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Bard

The Driving Hours

Senior Project Submitted to

The Division of Languages and Literature

of Bard College

by

Lukas Olausson

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2024

For Anna and Matteas,
my parents

The ultimate goal would be: to grasp that everything in the realm of fact is already theory. The blue of the sky shows us the basic law of chromatics.

Goethe

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Even the Smallest Entry

The night before flying home, I took the train into the city to see Justine. It was late December, the end of the first semester of our junior year of college, and I was going home for the first time in a year, to see my father, who was recovering from a long and brutal bout with Covid. He had been sick for over two months– three weeks of which he had spent in the hospital– and we'd only spoken over the phone twice in all that time. On both occasions our exchanges had lasted for less than a minute, and even then, he had barely the energy to mutter more than a few words.

As soon as classes let out, before I'd even completed all my finals, Justine and I loaded the car with our suitcases and the plants from our dorm room, and made the 100 mile trip south, to my grandmother's house on Long Island. I planned to stay there a few days before my flight home, to do some chores for her around the house, and, hopefully, get a bit of writing done. The month before– the day after Thanksgiving– she had left for Santa Fe, to take care of my father, and nobody had been able to check up on the house since. When I got there I found it cold and dusty.

I spent the first two days cleaning. I started in the attic, and worked my way down, through the bedrooms, and then the sitting rooms and the kitchen, and then finally the basement. When it was all done, when the dust was gone and the floors shined, and smelled gently of the lemon-scented soap I had used to scrub them, rather than doing the sensible thing, and sitting down to write, I put on my coat and walked to the station.

The weather that winter had been mostly mild, but I seem to remember the sky that afternoon appearing a solid sheet of gray. Around the train tracks, the bushes and trees had been

trimmed, and the amputated branches gave the impression of the walls of a very long tunnel. Caught in some of some of the branches were colorful bits of trash, mostly aluminum cans and plastic snack wrappers, but there was also a faded green sneaker that someone had apparently lobbed into the thicket.

I had ridden this route, from Manhasset to Penn Station, many times, the summer before, to visit Justine. It was the easiest way into Manhattan. The seats were clean, and the cars were peaceful. And it always felt like a bit of a secret entry, snaking through the backyards of the commuter towns and the little inlets on the northern edge of the island. But passing through Queens, the scenery would begin to change. The train would weave between apartment buildings, over busy streets, past parks, and community gardens. There was a stop in Flushing, and then Astoria, and then, almost without warning, the train would duck into that impossibly long, lightless tunnel beneath the East River. Entering the tunnel there was always a big woosh, and my ears would pop. I'd pinch my nose to equalize the pressure in my head, and many of the other passengers would do the same.

That evening, when I popped out in Penn Station, Justine met me at the staircase in the main atrium. We stood there for a moment, on the landing, on our own little island amidst the bustle of the crowd, wondering what to do. Eventually we started walking. The station was under construction then– perhaps it's always under construction, full of dust and the sound of hammering, and this says nothing of that particular evening– but I remember it felt important then, as we wound through a maze of makeshift corridors, built of thin sheets of plywood, and long stretches of plastic. There was dust everywhere, fine as flour, laying thinly on the concrete floors. It stuck to the bottoms of our shoes and hung in the air. Though it was nothing like snow,

we pretended it was, skating and twirling in our cold sneakers. Inspired, then, we decided to go ice skating for real, and Justine led us out of the station and into the city.

I held her hand as she steered us down the sidewalk. The sun had long since set, but it wasn't too cold, and the streets were busy. She walked fast, moving easily among the crowd. She seemed to have a supernatural ability to predict how someone was about to move before they did. After a while, twenty minutes, perhaps, she stopped at a liquor store in Midtown. I waited at the curb, as she went in. I spent a minute watching the movements of the delivery cyclists and the misplaced tourists, and then she re-emerged, grinning, coat pockets bag full of tiny bottles of cheap whiskey.

We walked even faster the rest of the way to the rink, jogging through the intersections. We darted between car bumpers, suitcases, and hustlers, between the cold concrete of the city and the inhabitants of its streets. We laughed, and hollered. At the rink we skated for an hour, floating through the loud music and the bright lights, holding hands but not speaking– green tags, proof of our legal admission, fluttering at our wrists.

On the train ride back to Manhasset we sat facing backwards, pretending that we were traveling in reverse not only through space, but time as well. Justine had said once that that was how it worked. "It's like watching a whole day play back on rewind," she had said. And so that's what we did. We sat facing backwards, and watched through the window, the whole thing over, only this time in reverse. She put her head on my shoulder, and we rattled back through the tunnel, towards Queens and then Long Island. Once home, we laid our coats on the couch and scuttled up to bed, still wearing our jeans.

Just a few hours later, at four, the alarm went off. We rose and stripped the sheets off the bed, and brushed our teeth. The house was cold and dark, and quiet, save for the ticking of the radiators, and the sounds of our dressing. For breakfast we fried two eggs alongside three tiny potatoes that I had baked the day before. We stood in the kitchen watching the eggs sizzle, and waiting for the coffee pot to boil. Then we sat on the couch in the very clean living room, with our plates propped on our knees, as we ran bits of potato through the yolks.

When the Uber arrived, to take me to the airport, we said goodbye, and she walked toward the train station, and the long gray tunnel of barren shrubs awaiting her. The driver nodded at me, and took my suitcase. He spoke softly on the phone as he drove. It was too quiet for me to guess the language, but I wondered if he was describing the sunrise. When we reached LaGuardia I found that the renovations were finally coming to a close, and that the security protocol had changed. "Keep your shoes on," they kept saying. "Belt too."

I walked to my gate and found a seat next to the window. The airport shops were just beginning to open, and the travelers who had spent the night in the terminal were starting to stir. I opened my laptop, and took a look at the essay I was supposed to be finishing.

It was for a class in which we had studied the writings of the 19th century Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, and 20th century English poet, W.H. Auden. Both figures, to varying degrees, and at various stages in their complicated careers, were driven by questions of faith– faith in Christ, and faith in the capacity of language to convey their belief.

I was not raised religiously. Not in the slightest. In fact, I hadn't (at least in any formal, intellectual way) considered the question of faith until landing in this literature class. Though, as

my father became increasingly sick, the timing began to feel ever more pertinent– for the first time ever, I was wondering about the continued existence of my his life; and from this aspect of uncertainty, there immediately arose a second, a sense that in the face of his illness, the focus of my academic studies, in literature and writing, were somehow inadequate to answer the strangeness of what was happening. Or, to say it another way, I had begun to doubt my assuredness in the written word, my unwavering assumption that there was nothing– no thing, no experience, no relation– that language could not, if nothing else, at least point at. At least say, *there it is*.

Today, Kierkegaard's name, at least in popular association, is nearly synonymous with a single metaphor: the movement of a dancer who jumps "straight into a definite position, so that not for a second does he have to catch at the position but stands there in it in the leap itself." It comes from *Fear and Trembling*, a book he published under the pseudonym Johannes de silentio. The text's primary focus is the Binding of Isaac, the account in Genesis 22 of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of his son. Silentio makes the case that Abraham's behavior is an exemplar of true faith, that in order for him to trust that God would somehow make it possible for him to kill his son and still keep him, he had to believe, against all logic, that God had the power to suspend morality.

Auden, in his late 30's, returned to the Christian faith of his early childhood, a move partly influenced by his reading of Kierkegaard. For the rest of his career, Kierkegaard's writings would remain a profound influence on his poetry, though later in his life he became a skeptical admirer, eventually going on to say he thought Kierkegaard's conception of the leap as a

metaphor for faith flawed in its suggestion of a "perverse arbitrariness," but valuable to the end that it "reminds men that they cannot live without faith in something, and that when the faith which they have breaks down, when the ground crumbles under their feet, they have to leap even into uncertainty if they are to avoid certain destruction."

One of the fundamental concerns common to both Auden and Kierkegaard's writing is the perception of a contradiction between how the events of one's life are enacted, and the means by which they are eventually understood. In his long-form poem from 1947, "The Age of Anxiety," Auden writes that,

> *Human beings are, necessarily, actors who cannot become something before they have first pretended to be it; and they can be divided, not into the hypocritical and the sincere, but into the sane who know they are acting and the mad who do not.*

And this dichotomy, at least to my ear, seems to echo one of the most famous Kierkegaardian dictums, often paraphrased from his journal, in which he holds that though life can only be understood in reflection, backwards that is, it still must be lived forward.

I think even as a child I held the conviction that, given the right combination of words, almost anything could be explained, or indicated, or correlated, if not directly, then by way of analogy. I say this as a sort of way of understanding why, when I was about ten or so, I decided to spend a long afternoon on the beige carpeted floor of my bedroom, making a list of all the things I could remember about my father– all the stories he'd ever told me, all the things we'd ever done together. I remember deciding that, given the absurd scope of my ambition, it would be necessary to impose certain restrictions on my list: I would distinguish between the moments I could remember specifically, and the things I knew we did because they had been part of a certain

routine. It seemed to me that the former were somehow more significant– that they were not just some arbitrary selection which on that particular day I had been able to recall, but actually centrally important to the person I was. I figured that if I wanted to understand the nature of the bond between me and him, the list would be where I'd find it, that even if there was something about our relationship that I couldn't quite make sense of in my mind, on the page, in the logic, the geometry of the language, it would be there. In some very rudimentary way, I believed that the organization of the list could be the thing we shared.

I think it's telling, though, that I didn't keep the document, or show it to anyone, I'm not even sure what happened to it in the end. All that's left is the memory I have, of the sensation of making it, of laying on the floor, with my cheek pressed into the carpet, scribbling notes on sheets of loose-leaf printer paper, as fast as my hand could move, while my father sat on the couch in the other room, scrolling through used car listings on Craigslist.

The first bullet point had to do with a story he had told me once, of the year before he met my mother– a year he spent taking care of a small, but elegantly furnished adobe house, just outside of Taos, New Mexico, while its owners traveled through China. The house, he had told me, was built on the mesa, and the only way to get to it was on a long dirt road. There were very few other houses out on the mesa in those days, and there was basically nothing else around, just miles and miles of sagebrush, unpaved roads, and roaming packs of wild dogs.

He spent the days as a traveling mechanic, driving his rusty Volvo between his clients' houses, fixing their cars and washing machines; but he spent the evenings alone, at the house, watching the dogs and the sagebrush. He'd said that he had seen the sunset every day that year.

Part of the reason for the lack of a formal religious practice in my childhood had to do with the fact that neither of my parents had been raised religiously. My father was born in Sweden, and at the age of twelve, moved to Queens, with his Cypriot mother, two brothers, and three sisters. The shadow of the Greek Orthodox Church loomed somewhere in the background, rather innocuously, but he was never baptized, and neither were my brother and I.

My mother is from California, and Jewish by descent, but I've come to think of that aspect as more of an intellectual inheritance, than a religious one (the exception being, her prized bronze-cast menorah). When I told her that I was going to try to write this essay, about sickness and faith, it was her suggestion that I look into the work of Oliver Sacks. Apparently her own father had put her onto his work when she was about my age– she said that she had even attended a lecture he gave at Berkeley, while she was a student there.

My mother has told me, on a couple occasions, that if she had the chance to "do it all over again," she might have studied neurology. She's a teacher now, but in college, and for a number of years after, while living in San Francisco, she wanted to be a playwright and an actor. Only on very rare occasions does she talk about this time in her life, and rather than doing the straightforward thing and asking her about it, I've come to wonder if her desire to do so didn't, in some way, stem front the fact that she may have felt, at home, like her older sister's cerebral palsy took center stage. It's a flimsy hypothesis based mostly on a small picture in a crumbling photo album that I haven't seen in years; she's exactly the age I am now, standing on a small

black stage, with her sister's crutches on her forearms, and her jaw jutted out toward the camera in a puckish grin.

Regardless, I took her advice and picked up a copy of Oliver Sacks' seminal, and perhaps still most well known book, *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* (1985). One of the most interesting things I found while reading it, is the fact that he returns again and again to the question of whether his patients know their own suffering– and specifically, whether they perceive the same tragedy in their pathologies that is assumed of them. It's a complicated question, for a whole host of reasons, but what really catches my attention is the implication that seems to hover just above, and asks to what extent the basis of human identity might actually be predicated on sickness. Sacks, for his part, lands consistently in the same place: "... animals get diseases, but only man falls radically into sickness."

My father, when he started showing symptoms of Covid, tried to keep it a secret. He stayed home, and didn't let anyone know that he was sick. Eventually, though, my brother found him, one day after school. He found him on the couch, wrapped in sweaters, and he called our mother. She left work immediately, drove to the house, and together they carried him to the car, and took him to the hospital.

I assume that by the time my brother found him, my father was aware that he had Covid, but I have never tried to confirm this, nor have I ever asked why he didn't tell anyone that he was sick. There is a part of me that feels that the answers to these questions are as obvious as they are painful: of course he knew, he just couldn't bear asking for help.

Covid, it's worth clarifying, is a very different illness from those which Sacks describes in his book. In *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, he writes almost exclusively about patients of his who are affected by syndromes which occur in the right hemisphere of the brain. The contemporary neurological understanding of such syndromes has shifted slightly since 1985, but for the sake of simplicity, I'll stick here to Sack's explanation: these are syndromes which occur in the portion of the brain we use for recognizing reality. It is "impossible," neurologically speaking, he writes, for such patients to "know their own problems." Unlike someone who has, for instance, lost an appendage and is fully capable of registering their bad luck, these patients have all lost some fundamental capacity to process who they are, and thus (at least theory) are "no longer there to know it." Their syndromes are corporeal, localized so to speak, in a very tangible region of the body, but their symptoms are largely intellectual. And this is a significant detail: it tells us that Sacks' project originates from a desire to locate and sketch the intellect, to show where various modes of abstract processing actually occur within the brain. To point directly at the thing that makes us human.

In 2012, just three years before his death, Sacks published an essay in the New Yorker about a number of drug induced hallucinations from his own life. In one episode, attempting to see "'true' indigo," he concocts "a pharmacologic launchpad consisting of a base of amphetamine (for general arousal), LSD (for hallucinogenic intensity), and a touch of cannabis (for a little added delirium)." It takes twenty minutes for the mixture to take effect. Then he turns to face a blank wall, and exclaims, “I want to see indigo now—now!”

> *And then, as if thrown by a giant paintbrush, there appeared a huge, trembling, pear-shaped blob of the purest indigo. Luminous, numinous, it filled me with rapture: it was the color of heaven, the*

> *color, I thought, that Giotto spent a lifetime trying to get but never achieved– never achieved, perhaps, because the color of heaven is not to be seen on earth. But it existed once, I thought– it was the color of the Paleozoic sea, the color the ocean used to be. I leaned toward it in a sort of ecstasy. And then it suddenly disappeared, leaving me with an overwhelming sense of loss and sadness that it had been snatched away. But I consoled myself: yes, indigo exists, and it can be conjured up in the brain.*

These days, my understanding of the possibilities of language is far less absolute than it once was. It seems to me, and I'm sure that this too will eventually undergo a revision, but that it's often the case that the "meaning" of a sentence exists as much in the momentum of its run, as it does just above the page– such that while reading, one's attention is divided equally between two planes attention. That of a direct, denotative "focus," and that which exists at a slight remove, as a sort of associative "wandering." The geometry, then– the logic of the most successful units of writing are not at all rigid, but always slightly shimmering. The poet Christian Wiman, interestingly, has argued something similar about faith, that one arrives at belief not because of any certainty, or because they have had their doubts assuaged, but exactly for the opposite reason, "because faith is not a state of mind but an action in the world, a movement *toward* the world."

In the second essay of *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, Sacks describes a certain patient, Jimmie, who has a type of amnesia that, since 1945, has effectively "cut–off" his short-term memory and sense of time. The effect is so profound that when he first meets Sacks, in 1975, he is under the impression that the Second World War has only just recently ended, and that he is still the same young man he was thirty years prior, facing the imminent decision of

whether to continue his career as an assistant submarine radio operator, or to attend college on the G.I. Bill. Almost immediately after meeting Jimmie, and without discernible difficulty, Sacks anticipates a plausible diagnosis, and has it confirmed by a psychiatrist: Korsakav's syndrome. A rare, and in Jimmie's case, unusually severe repercussion of alcohol abuse.

In the New Yorker essay, the one glimpse Sacks offers regarding a possible impetus behind his obsession with states of altered consciousness is cursory but intriguing: "When I am not working," he writes, "I get unmoored, have a sense of emptiness and structurelessness." It would be wildly unfair, and way beyond my understanding of the topic, to suggest that buried in this disclosure is some fundamental aspect of Sacks' own driving pathology, so I won't go there. But I will say that the question of transcendence, of getting outside of one' self (both body and brain), and identifying patterns of meaning in life beyond the mundane and the day-to-day, is all over Sacks' writing. It's in the first joint he smokes (his own hand appears to him as the hand of God); it's there in the essay about Jimmie. It's also, I think, where an interesting contradiction begins to arise, one that's spelled out with surprising lucidity in a parenthetical in the New Yorker essay. "We need hope, the sense of a future," he writes.

> *And we need freedom (or, at least, the illusion of freedom) to get beyond ourselves, whether with telescopes and microscopes and our ever-burgeoning technology, or in states of mind that allow us to travel to other worlds, to rise above our immediate surroundings.*

The contradiction, I think, boils down to the fact that the transcendence he's interested in is startlingly faithless. It manifests– when it does at all– as barely more than an optical device, an "illusion of freedom." And although he never says it directly, his understanding of transcendence

seems to presuppose tragedy, as though we eclipse the monotony of our lives only in the rare instances where we leave behind our own innate (and inherently limited) modes of cognition.

This, in large part, is why I'm so interested in Sacks' question of whether his patients know their own suffering: his notion of transcendence seems to demand that they are, whether they know it or not. We might go so far as to wonder if, for Sacks, there is any form of human existence that is not, at some basic level, grounded in suffering. At the very least, this way of reading his work might help explain why he seems to gloss over the fact of Jimmie's alcoholism. Coping mechanisms, in Sacks' work, are always a given.

Jimmie, as Sacks iterates and reiterates, is charming and bright. He is a deft checkers player, and beats Sacks easily. He is capable of drawing the periodic table of elements from memory (but will omit elements discovered after uranium), and fluent in morse code. But his intellect is conjoined with a memory that is continually and cyclically effaced, often multiple times within a matter of minutes, to the effect that in the nine years of "knowing" Sacks, he is never able to consistently recognize him.

In a particularly striking passage, Sacks describes him as being "stuck in a constantly changing, meaningless moment." And nearing his conclusion, Sacks veers outside the realm of science, and begins to wonder, plainly and directly, if Jimmie has a soul, if there is any perception of meaning in his experience of life beyond the most superficial awareness of what must otherwise appear to him as an unrelated sequence of sensations and impressions. The answer comes to Sacks, while observing Jimmie in the chapel and the garden, where he realizes that in such spaces, Jimmie is "no longer at the mercy of a faulty and fallible mechanism," but has surrendered (if only momentarily) to a different type of awareness, one that is perhaps both

spiritual and transcendent. In such instances, Sacks explains, Jimmie is "deeply attentive to the beauty and soul of the world, rich in all the Kierkegaardian categories– the aesthetic, the moral, the religious, the dramatic."

After my mother and brother took him to the hospital, my father was put on a ventilator, and after a couple of days he seemed to be recovering. At least he was eating again; the doctors told him he would be out by the end of the week. Then, they found pneumonia in his lungs, and that's when my mother started going to visit him every day– sometimes twice a day. She'd sneak in bowls of soup, and herbs from her acupuncturist, and she'd sit in a chair in the corner, to read to him.

On her drive home from the hospital, she'd often call me and give me the updates– names of medications, and symptoms, and nurses. Often it happened that she would call just as I was walking out of class, heading to the dining hall for dinner. In our calls she'd speak in a whisper, and it was difficult to understand what was happening.

"It's spreading," she'd say.

"What's spreading?" I'd ask.

"The sickness."

"Yes, but what is it? Bacteria, fungus?"

"It's bad. A bad kind, I think."

"Oh," I'd say, and we'd go on like this, back and forth over the same minute details, with our little sentences, in this peculiar mode of speculation, until there was no longer a line between whatever the doctors had initially told her and the situation we had come to imagine. I knew,

without her ever having to tell me directly, that she thought he was going to die. I knew because I could hear it in her voice, in the dull resignation of her words, and because she asked me, one evening in late November, if I had packed a bag in case I needed to return home before the end of the semester.

I remember our conversation on my birthday. She called on her drive home from the hospital, just as she had done so many times over the last few weeks. She sounded impossibly tired. Every word seemed to require more energy than she had to spend, and I could hear behind her voice, the faint tick of the car's turn signal, the small sounds of her fingers sliding along the wheel. I could picture her so clearly, in the blue glow of the dials of the dashboard. I knew, somehow, that even if there were tears on her face, she was sitting as she always was, tall and upright, with her arms at right angles to the wheel, and her chin arched slightly upward.

"They found a blood clot now," she said.

"What?"

"In his thigh."

"What happened?"

"They put him on a blood thinner."

It was silent for a minute, and then she said, "Hold on, I have to order." Her front bumper scraped as she pulled into a drive-through, and I could hear her clear her throat, and put on her teaching voice, to ask for a bag of chips and two chicken burritos– the chips for herself, the burritos for my brother. "Well, I love you," she said, finally, when she got back to the house, and her bumper scraped again, this time on the crest of her own driveway.

We are always rubbing up against the world, trying to discern some boundary between where we end and the rest of it begins. "The universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest. By a power that is fathomably secret, and holy, and fleet," writes Annie Dillard. "There is nothing to be done about it, but ignore it, or see."

Today, as I sit in my yellow hatchback in the gravel lot at the edge of the river and prepare to call my father, there's a dusty wind and a gray haze, and the mountains across the way look especially blue. It's late autumn and the few leaves that remain fall as gracefully as snow.

The train tracks run parallel along the water here. An older couple has come out to walk their dog, but besides us, there's nobody else around. Their faces are buried in scarves; they're holding hands and trying to balance on the rails, but the dog and the wind keep pulling them off, dragging them down to the river, where the tide has gone all the way out.

This is my favorite spot. Today is my twenty-first birthday. A year ago, my father was in the hospital, but he's healthy now. This is where I've come to talk to him, for a phone call I know won't last much more than a minute.

The marvel of language, after all, is that it makes that leap back into finitude as though it were standing there all along, as though no contradiction was ever too great to be reconciled.

The Fox

At the end of class on an otherwise unremarkable day, a few weeks before the end of my freshman year of high school, my English teacher at the time, Ms. Biscamp, dropped an essay on my desk as I was preparing to leave. She probably said something. Perhaps, "I think you might like this." And then I must have thanked her. I must have. And I'm sure she nodded before heading off.

In the seven years between that afternoon in late spring, and the day, a few months ago, that I first sat down to write about it, I had forgotten the title of the essay as well as the name of whoever it was who had written it. But the sweep of its premise stuck with me: it was a portrait of a much younger version of the author, crawling through a field, pretending to be a fox, wanting to become a writer, and then growing up and becoming one. But what caught my attention at the time, and what it was that had so firmly lodged itself in my memory, was a rather puzzling anecdote, a second chronology, stitched gracefully through the narration of the childhood, in which the author, middle-aged now, walks along a certain frozen river near her home, at the edge of the woods. She walks briskly, to keep up with her dog, who is hunting the scent of another animal. But the writing in those scenes was so light and delicate that I never knew for sure what the dog was chasing, whether it was a real fox, or some trace of the narrator as a young girl.

This story is of interest to me for a number of reasons, not the least of which is this: I was actually a real nuisance in Ms. Biscamp's fifth period class. I was so annoying, in fact, that she wrote an email to my mother explaining how difficult it was to discipline me; I was constantly talking when I wasn't supposed to, distracting other students, and submitting homework

assignments weeks after their deadlines. But the worst offense, according to her, was that I was in the habit of submitting essays that were of significantly worse quality than she thought I was capable of.

Writing this now, along with an abiding sense of guilt, I find myself surprised and even somewhat impressed that I was able to cause such a raucous– it seems rather incompatible with the severe academic obedience of my later years of high school, and even the majority of my time in college.

During my first year at Bard, the library was mostly closed, due to Covid. There were special steps that could be taken to check out a book, but nobody was permitted to stay in the building to do work. In my second year, there were fewer restrictions, but masks were still required, and anyway, I had gotten used to a number of alternative (and occasionally unconventional) study spaces. One of which was the Ottoway theater. I'd sit there, writing, late at night, alone in the middle of all those empty seats, with all the lights off and only a faint glow coming from the screen of my laptop.

But for the last two years, I've been partial to a certain long, gray table on the fourth floor of Stevenson. There's a nice view up here, overlooking the chapel, and the dining hall, and the tops of the trees that surround it. And if I tilt my chair at just the right angle, I can make out the purple ridges of the Catskills across the river. There are other tables, of course, with more attractive views, better access to the surprisingly limited number of bathrooms; there are quieter and more secluded rooms. But I like it here. I like the early mornings, the long walk up the

concrete stairwell, the empty evenings. The fact that the concrete corridors are full of deadends, and never lead where Ithink they will.

Most of all, perhaps, I like the fact that up here you have to walk quickly among the shelves, so as not to ever turn your head to the side and risk the possibility of catching sight of an intriguing title, or a familiar name, and loosing the day's momentum to an afternoon spent crumpled on the carpeted floor between the shelves, in the sentences of another writer's world.

In my allegiance to this place, spending so many hours here each day, I have, gradually, gotten to know the other people who frequent these rooms. Some of them have become friends, people I've had classes with. But there are many more who I've never spoken to, for instance the boy who wears a blue puffer jacket and brushes his teeth in the third floor bathroom almost every Wednesday morning. Or the girl with long, straight brown hair who solves the jigsaw puzzles which the librarians put out for us students. I do not know their names, or even, in many cases, what they are here to study. But I know where they like to sit. And together, we share the deeply internal solitude, the simple quietness of these hours.

But it's true, as a freshman in high school, I was not so taken with academic study. And my teacher did in fact send an email to my mother and, a few days later, my father asked me about it. He was driving me to the bus stop. I had started attending, beginning the year before, a charter school on the opposite end of town, and in those early years, before I got my driver's license, it was our routine that he would let my brother out at the elementary school, before dropping me off at the lot where I could catch the bus. On this particular day, he waited until my brother was out of the car, before reaching for the volume knob on the radio.

"So tell me about Ms. Biscamp's class," he said.

I realized immediately what was happening, and tried to explain to him that I wasn't the only rascal. I remember, very clearly, keeping my eyes trained on a thin crack in the windshield, where it had been hit some years prior, by an errant rock, shot from the tire of a semi-truck. I had some sense that he wasn't really interested in talking to me about this, and I wondered if my mother had put him up to it. In the end, he didn't scold me, or even tell me to improve my behavior, or even to apologize to her for misbehaving. "Ok," was all he said, after a while, before letting me out at the curb.

In Ms. Biscamp's class later that day, I didn't speak. Not a word. The class ended, and at five o'clock I got back on the bus, and took the same route back to the weedy lot, bouncing in my seat as the driver plowed through the potholes and over the speed bumps, among the maze-like streets of square, brown houses. It was early autumn, an unusually rainy autumn, but that afternoon was clear. The sky in that part of the Southwest shifts at the beginning of fall to an almost imperceptibly lighter shade of blue, and it stays that way until spring. I remember, on that bus ride home, looking at the sky.

My father was already parked at the curb by the time the bus came in. Stepping inside his car, I noticed he had the heat running. I said nothing about it, though, and we had the same conversation we always had. "How was today?" he asked.

"Long," I said. I thought of it then, throughout the three years of him driving me to and from that bus stop, as more of a ritual than a real question. But now I wonder, now, if there was more to it; I wouldn't be surprised if he was waiting, hoping even, for the day that I'd have something more to say. Something like, "Good, actually. How about you?"

I don't think on any of those drives home I ever asked him how he was doing. We always had our two line conversation, and then he'd nod. He'd pause a moment to put the car in gear, and once off, he'd put the radio on. About half the time it was NPR, and the other half it was a well worn disc of U2's "The Joshua Tree" album. And for the rest of the drive we'd sit still, save for the brief motions of him turning the wheel, or shifting gears, or me flipping the sun visor.

After we got home that day, after the bumper scraped on the driveway, after he'd parked and nodded and said "Ok," and after I'd kicked my shoes off in the mudroom, I walked over to the little alcove behind the couch, where we kept a computer and a printer, and a little green filing cabinet stuffed with all our important documents– bills, report cards, lease templates, and so on. There was a little booklet on the desk, with the passwords to everything. I flipped through until I found what I was looking for, then I logged into my mother's inbox, printed Ms. Biscamp's email, walked back over to my room, and pinned it, triumphantly, onto the wall above my desk.

I had been a mediocre student throughout elementary and middle school, and sometimes a little less than that. In first and second grade, when we were still living on Long Island, before our move to Santa Fe, I struggled with reading. I spent many afternoons in a small, hot and windowless room in the basement of the school, with an old woman who I feared, and her owl puppet, as she tried to teach me phonics. Even then, at age five, I felt a sense of shame, and an acute awareness of my shortcomings as a student. This seems a slightly ridiculous thing to say, in part, of course, because I didn't yet have the vocabulary to call it that. But I knew enough to know that I didn't like school.

At home, my mother did her best to help me catch up. We spent long evenings hunched over the dining room table, as she dragged me through various reading comprehension exercises. On two occasions, overcome with frustration at my obstinance, she cried and threw a book across the room.

In the following years I caught up a bit in reading, but continued to struggle with spelling and math, and on multiple occasions I was given oddly sized pencils, which were supposed to help improve my handwriting. I had two redeeming qualities in the classroom, though, at least until Ms. Biscamp's class: I was eager to impress my teachers, and I could be quiet. And though a few of my teachers loved me for it, I didn't think of myself as a good student.

In one of his books, Édouard Louis describes the great deal of effort he went through in his youth to prevent his mother from meeting with his teachers. He explains that he didn't want her to know who he was. I'm thinking of an excerpt of his, specifically about an argument he had with her, years later, as an adult, in which he confessed that he had "hated his childhood."

"But you were always smiling!" she says.

> *How could I criticize your reaction that day when it was, in a way, a symbol of my victory, of the fact that I had succeeded, throughout my entire childhood, in keeping you ignorant of what my life was— and, ultimately, in preventing you from becoming my mother?*

Unlike Louis, I did not hate my childhood, and I had no real reason to hide anything from my parents, but for various reasons I did the same. I destroyed report cards. I tried strange tactics to convince them not to attend conferences with my teachers, by attempting to schedule them for times I knew they couldn't make, or forging notes explaining that their appearance wasn't strictly necessary. I think I feared that they would be disappointed by my less than perfect grades, or by the fact that I spent most recesses alone, on the swings. I had some sense that they had already

sacrificed so much for my brother and I– working jobs they didn't love so that we could have the best possible opportunities– that to call any excess of attention to myself would be to commit an intolerable act of cruelty.

Many, many writers take up the question of the origin and justification of their authorial selves. In 1965, Auden devoted his inaugural lecture at Oxford to the phenomena. He explains the various stages of the development of a writer's internal critic. My favorite part of the lecture, and I think also the funniest, is this one: a recurring congregation, of sorts, where all the young wannabes gather and "discover that they are a new generation [...] somebody shouts the word 'modern' and the riot is on."

I wish I could say that in Biscamp's class I was suddenly struck by a revelation of the marvels of literature, and from that moment forth, I was a paragon of the diligent and highly motivated student. But, of course, it did not happen that way. My impulse, in fact, was the opposite. I decided my best bet would be to take the various analytical techniques that were being taught to me, and then find ways to corrupt them; to use my growing vocabulary of literary devices for the purpose of building complicated and unusual arguments. I figured, naively, that if I could somehow procure the "evidence" to support my claims– if I could pull the right quotes, decontextualize them just so, and write with enough conviction– it would be possible, theoretically speaking, to put any number of seemingly incompatible ideas together and expect a passing grade.

It's a shame, really, that I didn't save any of these early papers. I was quite proud of them. It's possible, of course, perhaps even likely, that if I were to reread them now they wouldn't seem rebellious or daring. But in the process of writing them, that's exactly how I felt– like I was

getting away with something, as though I had found a way of enjoying a chore that ought to have been taken as a horrible punishment.

Over the next few years, however, my career as a literary provocateur began to dwindle, and then develop, against my best intentions, into an earnest appreciation for what it takes to write something that's actually worth reading. How difficult it is to do the work honestly and compellingly, to grace, with words, even the tiniest nub of reality.

In a previous draft of this essay, (reverting to my old ways, I guess) I tried to argue that there are no obvious benefits to studying literature. The dishonesty of this statement was immediately pointed out to me, and rightly so. There are a billion, million, and one benefits to studying literature, but I stand by this: none of them, not a single one is ever guaranteed. That part is always on us, it's the bill we foot with time and attention, the hours spent wearing down our delete keys.

Two years after Biscamp's email, my mother started writing a memoir. She enrolled in a low-residency MFA, and sometimes, in the evenings after school, she'd take me to readings, given by authors who were being hosted by the program. We heard Tommy Orange read, and Pam Houston, and Justin Torres. I was enthralled.

When I first fell in love with language, in the early days of the agitator business, it was because I realized that it could be a place: somewhere that I was free to go and be alone in, as though inexplicably transposed into another realm, slightly adjacent to wherever it was that all the other experiences in my life happened. It was a place external to the world of my parents'

divorce, and the fraught awkwardness of my early teen years. But it wasn't until I realized that this place that I loved could also be shared, that I started taking the tasks of reading and writing seriously.

The same year that she enrolled in the MFA, my mother got in contact with Julia Mars, the author of the novel *Rust*, to look at an early draft of her manuscript. They agreed to meet at a chic bistro in Albuquerque, an hour south of our home in Santa Fe. My mother asked if I would go with her, and said yes. At the bistro she handed me her credit card, and told me to get something for lunch. I sat at a tall table near the window, ate fish tacos, and flipped through a car magazine while they talked.

Afterwards, we went on a walk at a nearby reservoir. It was early May. The sky was pale, and the air was still. The light fell in round splotches on the walking path, diffused by the branches of the surrounding cottonwoods. There were a dozen or so other people there, most of them fishing for stocked trout, sitting on coolers, with their rods lightly balanced across their laps. As we walked, Julie told a story about walking her dog along the edge of a lake, a lake similar in size to the reservoir where we were now. She said it had been early in the morning, and that there was nobody else around. Because the dog was well behaved, she decided to let it off leash. Immediately, though, it jumped into the water and was bitten by a beaver. Julie explained that she had no choice but to jump in and save her dog. The beaver, startled, swam away, but the hind leg of the dog was bleeding. Together, she and her dog crawled out of the lake, then she tore a swatch of fabric from her shirt, and wrapped it around its leg. "Instinct," she said. "Pure instinct."

My mother and I nodded and smiled. "Oh, wow," I said, feeling as though I had been let in on a tremendous secret. And, in a certain sense, I guess I had. But we never saw Julie again.

I said before that for many years I had wondered about the author and title of the fox piece, and sought ineffectually to find them. In the final stretch of writing this essay, however, it happened to resurface. Mary Oliver, *Staying Alive*: "We are walking along the path, my dog and I, in the blue half-light…"

The story is slender, at four pages, and much shorter than I had remembered. And the fox is there with them every morning. Really there. It's there in the end, as well, after the old, skinny dog has died. It sits on a sandy rise, yawning, smiling almost, with its litter strewn about and it stares right back at her.

Santa Fe

Before we lived in Santa Fe, we lived in the basement of my grandmother's house on the North Shore of Long Island, in a green suburb at the mouth of the bay that separates the two eggs of Fitzgerald's novel. In real life, though, the capes are not ovals, and they almost certainly don't confuse any birds. On maps, the eastern egg looks a bit like the head of a dog in profile, with a short snout and two small, perked ears; its counterpart is a good deal smaller, and vaguely resembles the cut of a bishop's mitre. I don't know whether Fitzgerald's claims regarding the relative fashion and wealth of the two capes were ever true to life, and I've never cared to check; but these days, certainly, there is no obvious difference. There is new money and old money, and blue lawns, and big houses, and long, private docks on both sides of the bay, and the Gatsbys and Toms pass freely between them.

But at age five, of course, I had no sense of the literary significance of where I was living. The geography which occupied my mind consisted primarily of two partially finished rooms in the basement of the house, with tile floors, concrete walls, and wires and pipes in the joists of the ceiling. My brother and I slept on a blue bunk bed that our father had assembled, and he and our mother slept in the other room, with the washer and dryer. Besides a small, circular table, an orange rug, and our mother's bookshelf, the basement was mostly bare of furniture, but I remember the rooms as being quite cozy. The floor was angled slightly, and when it rained especially hard the water would seep through a few invisible cracks somewhere above the washing machine, and begin to flow downward and across the basement, underneath the flimsy door between our rooms, toward the sump-pump. I don't think this happened more than two or three times in the two years that we lived down there, but I remember, so clearly, some gray

summer evening, the contrast between the frustration it caused our parents and the delight it caused the two of us. "Holy Guacamole," we kept saying to each other, enthralled by the sight of the small river flowing around our bunk bed, and the sound of the words exiting our mouths, words which clearly had no effect on our parents as they rushed about the room with buckets and mops. Though incidents like this were, for us, excellent perks of living in the basement, they must have been a key stressor in the lives of our parents, and even, perhaps, an eventual motivation for our move to the desert.

At the same time that we were living in the basement, another family, a single mother and her son, were renting from my grandmother, and living in the attic. I can no longer remember either of their names, or even what they looked like, but I can still see, somehow, the miniature, plain bagels and small cups of dark coffee they had each morning for breakfast. The bagels came in a large, unmarked plastic bag, which never seemed to empty, and they always drank their coffee without milk, or cream, or sugar. I used to imagine, based purely on the way it smelled, that the coffee tasted like hot chocolate, maybe even better, and I felt jealous of their routine, which was obviously superior to the Greek yogurt and toasted granola of our own mornings.

I think the boy was about fifteen, so ten years older than me, and thirteen older than my brother. There were many evenings after school, while both our parents were at work, that he looked after us. Besides the attic and the basement and my grandmother's room, the other bedrooms were empty, and we were free to explore them. Other times, we'd play catch in the backyard, or basketball in the driveway, and pick the tiny, wild strawberries that grew in the lawn– and when we got tired of those activities, or if it rained, we'd watch TV, or duck under the piano in the living room, to play with Legos or folded paper planes. When we played together I

never felt that we were being taken care of, at least not in the diminutive sense. It always felt like he was our friend, and I wonder now, if this is also how my parents viewed our relationship, and whether they in fact knew the extent of his kindness.

In the Spring of 2009, they found a listing for a house in Santa Fe, on Craigslist, and then immediately bought tickets to fly across the country to see it. I'm not sure for how long they had been watching the market, or what exactly it was they were looking for, but according to my mother, the decision to move was partially catalyzed by the sudden realization that the vast majority of our neighbors on Long Island all drove big, black SUVs. It seems they woke up one day, sick of the basement, and the suburbs, and sitting in traffic; they wanted to see the sky again, I guess, the full sky.

After they made a deposit on the house, they flew straight back to New York to collect us and their belongings. They bought a motorcycle trailer from a guy out in Oyster Bay who collected Harleys, and then our father built sides for it with two-by-fours and plywood, and we helped him sand it and paint it brown. Then we loaded it with our belongings– our father's tools, and our mother's bookshelf, and all our bikes. And when that was done we hooked the trailer up to my father's little green pickup truck, and then my mother drove it, with a friend from work, across the country. So they wouldn't get lost, she found directions on the internet, printed them out and marked all the turns with a highlighter.

A week later, on the Fourth of July, my father, brother and I packed our backpacks and flew to New Mexico to meet them. We sat all the way at the back of the plane, right by the bathroom and the turbines. I got the window seat and kept my forehead glued to the plastic

window panels. It was my first time flying. I watched as the sun dipped below the clouds, and as the sky turned dark, and the stars came out. And over the cities we'd all lean over to watch the fireworks, little bursts of color in the golden matrices of intersecting roads. The flight attendants gave us blankets and pins and extra orange juice. "Your sons are so well behaved," they told our father. And in the morning, when my brother and I woke up again, we were in our new lives in our new house.

There was no furniture. We slept in sleeping bags on the carpeted floors of our big new bedrooms, and set up camping chairs in the living room in lieu of couches. We played with Legos and Matchbox cars on the clean, empty floors of the dining room, pretending each tile was an empty lot in a brand new neighborhood. We spent hours, whole days even, crouched over the cold, tile floors that summer, constructing cities, complete with thin white roads of printer paper.

The first thing our parents did was split the house in two, and rent out what was obviously the better half– the side with the basement. They did it all themselves, of course. Our mother picked the appliances and the hardwear, and our father did the plumbing and electrical work, and put up a yellow pine fence so there'd be two separate yards. Our mother wrote a lease, and our father sealed the brand-new apartment off from the rest of the house with drywall. Like with the trailer, we all pitched in to paint.

The next big thing that happened was that our father went out and bought a tree. It was the first time I'd ever heard of anyone buying a tree, and it felt like a big deal. He summoned us, his family, and our new neighbor, Rob, to help get it planted.

Rob lived directly next door to us. He was thin, sharp jawed and a few years older than my parents. He worked as a litigation lawyer at a specialty firm that represented big name oil companies. He didn't talk often about his work or his past. At some point, I can't remember how, we found out that he had an ex-wife and a teenage daughter living in Montana, or maybe Wyoming, but we never learned where he was from, or how he got to be a lawyer. He was always very generous with us, though. He had a trampoline in his backyard, and he'd let me and my brother jump on it while he smoked and talked to our parents in his garden. He spoke at length with my father about the intricacies of building houses, riding motorcycles, and planting trees. He chain-smoked and drank, and he had the most beautiful garden on the cul-de-sac. It was his pride and joy. He also had some sort of connection, I guess, with the local nursery, and he helped my father get a deal on the tree.

Years later, when he saw me lugging a thick, water stained volume of *The Lord of the Rings* around, he invited me to watch one of the films with him in his house. He had the whole set on Blu-ray, and a "state of the art" sound system in his living room. He let me drink a Sprite, and he gave me one of those round, crustless, pre-packaged peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. We ate and sipped our drinks right on the leather sofa. After an hour or so, we paused the movie so he could smoke and we could rehash some of the more exciting fight scenes.

"So what do you think, Lukas? Better than the book?" He always used my name when he spoke to me, even when it was just the two of us, and he was always asking what I thought about things.

"You mean the movie?" I asked.

"Or life in general, if you have a sense."

"Well, I guess it's pretty good," I said.

At various other points in time, he introduced me to jazz ("The Dave Brubeck Quartet"), the roller-skate service at Sonic, and the basic principles of Feng Shui. He painted the interior walls of his house a deep forest green, and for a long time afterward I dreamed of one day living in a house with walls the same color. And though I was utterly mistaken, for an even greater number of years– for a long time after he made partner at the firm and moved into a much larger house in the desert, with a tennis court and swimming pool– I continued to believe he was leagues ahead of my own father.

Digging the hole in preparation for the tree took three days. My father found a rocky patch of dirt on our side of the yellow fence, and he hung up a tarp to protect his neck from the sun. When the hole was finished, it was deeper than my brother was tall, and wide enough that I could comfortably lie down in it without my head or heels touching either side. We called Rob over so he could offer his opinion. He leaned against the fence, lit a cigarette, and said it looked good. Then he dragged a hose over from his house, so we could pre-soak the soil.

On the day we were set to pick up the tree, we drove down to the nursery with Rob, and walked all the way to the back of the lot, behind the greenhouses. It was waiting for us there, with its roots in a burlap sack, and a blue tag around its trunk, where my father had written his name. The tree had shiny red bark. It was tall, but quite thin. There were only a few puny leaves up at the top, but we all agreed with my father that surely once planted it would take to the soil and grow to be quite large and beautiful. Even now I'm not sure how he picked it. Or, for that

matter, if it had even been on sale when he found it. Regardless, the nursery employees seemed happy to see it go, and were eager to help us load it, with a forklift, into our repurposed motorcycle trailer. When it was all done, everybody shook hands, the employees wished us good luck, and we drove off, grinning like bandits.

The smiles didn't last more than a few minutes, though– basically until we reached the first powerline and realized the tree wasn't going to clear it. My father pulled us over to the curb, and he and Rob scratched the stubble on their chins for a moment. Suddenly, Rob said he had an idea, and he jumped out of the cab. A few moments later, he was climbing up the trunk of the tree, scooching his way along, until it was bent low enough that we could proceed. Rob rode in the trailer the rest of the way back, and we repeated the procedure at the following powerlines, with my father slowing the truck down to give Rob a chance to bend the tree, and then inching forward and hooting with each successful pass.

To get the tree from the trailer to the hole, though, was a much more complicated endeavor. We had to transport it down a narrow walkway, far too small for the trailer to fit through. Apparently we had no cart adequate for the task, so Rob and my father devised a scheme that involved winching the tree on a sled of plywood, which we'd roll over a series of thin logs. My brother and I and one of the other neighborhood kids were tasked with feeding the logs under the plywood as the tree was pulled along. My father explained that he would steer the sled with the array of ropes and pulleys that he'd rigged along the side of the house, and everybody else was instructed to keep their hands on the trunk of the tree, which would be leaned on its side, in a horizontal position, so as to prevent as much damage to its branches as possible. The most fundamental issue with this plan was that very few of our rolling logs were

symmetrical or even vaguely circular, so rather than smoothly rolling the tree into place, they began to collide with one another and splinter, leaving behind a wake of wooden detritus. It took half the day to move the tree thirty feet.

As far as I'm aware, there is only one photograph of the event, taken by my mother moments after we finally lowered the root ball, with ropes, a bit like a coffin, into its hole. In the center of the frame, my brother and I stand in the mud of the freshly watered ground, fitted in rainboots, baggy sweatpants, and beige, wide brimmed hats. I have one hand on the trunk of the tree and the other around my brother's shoulder. Our small black sunglasses face the camera directly, and all other eyes– our father's and our neighbors'– point directly at us. This is our house. This is our tree.

After the tree was planted, and our first tenant moved in, my father began his real estate career in earnest. He took out a second mortgage on our new house and used the money to buy and fix another, an old rundown adobe on the east side of town. He sold that one and then bought another, and another. They were all old houses in nice neighborhoods, with thick mud walls and sloping floors. Though sturdy, and well located, these were ugly houses, full of trash and stinking of cat urine, with their gardens overgrown and tangled, and beginning to reclaim the walls. But these were the only kinds of houses he could afford, houses with mortgages that had lapsed, and were in the process of being torn from the owners who still inhabited them. My father was able to buy them because he knew the man who knew the man who ran the auctions, who knew before anyone else when a house was going to foreclose. So my father always had first dibs. The man he knew was Gabe.

Gabe was a round man with a shiny bald head, a full beard, and a patch of skin that bulged from the back of his left hand, where he'd once been shot and the surgeons had taken skin from his stomach to patch it. They'd grafted it on to him like he was a tree. I'm not sure how my father met Gabe, but I remember how my brother and I did. Late summer, maybe the second week of second grade, a long evening at the park. We sat at a picnic table, doing homework, and on the bench next to us, our father and Gabe devised a plan to buy more houses. Our mother, I think, was at work, waiting tables. This is a real memory, but it's also become somehow more than that: it's become the myth I tell myself about the cost of my education, the things my parents did so that I could be here.

Before we moved to Santa Fe, my parents tried upstate New York. They found an old house about an hour's drive on a long dirt road from Ithaca, with no electricity or running water. It lay at the top of a green, clearcut hill, and on cloudless days there was a view of a far-off mountain range. The floors were unfinished, the roof leaked, and the walls were full of mice. But the bathroom had a big porcelain tub, and the kitchen had a blue cast iron stove. And then there was the yard. A hundred acres of forest, with a stream running through it, toward a tall sycamore upon which the previous owners had strung a tire swing. There were a few extras, too. A old sauna, a blue tractor, an outhouse, and man named Michael who lived on the property in a converted school bus. But the winters were gray and skyless, and most days there wasn't any view at all.

My father often told my brother and I, as we were growing up, that he had studied dendrology as a student in college, at a big state school in Fort Collins, Colorado, attended predominantly by the children of ranchers and miners. I learned later that this was only a fraction of the truth. Though he did take a dendrology class at one point, he had actually studied "resource management." And in the end, he dropped out a semester before he was due to graduate. But I like to think that my father's career in real estate can still be seen as a type of conservation, an attempt to protect the things that already exist.

When I was in high school, he showed me a textbook from the dendrology class, a dense green tome of indexing and identification systems. There is a certain strand of contemporary academic theory that clashes at a fundamental level with such notions of classification. In my own college education, I have taken classes where we've read philosophers who are unsure if there is even a significant distinction between the living and the dead, let alone the various subspecies of pine. Philosophers who might call my father's textbook an outdated artifact of Kantian ontology. And that is exactly what I find most interesting about this story: how the movement of my father west, from New York to Colorado, is so opposite to the direction of my own. Or perhaps opposite is an unfair word. Perhaps the movements are inverse only in direction, like the thing that happens when extending a finger toward the mirror.

Our tree died about seven years ago, slowly, and with us barely noticing its passing. My father continued watering it until the very end, and I think even past it. Once a week he'd walk out into the courtyard that he'd fenced off, in a white T-shirt and his raggedy slippers, and let the ground soak until it was mud again.

Wyoming

In middle and then high school, my friend Odin and I were devout runners. We trained five days a week, sometimes twice a day, for 48 weeks of the year. And for five years, on eleven Saturdays each semester, we raced. We raced other kids our age, on tracks and dirt roads, in just about every corner of New Mexico. And when we weren't running, we were talking about it. About our competitors, about our chances at qualifying for the State Championships, about what it might take to shave another thirty seconds off our 5k times– and slowly, in this way, it so thoroughly saturated our lives that it became a sort of philosophy. We began to imagine that the source of what we perceived as the unhappiness in our parents' lives– the cause of their divorces, the confines of jobs they hadn't dreamed of– could be explained, quite simply, by the fact that at some point they had stopped running. They stopped chasing whatever it was that they had really wanted, and settled for adobe-house, suburban mediocrity.

Of course, this sounds ridiculous now, totally unfounded, and unfair; evidence only of a type of psychological projection of our own youthful angst and frustration. But I really mean it when I say that we believed (and I'm not just speaking metaphorically here) that we could run our way out of anything, that if we just pushed hard enough, and for long enough, well, eventually… *voila*, the world would be ours.

Part of our reasoning, though, for suspecting that our parents were sellouts, had to do with the fact that at one point, not too long before we were born, they had actually been quite cool. We had grown up, after all, as many children do, hearing stories of some of their funniest and most impressive exploits, and over time, I think we convinced ourselves that we needed to live up to those stories, to do things just as ridiculous as they had.

It was from this very particular mindset that I managed to convince myself, and then Odin, that we needed to spend the winter intercession of our sophomore year of college in Wyoming: living out the back of a car, and skiing.

I first called Odin with a tentative plan for the trip in the late fall of 2021, a year and a half after the earliest Covid shutdowns in the nation had been implemented. I remember the conversation very clearly. It was raining, lightly, and I was walking home from class. When I asked if he'd like to join me, he agreed without hesitation. And his only question was, "What are we going to eat?"

Over the next few months we spoke over the phone regularly, he from his dorm room in Los Angeles, and me from my own at Bard. We spent hours at a time discussing the logistics of the trip, and deliberating on such varied subjects as frostbite, avalanches, bears, carbon dioxide asphyxiation, and the potential humiliation of having to shell out cash for a motel. Ultimately, though, the plan was never more fleshed than this: we'd meet in Santa Fe, borrow his parents' SUV, and aim for Jackson, Wyoming. We'd pack lightly and travel cheaply, skiing along the way, wherever there was snow, and sleeping in the trunk of the car whenever we got tired. And most importantly, we weren't going to pay for a single lift ticket.

When the day of our departure finally arrived, Odin showed up about two hours late, but, as promised, he was in the SUV. He found me sitting on the curb in front of my mother's house, wearing a ratty t-shirt and a blue ski helmet. I opened the passenger-side door of the car, and our 12 gallon water tank tumbled out. The nozzle hit the ground, shattered, and water started spilling out onto the concrete. "Lukas Muir Olausson," he said, "you have no idea how happy I am to see you."

We used duct tape to patch the leak. Then I threw my skis, my warmest winter coat, and two down sleeping bags in the car, and we drove to the grocery store. On the way there, Odin informed me that he had forgotten to bring both the propane stove, *and* the cooler. Our meals would be limited to ingredients that would neither need to be cooked, nor refrigerated. Naturally, we landed on canned beans. We also purchased eight packets of pre-cooked rice, a bag of baby carrots, a bottle of hot sauce, a jar of peanut butter, two dozen tortillas, six oranges, and a liter of Jack Daniels. Then we opened Google Maps and plugged in our first destination. Telluride, Colorado. "I guess we're really doing this," Odin said, and with that we pulled out of the parking lot.

By then, we had been skiing uphill, as we called it, since our junior year of high school. Instead of taking the chairlift, we'd hike to the top of the mountain on the same trails that everyone else was using to ski down. When they'd stop to ask why– something which happened frequently and usually with a heavy dose of sarcasm– we'd say it was about staying in shape, or saving money. And though both of those things were true, it was also the case that we did it because it felt punk, almost as though it were a gesture of protest against the sport's elitism. In this regard, we were totally unsuccessful. As far as I know, we never persuaded anyone to take up our method, and I highly doubt that anyone who saw what we were doing thought it was rebellious. I'm sure that most of the time *we* were the ones coming off as self-righteous snobs.

It's worth mentioning, at this point, that it was actually Odin who taught me how to ski, and not only that, he did so from his snowboard, which is to say that he taught with unbelievable patience and little to no practical advice. But he had two tricks that made all the difference:

firstly, he convinced me to buy a season pass, a financial investment that ensured my absolute commitment; and secondly, he always had two Snickers bars in his car's glove box for the drive home.

The roads to Telluride were slick, and the drive there took about six hours. We arrived just after 11 p.m, and to our surprise, the free gondola, which runs between Telluride proper and the village of slope-side condominiums above it, was still running. Odin parked the car between two identical red Teslas with studded tires, and we rushed to get our snow gear on, hoping to get a run in before finding a place to sleep.

As we got ready to board the gondola, the lift attendant, a bearded twenty-something in a hoodie, told us he hoped we weren't planning on skiing.

"Nope," we said. "Just going for the view."

"Good," he said. "We don't allow night skiing." But he must have seen straight through our bullshit, and radioed in to the attendants at the top, because when the gondola door opened, there were two ski patrollers waiting for us.

They asked us where we were going. Fortunately, we had prepared for this possibility, and promptly fired off our excuse: we were visiting a friend, who was staying in the adjacent hotel. They looked a bit skeptical, but didn't say anything, and eager to avoid a prolonged conversation, we promptly strode into the nearest building. Once inside, we found an elevator, and rode it down to what we assumed was going to be the ground level, hoping to find a door there that would lead us out onto the ski slope. It turned out, though, that this was the basement. So we got back in the elevator, and rode it up to the next floor. There, we found a long, dark

hallway and miraculously, after a few minutes of testing all the doors, we opened one which was unlocked and led directly to a balcony. We threw our equipment down, into the snow beneath us, and then jumped, falling sternum deep. It took about half an hour to find the things we had dropped. And it took another half hour to dig ourselves out and wade over to the nearest groomed trail. The whole time we were working in complete darkness, and trying to remain as quiet as possible, so as not to alert any nearby patrollers to our presence. When we finally reached the ski slope we laid on our backs, sweating and out of breath. Then we laughed. We laughed for a long time. The mountains across the valley were hidden in darkness, but we could see the stars, and the lights of the town below us– and where we were, sandwiched in between, it was totally silent save for the sound of our laughter and the buzz of a distant snowmaker.

That night, we used a cellphone app called Dyrt to find a place to sleep; it led us to a public park, and indicated that we could stay in the car overnight without charge. By the time we reached the park, it was about one in the morning, and we were too tired to crack open any cans of beans. We hid my skis and poles, and Odin's snowboard beneath the car, and threw everything else into the front two seats. Then, still wearing our jackets, gloves, and snow pants, we crawled into our sleeping bags. We realized immediately, though, that they were frozen stiff. The water tank had apparently leaked during the drive, and our bags had absorbed the spill. When we checked the car's thermometer, it registered that the outside air temperature was negative twelve degrees. Needless to say, despite our exhaustion, we barely slept that night.

At sunrise we were greeted by the sound of a snowplow driver knocking on the windows of the car, with the back of a shovel. "Can't camp here, gotta leave," he told us. The interior of the car was covered with a thin layer of ice, the moisture of our breathing having accumulated

and then frozen on the leather upholstery, the windows, our sleeping bags, and even the buttons on the radio. With credit cards, we scraped what we could off the windshield, and high-fived when the engine turned over on the first try. Then we put the skis and snowboard back in the car, and drove off. We had been in Telluride for less than seven hours, and we were already sick of it.

On the road, we ate a few spoonfuls of very firm peanut butter for breakfast. A few hours later, stopping for lunch, we pulled into a truck stop, and chewed on frozen oranges, and warmed tortillas on the engine block. Fumbling with our numb fingers, we filled the tortillas with beans and rice.

Around three o'clock that afternoon, we wound up in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, a town known for housing one of the biggest ski mountains in North America, and also for having produced more Olympians than any other in the country. To catch the sunset atop the mountain, we hiked 4,000 vertical feet over the course of four hours. It was brutally exhausting. Later, we would joke that every fifteen minutes there had been an eight-year-old in Lycra, spraying snow in our faces and telling us we were going the wrong way. At twilight, we began our descent, weaving through a parade of snowcats as they set out on their long, ghostly journey through the night.

We returned to the car, then parked behind a church, opened the bottle of whisky and another can of beans. In the morning we surrendered eight dollars to a fitness center, so we could soak in a hot spring, use a toilet and take a shower. We shaved our faces in the bathroom sink, and having forgotten shaving cream, we used soap from a dispenser on which a feathered wing had been engraved. I Googled the lines to the Dickinson poem.

I've heard it in the chillest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,

It asked a crumb - of me.

"Huh, pretty neat," Odin said.

Then we drove to Jackson, Wyoming– which, as far as we had heard, the biggest, baddest ski town in the contiguous U.S.. On the drive in, the local Christian rock station somehow overpowered our bluetooth connection, and warned of a massive incoming storm. We decided that if we were going to be snowed in for a couple days, we may as well be stuck near a mountain. So we ventured into Teton National Park.

The Park in winter is closed, and so we made it only as far as the road had been plowed. We parked the car, and then, sitting hunched over in the trunk, we prepared our cold bean burritos. We drank a little bit more of the whisky. The car was a real mess at that point, with all of our clothes and equipment and food scattered about, and just about everything was damp, too– from a combination of sweat, melted snow, and leaked drinking water. But no matter what we tried, it just didn't seem possible to keep it all organized.

We awoke the following morning, just before dawn, to the sensation of the car subtly trembling. We could hear, in the distance, as ski patrollers tossed explosive charges onto the slopes of the resort, triggering controlled avalanches.

Realizing that we probably would not be getting any more sleep that morning, we suited up and set out into the snow. A foot had fallen overnight, and it was still coming down hard. We started hiking in the direction of the mountains, but the visibility was so bad that we wound up spending the whole day trudging in big loops, trying to find a steep enough hill to ski down. We had driven more than 800 miles to get to the Tetons, and now, right at the base of them, it was too cloudy to even see where we were. The exhaustion, the hunger, the cold, even the hostility

we'd encountered in Telluride and Steamboat, had all been bearable. But this? This was too great a blow. We barely spoke at all that day, opting instead to listen to the soft sounds of the snow landing on our shoulders. It was so quiet that every time we paused for a drink of water, or to catch our breath, I could hear my own heartbeat.

When we returned to the car that afternoon, we dug it out using my skis as shovels. Then we drove into town to find a laundromat. We washed and dried just about everything we owned, and delighted in the warmth of the building, and the fact that nobody here was giving us dirty looks or trying to kick us out. We had found what was perhaps the last dirtbag safehaven in all of Jackson.

The rest of the week played out according to an almost identical routine: we'd wake up to another foot of snow, and the sound of distant bombs; we'd wrap our fingers with duct tape (which had begun to split and bleed from the cold), and trod around in the fresh snow, looking for safe hills to ski; we'd eat cold beans, hang out at the laundromat, drink cheap whisky and fall asleep in dry sleeping bags.

Then, on our third visit to the laundromat, Odin looked over at me from across the bench, as we were waiting for the dryer, and said, "Dude. What if tomorrow we just bought day passes?"

With an expletive, I agreed.

That night we ate the last orange and finished the bottle of whisky, and when we emerged from our sleeping bags at dawn, for the first time since crossing the border between Colorado and Wyoming, we saw the sun.

The day we rode the lift I thought about a quote from Yehuda Amichai that I had stumbled across a few months prior. "To live is to build a ship and a harbor at the same time. And to complete the harbor long after the ship was drowned." I thought about our parents, and all the stories they'd told us of their youth. Maybe sometimes, by the time we’ve built the thing to protect our dreams, we’ve forgotten why we had them in the first place. And unwilling to accept this, we chase perpetually at those select moments of clarity which hold their own weight in concurrent pain and joy, those moments where the whole of the world stands still with us. And don't we sometimes get there, with the sensation of falling in our stomachs, and our heads in the snow and feet in the air. Don't we sometimes get there, throwing orange peels out the car window, clipping toenails in church parking lots, brushing teeth in gas station bathrooms. Laying in the back of a car in a frozen field in Wyoming, dreaming of flight and feathered things.

A Difference

In the summer that I was twelve and my brother was nine, we spent almost every day outside, with our neighbors in their backyards. There were four other kids about our age who lived on the cul-de-sac; they were all boys, and we were friends with all of them. In one backyard, on the first day of the break, we planted a handful of dried corn kernels alongside an irrigation line, which had been run earlier that spring, for a lawn that would never grow. We promptly forgot about our handiwork, though, and were shocked when, in early August, a wall of corn stalks seemed to shoot up out of nowhere.

This was not exactly unusual, though. Since moving to Santa Fe, we had spent most of our summers outside, playing with the neighbors, roaming from one yard to the next– one activity to the next, always surprised when the day before, or the distant future caught up to us. We'd spend a whole afternoon practicing our trampoline flips, and be annoyed when we woke up the following morning with our knees bruised from bungled landings. Or we'd jump our bikes over the curb and into a patch of goatheads, and feel personally wronged upon discovering, an hour or so later, that our tires had gone flat. But by far the worst collision with time was always the end of summer itself, the shock that two months had slipped by, and that it was once again time to go shopping for pencils, notebooks, and binders, to get ready for the long school year ahead.

The summer of the corn stalks, though, something changed with our parents. They started arguing. They'd go at it the whole afternoon, and sometimes well into the night. And even though they had the house to themselves, they'd argue in their bedroom, behind the closed door, for some reason. We'd hear them sometimes, my brother and I, if we ran inside, for instance, to grab

a snack. But we always pretended not to notice. We never spoke about it, and we never told the neighbors, and yet somehow, they seemed to understand. Nobody ever asked why our backyard was suddenly off limits. And, anyways, It wasn't a loud sort of arguing, at least not most of the time. It just sounded sad.

In the evenings that summer, my brother and I were always the last ones to head in. The sun would set and the sky would turn blue, and then one by one the other kids would be called in for dinner. And then it was always just the two of us, standing out there in the street. There are a lot of games to play when you have four friends; a lot of rules to make and technicalities to argue over. There are a lot of things you can do with just one brother, too. But sometimes you run out of ideas. And so, after kicking the same ball the same way, so many times, the night would begin to feel a little cold and lonely. The glow of the streetlight and the whirl of insects would start to feel a little less charming.

So, bored and tired, eventually we'd always return to our square, pink house at the end of the cul-de-sac. We'd kick our sandals into the mudroom and wash our feet in the tub, our soles having turned gray from the asphalt. It never made sense to me that the bottoms of our feet should be so dirty, considering that most days we never even took them off. But there they were, dirty as though we'd run barefoot. And there *we* were, sitting on the side of the tub, taking turns scrubbing our toes beneath the faucet.

We always took our time with this, eager to avoid angering our parents by dirtying the floors of the house, but there was a second reason, too– we knew we had to be quiet so as not to disturb them, but not too quiet that they'd be surprised when they found us. Eventually, with our clean feet squeaking on the tops of the tiles, we'd sneak into the kitchen, aiming for the freezer,

hoping for ice cream. In my memory it seems that every night, at the very moment we opened the freezer door, they'd emerge. "Oh, hey guys," our father would say. And our mother would take a tissue from the box above the microwave, and use it to wipe her eyes. Then we'd all stand there, more or less in silence, bare feet on cold tiles, passing around a tub of chocolate ice cream.

After a while, our father would ask us then how our day was. "Good," I'd say, as neutrally as possible, eager to slip back into that forgotten world of timelessness and filthy asphalt. But my brother had a different approach. In those days, he'd try just about anything to get them to smile. And he always had something for them, some joke or silly thing that had happened to us, some little chestnut that he'd been saving all day, waiting for the chance, perhaps this very moment, to test it.

Long Island

At the end of my junior year of college, after the summer internship had fallen through, and Justine had left for France, I asked my grandmother if I could stay with her at her house while I figured out what to do next. I told her that I didn't want to go back to Santa Fe, and she seemed to understand. She said she was happy to have me, as long as I was willing to help her with her spring cleaning, and to tend to her garden. I was, and so I moved in with her.

The house had been empty for many months– she had been living with my aunt, way out on the northeasternmost tip of the island, helping care for her youngest grandchild– and so there was a lot of cleaning to be done. It took a whole week to get all the dusting and vacuuming and mopping done. And that was just the start. When the house shone, we began working our way through the closets, clearing out all the old coats and shirts that had been abandoned by my aunts and uncles and cousins. Most of the time she had no idea who had left what, or how long it had been there. Sometimes she'd tell me to try something on. "Oh, that's nice Lukas," she would say. "Look, Polo." She'd point at the tag, and raise her eyebrows, or poke me with her elbow.

"Yes," I'd say, and smile. "Very nice."

When we weren't cleaning, or eating, we'd take a walk. We walked a lot that summer, even though it was always hot– even in the shade and even in the early mornings. Some days she would walk twice, once in the morning and then again in the evening, if we took a ride to the beach. Those are the days I remember most clearly. They were small and light and beautiful and began for real at about six o'clock in the afternoon, with us sitting quietly on the couch, watching some report, and waiting to see if the windows in the other room would turn a special sort of pink. And if they did, we'd just look at each other and know. We'd get up and change into our

bathing suits, and grab the stale bread and the car keys, and take a long and indirect route to the beach. She'd navigate from the passenger seat, and hold her glass, and let the condensation drip from her wrinkled palm onto her knee. She knew all the A roads and all the B roads and all their names and where all the Greeks lived, and sometimes, when we passed their houses, she'd tell me how she was the one who had brought them here.

Mostly, though, we drove in silence. She'd point when she wanted me to turn, and tap my shoulder to ask me to stop, to let her peek into the largest, most secretive and overgrown estates. On occasion, we'd get the angle just right and we could see all the way through, down about a quarter mile of lawn, as it leapt over statues and sundials, right to the Sound and the masts of a dozen sailboats tilting in the breeze. She'd look a while through her window, slightly smudged from the grease of her forehead, and study the shapes of the hedges or maybe the wind on the water, and then she'd nod when she was done. Those were quiet streets, and it was rare that anyone ever came up behind us, but those who did never seemed to mind.

"Beat them," she'd say when she wanted us to pass another car, and I'd push the pedal a little further, driving the long machine as she found befitting, in the same manner as she had taught my father and his siblings: braking late but still before the corners, floating the front up close to the guardrail, or the bumper of the car in front, and letting God or physics or alien technology or whatever it was take care of the rear. We never pushed it too far, but getting close we'd start to smell the heat of the tires blowing through the vents. We'd let it cool out on the long, straight stretch just before the beach, slowing down to where the cop cars would hide, waiting for street racers.

We always parked on the far side of the dunes, nearer to the bathroom. The sky there seemed lower than it ought to, and sometimes the clouds would get caught in the shrubs. Walking along the edge of the sand, she'd scan the horizon for seagulls, with her hands balled and swinging, and her ankles in the water. I'd walk a bit behind, just watching, and holding the bag of bread. The light would catch a corner of her face just so, and she'd look fifty years younger, and as happy as I'd ever seen her. Eventually, the sun would set and the lifeguards would clear the beach, and we'd make our way back to her house, driving with all the windows rolled down, relishing in the cool air shuddering through the car. Once at home, she'd turn into the TV room, with her glass, and I'd recede out onto the back patio, with the bugs and the bright light of the garage, to grill a hotdog.

Most mornings that summer we woke up to the air conditioners in our bedrooms blowing hot air, even though they were Fredericks– the finest quality when she had bought them– and even though I had changed the filters at the start of June. Whatever the true cause of their defect, it always seemed to be the house's way of telling us to get out. We'd oblige and eat breakfast on the back patio under a big green umbrella. We always ate yogurt in the mornings, with a mixture of spelt and nuts which she liked to blend herself. The mixture was famous in the family and all six of her children were known to have adopted the particular ratio and method of blending. She was proud of it and thought it partly responsible for her good health and energy.

She'd take a turn, then, around the neighborhood after eating, and I'd head for the yard, to rake, mulch, prune and mow. She often got blisters on her feet and it was not uncommon for her

to take one lap around the block before returning to the house to wrap her toes in tissues, drink a bit of water, give me a wave, and head back out for a second.

Other mornings, though, she'd wake up with a headache, and not have it in her to leave the TV room except to refill her glass, and I'd spend the whole day out in the yard, wrangling the shrubs and the weeds. I never learned how to stop the ivy from getting caught in the hedges, or the neighbor's bamboo from ducking the fence; nor did I ever dissuade the hostas from crowding the patio, or the dandelions from overrunning the lawn. But as long as her neighbors weren't complaining, she was fine with the weeds and looking the other way.

On the good days, after her morning walk, she'd come out to sit under the umbrella and watch me with the plants. On the really hot days, she'd wave me inside. I'd follow her into the kitchen and then, one at a time, we'd put our mouths under the faucet, and let our hair touch the back of the sink as a little water dribbled down our cheeks. We'd go upstairs then, to continue making our way through the closets, filtering through the garments, notebooks, and photographs that her kids had left behind. Sometimes there were real mysteries– she'd reach into the dust and lint and who knows what else to pull out some fur coat or hat that hadn't quit its hanger in three decades. She'd hold it up, some strange piece of evidence in a trial, the significance of which neither of us could figure. We'd shake our heads and lay the coat into the donation bag. I believed her when she told me how good it felt to get rid of this stuff, and prayed in secret that no one would ever come to retrieve the things we'd already deemed no longer necessary.

At the end of the day, in gratitude for my help, she'd occasionally pull the blender out from under the counter, and fill it with frozen bananas, yogurt, and cocoa powder. She'd have me

ground some almonds for a topping, and then she'd draw the longest spoon from the drawer and drop it into the blender. "All yours," she'd say.

Sometimes there were visitors. They'd come from the city on the weekends to use the yard and the barbeque, or to dig through old love letters, or just move the furniture around in the upstairs rooms, and upon their departure they'd leave behind whelk shells, stuffed animals, speeding tickets, and usually a bit of dirt on the floor. We'd sweep the dirt, and change the sheets, and hide everything else in a closet in the basement, and by the next weekend there'd be a new batch of aunts, uncles, husbands, wives, fiances, and babies. We always served fish. That was the one thing everybody loved. Branzino, porgy, sometimes salmon.

We had a friend at the supermarket who'd call whenever there was something good, and he'd hold it for us in the back until I could swing by to pick it up. He wouldn't let me pay though, until I agreed to his conditions, and promised there'd be no funny business: we wouldn't cook it too long or try any experimental seasonings. He'd make me swear that nothing would touch it except oregano, lemon, and olive oil. Then he'd grin and wrap the fish in paper and ask about my grandmother. "She still walking?" he'd say, and I wouldn't have to answer. I'd just laugh, and he'd hold the fish up a bit so it wouldn't rest too heavily on the scale. Maybe it was because she was Cypriot, maybe it was because we always paid in cash.

After the first few tries we learned it was better not to flip the fish a whole bunch, so once we had it in the basket on the barbeque, we'd walk around and show the guests the yard. The new flower beds and hedge shapes. All the rocks I'd dug up. I'd tell them I was planning to build a small retaining wall, and they'd smile, and sip their drinks, and admire the little irises and the

lilacs and the sunset. We'd wash our hands then, and set the patio table and carefully lay out the silverware and plate the salmon, and suddenly the evening would feel quite formal. All pleases and thank-yous with the passing of the salad bowl, all knives and forks as we picked at the bones.

One weekend my aunt N showed up on the front steps with her daughter, and a few books, and a big box of diapers. They stayed longer than our other guests, and ate fish with us two weeks in a row. Even the baby ate a little. The baby was well behaved, and ate almost everything and hardly ever cried. She was a good talker, too, and knew the names of all sorts of airplanes. You could sit with her on the couch for an afternoon, flipping through the airplane book and she'd tell you things. *C-130, has smoke*. *Stratofortress, has wind*. She really liked to talk about the Stratofortress. But whenever my aunt had an appointment in the city, we'd set up the sprinkler in the back, and spend an hour getting muddy and running through it. To protect her eyes from the water, the baby would ask to wear my grandmother's hat. She'd run across the yard, back and forth through the mist of the sprinkler, yelping with each pass. She'd trace the arch of a rainbow with her arm, and then duck behind a row of arborvitaes.

When one of her mother's appointments turned into a four day road trip, we found out by way of a seven-word text message and then quickly adopted the child into our quiet routines. I dug an old crib out of the attic– one of the few things my grandmother had refused to donate– and took it to the garage to give it a fresh coat of paint. When it was dry, we put it in one of the upstairs bedrooms, and took the baby on a tour of the closets, to show they were empty.

In the mornings we'd still wake to the air conditioners blowing warm air, but now there was also the sound of a baby crying. To soothe her, we'd hold her and walk her to the corner at

the other end of the room, and sing a little. She seemed to like the paintings there: colorful and impressionistic scenes at the edge of the ocean. A bottle of wine, a rose in a jam jar, a pair of musicians, and a woman in a red dress.

And so it was like this that we took care of the child, feeding her yogurt in the mornings, and teaching her the names of all the plants in the garden, and soothing her tears in the corner at the other end of the room. We watched as a sunflower grew above the fence between the neighbor's yard and ours. And on the last day of the three of us together, we put her in the car and took a long drive. We drove through the fancy neighborhoods, and past the houses big enough to have service entrances. We drove awhile alongside a sunglass-clad couple in a 10-year-old convertible, the woman's floral dress caught in the doorsill. We drove all the way to the last parking lot. All the way to the bathrooms and the start of the sand.

The tide had come all the way in that day, nearly to the parking lot. The lifeguard chair was floating, and though the lifeguards kept saying that the ocean was closed, nobody was listening. We were all wading out into the tepid water, towards a thin strip of sand just before the break, where a shoal had once run parallel to the shore. There were children playing paddle ball there, at the edge of the continent, with the ocean spitting behind them, and a few fishermen casting their lines into the surf. We watched the sunset.

The following morning, N returned. There was a long scratch in the door of her car, and an angry conversation in the kitchen, and then, suddenly, laughter, clear and bright laughter.

In the last weeks of the summer, when the tulip tree in the front yard shed its leaves, which were the color of polished copper, I started running again, at the beach, as my grandmother would take

her walks. I'd run at the very edge of water, where the recessed tide always the sand compacted in its wake. I'd duck under the lines of the old fishermen, who looked as though they'd been fishing so long their own skin had turned to scales. Sometimes, small children and seagulls would try to race me. And instead of counting miles or minutes, I'd keep track of where I was by counting the lifeguard chairs. On the stretch of beach where I ran there were seven chairs. Each chair corresponded to a different parking lot, and going east, the distance between each chair and its respective parking lot shrank. Running west, there were always fewer and fewer people in each of the designated swimming areas, and all the way at the very western tip of the beach, there was almost no one. There, at the rocky pier at the mouth of the inlet you could see, on very clearest evenings, the tops of the tallest Manhattan buildings. The commercial Midtown behemoths, the vacant Fifth Avenue pencils, and, at the southern tip of the island, the One World Trade Center. The buildings always looked blue, even though the haze that blurred their figures was yellow.

At the pier I'd take a quick swim to wash the sweat off my body, and then I'd start back, gradually picking up speed at each chair until by the very end I'd be flying. The dunes in the periphery would start to take on an orange glow, in the last, low light of the evening, and the planes overhead would catch the rays like tiny mirrors. I'd run so fast my legs would go numb. So fast that I'd get sand in my hair, from kicking it up behind me.

Upon reaching the final chair, I'd throw my hands on my knees, and hang my head, with exhaustion, and the rest of the night was always a blur. Finding my grandmother in the crowd on the boardwalk. Our barefeet in the public shower. The feeling of my sweat and the salt of the ocean drying on my skin. The long lines of cargo ship lights, far out at sea. Back at home, a feast

of leftovers on the glass table top. Cheeses, condiments, rice, brussel sprouts, potatoes, asparagus, quinoa, watermelon.

In the end, when all the tulip leaves have fallen, and everyone else has gone home, we do a little cleaning in the kitchen. I sweep the crumbs off the counter, into my palm, and she cleans the plates. Her feet stick to the floor a little as she walks between the table and the dishwasher. Her feet are still sticking to the floor when she asks if I'd like to go to the beach. "Yes," I say, and so we get ready. I pour the crumbs into the garbage, and she reaches for her sneakers, and takes a long time tying them; and in the interim second between now and the walk to the car, and the swim in the waves, and the taste of the banana smoothies after, and all that comes next, we have this second to know our fate before it's behind us. We have this second to know the party that's happening at the edge of the world, in a small silver frame in her attic, where there's a white bottle of wine, a rose in a jam jar, two violinists, and a woman in a red dress. Where the wind tugs at the edges of everything, and the sand and the rain blows in at the corners.

Table Manners

In the early days of the lockdown, my mother and I got in the routine of taking a brief walk in the vaguely pinkish spring mornings before school. On our days off, we left the house a bit later, so my brother could join, but our route never varied between the days he came and the days he didn't. We'd step outside, tuck cloth masks around our ears, and wind through the neighborhood streets, holding our breath and veering to the very edge of the sidewalk at the sight of other walkers. Slowly, we'd make our way uphill, towards a small public pool, where my brother and I took swimming lessons as children. The pool had been emptied at the end of the previous year's summer, and though it was now nearly warm enough to swim, it had yet to be refilled. We noticed this on our first visit there, gazing down into the gray, empty bowls.

Behind the diving board, we found a faint path that led to the top of a small, rocky hill. The path was steep enough that we had to sort of crawl to get up it, yanking on various shrubs and rocks to stop ourselves from sliding backward. At the top, we found a makeshift bench that someone had built with cinder blocks and two-by-fours, apparently in commemoration of their dead dog. When we got there we found it a nice place to catch our breath and look out over the city.

The spring in Santa Fe is dry and windy. Once the winter storms have gone, there is hardly ever any precipitation until the summer monsoons. But while the skies in spring are blue and cloudless, the air at eye level is suffuse with dust and pollen.

Atop the little dirt hill, with the whole city spread out beneath us, we spent a while studying the arc of the river, and the tall, leafless elms rooted on its banks. We watched as the dust billowed through the streets. It was easy to see how the city's development had unfolded

from the greenest pockets of land, nearest to the foothills and the water, and how it had stretched out in concentric, adobe rows, until settling in its current form. A vaguely triangular shape, butted up against the edges of two large highways– I-25 and State Road 599– and the southernmost reach of the Sangre de Cristo mountain range.

At the time, I was in the final months of high school, waiting to hear back from the colleges that I had applied to, and my mother was finishing a manuscript, a memoir of the early years of her childhood, and the culminating requirement of the low-residency MFA program from which she was about to graduate. Naturally, we often spent those mornings wondering and talking about the future. I still wasn't totally sure what I wanted to study in college, and my mother, on a couple occasions mentioned a desire to leave the state. She told me that after my brother finished high school, she might look for work in Massachusetts, or perhaps Arizona.

There were also more abstract concerns. We spoke at length about this feeling we had, an acute awareness of the plasticity of things that had otherwise seemed immovable. We wondered about the potential outcomes of the following year's election, the various political tensions my generation was due to inherit, and the fate of the planet's health. I am struck now by the difficulty of trying to recall the particular orientations of these conversations, but I remember feeling hopeful. We were interested in such grand topics, in part, I think, because it was a way of getting beyond the otherwise banal considerations which consumed the other hours of our days: the frustrations of our overlapping lives, the bickering about a lack of space.

Not only are those specific conversations difficult to recall, much of the rest of that spring has blurred together in memory. The pink hues of the cherry blossoms in March. The flowering of the yellow rosebush in our driveway. The many windy mornings atop the hill, our shirts and

pants rippling just above our bodies. The long hours of virtual class, sitting with my laptop at the wobbly wooden desk in my room, watching the window, the passing clouds, and blooming roses. It all blends together, with no logic of sequence or consecution.

Our only reliable timekeepers were metronomic, born of routine. For instance, this one: every other week my mother would go out for groceries and toilet paper. In the early months, this was a challenging and complicated task. Following a mixture of word of mouth recommendations and gut instinct, she'd drive from one store to the next, looking for rolls. She even invented her own uniform for the errand, complete with a rain jacket, elbow length dishwashing gloves, and protective glasses. She'd return, always successful, still masked and gloved, and step directly into the shower. My brother and I always left a trash bag there for her clothes, so when she got out she could load them into the washing machine without recontaminating her hands. Then, all together, we'd wash the produce, and wipe the plastic with vinegar.

Most days, after classes, I'd go out into the yard to pull weeds and prune the rose bushes. At some point I decided it would be an interesting experiment to try to grow an apple tree from seed. I managed, to my surprise, to propagate a few seedlings in a damp paper towel, and then pot them in small styrofoam cups, the bottoms of which I punctured for drainage. For weeks the saplings sat on the windowsill in our kitchen, above the round wooden table where we had begun to eat our meals together.

Around the same time as the appleseed propagation project, we also began making sourdough bread from a starter, which we had grown in our fridge. My mother was inspired by

her own mother, as well as her two uncles, all of whom had recently begun making bread themselves, and would, on our Sunday evening family Zoom calls, show off their latest creations.

The simple task of kneading soon became one of the few genuine pleasures in the otherwise dull repetition of those days. I often found myself looking forward to removing the sticky dough from the glass mixing bowl, in which we let it proof. There was something very satisfying about sprinkling the counter with flour, and then kneading the dough until it could be stretched to the point of translucency. I remember our first two loaves: knocking the still warm crusts with our knuckles to test their readiness, and then tearing them open above the floral-print tablecloth on our wooden table. We ate the torn slices with butter, chewing and tearing ferociously, like we had never tasted anything so delicious. And indeed, we had waited so long for this simple luxury– for the starter to take, the dough to rise, and the loaves to proof and bake– that we had no patience left for manners, and so we ate without plates or even saying anything at all, letting the crumbs accumulate on the table. Crumbs we'd pick up with the tips of our fingers when the rest of it was finished.

Before Covid, it had been somewhat rare for the three of us to eat together. Most days, my mother didn't have time to stop at the house between jobs. She'd leave her classroom, tie a black apron around her waist, and then head to the restaurant to wait tables. She often wouldn't get back until after midnight, after we had already fallen asleep. So most weekdays, we'd only see her in the mornings. And because our father also retained fifty-percent custody over us, we were only at her house every other week.

During the weeks we stayed at our mother's house, on the days she wasn't around for dinner, we'd return again and again to the same rotation: pastas, frozen pizzas, and reheated leftovers from the restaurant. Waiting for the water to boil, or the oven to preheat, we'd sometimes watch a movie at the dining room table. We liked movies with car chases and elaborate heists. When the food was ready, we'd eat and do our homework. And the following morning, driving to school together, we'd grin as we sped through the roundabouts, and barreled over the train tracks.

By the end of May, the apple tree saplings were comparable in height to the length of my pointer finger, and we had a better sense of the risks of the virus. We no longer used soap when washing our vegetables, and we felt comfortable enough outside to take long bike rides through the still mostly empty streets of town. My mother's manuscript was nearly done, and I had narrowed my decision down to two schools: one in the mountains of Southern Colorado, and the other in the Hudson Valley of New York. Both of these locations felt symbolic, like distant reverberations of my parents' various migrations. To go back to New York felt almost like disavowal of our move to Santa Fe, an embrace of a certain type of snobby, swankiness that they had worked so hard to take us out of. To go to Colorado, on the other hand, felt like a peculiar and perhaps haunted repetition of my father's own trajectory through college. He seemed to see it this way, too, and it was actually he who pushed for Bard.

Towards the end of their marriage, one of the key tensions in my parents' relationship was a disagreement about how often we should go out, as a family, for social events. My father rarely had any interest in going to backyard barbecues, or other similar gatherings; but my mother,

whether she enjoyed them or not, seemed to feel we had a certain obligation to attend them, if only for the sake of keeping up appearances. Part of this difference seems, in retrospect, a matter of an irreconcilable difference of dispositions, but, there was something else as well. It just so happened that because of the zoning of the school that I was attending (my parents had snuck me in by pretending that we lived in one of my father's renovation projects), the parents of the friends I was making, the people we'd be hanging out with if we had been attending barbecues, were part of a slightly different social class than we were. Their parents were architects, scientists, artists, and lawyers– all embedded in a circle of intellectualism that I don't think my father ever felt comfortable in.

The last big gathering that I can remember us going to as a family was a winter solstice party in 2012. The solstice that year fell on a Friday, something I remember because it was exactly a week after the shooting at Sandy Hook. My friend Tilman had invited us to his family's house for the evening– he explained that, in accordance with a yearly tradition, they were planning to have a big bonfire. And, as a sort of sacrifice, they were going to burn an old pair of cross-country skis, in the hopes of charming the gods of winter and invoking, in the form of their gratitude, a snowy season.

It took us a long time to get ready, with my parents fussing about what we should wear. I remember standing in their bedroom, with my brother, listening to them argue. My mother thought we ought to dress up a bit. "What does it matter," my father had said, "We'll be standing in the dark anyway."

Tilman's family lived on a dirt road, in a community about half an hour north of Santa Fe, called Rio en Medio. They had a very enchanting little adobe at the top of a hill, with a huge yard, and a view of the Jemez mountains above Los Alamos. When we arrived, there were already five or so other families huddled around the fire. The mood, however, was solemn. Someone passed a flask of whisky around, but almost nobody drank.

Amazingly, though, the sacrifice seemed to work almost immediately, and shortly after dusk the snow started falling in fat, heavy globs. It wasn't long until a couple of inches had accumulated.

Suddenly, out of the quiet huddle, someone threw a snowball, and hit Tilman's mother, Mikayla, square in the chest. She gasped, and for a split second everyone was silent. Then, a full-blown war broke out, with everyone rushing about in the dim light of the fire, breathlessly hurling wet snow at one another. Somebody grabbed a shovel and started wielding it as a catapult. My father somehow acquired the lid of a tin trash can, which he used as a shield in a series of attacks against my mother, and then to dump a pile of snow onto my head. It was utter pandemonium. And I remember, so clearly, the sound of our howling voices in the empty night. Not quite laughter, not quite fear.

Right in the middle of all the chaos, Tilman's older brother, Quincy, led me behind a small shed, where we took cover, and then lobbed snowballs at his friends. In later years, as I got to know their house better, I'd come to learn that this shed was where he and Tilman stored their bikes and pellet guns; it was where they went to tinker, and to get out of the way of their parents.

A few weeks before the start of my freshman year of high school, about a month or so after my mother moved out, the two of us took a walk downtown, to catch the sunset and enjoy the cool evening weather. Out of the blue, she asked if I wanted to see one of the restaurants she had worked at when we first moved to Santa Fe. I said yes, and we strolled into the large, private courtyard of one of the most expensive hotels in the city. There were a number of stone paths which wound lackadaisically among the stone fountains and statues, and a few large, leafy trees. Strung among them was a canopy of soft yellow lights, the reflection of which were shone in the fountains, and the tall french doors across the courtyard, at the entrance to the restaurant. The doors were all swung open, and dressed with cream colored curtains. There was a band playing in the main room of the restaurant, and before I even realized what was happening, we were ushered into two plush leather chairs, where we could sit and listen.

A waiter came over to ask if we'd like anything to drink. My mother, to my surprise, asked for a glass of wine. I remember being amazed by the fact that she didn't even need to look at the menu to order it, and also a bit surprised: I had never, in my whole life, seen her drink. When the waiter returned, he brought with him the glass of wine, and also a platter of miniature burgers, which I hadn't heard my mother order. I glanced over at her face to see if it was some sort of mistake, but she just smiled and sipped her wine, and started telling me stories about waitressing. I ate the burgers and we listened to the band, and it occurred to me that I had never in my life felt so fancy.

Well, maybe once before. Our second year in Santa Fe, a brutally hot summer day. I was in the driveway, tossing a tennis ball at the neighbor's fence, when my mother came out of the house, dressed in long dark sleeves and a blue, wide brimmed hat. She walked over to me,

carrying in one hand a speckled pomegranate and a knife, and in the other, a tube of zinc sunscreen. She rubbed the sunscreen onto my nose with a very dry and calloused finger. Then she cut the pomegranate in half. She sat down in the gravel, then, and began picking at the shiny seeds with the same finger she had used to apply the sunscreen. I sat next to her and tried to do the same, to gently pry each seed from the rubbery pith without squishing it. But lacking a certain dexterity, I soon found my cheeks, hands, and shorts covered in the red dye of the arils. My mother, though, said nothing. She didn't once object to the mess I was making, or complain that I was staining my clothes. She just sat there and smiled, looking totally serene.

Almost exactly a week after our evening at the hotel, Quincy died. He accidentally electrocuted himself, while experimenting with an old microwave, looking, as we were later told, for solutions to the energy crisis. He was seventeen.

On the day of the memorial, the sky was a deep blue, and perfectly still. A single wispy cloud shifted slowly, high above the mountains. The ceremony was to be held at the highschool that Tillman and Quincy attended, which was also where their mother worked, as a counselor. My own mother drove me. I can't recall what we spoke about in the car– it seemed there was very little to say.

Throughout my childhood, my mother and I were late to almost everything. We were late to school in the mornings, on first days, and even though she was the teacher; we were late to birthday parties, doctor's appointments, track meets, and school plays. We were late both to the things which we dreaded, and also those which we were excited to attend. It was such a frequent occurrence that we used to joke we were professionals, experts in the art of finding seats along

the periphery, of apologizing profusely whenever we got caught, hands still on the creaking door behind us. But to Quincy's memorial, we were on time. Even then, the parking lot was already full.

We left the car on the side of the road, and walked along the shoulder, past overgrown weeds, and tiny slivers of litter, to the grassy field where people were gathering. There were many, many people. It was as though all of Santa Fe had shown up. We sat on the gnarled roots of a massive cottonwood, among the neat strips of shadows which its branches cast on the ground, and watched as one person after another took to the podium to tell stories about Quincy.

The principal of the school spoke. He said that the year before, Quincy had been given the honor of ringing an historic bell at a certain school function, but upon pulling the rope, it had apparently snapped right off. A lot of people laughed at this, the broken, tight-throated laugh that happens at the verge of tears– even I laughed, though there seemed to be almost nothing funny about what he had said.

One of Quincy's physics teachers spoke next. Quincy had a knack for physics, and just that summer he had been interning at the Los Alamos National Lab. His teacher said, as everyone else who spoke that day would later affirm, that Quincy was a brilliant student, and an excellent friend. That though he was quiet when you first met him, he was funny once you knew him better, and hardworking, and infectiously passionate. At the end of his remarks, he quoted Aaron Freeman; he said, "You'll want a physicist to speak at your funeral…"

> *to explain to those who loved you that they need not have faith; indeed, they should not have faith. Let them know that they can measure, that scientists have measured precisely the conservation of energy and found it accurate, verifiable and consistent across space and time.* [...] *According to the law of the conservation of energy, not a bit of you is gone; you're just less orderly.*

Next, Quincy's best friend spoke, and told a story of some harebrained backpacking trip, involving a snake, a bit of nudity and a lot of mud. Then his girlfriend explained the trials of a mishap-filled science project, involving standing on the roof of the school with a makeshift antenna. Near the end of the ceremony, Tillman took the stand, in a black suit and a pair of sunglasses just slightly too wide for his face. I'll never forget noticing how young he looked up there, nor will I ever forgive myself for the fact that of all the speeches given that day, his is the one I least remember. All I can recall of it, in fact, is a single image, of the two of them standing outside some sort of family function, a wedding, perhaps, or a baptism, realizing for the first time that day that they're wearing the same shirt, bickering about whether one of them should change.

A dozen or so other people– friends, family members, teammates, teachers, neighbors, coaches– also spoke that day. Quincy's mother, the highschool counselor who had offered solace to every grieving and confused person who had ever passed through the threshold of her office, did not.

When the service ended, late in the afternoon, my own mother took me to lunch at a tiny Indian buffet downtown. We were the only people there, and she held my hand as I tried not to cry, or think of the atoms between our palms.

The last time I had seen Quincy was at a track meet, the winter before. I had waved, and he had waved back, but I'll never know for sure if he recognized me– it had been a long time since I'd seen him. I stayed an extra minute, anyway, to watch him pole vault. I imagined that he would be quite good; after all, he was the most impressive person I knew. He had a girlfriend. He was a nationally ranked rock climber, and a National Merit Semifinalist. He was also, as it turned out, a phenomenally bad pole vaulter.

When her manuscript was finished, my mother had to submit a video of her reading a few minutes of it, as a substitute for doing so in front of a live audience. She asked that we help film her, and told us that she wanted to do it outside, in front of the rose bush. My brother and I sat on the stucco wall of the front porch, as she stood in the dirt yard, in a teal dress for the occasion. She read the first half of a chapter about living in a series of very small, colorful houses, on the edge of Capitola, and going for a run along the beach as a teenager, on the same sunny afternoon as a major earthquake. It was easy to imagine the scene, the books in their tiny house falling off their shelves, and the sudden, ensuing panic. "Is everybody ok, where's Anna?" She described how they found her, all knees and elbows, sweaty and swaying in the sand. Then she read something about an old blue car her parents owned when she was in middle school. She said it ran on kisses when it ran at all, and the rest of the time it was a place to sit and wait for the tow truck, or somebody else to come along and help fix it: "I remember the long winding road into the redwoods, the car breaking down, the fights in the car where my father would yell at my mother that her parents did not appreciate him…" I wondered briefly if the story had anything to do with her eventual marriage to my father, and then she finished.

To celebrate, we ate a fresh loaf of bread, right there in the yard, cutting off pieces with a pocket knife held close to our chests, and letting the crumbs pepper the ground. We ate the bread with canned artichokes, and we drizzled olive oil over everything– over the bread, and the artichokes, and even right into our mouths. We felt full, I think. And lucky. And then we rode our bikes into town, cycling down the yellow lines of the empty streets.

Because of the pandemic, it was not my parents, but rather my grandmother and my uncle who dropped me off for my first semester of college. I arrived in New York alone, with a coffee filter stuffed into the cloth mask on my face, just a few hours after a tropical storm had torn through the city. My uncle picked me up at the airport, and played for me the final mix of an album he was about to release. I asked him what the title was, and told me he was planning on calling it "Escape Plan." I nodded, and said I thought it was a good pick. I wore my mask for the entirety of the drive, as we swerved through Astoria, among the cars, cyclists, and fallen branches. At his apartment I put my clothes in the washing machine, and then took a shower.

The following morning we drove out to Long Island, to my grandmother's house. No tree limbs had fallen on the house, fortunately, but the yard was strewn with them. We spent the whole day clearing the fallen boughs, dragging them into piles, breaking them down with electric chainsaws, into smaller and smaller pieces. And then, a few days later, we drove up to Bard.

I hadn't had the chance to visit the campus before committing to the school, and on the drive there,I felt the corridor of trees around the parkway slightly confining. I was worried that I'd miss the sky.

After checking in, we drove a lap around the campus. It was huge and beautiful, and slightly eccentric, and quiet. Then we stopped at a picnic table, and ate some fava beans that my grandmother had prepared the night before. We had forgotten, though, to bring bowls, so we ate the beans directly from the pot. She said it was the same pot she had once bathed me in when I was a baby. We all laughed.

My mother's first visit to Bard was in the fall of my sophomore year; she came for a long, rainy weekend. I met her on a Thursday afternoon, after class, in the parking lot outside my dorm. The first thing she said was, "You're wearing all brown." I looked down at my jacket and pants, and shrugged.

We spent most of the weekend at her Airbnb in Red Hook, because it was too rainy to do much else. But the last day was beautiful. It was 50 degrees, and the sky was a thin blue. We went running on the muddy campus trails, crashing through the thickets and the mud, and bounding over the short, wooden bridges. When we were done, we sat on the curb behind my dorm. I went inside to gather some snacks. I grabbed my big bag of almonds, and fried up a couple quesadillas. Then we sat, crouched over the curb, with our knees pulled to our chests, nibbling on the same foods she had put in the brown paper bags lunches of my childhood, listening to the branches in the wind.

Visiting

Late in the summer, when it was almost time for me to return to school, my grandmother asked if I wouldn't mind helping her out with one last favor. She wanted to know if I'd go with her to visit the cemetery where her father is buried. I agreed happily. "Great," she said. "I'll get dressed." I was sitting on one of the old swiveling chairs in her kitchen, my knees tapping gently against the dark wooden table, and a spoon of yogurt in my mouth. I hadn't realized she meant today.

She went upstairs to change, then, her footsteps sounding lightly on the stairwell, and I listened, as I was in the habit of doing, to make sure that she made it to the top, and I then slipped out the back door, and into the garage, to gather a trowel, a pair of garden shears, and a small rake. The sky was a solid wall of deep blue, save for a few faint clouds that looked as though they might have been painted in a hurry. The air was still, and felt heavy with humidity.

The cemetery, she told me, once we were in the car, with the air conditioning roaring, was in Flushing. But our first stop would be to the nursery. There was very little traffic on the expressway, and we cruised with ease among the open lanes. The sun was to our backs, and it cast a long shadow before us, which we chased as it danced in the dappled light of the branches of the nearby trees. She sipped ice water from the glass in her hand, as the condensation dripped down her wrist.

The nursery, though, was a sorry sight. With the summer nearly over, there was a very limited selection of plants left. Almost everything was dry and spindly. I pushed a small cart, and chased her through the isles of the mostly empty greenhouses. She wanted something stately, fit for a king, but also something that could handle a lot of sun, and infrequent watering.

She was wearing a long blue flowing dress, over a loose fitting t-shirt, and she looked almost like a flag, striding between the plants. There were only a few other customers at the nursery that morning, and in contrast, they all appeared sluggish. I almost had to jog to keep up with her.

Eventually, at the far end of the last greenhouse she found something to her liking: a fragrant clump of English lavender. She rubbed a sprig of it between her thumb and forefinger, and then held it to her nose. "This will do," she said, and we placed it in the cart, before winding back through the maze of little pebble paths and hot greenhouses.

At the register, she tried to cut ahead of the only other customer in line, and I took a step to the side and pretended not to notice. The guy at the counter, about my age, rolled his eyes. My grandmother rolled her own eyes, then tried to haggle with him on the price. "You see, I thought it was only 35. Look– isn't it dry?" The cashier just shook his head, and mumbled something about what time of day was best for watering, and how to prune the plant in the autumn.

My grandmother shrugged, and said, "Ok, we'll do our best." Then she paid, in cash, and I loaded the lavender into the backseat of her car.

We cranked the airconditioning back on, and then she asked, her voice suddenly much quieter, if I didn't mind finding the directions on the GPS. "Of course not," I said, and I drove as she fiddled with the hem of her dress. She asked if I could drive faster to get the air to blow harder, and I told her that wasn't how it worked anymore, but she just shrugged again, and turned her head to face the window. I sped up anyway, and after a few more minutes we were rolling through the black, wrought iron gates of the cemetery. The watchman stopped us and explained that because it was Sunday, the cemetery would be closing early. We thanked him, and had begun

to roll forward when she told me that she was having trouble remembering the location of her father's plot. "I don't usually come in this way," she said. I asked if she wanted to see if the gatekeeper had some kind of map, but she said no, and we agreed to drive in a big loop until she could remember how to get there.

The cemetery was beautiful. There were trees everywhere, tall and elegant maples and elms. The grass was perfectly green and trim, and there were flowers planted at the base of nearly every headstone. It wasn't long before she figured out where we were. She directed me down a narrow gravel road near the edge of the grounds, and we parked the car under a shady sycamore.

Stepping out into the heat, I started sweating almost immediately, but I found myself feeling suddenly sad about the end of the summer, the months we'd spent together; our morning walks, our evenings at the beach, our sunset drives. I watched as she procured, from the trunk of the car, a dark gray censer, and then started filling it with incense.

The headstone was modeled, or perhaps inspired is the better word, after the Parthenon. The columns had been engraved into the white, speckled stone, and were adorned with gold finishings, and her father's favorite maxim, "Life is what you make it."

She told me, then, perhaps catching a certain expression on my face, that his death had come as a profound shock.

"He went to the doctor on Friday," she said, as though it had happened only last week. "And by Monday he was gone." I nodded, trying to imagine what it had been like, my grandmother and her three brothers rushing around Queens, in their dead father's Cadillac, searching for a headstone.

I knelt down in the grass and began pulling out the weeds that had begun to overwhelm the headstone. I trimmed away the tangled mess of dead stems, the remnants of the various shrubs and flowery things that my grandmother had apparently planted on her previous visits. The only thing that had taken was a sprawling patch of iris shoots, which had actually managed to spill over into the neighboring plots as well. As I cut away at the dead vegetation, I found a few bits of trash, a dozen white pebbles, and a whole colony of snails. I made a pile of the discarded shells.

I dug a hole, then, for the lavender. The soil, I remember, was surprisingly soft. A gentle breeze came through the cemetery, then, and on it I could smell the scent of the incense, and my grandmother's perspiration. When I got up to fetch the hose, she took my place, and knelt by the headstone to speak to her father. I watched her from a distance, and although she was too far away for me to hear what she was saying, I got the sense that it was just pleasantries. I returned, after a minute, dragging the hose behind me, so I could give the lavender a good soaking.

When I was done, she asked to hold the hose. She held her thumb over the nozzle and pointed it to the sky, showering us both in the cool droplets. They caught the sunlight in such a way that they looked like diamonds. We shivered, our bare skin shimmering.

"You know, no one really comes," she said. "Just me once in a while, and my brother Demey. He likes to come and share a cup of coffee with him."

I smiled. I didn't know what to say. We stood there for a little while longer and then she asked if I was ready to go. "Ok," I said, and we got back in the car, and she turned the air conditioning all the way on.

We were nearly through the gates when she told me to stop. "Hold on," she said. "There's just one more thing."

She had me wave down a gardener, who was driving by in a white pickup truck. "Where's Satchmo?" she asked, leaning across to my window. The gardener nodded, but he didn't say anything for a second. "I'll take you," he said, after a beat, and we followed him down the wrong direction of a one-way alley. He stuck his hand out the cab, to signal for us to stop. We did, and he continued on, alone, through the graves. The cemetery, at this point, was practically empty. There were no other cars, or visitors. We approached the headstone hesitantly. It was obvious which belonged to Armstrong. It was a tall, speckled black stone, decorated with hundreds of small trinkets and coins, all of which seemed to twinkle in the harsh sunlight. We stood in silence for a minute.

"He was a wonderful musician," my grandmother said, finally. "Just wonderful." She tapped a bobble head at the top of the stone, and sent it tipping. Then we got back in the car, and drove to the gates. They were closed, of course, so we waited, with the air conditioner running full blast, for the gardener in the pickup truck to finish his rounds, and let us out.

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