that the thing had been seen at all. But the shame of my having seen her mother with Lyle was injected with something else, a bruised envy that it was her mother in the bathroom that night and not her.

Before, I’d been a place of refuge for Elise. Once Elise had stood at my back door against the purple backdrop of sky, her yellow house glowing far behind her. She’d held her bare arms close to her body in the cold.

“It’s my mother,” she said. “It’s like torture there.”

She walked right in without saying anything else. She went over to the counter and pulled out a piece of bread from the bag. She started looking around for butter and it occurred to me that moving around the Fust house was second nature to me. I knew where to find most things, yet I always thought of myself as a guest, never too comfortable. Elise seemed at ease in other people’s houses, even those she hadn’t spent a lot of time in.

I had the feeling then that she was this mutable thing, someone who would leave our town one day. Maybe it’d be even sooner than I thought. She’d probably travel to Greece and Japan and Turkey
and meet a bunch of men. She’d return with ornate rugs and a new boyfriend every year, or maybe she wouldn’t return at all. I wondered if I’d still be here in forty years like my mom, who’d grown up in this house and graduated from our highschool in 1981. The house had suddenly seemed smaller than it already was as I watched Elise land in my grandmother’s old rocking chair, her folded legs reaching far out on each side.

“So what happened with your mom?”

She told me that Angelique had been measuring Elise’s waist every week in front of a mirror, and that today Angelique told her she’d widened an inch.

“Sometimes it hurts,” she said. “It’s like she wraps it around too tight, like it’ll make me smaller.”

I imagined the measuring tape digging into Elise’s skin, leaving pink marks all around her waist.

My mother never commented on my body. We didn’t talk about clothes or adornment. She was small and round with grey eyes and delicate wrists. She didn’t ask if I liked anyone in school, she didn’t talk about boys or men, she didn’t date. I told Elise I was sorry that her mom was measuring her, but I couldn’t think of more to say. I kept assuring her: Oh, Elise, you’re not fat. Look at yourself. And every time I said it, the words felt stickier and wrong.

She stayed fixed with the same frown I’d noticed on her face more and more, one of plaintive disappointment. I remembered our eleven year old selves, dresses down to our knees, sweaters tied around our waists. During recess we sat far away from the others, our knees bumping together, holding small things we had found. Elise once brought a music box to show me. It was wooden with a pearlescent top and gold engraving, the inside lined with crushed velvet. She opened the box and I saw
that it was empty except for a tiny wooden figure, a little ballerina. Her tiny pink lips and blackdot eyes were chipping. I reached out to touch her with my index finger but Elise pulled it away from me.

“No, you can’t touch it,” Elise said. “It’s too delicate.” Elise pulled the box away and closed it softly. I’d felt ashamed for trying to touch it, angry that she could withhold something from me.

* * *

Walking home alone one day, I thought of Marques and wondered if he’d stay at the Fusts’s forever, after Angeliqie and Karl died, when he’d be as wrinkled as one of the dehydrated onions stored in the shed. My mother had said he seemed like a drinker, that he didn’t do anything with himself but gamble with his circus friends, who she mentioned carefully as though they were pornographers. I imagined Marques inside his garage apartment. I’d only been inside once when Elise had brought me to have Marques teach us how to play poker. The walls were red and everything was smoke-drenched. I didn’t pay attention to the rules, never caught on to any card game. All I could think was that Marques probably masturbated a lot and used his white tank tops to clean himself up.

I shuddered just like I always did when I caught myself thinking about things I shouldn’t, just like I did in the early mornings when I was still in bed, only half awake, and the images slid into my mind. The more I tried to unthink them, the quicker they seemed to re-emerge from the back of my mind, as though it was a game where the intervals tightened, speeding up in overdrive like a broken tape. I repeated the moment I saw between Lyle and Angeliqie, but mostly what I felt in my own body: the way my legs seemed to unravel down the stairs as I hurried back to the bathroom where Elise
was waiting, the sense of cold and hot whorling inside me. It was like I’d tried to open a stranger’s car, thinking it was someone else’s, and set off an alarm over and over again.

Angelique seemed like an unstoppable force. I wondered if anything stood in the way of her and any other man or boy, if she could steal one of Elise’s future boyfriends, just like an actress I’d read about online. Karl was older than Angelique. Maybe they didn’t sleep together anymore. He seemed sadder to me now, even more of a shadow-figure than before. I felt guilty when I saw him from afar now, feeling more than Angelique seemed capable of feeling.

Before, we liked to play dress-up. Elise had a lot of clothes, and sometimes Angelique let us look through her old armoire where there hung dusty dresses with fluted sleeves and open backs, a white corset with red piping I felt too embarrassed to try on, black garters, vests of leather and fur, boa scarves, accordion collars and bolo ties, large men’s shirts, striped knee socks, feather hats stuffed into hat boxes, netted and fingerless gloves that stretched over our elbows, and a lattice fixture where there hung chains and suede ties, chokers of silken and bejeweled textures, necklaces heavy with fat and faceted stones and charms like forgotten medals of honor.

Elise and I gently nudged each other out of the way to see ourselves in her full-length mirror. We painted our lips with vampish colors, brushed dark powder below our cheekbones to give the illusion that our faces were made up of only angles.

Elise held a lighter to an eyeliner pencil to make it soft and we coated our eyes in the black smudge, drew dark red points where our top lips turned into cupid’s bows. Sometimes I cleaned off the makeup before I went home, sometimes I didn’t, though my mother always noticed that stained, bitten look of my lips.
I tried on the clothes that covered more flesh: dark wrap dresses, wide lace shawls. What I really enjoyed, anyway, was looking at the clothes and jewels and touching each and every one of them, feeling the textures of satin and fuzz between my fingers. That evening I felt like trying something new. Around my neck I tied a red velvet choker studded with black stones. I chose a black bustier top with lace that itched my sides. My breasts were pushed up like the girls at the Renaissance Faire that my father had taken my brother and I when we were very little. Elise tightened the lacing on my back until the underwire dug into my skin. I didn’t complain but frowned in the mirror.

“You should wear it!” said Elise. “Really, your collarbones look so nice. I’ve always been jealous of them. You look so pretty.”

They hadn’t occurred to me as anything beyond bones. Her eyes glimmered with something like jealousy, something like lust.

“You can have them,” I said. I could take a scalpel to my chest, make a fine slit; slip the long thing out and do the same to her. We’d trade bones.

“See, there’s such a straight line from there to there,” she said, pointing from my shoulder to my solar plexus. I looked at the same place on her body, which seemed almost exactly the same as mine.

An urgent knock at the front door tore me from the bloody transaction.

My mother stood on the Fusts’s porch in a loose dress the color of drying mud.

“Mom, what are you doing here?”

“You wouldn’t answer any of my calls. Where is your phone? I didn’t know where you were. You have to start telling me where you’re going,” she said. I could tell she was trying to stay calm so I wouldn’t be embarrassed.
“What are you wearing?” She asked.

I looked down at the lace clinging to my stomach and pinching the space between my pelvic bone and thigh, and my hand flew to the velvet around my neck.

“What are you wearing?” I said.

Angelique came trotting in.

“These two were just playing dress-up,” she said to my mother. A ruddy blush filled my mother’s cheeks.

“Very fun,” she said, unamused. “Now please change, Lila. It’s time to come home. I need you to change the litter box and help me with dinner. My back is hurting again.” She gave Elise and Angelique a tight smile and shifted her weight.

I changed back into my other clothes, leaving the lingerie hanging in the bathroom. I crumpled the velvet band into my pocket.

It only took walking a few steps away from the house for my mother to let out a low, pained laugh.

“Is that what you girls like to do together? Dress up like hookers? That’s the big draw?”

“I don’t get why you hate Elise so much.”

“I do not hate Elise. I can’t hate a teenager. I just think her mother doesn’t seem to care what her daughter could become. She seems...controlling. She puts thoughts in her daughter’s head that a mother shouldn’t. Elise is going to resent her one day if she doesn’t already. It’s just a matter of time before she runs away or starts doing drugs...” She paused.
“There was a little girl I babysat when I was in college whose mother made her anorexic. She left the smallest portions for her dinner and hid the rest of the food away. Never even offered me anything. They were a wealthy family, they could afford all the food they wanted. But she quartered everything to make it look like the plates were fuller than they were, like it was the Depression. These tiny sandwiches with big green garnishes on the side. Imagine starving your own child. It was heartbreaking. The little girl thought it was normal that she went to sleep with pains in her stomach.”

“So what did you do about it?” I asked.

She looked taken aback. “What did I do? Well I brought some crackers along with me sometimes. That was the best thing I could do.”

“But what about her mother? Did you ever say anything to her?”

“Of course not. It was none of my business. I was just the babysitter.”

“You’re a hero. You know, Angelique doesn’t starve anybody. She actually makes really really good food. That’s why I’m always there for dinner,” I said. “She’s really nice to me actually. It’s not like you’ve tried to get to know her, tried to make some family friends or something like other people around here.”

“So you want to be normal now? You want to be like other families? I thought everyone around here was too boring for you. You think you’re better than everybody else. That’s how your father was. Always wanted us to be somewhere else, anywhere but where we were. It was like he was constantly ready to jump up and leave if I didn’t come up quick with something to entertain him, to keep him around. It was never enough—he wanted to go on vacations we couldn’t afford. He lived on another plane. That’s why he’s with that girl in Hawaii.”
“You take one thing and make it about everything else!” I said loudly. We had reached our backdoor. I left my mother in the kitchen and ran down the basement stairs, the sharp smell of cat shit hitting my nose.

* * *

In the dream, Elise and I were sitting on her porch, surrounded by the humid summer air. The sky—which I could feel but couldn’t see—was swollen and green, the way it looks before a summer storm. We were talking, though I didn’t know what about. I couldn’t hear the words coming out of our mouths. Her hair slowly turned from yellow to ash-blonde, then to grey. It began to recede. A mirror appeared behind her but reflected the front of her face just as I saw her. Her face had become more cartilage than skin. And suddenly there was a baby there, in her lap. It couldn’t have been hers, she was too old. Too old and too young. A baby with dark moles around its neck and dark brown eyes set on me. Swaddled there, in her arms, I understood that the baby boy was Lyle.

Strands of Elise’s silver hair slipped into the wind like cornsilk. Her bony hands curled around little Lyle, caging him like ribs, and he began to cry. She held him tightly to her chest and patted him and I had the sense she was cooing to him softly, that she was already aware of the woman who then burst from the Fusts’s front door. My mother—no, Lyle’s mother, in the dream-vessel of my mother—in checkered pants. I was sure it was Lyle’s mother, if he had one. My mother’s face was both hers and not hers, unfamiliar and new in the way the reverse image of a photo is.
She took the baby from old Elise’s arms, and Lyle stopped crying. I woke with an acrid taste in my mouth. I’d bitten my cheek while sleeping, I realized, as I swished water and found my spit mixed with blood.

* * *

Early in December I saw the crisscross of deer tracks in the snow from my bedroom window. The cloven imprints led my eye to the note, a torn piece of paper placed on slate, careful and sparse but written in glittering gel pen the color of unripe limes.

_Lila:_

This Saturday at 10PM, my house. Please come.

-E

How stupid, how strange, I’d thought when I first saw it. The note was cryptic and ungiving. In response, I tried calling Elise again, but had no luck. Against my will, something within me softened; a sliver of forgiveness, of relief, pulled me from myself too quickly. There was this pink haze over everything: the rosy image of her I had in my mind was phasing back in, as the sky and the air around me was literally shifting, becoming slightly more pink each hour for the rest of the day, and I felt tricked. Both my mind and the atmosphere felt infused with a sweet neon sap, until it dissipated.

The smell—and the crying—began the day after I found the note.
It was a rich, thick smell, metallic and sour, and it curled into the street and through the windows of the other houses in our neighborhood. Neighbors stuffed towels in the cracks and under their doors and moved their furniture so it pressed against the wallpaper to prevent it from peeling. People wore goggles when they left their homes and so did their dogs, to lessen the burning and quell the unstoppable pools of tears. Some carried spray bottles of cold milk to mist their skin and calm the rashes and blisters that began forming.

Our neighborhood cried for days. No one who lived within two blocks of the Fust house could stop crying from morning through night. My mother’s eyes were perpetually puffy and red and she kept a cold washcloth over her face at all times, and I, less bothered by the smell, took a few extra showers to alleviate the mild burning I experienced.

The real pain was the incessant unstoppable crying that went on like a broken siren, making me lightheaded with a sort of insanity that pulled me from my physical body and left me drifting through the daily motions. School was forgotten because I could not wake up from the fog that wrapped around my head like cotton. My mother left early in the mornings for work despite the lack of sleep and left me to call the school, insisting, in the best imitation of her voice I could manage, that I had the flu. In the neighborhood, the nights were long and full of weeping that ricocheted off the cement walls. Babies cried louder than usual at the sound of the others’ crying, dogs cried because of the babies’ crying, and cats shredded the walls and jumped from third-story windows to escape the unbearable irritation of it all.

I couldn’t tell if it was getting tangled up with my resentment toward Elise, but I had a feeling from the day the smell started that it had something to do with the Fusts. I couldn’t imagine any of our
other neighbors, families with their small kids or any of the old widows being the cause of something so intense and unreal.

* * *

I arrived before anyone else. Elise let me in, but didn’t say much until we were up in her room. Elise wore a stretchy, almost transparent dress that went from her neck to her ankles, with soft shoes shaped like cloven hoofs. *What the hell is all that?* I thought, and looked down at my own sweatpants and suddenly felt very unprepared.

I was sure this was all a stiff form of forgiveness but I felt silly, being led around by her, having her call the shots as always. But I thought it would be worth it: something was about to happen, I was going to be let in on something special.

“I just didn’t know who else to tell,” she said, and the slight desperation in her tone made me feel both important and foolish. She explained that a party was about to take place, and that she finally knew what the onions had been for all along.

My instinct had been right, I found, when I saw Angelique hovering over a large steaming vat, pots of all sizes covering the floor and every surface in the kitchen, filled to their brims with layers of pinkish onions floating among sudsy foam. My mom would have fainted already, I was thinking, just from the sight of it, not to mention the pungent steam that coiled around the house. I didn’t understand how it was possible that I was more or less immune to the smell as the Fusts were, how, unlike my mother and brother and the rest of the neighborhood, my face wasn’t bloated from crying.
Elise said the past few days had been normal for her family, that they’d gone on doing their things, Angelique spinning around her pole in the living room, Karl playing his guitar and Mo building elaborate mazes for the rats to race through, all while taking turns tending to batches of onions. She said it was like her house was the eye of a hurricane, that there was something about the way the onionmilk traveled from the kitchen and dispersed that when it hit the air of the outer world, it became stronger. The heaviest and most potent strains of the smell seem to be those which were pulled into the atmosphere of the neighborhood the fastest, and while the neighborhood sobbed for days because of the smell sticking to the air, the Fust house held only a trace of it, and seemed as mild as milk compared to the rest of the neighborhood.

“I can already feel the elasticity,” said Angelique, taking a deep breath of the steam and flipping over into a backbend.

The house was steaming hot. I felt a roiling inside of me. The Fusts had set fires in every room with a fireplace, which was most of them: the woodstove in the kitchen, the fireplaces in the bedrooms, the living room, and one of the bathrooms.

Elise brought me to her room.

“What can we have you wear?” she thought aloud.

I watched her eyes move over me, business-like, as though the past few months hadn’t happened. She began going through her closet.

“Elise,” I said. “Why am I here? What is this?”

My question was never answered with words. It all just started to happen around me.
It began at midnight and did not stop until midnight the next day. The event seemed to be considered a purification party of sorts, a re-set, a cleanse. It was like New Year’s, I thought, though with more dancing and a lot more onion. The doorbell did not stop ringing as friends from all over the world who had flown in arrived, dressed in skin-tight suits and muted colors of fine mesh stretched over all their parts. Most wore polarized sunglasses. Some had their hair slick with oil and wound it up in tight buns and styles with clips and pins.

There were introductions:

“This is Gustav.”

“This is Frank.”

“This is Mina.”

“This is Zina.”

“This is Nina.”

“This is Loli.”

“This is Zoli.”

My brother and mother would think that the Fusts were normal compared to the friends who arrived at their house that night. Gustav was a taxidermist that wore his taxidermied specimens. A petrified snake was wrapped around his neck, its tail set deeply down its throat. His wife, Zina, wouldn’t take her hands off of him. They both looked at me with electric green eyes. Zina’s hip-length hair wrapped around her body like Lady Godiva. Her long fingernails gripped Gustav, and with them she stroked my face.

“How pretty you are!” she said.
A cold feeling wound around my stomach.

Marques followed Elise and I from room to room, hanging around the walls. Everytime I glanced at him he replied with a wink. His cup full of Glühwein stayed full. When I stepped outside for cool air, I turned and found him behind me.

“I always thought you were so beautiful,” he said to me.

He wore an all-white outfit. A trickle of Glühwein had run from his white collar down the front of his shirt. I tried to hide the tremors I felt building in my hands. He wouldn’t break eye contact, but I smiled through the silence, swallowing the acidity in my throat. His calloused hand brushed against my elbow as I pushed past him, back into the haze of the party happening all around me.

The vat of Glühwein, deep red, spicy and fragrant with citrus and cinnamon, was divided into cups among the guests. They were drinking fast. Like the others, I held a glass of water in one hand and a cup of Glühwein in the other. I drank the water to keep my hands busy but took small, slow sips of the warm wine that singed my tastebuds.

“Drink both as fast as you can!” Angelique had directed.

Soft music played throughout the house and I found that in each of several rooms there was a different instrument, each being played, I gathered, by Karl’s musician friends. Tall hulking men, one with a long beard and tiny sunglasses on, another with a jet-black mullet. I didn’t like what they were playing—the constant tension and release of it, how it boomeranged off of the cavernous rooms of the Fusts’s house and throbbed in my ear no matter where I went, demanding to be heard from every corner. The music thickened in the dense air, each miniscule molecule of humidity swelling with the clamor of it. And the song—it took me at least half an hour to realize that it was all the same song, with
only a few slight variations scattered around the same thrusting loop. Over and over it played softly until it sunk into the skin of the house as well as my own. It became indecipherable, untrackable. Was it just one note? Were there several? I choked on it. Absent-mindedly I stood in front of one of the men, a bassist, the bearded one with the sunglasses. I couldn’t see where his eyes were but they seemed to be set on the floor, unaware of my standing there. I watched, transfixed, as his fingers bounced over the same places on the neck of his instrument like he was weaving something. But I felt that my ears were underwater, unable to attach his finger movements to the music ringing around me, the loop so perfectly endless I wondered if I’d imagined the music to begin with.

The energy of the party was tight and wound as the calyx of a flower as Elise grabbed me by the elbow and drew me into the round room where the guests braided together and began dancing, synchronized as though they’d rehearsed for weeks. I forced my body to move along with the others, squaring my hips and flicking my feet out rapidly, sweeping the floor with my toes and spinning with my arms crossed over my chest.

The mirrors all around the room amplified the wiggling candle flames, their flow of wax running to the floor, and the never-static limbs of the Fusts’s and their friends, whose eyes flashed in the mirrors in a frenzy of twirls and turns. I caught glimpses of myself, the ends of my hair curling upwards like the candle flames, a halo of frizz rising like mohair.

In the convective cloud of lamplight and fire reflected in every direction we were all sweating, really sweating. Beads of sweat sprang from our bodies. I felt them first from the others around me—I swore that the cold saline drops that landed on my upper lip had flown from the wet ends of Gustav’s
oiled hair. But it became harder to tell whose sweat belonged to who in the forming mist. I realized that I, too, was perspiring, more than I ever thought I was capable of.

The floor was slick with sweat and residual oils, makeup streaking along the wood. We started to skate, sliding round the room on our bare feet. In rhythmic rotation, as though on a schedule, people ran from the room to drink more Glühwein and urinated through the tunnels which opened up from small doors in the walls and led to the garden in the yard.

Marques tossed back the Glühwein like it was water and his eyes rolled toward me here and there. I tried my best in the small, round room to keep myself in a pocket of women. But Marques grabbed me by the elbow and spun me into his chest and there seemed to be three of him: one bobbing from side to side, one turning, and one looking at me, as drops of sweat clung to my eyelashes, blurring my vision. Three greasy glow worms moving through the thick air. Our bodies were feverishly warm but his lips felt as cold and sharp as icepicks when he kissed me. I pushed him away and watched my body throw itself out of the room and I vomited into the mouth of one of the funnels shooting into the garden.

People were returning to the room with peels of onions in their hands which they rubbed on their skin tossed onto the floor. It didn’t matter that people slipped on the onion skins—as they fell, they laughed and caught onto the legs of the ones who were still circling the room and pulled them down. I let myself slip onto the floor next to Elise. Everyone was rolling around. It was early morning.

During the inevitable sluggish period, the dense air, made of mingled woodsmoke and sweat, began slipping under the doorway cracks and bubbled up through the chimney, and the house stiffened and dried out again. So did the people. Those around me shuddered and the whites of their
eyes grew whiter. Pieces of clothing were strewn in wet piles. A few people’s nipples were patched up with tape, the others were bare. Some people hung over their knees, hiding their genitals as their skin started cracking, splitting away in seams.

New hands burst through their old hands as though they were being ungloved, fresh feet broke through and toenails and fingernails popped off and ricocheted off the metal pole and the mirrors—ding! ding! ding! I shielded my eyes. Barrettes, wedding rings, and other accessories fell to the floor, along with the involved hairstyles which peeled off like wigs. I thought I saw Gustav’s snake, which had appeared by my feet, move with a jolt of life.

I looked down at my own body: nothing was happening. A puddle of sweat had gathered beneath my feet. I didn’t remember taking off my sweatpants, but I stood there in my underwear, suddenly feeling colder though every muscle in my body was soft and relaxed.

I realized I hadn’t cried in many months, not even when I bled. But as I watched Angelique dancing—solo, slowing down each second until she fell to the floor—and I thought again of summer, of bathrooms and the bodies and Lyle, I cried. I cried not for Elise and how faraway she felt from me, but for Lyle. I thought of how alone he was in that attic, how little he spoke, how he stared at the floor as though he was reading it.

The figures that emerged from their old skins had unformed spines which glowed neon through their translucent skin. They rose, twirling in haphazard waves. They were bald, their eyes larger than before, their ribs and fingernails soft. The piles of old skins sank like worn and matted pelts of mink and ermine and began fizzling in the heat of the remaining fires and started to liquefy, all of the colors of skin and hair and garments marbling as they became one slow-moving molten drip that
found its way out the door without a scuff or stain left on the floor. It was almost midnight again, and every window and door had burst open and the guests were leaping out of every orifice of the house.

I watched my friend Elise as she dove out of a window from the side of the house, onto the driveway. What was she? I couldn’t locate her skinpile, only a few tiny glass shards on the floor, like jewels.

Elise had once asked me, playfully: *Who are you? I mean who are you, really? I feel like I don’t know anything about you.*

She had been right.

Goggled and sheathed, the neighbors peeked through their blinds as the figures ran freely through the streets, tufts of new hair sprouting from their heads and streaming behind them like flags. I didn’t care where they were running. I thought I would stay behind the glass of the Fusts’s like the neighbors in their houses, but I didn’t. I took off after Elise into the backyard.

When I found her huddled in the pocket of frostbitten trees where our yards met, I sat down in front of her. And though her head was in her hands, her skin cold from the sweat-tapping, I took her thin body in my hands and I shook her. My fingers curled around her arms which were brittle as kindle. My sad, dry friend. My hollow friend, made up of only bones. I shook her until our skulls clapped together.
Mouthful of Birds

Translation of “Pájaros en la boca” by Samanta Schweblin

I turned off the TV and looked out the window. Silvia’s car was parked in front of the house, with the headlights on. I thought that maybe I wouldn’t answer, but the bell rang again: she knew that I was home. I opened the door.

— Silvia

— Hi — she said, and walked in before I said anything—.

We need to talk.

She gestured to the couch and I obeyed, because sometimes, when the past knocks on the door and treats me like it did four years ago, I’m a moron all over again.

— You aren’t going to like this. It’s... it’s a lot— she checked the time—. It’s about Sara.

— It’s always about Sara.

— You’re going to say I’m exaggerating, that I’m a crazy person, all that stuff. But today there isn’t time. You’re coming home right now, you have to see it with your own eyes.

— What happened?

— Besides, I told Sara that you’re coming, and so she’s waiting for you.

We sat in silence for a moment. I thought about what would be the next step, until Silvia frowned, got up and went to the door. I took my coat and left after her.
Outside the house looked as it always did, with the grass recently cut and Silvia’s azaleas hanging from the balconies of the first floor. We got out of the car without talking. Sara was in the chair. Although by that year she had already finished classes, she was dressed in her highschool uniform, which fit her like those schoolgirls in porn magazines. She sat with her back straight, knees together with her hands on them, concentrated on some point on the window or in the garden, a posture that reminded me of her mother’s yoga exercises. She had always been pretty pale and thin, but now she looked healthy. Her legs and arms seemed stronger, as though she had been working out for many months. Her hair shone and her cheeks had a slight blush. When she saw me walk in she smiled and said:

—Hi, dad.

Though my little girl was really a sweetheart, the two words were enough to understand something was wrong with her, something surely related to her mother. Sometimes I think that maybe I should have brought her with me, but almost always not. A few feet from the TV, next to the window, there was a cage. A birdcage—seventy, eighty centimeters—; hanging from the ceiling, empty.

—What is that?

—A cage—Sara said, and smiled.

Silvia gestured to me to follow her to the kitchen. We went to the large window and she turned to make sure that Sara wasn’t listening to us. She was still upright in the chair, looking toward the street, as though we’d never arrived. Silvia spoke to me in a low voice.

—Look, you’re going to have to take this calmly.

—Stop fucking with me. What happened?

—I haven’t eaten since yesterday.
—Why are you putting this on me?

—So that you can see it with your own eyes.

—Ah...So you’re crazy?

She said we should get back to the living room and pointed to the chair. I sat facing Sara. Silvia left the house and we watched her pass the window and enter the garage.

—What’s wrong with your mother?

Sara shrugged. Her straight black hair was tied in a ponytail, with bangs that almost reached her eyes. Silvia returned with a shoebox. She held it at her right side, with both hands, as though it was something delicate. She went to the birdcage, opened it, and from the box took out a tiny sparrow the size of a golf ball, put it inside the cage and closed it. She tossed the box on the ground, kicked it to the side, next to nine or ten similar boxes piled up under the desk. Then Sara got up, her ponytail shone around her neck, and went to the cage skipping, like girls five years younger than her do. With her back to us, on her tiptoes, she opened the cage and took the bird out. I couldn’t see what she did. The bird screeched and she struggled with it for a moment, maybe because the bird was trying to escape. Silvia covered her mouth. When Sara came back to us the bird wasn’t there. Her mouth, her nose, her chin and her two hands were covered in blood. She smiled bashfully, her giant mouth curled and opened, and her red teeth made me jump. I ran to the bathroom, shut the door and vomited in the toilet. I thought that Silvia would follow me and start with the blame and orders from the other side of the door, but she didn’t. I washed my mouth and face, and stood at the mirror listening. Something heavy came down from upstairs. The front door opened and closed several times. Sara asked if she could take the photo from the shelf with her. Silvia answered yes, her voice far away. I left the bathroom trying not
to make noise and I slipped into the hall. The front door was wide open. Silvia put the cage in the backseat of my car. I took a few steps with the intention of leaving and yelling a few things at them, but Sara came out of the kitchen and toward the street and I stopped short so she wouldn’t see me. They hugged. Silvia kissed her and got her in the passenger’s seat. I waited for her to come back and shut the door.

—What the fuck?
—You’re taking her.

She went to the desk and began crushing and folding up the empty boxes.

—Holy God, Silvia, your daughter is eating birds!
—I can’t do it anymore.
—She eats birds! Did you see her? What the hell does she do with the bones?

Silvia continued staring at me, unmoved.

—I suppose she swallows them too. I don’t know if the birds...
—she said, and kept staring at me.

—I can’t bring her with me.

—If she stays I’ll kill myself. I’ll kill myself and before that I’ll kill her.

—She eats birds!

Silvia went to the bathroom and locked it. I looked outside through the bay window. Sara waved at me happily from the car. I tried to calm myself. I thought of things that would help me take a few clumsy steps toward the door, praying that time would be enough to return to being a human that is common and ordinary, a neat and organized guy capable of standing in the supermarket in front of
the display of cans, confirming that the chickpeas he is carrying are the best. I thought about things like
if I know of people that eat people, maybe eating live birds was not too bad. Also from a naturist point
of view it’s much healthier than drugs, and socially much easier to hide than a pregnancy at thirteen.
But I think even the car handle kept repeating she eats birds, she eats birds, she eats birds, just like that.

I brought Sara home. She didn’t say anything during the trip and when we arrived she put her
things down alone. Her birdcage, her suitcase—that we kept in the trunk—and four shoeboxes like the
ones Silvia had brought from the garage. I couldn’t help her with anything. I opened the door and
there I waited for her to come and go with everything. After showing her that she could use the room
upstairs, and giving her a few minutes to set up, I had her sit down facing me at the dining room table.
I prepared two coffees. Sara put her cup to the side and said that she didn’t drink brews.

—You eat birds, Sara—I said.

—Yes, dad.

She bit her lips, embarrassed, and said:

—So do you.

—You eat live birds, Sara.

—Yes, dad.

I remembered Sara at five years old, sitting at the table with us, raptidly devouring a pumpkin,
and I thought that we would find a way to solve this problem. But when the Sara facing me smiled
again, and asked me how I would feel swallowing something moving and hot, something feathery and
footed in my mouth, I covered it with my hand as Silvia had done, and left her alone facing the two
coffees, untouched.
Three days passed. Sara was in the living room the whole time, sitting straight in the chair with her knees together and her hands on top of them. I left early for work and passed the hours on the internet consulting the infinite combinations of the words bird, raw, cure, adoption, knowing that she was still sitting there, watching the garden for hours. When I got back home, around seven, and I saw her just as I had imagined her all day, the hairs on my neck would rise and I felt like going out and leaving her locked inside, hermetically sealed, like those insects that I captured as a boy and saved in glass jars until the air was gone. Could I do it? One time as a boy, I saw a bearded woman who held mice in her mouth. She held them for a while, a tail moving itself between her closed lips, while she walked before the crowd smiling and directing her eyes above, as though it gave her great pleasure. Now I thought of this woman almost every night, tossing and turning in bed unable to sleep, considering the possibility of sending Sara to a psychiatric center. Maybe I could visit her once or twice a week. Maybe Silvia and I could take turns. I thought of those cases where the doctors suggest complete isolation of the patient, keeping them away from their family for months. Maybe it would be a good option for everyone, but I wasn’t sure if Sara could survive in a place like that. Or maybe she could. Either way, her mother wouldn’t allow it. Or she would. I couldn’t decide.

On the fourth day Silvia came to see us. She brought five shoeboxes which she left next to the front door, inside. Neither of them said anything about it. She asked for Sara and gestured to the upstairs room. Then she sat down alone. I offered her coffee. We had it in the living room, in silence. She was pale and at times her hand shook, the cup clinking on the saucer. Each of us knew what the other was thinking. I could have said This is your fault, you did this, and she could say something
absurd like *this is happening because you never paid attention to her*. But the truth is that we were already very tired.

—I'll take care of this —Silvia said before leaving, pointing to the shoeboxes.

I didn’t say anything, even though I was deeply grateful.

In the supermarket the people carried their loads of cereal, sweets, vegetables, meat and dairy products. I limited myself to my canned food and joined the line in silence. I went two or three times a week. Sometimes, when there was nothing to buy, I went there anyway before returning home. I took a shopping cart and walked through the shelves thinking of what I might need. At night we watched TV together. Sara sat stiffly in her corner of the chair, me in the other spot, keeping a watch on her every so often to see if she was following the show or if her eyes were stuck on the garden again. I prepared food for the both of us and brought it to the living room on two trays. I left one in front of Sara, and there it stayed. She waited for me to start eating and then she said:

—Excuse me, dad.

She stood up, went up to her room and closed the door gently. The first time I lowered the volume of the TV and waited quietly. A sharp, short screech was heard. A few seconds later, the bathroom faucets followed by running water. Sometimes she came down a few minutes after, calm with her hair perfectly combed. Other times she showered and immediately returned in her pajamas.

Sara didn’t want to leave. Studying her behavior, I wondered if she was becoming agoraphobic. Sometimes I took a chair out to the garden and tried to convince her to come out for a bit. But it was useless. Still, her skin was radiant with energy, and everytime I saw her she was more beautiful, as
though she spent the day doing exercises under the sun. Every so often while I was minding my business, I found a feather. On the floor next to the door of the dining room, behind the coffee tin, between the silverware, still wet in the bathroom sink. I picked them up, careful that she wouldn’t see me doing it, and put them in the toilet. Sometimes I stayed to watch how they went down with the water. Sometimes the toilet refilled, the water lulled again, and I was still there watching, wondering if I should go back to the supermarket, if it was justified to fill a shopping cart with so much garbage, thinking of Sara, and what it was in the garden.

One afternoon Silvia called to say that she was in bed with a bad case of the flu. She said that she couldn’t visit us. She asked me if I would be able to sort it out without her and I understood that I can’t visit you meant I can’t bring more boxes. I asked her if she had a fever, if she had seen a doctor, and when I had enough of her responses I said that I had to get off the phone and I did. The phone went on ringing, but I didn’t answer it. We watched television. I brought my food and Sara didn’t get up to go to her room. She concentrated on the garden until I finished eating, and only then did she return to the television program.

The following day, before returning home, I passed the supermarket. I put some things in my cart, the same as always. I walked between the racks as though it was my first time at the supermarket. I stopped in the pet section, where there was food for dogs, cats, rabbits, birds and fish. I picked up some of the food to see what they were about. I read the ingredients, the number of calories and the recommended serving for every breed, weight and age. After that I went to the garden section, where there were only flowering and non-flowering plants, pots and soil, so I went back to the pet section and
stayed there thinking about what to do next. The people filled their carts and sidestepped around me. Over the loudspeaker they announced a sale on dairy products for Mother’s Day and they played a melodic theme about a guy who has plenty of women but misses his first love, and finally I pushed the cart and went back to the section of canned goods.

That night Sara took a while to fall asleep. My room was beneath hers and I heard her through the ceiling walking nervously, getting in and out of bed several times. I wondered what the conditions of the room would be, I hadn’t gone up since she had arrived; maybe the place was a real disaster, a pen full of grime and feathers.

The third night after Silvia’s call, before returning home, I stopped to see the birdcages that hung from the awning of a veterinarian’s office. Not one looked like the sparrow that I had seen in Silvia’s house. They were colorful, and generally a bit bigger. I was there for a while, until a salesman approached me and asked if I was interested in any of the birds. I said no, not at all, that I was only looking. He stayed closeby, moving boxes, looking toward the street, then understood that I was really not going to buy anything and returned to the counter.

At home Sara waited in the chair, upright in her yoga exercise. We greeted each other.

-Hi, Sara.

-Hi, dad.

She was losing her rosy cheeks and didn’t look as well as she did before. I made my food, I sat in the chair and turned on the television. After a while Sara said:

-Dad...
I swallowed what I was chewing and lowered the volume, doubting whether or not she was talking to me, but there she was, with her knees together and her hands on top of them, looking at me.

-What? -I said

-Do you love me?

I made a gesture with my hand, accompanied by a nod. Everything in it signalled that yes, that of course. She was my daughter, no? And even then, just in case, thinking of everything my ex-wife considered <<the right thing>>, I said:

-Yes, my love. Of course.

And then Sara smiled, one more time, and watched the rest of the program.

We slept badly again, her walking from one side to the other of her room, me tossing and turning in my bed until I fell asleep. The next morning I called Silvia. It was Saturday, but she didn’t answer the phone. I called later, and around midday too. I left a message. Sara sat in the chair the whole morning, looking toward the garden. Her hair was a bit unkempt and she wasn’t sitting as straight, she seemed very tired. I asked her if she was okay and she said:

-Yes, dad.

-Why don’t you go for a bit to the garden?

-No, dad.

Thinking about the conversation from the night before it occurred to me that I could ask her if she loved me, though immediately that seemed stupid to me. I went back to calling Silvia. I left another message. In a low voice, making sure that Sara wouldn’t hear me, I said into the answering machine:

-It’s urgent, please.
We waited each in our own chair, with the television on. A few hours later Sara said:

-Excuse me, dad.

She locked herself in her room. I turned off the television in order to hear better: Sara didn’t make a single noise. I decided that I would call Silvia one more time. I picked up the receiver and, when I heard the dial tone, I hung up. I went in the car to the veterinarian, I looked for the clerk and told him I needed a small bird, the smallest he had. The clerk opened a catalogue of photos and said the prices and feeding varied between species.

-Do you like the exotic ones or do you prefer something more domesticated?

I hit the counter with the palm of my hand. Some things jumped about the counter and the clerk was silent, watching me. I gestured to a small bird, dark, that was moving nervously from one side to the other of its cage. He charged me a hundred and twenty pesos and handed me a square box of green cardboard, with little breathing holes around the side, a free bag of birdseed that I didn’t accept and an owner’s pamphlet with the photo of the bird on the front.

When I returned Sara was still shut up in her room. For the first time since she was in the house, I went up and entered her room. She was sitting in the bed facing the open window. She looked at me. Neither of us said anything. She looked so pale she seemed sick. The room was clean and tidy, the door of the bathroom ajar. There were about twenty shoeboxes on the desk, taken apart—so that they wouldn’t take up so much space—and some neatly stacked upon others. The empty bird cage was hanging near the window. On the bedside table, next to the lamp, the picture frame that she had brought from her mother’s house. The bird moved and its feet scratched along the cardboard, but Sara stayed still. I left the box on the desk and, without saying anything, I left the room and closed the door.
Then I realized that I wasn’t feeling well. I leaned against the wall to rest for a moment. I looked at the owner’s pamphlet that I was still carrying in my hand. On the back was information about the care of the bird and its reproductive cycles. They highlighted how the species needed to be in a pair during periods of heat and the things you could do to make the years of captivity as enjoyable as possible. I heard a brief shriek, and after that the bathroom faucet. When the water began to run I felt a bit better and I knew that, in some way, I would manage to make it down the stairs.
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