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flowergirls

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flowergirls

Senior Project Submitted to
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by
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flowergirls

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I.

The thing was curious beyond investigation.

You¹ have read about it in some book, the one your mother left lying on your bed one dustcolored afternoon. *A universal transition*, the book had called it, but you discarded the claim as something of a myth. What could be so integral to the ancestry of humankind, yet even your own mother could not describe it? And on that one day it was spoken aloud, when everyone was herded into the gymnasium. The shy shuffles, furtive eyes, the chewed cuticles. Even listening to the melody of the lecture, to imagine the thing really happening was an inconceivable harmony. It simply could not be.

But it comes to you, one moonless October evening. You feel a stickiness between your legs and so you retreat to the toilet. The cloth of your garment is soiled—scarlet streaks across what was once a soft pink pattern of stars.

When you had pored over those illustrations, the individuals gazing at vulvas through mirrors, the diagrams of flatbreasted children metamorphosing into fullbreasted adults—you had never felt more alienated from your own form, imagining the way it might turn on you.

In the sterile bathroom you now sit beside the body that bleeds, examining the stains it has produced. You prod the body and blood drips onto fingertips which you smear onto a thigh. You almost like the way it looks, the way the little hairs rise from the cherrycolored fluid, so you reach into the vessel and apply more until the entire thigh is red.

The shower runs and you allow the body to soak in it, rosewater streaming down the drain. The thing which has happened you would like to keep a secret, most of all from yourself. There is a bundle of cloth you once wore in the corner of the bathroom, a soft pink pattern of stars, which you now hide beneath your bed, bloodcrusted and crumpled. Over the next week, you will curate a collection. It is a banishing ritual.

¹ Elinor Rose Fallon—born January 31, 1996.

2.

You² have heard his walls are painted lavender. It is now the only color you will use to write. You settle into the page, sinking into the ink of his name.

Over, and over, and over again, it is written.

His name is a peach on a porcelain plate. It is mystical and ancient, immediate and clairvoyant. It is ripe with so much promise that it hurts.

It reminds you of a song, one that you heard him sing once. His voice is the fruit of your affection. The way each melody hangs from his lips like drooling honey; you long to bottle it in a mason jar, to massage it into your temples every evening before sleep.

Luckily, you have found his song archived while searching his name online. You loop the recording on repeat and your wrists become the rhythm, circling tirelessly to depict him.

When the entire page becomes patterned with the letters of him, you cry.

It is then that he becomes the most absent. You do not know why you have spent so long meditating on a name, recycling the word until it has become bloated and dissociated. It is fully disembodied now, a cacophony of shapes blotted across a thin sheet. You are furious with yourself; you have splintered the only piece of him that could be held in your hand.

Salty tears evaporate into the air. His name is no longer there—it is a peach on a porcelain plate.

You fold the page and begin piecing it into scraps, lightly dusting your bedcover. Once it no longer remains, the meal is ready for consumption. You slip a shard of paper between soft pink lips. On your tongue, the thing dissolves into pulpy clumps, peachskin to be swallowed. One by one, you gulp down the slices, the dismembered letters, the lavender ink.

The name is inside you now. It is yours entirely.

² Lily Ava Davari—born October 16th, 1996.

3.

You³ met Lily when you were eight. Back then, it was all colored crayons and fairy villages and scheming to move to Alaska together. The two of you think of other things these days, now that you are fourteen.

Together you bathe in the water that swirls with milky pastels. You have read somewhere that tangerine peels silken the skin; these float between your bodies like petals curling to lick the flesh. Today you are entrenched in the wonders of each other. When is your mother's birthday again? Remind me of the time you found a donut at the bottom of the lake. Should we change our middle names to be the same?

Your hair is damp and clings to your neck in thin strings. She squeezes a dime of shampoo into her palm and kneads it into your scalp, the scent of lavender bleeding into the air. When she speaks, her voice wraps around you like a warm cloak.

You can say it, Elinor. I know why you like the lavender kind.

Lily is always doing this, pushing you to unfurl your secrets. As if you both are children again, suited up in red coats and rosy cheeks. Huddled beside the playground, foreheads pressed together to protect all worries from drifting off with the wind. Here you have both whispered about all the things which splinter your hearts.

You have always admired the ways in which Lily is warm. She is like the colors of autumn, a worn-in sweater, a jazz chord fluttering out the window on a Sunday afternoon. Her throat is open and she is always speaking of the thoughts which filter through it. She is more generous and trusting than you will ever be.

I like it too, you know, she tells you. Ever since you told me about his bedroom, it's the only color I use to write.

She rubs her fingers in heartshaped patterns along your hairline. She has put you at ease with this confession. It is strange how Lily packages these moments of connection, first by placing you in a box and then asking you why you are there before lifting the cover.

³ Elinor, like frost on a cherry.

You sigh into the tub. To be in love is of echos and aches. You are grateful that Lily feels it, too. The two of you are always thinking in his direction, and your other friends are easily fatigued by these conversations. Together, you speak of his hair, his silvery voice, the way his eyes turn grey in the rain. You postulate his future and memorize his idiosyncrasies. He has brought the two of you closer than you have ever been, but you know all triangular love must one day reach an expiration. Though you will never speak this aloud, somewhere inside yourself you are certain that you will win out. Lily is somehow too gentle and feathered in kindness to outlast his attention-span. You believe he is only attracted to slices of the self, to those who never unveil themselves fully.

Lily plunges your head beneath the water, a creamy purple film bubbling to the surface. Sunken in the bathtub, you release your secret down the drain. You resurface obsessed with the idea of yourself as a mystery.

4.

When you⁴ turn fourteen, your thoughts begin to magnetize around two poles: boys and self-deprecation. You cannot picture it yet, but the thoughts swing like a pendulum, each energetically providing life force for the other to exist.

Things you used to take interest in are still appealing to you, but now they carry much heavier implications. For example, you still like The Beatles, but now you know this preference could ultimately guide you to true love. Surely, if you display your affinity on a t-shirt, it will assist you in winning over a boy with like-minded taste— someone sweet and sensitive and interested in harmony. Everything about you must be contemplated twice: your likes and dislikes existing in their own rights, followed by their capacity to be received. Nothing is solely your own; it is all an advertisement of what kind of person you are, and consequently what kind of person you could be with. Everything is a metric of desirability.

It is a fragile ecosystem to think in double. If, by some stroke of fortune, you wake up bathed in confidence, it is only secured once several compliments are slipped your direction in the hallway or at the beginning of algebra. If the outside world cannot match your internal landscape with adequate enthusiasm, your mind will splinter off into shadow and dust. You will be devastated.

Even at your most delicate, though, you can always love Elinor. Maybe your weakness makes you love her even more. Elinor always knows which boys to call stupid and which compliments to weave into your hair in the morning; she is a lush cushion always ready to ease your aches. By the same token, she is your favorite person to fantasize beside. The two of you spend hours daydreaming together of your sugary crushes. Every so often, one of you will point out how much energy you've devoted to unrequited love, and a note of disappointment will strike your chest. But the remark will soon enough be brushed off, and the two of you will return to the infinities of your curiosities.

How many boys do you think have ever thought I was pretty?

What do you think he thinks when he hears my name?

Do you think you'll know true love as soon as you feel it?

⁴ Lily, a name that can be held in one's mouth like a cooked apple.

5.

Your mother is the one who gets you the gig. She is quick and cunning as a salesman, though you⁵ and your brother are the only products she has ever been concerned about advertising. She is calculated—the puffing of her chest, the flouncing of her wrists—but you can smell the desperation in all of it. She craves interactions she can charm her way through, starves for attention, dramatises everything to center herself. She mortifies you.

Today you go in for the first time. It is bizarre, walking through those hallways. They seem so large now, so hollow. The scent of bleach and teenaged sweat clings to the walls. You pass the janitor's closet and think of all the things you did in there when you were fourteen.

In the classroom, you are surprised by the number of girls. When you were in highschool you recall how they would never want to sing with you, even though you'd beg them for backup vocals. No matter the opportunity, they always preferred the safety of the audience.

Today, though, they are here, younger than you remember them ever looking when you were fourteen. They are bashful and armed with the untouched Martin guitars their Daddies must have bought them. You hold back an eyeroll— all the years and saving and scouring you had to suffer through to earn yours. You remember the promise you made to yourself in the car, a pledge to exert as little effort as possible into this job. It is hard, though, when you feel the pit in your chest enflame; clueless, privileged girls playing guitars without names.

They need to see real musicianship, so you clap your hands together and introduce yourself. Your face turns into your mother's as you effortlessly conjure her frequency of charm. It is a trick you know old and well. Immediately, lashes in mascara flock towards you and you are the center of the room. You scan their eyes and find a pair, big and watery and brown like autumn. You can tell she finds you attractive by the way she presses her thumb into her thigh.

Can I borrow your guitar for a moment?

You would have found her cute, back when you were fourteen. Bangs, smudged lip balm, tight Beatles T-shirt.

Sure, she mutters. She hands you the guitar quickly so you will stop looking at her.

⁵ Isaiah William Thomas— born July 25, 1980.

You thank her and begin to strum out an arpeggio, the one you always use when trying out a new instrument. Her guitar is a real beauty, and you praise it abundantly in front of the whole class. She is still avoiding eye contact with you.

You play through one of your most recent originals—the vocal line and melody are really something, but the lyrics could use some more work. Still, a rush overcomes your teeth while you deliver the song. You have these girls completely captivated.

When you've finished, they burst into applause. Your ego is stroked, and you wonder if maybe this job won't be so horrible in the end.

You duck from the compliments cheerfully.

No need for all of that, you grin.

You reach your arm out to hand the beautiful guitar back to the girl. She is huddled next to another, and their lips look as if they are about to burst with secrets. You ask if they have something to say.

Oh, one gasps. No, no. We just think that was beautiful.

Their eyes flit around and they nudge each other with their feet, a language you vaguely understand. You are amused.

You're sweet, you tell them. What are your names?

Their eyes light up.

I'm Lily.

I'm Elinor.

Alright, Lily and Elinor. I have the feeling that the two of you will make quite the musical pair.

They giggle, a sound you save in your head for later.

6.

When you wear clothing that used to belong to somebody else, you invite their troubles to seep beneath your skin, and they will haunt you until you undress. This is what the town witch tells you⁶ and Elinor the day you find her perched by the entrance of your favorite thrift store.

Immediately, Elinor is repelled. She refuses to enter the shop after that, claiming she has enough worries of her own. Funny, you think, that she is so protective of herself yet so impressionable at the same time. You, though—you feel inspired by the possibilities of the promise. Dipping into somebody else's problems for a change is compelling to you. Elinor waits on the stoop admiring the witch's crystal collection while you comb through the racks of clothing.

Each piece is a time capsule. You try them on, every item sweeping you into a narrative of elsewhere. A pair of jeans, belonging to a girl whose father had such overzealous wealth that he bought her a new wardrobe every weekend. How exhausting it was for her, shedding the clothing week after week like an immortal caterpillar. Next you try on a silky shirt, hastily tossed in the donation bin because its previous owner and her housemates could not stop arguing over who should wear it to next weekend's rager—the most important party of the season thus far.

You finally decide to buy a sweater: a creamy cashmere, the color of baby powder, lush and hugging close to your abdomen. It is from a girl who received so much attention from suitors that she could not possibly handle it. She was inundated with date proposals, chocolate bars. Sweet glances. Her sex life was abundant and extraordinary; she often had difficulty from night to night choosing which lover to spend her evening with. They were each so unique, so thrilling.

This is the sweater you will wear only once. You will pull it over your head and feel it sway against your stomach. The girl will pulsate through your skin and resonate in your hands, which will shake furiously.

⁶ Lily—a jazz chord fluttering out the window on a Sunday afternoon.

Your eyes will dot across the parking lot, first searching for him, then Elinor. She will look towards you through the bus window, rosycheeked with brows furrowed. You will know she is concerned for you, wondering if your parents will actually arrive for pickup as you told her they would. You will grow slightly queasy in the lie, knowing the nervousness it will bring her until you resolve it with a phone call to relay that you have arrived home safely. She has always been quite the obsessive worrier. The only reason you have ever been dishonest with her is to spare her the energy. You tend to know the gravity of an event will inevitably be superseded by the narrative her mind will cast over it.

This time, though, will be different. Or maybe not. You will be unsure of whose feelings your lie will save. But you will listen to the girl in your sweater— she demands secrecy.

7.

When you⁷ turn fourteen, you meet him after school one day.

Though your parents detest the phrase, you are a latchkey kid. They are rigorous professors of biology, and they have plenty of ideologies regarding motivation and success. Recently you have taken to disappointing them. You are disinterested in academia and would prefer to play around on Garageband. You record your own voice in harmonic layers, fantasizing that you are a triplet. Your parents are not home with much regularity, but the glass vases which line the living room shelves are always bottled with shame and resentment. You do not leave your room very often.

On this day, you know the professors will not be home until dark; they are attending a cocktail party out of the obligatory social regiments to which they prescribe. Once you see Elinor's bus wheeling away from the school parking lot, you skittishly inch towards the car you know is his. You count your breaths, reciting a mantra on every third exhale: I will not be caught.

You have never done anything like this before. Never slithered between sidewalk cracks for a boy, never felt lips pressed up against your own, and, most importantly, you have never been dishonest with Elinor. Out of it all, this betrayal makes you most uneasy.

Your lungs balloon with so much anticipation that you nearly drift upwards before you reach the greasecolored car. He is inside there, waiting for you. When you open the door, a putrid scent nests in your hair; it is probably wafting out from the moldy peach pit resting in the cupholder. He looks you up and down while you are still standing on the pavement and takes note of what you are wearing—a sweater the color of baby powder, your belly protruding slightly between its hem and the waistline of your pleated skirt. You are roundfaced and your eyes are bright.

Lily, he says, holding the word in his voice like a cooked apple. You blush and curl into the passenger seat.

He drives you to the lot of an abandoned playground. There, you are touched and grazed and prodded and licked in the leathery folds of the backseat. His breath tastes like cigarettes

⁷ Lily, like a song named after a flower.

and chewing gum, smells that make you think of Elinor's father and the way he would spend most evenings chainsmoking in the garage. You and Elinor once spent the afternoon hiding each cog around the house, certain that over time the two of you could starve his addiction. Instead, he stumbled into her room only half an hour later, veins bulging about his meat neck. He delivered a scolding very close to her face, and you watched from afar, terrified. For minutes on end Elinor maintained her icy glaze while the spit particles went diving into her ear.

You shake off the memory and return to kissing the lips before you, surrounded by sweeps of stubble. It is difficult for you to maintain your focus on the activity at hand. As the bristles brush against your cheek, you shudder; you are wishing to hold eye contact for even just a moment, but he will not pause or open his eyes. He finishes, silently, and drives you home before sunset.

8.

The two of you are in the basement, where you usually are when together. Faded paper eyes of baseball stars still peer from the wall, unmoved since the year you were eight. A sense of your boyhood has been preserved throughout it all; the hangovers, the girls, the softer nights when it was just the two of you.

Tonight you engage each other through music, your default method of passing time. You are both feeling more nostalgic than usual; you tuck away the electric amps, hang your guitars on the wall, and resurface the other metal cases. It is not very often that the two of you do this.

Your brother Daniel is thick-fingered. When he plays the cello, the room becomes cavernous and velvety; he bows rich notes which hang suspended in the air, drooping downward from their weight of sorrow.

You⁸ prefer to be nimble; your violin emits fresh, bright tones which travel in luminous waves across the room.

When you play together, your sounds collapse into one another seamlessly, thick and woven. You each close your eyes and allow your fingers to flutter into warm melody—a meditation in presence. When you were younger, you performed only the rigid notations of classical composers; for many reasons, these arrangements have staled. In recent years, you both have given yourselves over entirely to improvisation. It is a practice in intimacy and trust, perhaps two things which you may only find in each other.

As the lush tones recede to a close, eyelids open for the signaling of an end. You both lift your bows from the strings and pause, allowing the vibrations to simmer throughout the room. A sharp clapping interrupts the moment, puncturing the air.

She stands in the stairwell, looking so small to you now. Contained by an orange cardigan, ambiguously shaped in her abundant skirt. She is clapping with fervor, but her face bears the tentative smile of one who is already ashamed for having intruded. You both shift your gazes in her direction icily.

She chirps some words and they stab the air like an out-of-tune flute.

Sorry to interrupt—I just couldn't resist. Oh how I miss when you boys would play!

⁸ Isaiah, like eyes that turn grey in the rain.

Fitted suits, too tight around the waist. Sweat beading across prepubescent hair of the upper lip. Throbbing fingers.

You meet her with only a musty silence baked in resentment. She does not believe in this look, and skips up the stairs merrily.

I'll leave you to it! The door closes behind her.

Without discussion, the two of you pack up your instruments.

9.

After it happens, you⁹ pluck the keys out of your pocket and let yourself into the house. You can hear his car peeling away from the driveway behind you, but you do not think of it. You do not think of anything. Your hands shuffle through the pantry, landing upon a can of tomato soup. It is thick and red and sloshes out of the can like blood-infused vomit. As soon as it comes out of the microwave, you dump it down the drain. You wonder if the stench will cling to the hair in your nostrils for hours. It is the first thing you wonder since arriving home.

Regrettably, you must use the bathroom. Your mother obsesses over mirrors, so here you must interface with your own reflection. You have always thought a mirror paralleling the toilet was a peculiar decision; even after years of pondering your body while shitting, the thing never became any less alienating.

Today, you lock eyes with yourself. They are hollow somehow, less your own. The deep brown usually caressing your pupils seems to be wringing them out today, wishing for something unseen. You think of the girl you once read about who plucked her own eyes from her face— afterwards she called it the most divine experience of her life. For a moment you see yourself eyeless, your sockets like orange rinds with the fruit scooped out. You shudder and turn out the lights.

Next you go to the bedroom and consider the things which make it yours. The daisies drooping over the windowsill, the box of thrifted clothes that you refuse to hang in your closet, concerned about the potential energetic exchanges. The rug your mother bought you before you were born, the wall you and Elinor painted lavender one day, much to your mother's disapproval. You are unsure how to feel towards it now, recalling the taste of paper and longing crawling throughout your body.

Now you are in bed, deep beneath the covers. You are safe here. Once you have curled into a satisfying chrysalis of sheets, you force yourself to think about it.

At first you can only think of that sky, how it sent beams of warm, pastel light flooding through his car windows. Lighting for a miracle. And it was sort of a miracle, wasn't it? You could hardly believe it was happening, you had fantasised about it for such long hours, your body jolted into shock the moment it began— isn't all that what a miracle is made of? And

⁹ Lily, a name for a latchkey kid.

certainly Elinor would think of it that way. And his lips looked ruby, alight from the refractions through pink clouds and dusty glass. And the body that bled—the way his lips matched the streaks of scarlet you found on your thighs afterwards. It was so beautiful, maybe.

Some moments feel more clear to you than others. The memory seems to fade in and out of consciousness. There was a lot of pain. You are not quite ready to think of how much yet, maybe. You would just prefer to think of the light, that miracle of a sky.

Suddenly, you are steeped in the weight of fatigue. Normally, when you feel this way, you touch yourself until the weight of the day is released. Then you can sleep. This is not necessary or preferable today. It is the first night you do not touch yourself since you figured out how. You forgive yourself for not thinking about it all too thoroughly. It has been quite a day, and you know there will be plenty of time to think later.

10.

You¹⁰ remember everything.

It is just a matter of boxes.

When you were younger, your mother would run circles around you, trying to pull your memory into rationality. You would, for instance, catch sight of the ripe banana your brother was slurping alongside his cheerios, and your chest would inflate with envy. The subtle yellow fluidness of the thing would cry out to you, yearning for you to devour it in pleasure. Though you sustained several memories of yourself sliding the food down your throat, only to be met with scratchy red gums and swelling for hours afterwards, these remembrances did not serve you. They were unpleasant. Repressive of your desire. You did not claim them, and so you would nonetheless forage the goopy pale clumps from your brother's plate and swallow them with glee. Of course, the allergic reaction would come almost immediately: you would grow fussy, your mother would swell with sweat and frustration, and you would shortly thereafter discard the memory into a pile of similar occasions. Upon the next banana sighting, you would deem this occurrence as unhelpful as its predecessors, tuck it away in a box of uselessness, and the cycle would churn on.

It was a similar compartmentalization with women.

Their beauty, lush promises of fulfillment, the desire and pleasure and grace and gratification. Then came the rest of it—the itchy throat, the constellation of hives across the back, the involuntary watering of the eyes. It made sense until it didn't. There was always that moment—the navel of the experience—when the sensuousness turned repulsive. When kissing became an unnatural exchange of fluids, breasts morphed into strange lumps mounted atop a torso, and some feature of her face became inexplicably, undeniably wrong.

Sometimes this would happen after five weeks, other times it only took minutes. The beauty of sex was so fleeting; you always wished you could calcify your pleasure into a statue before it became otherwise. It was impossible, though, to stop a woman from unwinding. And so you unfurled yourself in every direction, fucking your way through a flurry of limbs, lips, hair, irises—all paced so ravenously that you would never need to pause and long for more.

¹⁰ Isaiah, a name that is mystical and ancient.

You became increasingly undiscerning about the women. You took them as they came, and plenty of them did. You had reached peak desirability; simply seeking what would serve you garnered all sorts of great fortune. Women longed for you in troves— girls from your teenage years, still working at various cash registers throughout the neighborhood, their noses pierced and eyes tired. The secretaries and substitutes at the highschool, the way the fabric wrapped so suggestively around their asses, the fluorescent smiles they'd slip you every time you crossed paths in the hallways. Then there were the ones at the bus stops, the coffee shops, the ones who you would wonder about and suddenly they would be there before you, shimmering and naked and tangled in your sheets.

After every orgasm, you felt more and more disenchanted. The connective properties of sex seemed less and less palpable, and you began to notice a heavy loneliness clamboring in your chest the mornings you woke with another in your bed. You would usher them out, blouses unbuttoned, rattling off the well-worn excuse that your mother was a born-again Christian who would have her best kitchen knife at your neck if she saw any trace of sex in her house. They would all bob their heads and promise to call you, shuffling out the door with something saccharine in their eyes. You despised this.

II.

When you¹¹ are fourteen, there is still baby fat that hangs about your stomach. A protective layer of dough that will peek out from under creamcolored sweaters. You can squeeze it between your fingers when you forget how to be inside a body; a dull pinch always reminds you that you are never really as gone as you think you are.

When you are fourteen, there is still baby fat that is strung across the recesses of the mind like fairy lights. It is soft and dim and warm like fresh bread in your belly. This is the stuff that tingles when a boy blushes at you. It will show you a most vivid silhouette of your true love when you are asleep.

When you are fourteen, people do not approach you and squish your fat between their palms like they used to. Your cheeks no longer get purple as a turnip from all the kneading and pinching and rolling from those women who smell like almond lotion and smile too much like a penny.

Mostly, when you are fourteen, you are on your own to figure out how all of this will age. When a man comes, he will want to touch all of you and try the pinching and prodding and squeezing out for himself. It is a real honor to be touched when you are fourteen.

When you are fourteen, it is difficult to really know any of these things. Except, of course, how it feels. Which certainly will not be how you imagined it would feel since these days you are only used to the sensation of fumbling your own baby fat.

When you are fourteen, the things you cannot say will always be missing. Like how hollow it felt that first time you felt someone else inside you. Like there is a layer of baby fat over everything you could think, protecting the thoughts even from yourself. It is possible you may find the words much later after the curling of the years, but they still will have been missing when you were fourteen.

¹¹ These are the things that are harder to say.

12.

After you¹² fuck the girl in the car in the parkinglot under that miracle of a sky, you wonder about, of course, the legal implications. If she will turn on you and tell. It will come out in the guidance counselor's office, who will then report you to the principal, who will then fire you and carve your name onto some sex offenders list for all of eternity.

Or maybe she will squeal into the belly of her father who will forage your skeleton in the middle of the night, slicing flesh from bone ravenously and without method. Or she will resurface years later, when you are a father and have your own daughters. She will pull her car up beside them one day while they stroll through town and invite them in close, whispering to them about the things you did to her when she was their age, when she was fourteen.

The thing is, though, that these thoughts only exist in the smallest corner of your mind. Anxiety never entertains you for long. You would easily do it again. You aren't even sure if she was that special—you aren't even sure that you made the exception of sixteen years solely for her. You think about the other girls who are fourteen with their pearshaped breasts and greasy foreheads. You imagine, often while masturbating, that they could land in your bed without much effort.

Besides, you are not a criminal. You are a lover. It is your charisma and charm that drown your fears. You are not worried about a conviction or consequence; the girl chose you as much as you chose her. You know she knows that. It is why she drifts away all at once.

You do miss her, surprisingly. The comforts of her skin and shyness. You are too strong to obsess over her, but for a while you think of her often. You wonder how she is doing, where she goes after school these days, who else has been inside her. You see her sometimes, because she is friends with a girl named Elinor who suddenly you are friends with, too. When you see her she is cordial but cold. She makes little eye contact and exits conversation swiftly as possible. You sense her shame and are unbothered—shame is one of the least attractive indulgences. Besides, she is too young to know what is good for her. She is only fourteen, anyway.

¹² Isaiah, like a peach on a porcelain plate.

13.

It has been three days since you¹³ have seen him, and now it is Friday.

Fridays are reserved for Elinor; the two of you rotate houses each week, as per your parents' diplomacy. Both of you prefer to sleep at your house. It is more cavernous, more removed. Your voices echo when you lumber up the stairs, filling the air with the warmth of your own company— a utopia built for the two of you. Most nights, you are alone with her until your parents arrive home late in the evening, sleepless and frantic, reeking of stale books and coffee grounds.

Tonight, you almost call Elinor to tell her you are not feeling well. Another lie, though, seems too sacrilegious for you to bear. You are feeling heavy and insular, and would prefer to draw the shades and sip on warm liquids by yourself. It is a new feeling, your reluctance towards her presence. She demands rawness from you, something you normally give abundantly and intuitively. This week, though, you are tending to a real secret for the first time. You had not known the energy which keeping one requires, but it is labor you feel drawn to do. These days secrets give you a sense of power that transparency cannot.

When Isaiah first called you, you immediately wanted to run to Elinor screeching. Both of you had melted into one another at first sight of him. He was gorgeous— finely sculpted features contained by the sharp jaw he could relax to release his thick, silver voice. To leave her out of this development felt a betrayal.

He had become the solar axis off of which you and she bred your musings. You would compete to memorize his Facebook posts, print out pictures from his childhood to cheer each other up, and spend hours analyzing every verbal exchange he awarded each of you. He became elevated to a majestic status— a deity of beauty and projections, an addictive thought.

Normally at these sleepovers, you and Elinor would enable one another to obsess. You had both always loved singing together, but suddenly the art became seduced by its audience. Each song you arranged became lathered in deeper meaning— beyond a creative ritual, you were curating something to be consumed by him. Every note, every harmony was chosen in anticipation of his attention.

¹³ Lily, between folds of leather.

You know that tonight Elinor will want to sing together and entertain these fantasies, but you are unsure that you will have the energy to feign imagination. You have never felt further away from her. You are not even really sure how you feel towards Isaiah anymore, now that it has happened. You have not had time to think about it; you have not had time to think of anything. Now you are thinking of how to maintain equilibrium with Elinor, and you are exhausted.

You could, of course, tell Elinor what has happened. She would be shocked and excited, but beneath it all would hang her unspoken envy. When the two of you loved him together, there was always a silent agreement that he could never save you both. But the seal had been broken—under that miracle of a sky, you became the winner. An irreversible distancing would occur; she would feel inferior and you would feel guilty. But your guilt would be decorative, an ornament of a fabricated victory. What did you really win? The triumph was hollow; the resolution felt unworthy of all the hours you had spent premeditating it. You felt underwhelmed, unresolved, as if, in a strange way, nothing had changed. Being with him was exhilarating but empty, like the moment was over before it had even begun. And you had not spoken with him since. You were beginning to question the reality of the thing.

You decide to tell her you are feeling tired, and you will suggest watching a movie. She will be disappointed, but at least your bodies can be together this way. And you can be alone with your thoughts.

14.

Your father has taken a certain interest in Isaiah. He is a musician as well, and he has seen Isaiah performing solo at the local brewery on Saturday nights. He has been looking for new talent to play with, and of course Isaiah impresses him with that silvery voice. The two of them get to talking and immediately hit it off over whiskey and spiked lemonade.

On a Friday night in December, he invites Isaiah over for some beers. You¹⁴ can hardly conceal your giddiness. You nearly invite Lily over to share the joy, but she has been difficult to make plans with recently. Fridays no longer feel ceremonious—the promise of an evening together is often revoked by the mildest cough or headache. You feel slighted by this, and decide it will feel good to be the one who is unavailable tonight. Besides, you would like his attention to yourself for once. For the past few months, it has only ever been you and Lily and Isaiah all together—his smiles and compliments always ambiguously directed towards your collective presence. You find this infuriating, but tonight will be an opportunity to distinguish yourself from her.

When he arrives, you are so nervous that you can't bring yourself to greet him. Rats crawl across the surface of your tongue and slither into your tonsils. You breathe slowly and heavily through your body until you hear your mother's voice fluttering up the stairs.

Elinor, love, Isaiah is here!

I'm about to hop in the shower! I'll come down after! You shout back while peeling your clothes off. You crumple your underwear and hurl it into the corner, soft pink patterned with stars.

The waterbeads massage your scalp, streams of diluted lavender sliding down your back. You hum a tune to yourself that gradually grows louder. It is a song you have heard him sing before, a sweet melody you wish he will hear beyond the shower curtain and echoing through the floorboards. Your voice is velvety and rich and accompanied by its own porcelain echo; it curves through the mist and hangs softly like a cloud. Wading in the power of yourself, you become curious towards your body and begin to touch flesh tenderly, exploring it as though it

¹⁴ Elinor, like a secret down the drain.

were not your own. Water and song and sensation, all of it revolving around your own spirit—you are casting a spell.

15.

The days are emptied by time and motion. You¹⁵, too, are hollow. Your bones have been excavated from your body and you drift weightlessly, as if an apparition of yourself. You spend long hours asleep, and when you are awake it does not feel particularly dissimilar.

Your parents do not notice except for when you do not eat. The three of you do not spend many meals together, but when you do, you are hardly able to eat more than a few scoops of rice. Your mother scolds you that you are too young to diet and stares at you until you swallow a forkful of meat. It is gummy and tastes too much like blood. Your mother looks pleased.

Elinor is catching on. The lack of eye contact, the removedness, the controlled tone you use to speak. You are incapable of arousal, of excitement, of planning ahead. Elinor asks, teases, begs, pleads for you to show her some sign of vulnerability. You act as if she is unwarranted in her worries. It has been a month.

Lily, something has happened.

You droop your eyes towards the ground.

Lily, we aren't warm like we used to be.

You study the patterns on the floorboards, the webbings in the cedarwood.

Lily, look at my eyes!

You jerk your head up. You meet Elinor's eyes, glossy and blue and bloodshot. She is crying. You let yourself crawl into them, trying to absorb their hurt and understand their fatigue. You wish, so badly, to feel guilty. You feel nothing.

Elinor, I'm sorry.

Your voice is full of ice crystals. You hope Elinor cannot hear them. You do not know what else to say. You leave her eyes now—you have never liked the way they glaze over when they become disappointed.

Is that all you can say?

It is a question, not an accusation. You nod.

Okay. I think I am going to go home now.

You let her leave, even though you shouldn't. You watch while she mounts her bicycle, the cherrycolored one with the basket on the handlebars. As she pedals westward, the thought crosses your mind that maybe it is unsafe for her to be cycling while so upset. But then

¹⁵ Lily, with eyes big and watery and brown like autumn.

you hear that word again. *Okay*. So resigned, so ready to withdraw. She could only exert so much effort to pry you open. You know she will be there when you are ready, but somehow this is still a loss. As if you have been given up on.

16.

Slowly, you¹⁶ begin to miss Lily when you realize she has stopped coming to play music afterschool. At first, you think nothing of her absence— she was probably just overwhelmed, maybe a little nervous. But weeks fade onwards and the crack in the linoleum tiles beneath where she usually sits is growing bigger. You do not call or write. This would be against your philosophy of free love and running with the moments as they come to you. Without her there, though, the afternoons are noticeably less green. Hours slink by with such an exaggerated slowness that it seems time only exists to mock you.

One evening you find yourself in Elinor's father's garage. You have a few stouts in your belly and the stubble across your cheeks is growing thick and course. You enjoy these evenings with her father; though he is several decades older, there is still a timelessness that silvers the music you make together. He is a skilled mandolinist, and you trust him to decorate your developing ideas. The two of you find one another humorous, warm, pleasant. He is very fond of having his daughter around— aside from the times when he rolls a joint from his secret pot stash and offers to share it, a treat just for the boys.

You don't mind Elinor's presence. She usually just nestles herself into a folding chair and stays pretty quiet. Sometimes her eyes will linger on your mouth or your fingers for a moment too long and you will grow unsteady in your chest. This sort of attention does not normally flutter you in any particular way, but in these moments you feel that if you were to suspend the rules of age and time for sex again, you would rather keep it to just Lily. Maybe you want to keep the so-called crime as contained as possible, or maybe Lily has awoken something within you that you still have yet to name. You are unsure of your intentions, but it is clear that things are not the same with Elinor. And besides, you could hardly imagine disrespecting Elinor's father in this way.

On this evening, he excuses himself after ingesting several too many buffalo wings and it is clear he will not return to the garage for some time. You are left to orchestrate some sort of interaction with Elinor. Usually when it is only the two of you, you feel as if you are being interviewed. Wary of this, you bolt to the first question.

How is she?

Elinor blinks, her eyes wobbly from smoke lingering in the enclosed space.

¹⁶ Isaiah, a deity of beauty and projections.

Lily.

She nods, retreating further into her seat.

She's been down. Lower than I've ever seen. I'm worried about her.

You let out a small, unmelodic hum. You do not know what to make of this.

Sorry to hear, you settle on. Tuesdays aren't the same without the two of you.

She sighs and smiles sadly like a coin.

I miss her too. I have trouble singing without her.

Your chest twists. You understand. Instinctively, you find yourself reaching for her shoulder. You wrap your fingers around it and squeeze, only for a moment. It is softer and more relaxed than you had imagined.

Sing one with me, then.

So she does.

17.

Lily has been returning to some semblance of normalcy, you¹⁷ think. You watch the cars sail across the highway, tiny and metallic from where you sit atop the hill. Twilight unfolds and you breathe it into being. Here, you settle into the manifestation you have been toying with, the one your mother suggested to you long ago. You use it whenever you would like to uplift a loved one who is hurting.

To begin, you droop your eyelids and locate a memory of Lily at her highest—one where she is glowing and radiant, hair aflutter in the sunlight, her laughter circling like a butterfly. You visualize this Lily with as much concentration as you can muster. You hug her, wrap her in love, feel her presence. Watch her skip through the flowers, eat a few ripe blueberries, lick at the pulpy juice streaking downwards to her palm. You do this every evening, wherever you are, in the moments as the sun descends. This is your prayer for Lily.

Recently, you believe your meditations are reaching some sort of fruition. Though possibly out of some guilt, she has invited you over the past few Fridays without prompting. She engages more thoroughly, laughs from her belly, remembers better. You cherish every moment of each evening's unwinding; you are tired of grieving the gaps in your friendship.

Notably, however, she remains resistant to doing anything musical with you. She tells you she is too tired and can't force herself to be creative. You can feel the rims of your eyes hardening every time she rejects you in this way—it feels like a calculated denial of intimacy. You are certain Lily is withholding for a reason, but you have learned to stray from inquiry. One day she will open to you, you are sure of it.

In the meanwhile, she has stopped showing up to the afterschool music program. She has too much homework and besides, she tells you, nobody there is very talented anyway. You remain disappointed, and cannot bring yourself to go only for Isaiah's company. Isaiah visits your house most weeks, anyway, to fool around in your father's garage with the eclectic bass collection. He was always more warm towards you there, anyway.

Most of these evenings, you join Isaiah and your father in the garage, which is stale and stacked with empty beer bottles and crushed cigarette cartons. You watch as the two of them grow tipsy throughout the night, egging each other on with arcane musical facts and dry humor. They do not extend conversation much in your direction, but you are content to listen, soaking up the masculine dialogue seemingly so foreign to your own.

¹⁷ Elinor, like a soft pink pattern of stars.

When their cheeks rosy to just the right shade of pink, the two always collect their instruments from the cases. They invite you to join along, though usually you are too intimidated to participate. Leaning into his guitar, Isaiah fastens down the chord progression, while your father lays tasteful arpeggios atop, milking the notes from his mandolin. Together, they write songs about alcohol and women, bible verses and the passing of time. You sigh. You are just grateful to bear witness to the creativity of the two men you love.

18.

When you¹⁸ are thirty one day you realize how much of it is gone. A man walks up to you on the sidewalk and asks where he can find some pot. When you get home you scrutinize yourself in front of the mirror; withering fingertips, yellow starch festering between the cracks of your stained teeth, hair beginning to shrink away from the places it once grew. You understand why a man could see you on the street and detect such a thing about you.

When you are thirty you resent hearing people gloat about their childhood. They are small of mind and spend their time wishing into an abyss that will never wish for them back. Besides, you are smart and you know that childhood is the most tragic stage of life. A child must navigate new stimulation constantly; they are unsafe and unknowing and dependent. Hot stage lights, tiny three-piece suit, your mother glaring at your babyfingers flailing across the cello neck from backstage. This is why people live longer, to progress further, to evolve beyond it.

When you are thirty, though, there is something about youth that feels intoxicating. Not early adolescence, but the meaty part that comes later on, when your body begins to turn on you and shows you independence before your mind has a chance to catch up. Particularly, you like watching the girls— how their breasts bud like crocuses, how the baby fat melts from their jawlines, how their hips begin to curve outwards. It is like how your body is turning on you, but somehow more helpless. More palatable. More endearing. It is a miracle.

When you are thirty, you get a job at the highschool you first went to when you were fourteen. Everytime you go you get to see them, the girls who chirp and flutter. They are bashful with their bodies, and it makes you feel something like hope. There is a quality so springlike and verdant about their evolution, how close to the peak they are, yet not quite close enough to begin worrying about the decline. You bubble joyously in the space between yourself and them. The beauty, the potential, the promise. All those years between fourteen and thirty.

¹⁸ These are the things that are harder to say.

19.

When you¹⁹ turn sixteen, things feel less real than they ever have.

The days are oversaturated with bleached hallways and essay prompts. There are a series of worries that occupy the linings of your teeth. They write the textbook of your afternoons: the bus ride home, the timed thirty minute nap, the small snack of one hundred and fifty calories, then the study session that stretches until dinnertime.

The rigidity of your schedule both keeps you afloat and holds you hostage. Your life revolves around due dates and homework; you make little time for the things people tell you are the most important part of being sixteen, like cherry colas and diners and milkshakes and friends. You are not sure if you enjoy any of those things.

Sometimes, the sun beats through your window with such ferocity that your concentration fades. The anxiety which normally fuels your work begins to turn on you, and you become obsessed with the idea that if you do not immediately go sit in the sunshine, it will never return. These are the moments when you ring up Elinor, and the two of you sit on the lawn and rip out the grass blade by blade until there is nothing else to say.

You imagine that you love Elinor in a similar way to how a man may love a dog he named when he was a boy. The name probably felt right when he was five years old and giddy-eyed, but now it seems trivial. A flavor of embarrassment coats his tongue each time he shouts the word into a field to call him home. Elinor is the same— like favorite overalls grown too tight and blueberries picked a day too late. She is familiar and full of fondness, but the timing is somehow wrong.

When you are sixteen, you stop thinking so much about boys. This is another gap that seems irreparable between you and her. Elinor can float for hours atop the name of a single crush— her face grows peachy and her lips gently balloon. When you look at boys who are sixteen, all you notice is their oily cheeks and sparse, quarter-grown mustaches. They speak and a layer of pretentiousness coats each word so thickly that every sentence becomes deprived of meaning. Your stomach inevitably churns in disgust.

¹⁹ Lily, a name like a worn-in sweater.

You are curious about girls. You love the way they speak with rubies on their tongues and how hair cascades down their backs. It is a thought, usually, that you decide to save for later. Once, you almost tell Elinor, but then you realize she would likely think you are just confessing your love for her. This would demand more energy than it is worth. Besides, you already have so much to think about when you are sixteen.

20.

You²⁰ tell Elinor on a Friday afternoon.

You hadn't anticipated any confession, but the afternoon demands it.

The two of you are walking behind the high school through the wooded trail that leads to the crystalline stream. You have always liked to send stones cascading beneath water together. Today you make a ritual of it; your birthday is approaching and you would like to release the things that no longer serve you before plunging into the new year.

Elinor tosses pebbles into the stream, wishing away bad habits like nail biting and road rage with every throw. You, though, can hardly hear what she is saying. You are in a trance, unable to take in any stimuli beyond the smooth stone you clench to your palm. Before you even picked it up, you felt him within it somehow— his essence grounded into stillness, resting atop the grassy earth. You rub your thumb over its surface and you are inundated with sensation. His cold fingertips circling your nipple. His lips leeching upon the flesh of your neck, leaving a constellation of purples in their wake. The pressure of his skin against your crotch— the warmth, the stickiness, the fluttering.

Lily, where are you? Elinor touches your shoulder slightly. You immediately flinch. Moisture begins to well in the corners of your eyes.

It was three years ago, you hear yourself say, velvet dangling from your voice. You turn from her and set your gaze softly on the water.

In the backseat, I wanted, between the folds, his hands, touching. In his car, a cupholder of moldy peach pits, and our lips. The way he said my name, I didn't know, I didn't know. He drove me home afterwards. The sky was a miracle— the pulpy orange, the pink so soft I wished I could roll it around on my tongue. It was all I could think of. We didn't say goodbye— he couldn't look me in the eye afterwards.

That was the thing I never expected. The emptiness, the deflation. I couldn't tell you, I felt like I was broken. Our fantasies— I felt unappreciative and unworthy. I didn't know if you could understand how rotten it all made me feel inside. Like an apple chewed and spit up.

²⁰ Lily, a name that is too feathered in kindness.

And all these years, and you, and him. You have your own beauty together. I don't mean to end that. Really, it brings me such joy to see you on stage, and together the two of you sing like silver. I love him because of how he uplifts you. I could never tell you, I could never change that. I don't want to—

I'm so sorry, Elinor. I'm so sorry for pushing you out. I was so alone. I was so—

21.

After she tells you²¹ about the day in the car in the year in the sky, you do something you will never tell her.

You write fervently into a notebook— stream of consciousness, the words slipping out of you like blood into a cup.

fuck pervert rage until whynotme twilight sex beauty peach dick wrong
love music again kiss lavender Lily sorry beneath virginity friend rape

They are words that take up space on a page until they don't anymore.

You rip them up into shards and flush them down your toilet. Cool porcelain steadies your feet. You stare at the rings under your eyes in the mirror.

In the weeks to come, you will return to your own garage with your own father and you will make music with the man who is the same man as he ever was. You will notice after some time your brain instinctively does the flushing of the words for you; they do not circle through your mind or tickle at your ears when you sing together in silver.

It is what she wants, anyway. For the music to continue.

In the years to come, you will find yourself growing closer to him until the two of you share something more sturdy and golden than what remains between you and her. He will confide songs in you, laugh with you, and always he will love you. One night he gives you sips of whiskey though by law you are too young. You grow drunken and clumsy so he lets you stay the night in his bed and leaves to sleep in a bundle of layers on the couch.

You'll lose contact with him and her both once you leave for college. You travel hours up the coastline and land in a small liberal arts school in Maine. She flies to the West Coast. You

²¹ Elinor, but the timing seems somehow wrong.

send each other letters for a while, but the clouds are still there and the envelopes become thinner over time until they do not come at all. As for him, he stays in town and lives in his mother's house. You visit him over breaks your first year, but shortly after your family moves to another state and you no longer have any reason to visit your hometown. The communal tether is uprooted, and the two of them float outwards and beyond like balloons bobbing out across the sea.

22.

You²² have been casually seeing a boy recently, and one night he invites you to a party. Before you began this entanglement, you and Lily usually found yourselves hermitted away each weekend, never bothering to venture to the land of orange spray tans and spilled tequila.

But the boy is charismatic and golden and extroverted, and he has this way about him which convinces you that you are, too, should he choose to spend his attention on you. For weeks he has been rubbing his fingertips along your spine and begging to go out, arm linked in yours.

You tell him that the girls who go to those parties do a number on your self-esteem. He tells you that you will be adored upon first glance if you choose to go. You find this an incredibly unfounded claim, but your chest begins to convulse when you imagine him dancing and sweating onto several surrounding pairs of jiggling breasts.

You say you will join him as long as Lily can also come. This is not his favorite suggestion; the two of them wiggle around each other like eggs in a basket. He twists his upper lip as if he is about to say something against his better judgement, then quickly clamps his mouth shut. So it is settled.

You twist Lily's hair into two tight french braids and slather blush across her cheekbones. She paints your eyelids a bright shade of scarlet. The two of you know one another's bone structure so well that it is intuitive, like cooking an old family recipe.

Lily looks beautiful and mature in the silky dress that clings to her abdomen. It is the color of baby powder and flatters her cleavage. You kiss her on the forehead and tell her how enchanting she is.

The two of you have discussed, of course, if you could be lovers. Once, maybe the first year of high school, you kissed each other a lot at a birthday party neither of you particularly wanted to be at. Everyone had sipped on watered-down margaritas and painted their toenails gold. When the collective antsiness collapsed into a game of truth or dare, every round prompted some iteration of the two of you kissing. Something about it, though, felt untruthful to the years you had spent together—her lips felt damp and wiry, like you were being met with copper instead of flesh. You did not enjoy the coldness this brand of intimacy introduced, and she agreed that the chemistry just wasn't there. You are grateful, though, that the two of you

²² Elinor— of echoes and aches.

pressed through the possibility of physical encounter, because certainly the question would always linger otherwise.

When you arrive, the boy's hand clings to your waist. His fingers fumble the lace hem of your skirt and you wonder if he is nervous. You can tell Lily is; she breathes shortly through her mouth, though her eyes remain composed and her posture maintains its dignity. You are in the kitchen of the guesthouse of a girl named Chelsea's parents. She is dressed like a clementine and catapults herself towards the boy the moment you enter, shrieking in drunken glee. Her voice stumbles around as she presses her hand against your cheek, then Lily's, emphatically deciding that you are the mermaids from her dream last night. She then recites her host's address, slurring to you that the guesthouse is a lawless land as far as her parents are concerned, though some nights her dad will come out and collect car keys. She shoves spiked seltzers into your fists and bounces away, her citrus dress fading into a sea of fleshy, gorgeous bodies. As soon as she is out of sight, the boy reports that Chelsea's father is a pervert and only comes by once his wife is asleep so that he can flirt with the girls. His eyes widen as he tells you that rumor has it Chelsea's father once slept with her ex-best friend, and she was promptly sent off to a boarding school in Florida when the news first spread.

You look to Lily to scan her reaction. She is confident and unthrown and says something sympathetic towards the girl. She presses the aluminum can to her lips and takes a long sip. You quickly divert the conversation to predictions about the evening.

You all have a fairly good time. You dance, orchestrate drinking games, slide in and out of drunken, enthusiastic conversations with girls you would normally avoid eye contact with in the hallway.

At one point, you are dancing with the boy to some David Bowie song he insisted be played. He sloshes his body eastward and westward, looking like an ear of corn in the breeze. Behind him, you catch a glimpse of Lily and become fixated; she is inching closer and closer to a boy, though you can't quite make out who he is. He is long and gangly and wears an olive-colored sweater. Suddenly, their faces are within inches of each other and their lips begin lapping up against one another. You stop dancing because you cannot hear the music anymore. You are fully entranced by the two of them.

Their lips swim in and out of each other's, rosy and golden. He slips his hand around the underside of her ass and she presses closer to him, stroking at the curls of his hair. Her body is electric and erotic.

They will leave soon, slip off into some corner and explore skin hidden beneath cloth. A resounding joy echoes through your chest. This is Lily in pleasure.

23.

One day, the girls are suddenly too young.

It is a revelation that dawns on you²³ in a moment when you feel rather out of sorts with your own destiny. You do not choose the girls; they just sort of land in your bed, or car, or a public bathroom, or what have you. There is no thread of consciousness swimming through it all. Your pelvis steers your body and who would you be to deny it the pleasure? Your dick is the most functional metric of your desire. Your mind does not know what you want of your days, how to fill the mornings in pursuit of satisfaction. Sure, you have your guitar and your songs, but where is the landing point? Your audience? Your people? The music hangs damp in the air with no one to receive it.

You like the rhythm of your own fucking. Sometimes the girls will ask to play music on the stereo. You grunt and ignore the insult.

Let's immerse ourselves in each other, you say, sifting through the notes of her hair and the harmonies of her skin, all the while pumping the rhythm into her. Sometimes she will moan or yell or whisper, but you have never paid much attention to background vocals.

Still, the less attention you pay, the further you become estranged from any reality of the moment. And as you peel out of the driveway, you begin to think of the softness of her body, how unsure of itself it was, how she wore her pearshaped breasts like a new pair of ice skates, still figuring out how to posture herself. You roll the math around in your head, counting and recounting— of course, you have always known. You have seen her every week in that dingy classroom, with those other girls, so longing and lush and how could you refuse— when suddenly there she is, slipping her backpack into your backseat, fastening her seatbelt like a strip of pastry over a cooked apple.

It is intoxicating, the batting of the eyelashes, the pleated lines of her skirt that your gaze runs across at each red stop light. She is so beautiful, so tender, so generous in her willingness to be held by you. She worships you. You love her for it. You couldn't have known any of it until you were there, seated in leather, lathered in light from that miracle of a sky. You drive to some asphalt behind the cornfield.

Lips and legs and flesh and cloth and deepness and blood and breath— so it is written.

²³ Isaiah— an addictive thought.

24.

His yearning only comes to you²⁴ in your dreams. It is powerful, metallic and brooding, and you smell it before anything else. The stench hangs humid in the air, as if you are stuck in a bathtub full of hot water and eroding coins.

You know it is him, wading through the dreamscape, slipping through the tendrils of your unconscious mind. You do not ask him to be or not be there. He just is.

Some evenings you sit beside him and play cards together wordlessly on a porch, sipping lemonade beneath an orange sky. This is your favorite of the times he comes. It is benign and you pass the hours in peace.

Other times, he is more forceful. His desire claws through time and he grabs you. Then, always, you are back in the car, under that miracle of a sky— only this time you are wax and cannot move through the leathery folds of his backseat. You can only be while he takes his liberties.

Of course, you still see him in waking life. He is, seemingly, a musical soulmate of Elinor's. They weave their voices together like silken strands, pastel and dewdrop all at once. You would never miss a performance of theirs. Back when you first told her, she offered to drift from him slowly, if that was what you needed. You could see, though, that it was a hollow gesture, and to ask her to leave him would only have further stretched the gap between the two of you. So instead you pleaded for her to stay, and told her you understood the joy the music brings her. Besides, you have always been able to handle yourself; no need to involve Elinor in your own internal cyclones.

As for him and you, your exchanges are superficial. The two of you never milk a conversation longer than five minutes, and usually Elinor is there to keep that brief moment afloat. It is never unpleasant. You often retract from presence and try to slither through his pupils and into his brain. What does he think of while speaking to you in those plastic phrases? What does he think of that day? Has he rewritten his memory? Does he see you in the daytime as used and ready to be discarded? Or is he also thinking of the dreams unspoken, grateful for those shimmering hours on the porch, spades and hearts and clubs and diamonds and lemonade until it is time to wake up.

²⁴ Lily— a utopia built for two.

You keep these thoughts always to yourself, drifting clouds over your eyes and tongue to mysticize yourself from the outside. Somehow, though, it is always the after days you think of him least that he will creep in at sunset. When you will close your eyes to sleep, only to find him beneath an early moon, sitting on the wicker chair, waiting for you.

25.

You²⁵ do not admit this to many people, but most evenings in your home are uneasy. A taste haunts the air, metallic and brooding, as if just before a thunderstorm. Your parents scream at each other often and about many things: bills, alcohol, accusations of infidelity. You used to press your ears up against their bedroom door and decipher as much as you could. Then they became less contained about it all, and the fights would spill out into the kitchen, the dining hall, the living room— further and wider until the entire house was just a big stain.

You are no longer curious about the nature of their arguments. When it happens, you would just like to be away. Your first instinct is normally to go to Lily. She has always been warm as a jazz chord on an autumn day. You imagine she will hold you and feed you tea and watch reruns of *The Twilight Zone* with you. But then you think of how most things have changed. How she would let you in, but chances are she would prefer you keep quiet and to yourself while she studies. You think of how, if you asked her to sit down and watch TV with you, only for an episode, she would click her teeth and shake her head and get that look in her eye. Moist with pity and moral high ground, which you resent. You decide you cannot ask her any favors. Not anymore. Not right now, at least.

So when thunder erupts in your living room, and your chest burns and rattles and fills with ash, you find yourself in Isaiah's driveway instead. He is comforting in his own way. He rolls a joint and the two of you sip on smoke, sifting through songs on the radio and fingering them out on guitar strings.

Sometimes, if you are both feeling particularly cloudy-eyed, you kiss a little. It is never particularly promiscuous. Mostly just an exploration of sensual experience, a honeyed connection between plush lips and skin. It is a natural, even platonic, progression of your friendship—the two of you could satisfy each other in this way, or you could not. Like singing in harmony, only a more physical and moist iteration. Neither of you ever feel moved to take things further.

Of course, there are instances where you can only think of Lily. Vivid imagery of the backseat of a car under the sky rockets through your brain, unshakeable. And if you think about it for too long, inevitably a slug of guilt inches throughout your abdomen. Somehow, still, you feel graced to be in his arms. Charmed. Special. As if your empathy cannot extend far enough to erase these things.

²⁵ Elinor, beyond investigation.

26.

This is the song he named after a flower.

It is interesting to make one's vulnerabilities communal; you²⁶ imagine him writing it all in some scuffed composition book, intoxicated somehow, in the hollow light of his bedroom. He is careless about many things, like ladybug carcasses piling on the windowsill and aluminum cans in the laundry basket. Gum is furred into the cilia of his carpet and his sheets smell of sour milk. This is something else, though.

His pencil curves and recurves like the sunlight of the days, stretching long and thin to write petal upon petal. He draws words from tenderness and heartstrings, and by the end his lyrics are written in silver.

He brings it to you first. It is the most intimate ritual the two of you share. You become inflated with recognition as you read through the lyrics. It is about her— how could it be otherwise?

He has never told you about his time with her, though you have thought of it often. Him, discovering fractals and moments that you had never imagined, though you always thought you knew everything about her. Him, holding her name in his mouth like a cooked apple, giving it to her in this way for the first time. Her name— all of a sudden it is unfamiliar, icy, intoxicating, full of potential. It is erotic and desireable. She orgasms in all the possibilities of herself.

There are infinite ways you consider her, and none of them will ever be how she thinks of herself. For so long, you could not bring yourself to believe in the incongruence, but it is only rooted in abundance. It is beautiful, how infinitely she is perceived. You read of her now for the first time through his squarelike and slanted handwriting.

You can tell he is anxious as he looks towards you and blinks fervently.

Sing it to me, Isaiah.

His fingers weave across the strings, chords aerading over melodic crests and valleys. He enchants you when he plays. His eyes widen and his presence becomes fully embodied. He is within himself, rooted into the earth by the precision of this moment.

²⁶ Elinor, like the mermaid from a dream.

When he sings of her, his voice pours out silvery and worn. In his rawness you hold him between your lips, pressing out smooth harmonies to envelop his notes. Softly the two of you sing towards her being, longing to congeal her pieces as whole.

27.

Remember when the two of you used to sing in the bathroom together? You²⁷ would be in the shower and she'd be sitting on the toilet and together you'd sail your voices into the air

Harmonies that would ricochet off the walls and be sent right back to wash you over

And then you'd switch places and she would scold you for getting the floor all damp even though that's what bathrooms are for, you would tell her, and water is meant to dry

You'd count the cracks in the linoleum and smell the lavender soap wafting from the tub as she scrubbed the length of her body. Sometimes she would scour her flesh until the water ran cold

And you would draw back the curtain to find her raw and red and tender (like a slab of meat in the rain) and you would usher her into a towel and stretch the soft fabric around her skin and watch her face come back to life

And you loved her so much while she shivered into your arms (naked as a dying baby bird) and you held her so close for as long as she needed

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You remember sometimes (on the nights during that stretch when the two of you were apart) before falling asleep you would think of her and

How you used to wake up to find her standing by the window

She would press her bare breasts up to the glass and feel the sensation of coolness circulating through tissue

And if she caught you watching she would toss her chest into the air and let out a laugh, higher in pitch than what is genuine

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<sup>27</sup> Elinor, the body that bled.

You thought of the people below in the streets and wondered what they thought of her  
flesh, billowing like dough against the frame

You secretly wished that you could be one of them if only to see her for the first time

To think of her as someone other than yourself

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On a chilling evening towards the end of March she asked if you would meet her at the
diner, the one where the two of you used to order pink milkshakes and sip out of the same straw

You found her there, curled into a booth (looking like a baked slice of apple)

It had been so long since you were that warm together

You wanted to wrap her fingers between your own and sing in harmony as softly as you
used to, but the air tasted so different and the change hung in a ring beneath her eyes

And she told you that he was the reason you had been apart for so long.

You cried into the booth (like the skin of a peeled apple)

Because you had known she had known you both had known all along

He sat at the center of your drift.

You sang apologies into her ear and they leaked everywhere. They were so heavy with
sorrow that even the waitress felt sore in her muscles when she got home

You each vowed that you were stronger now and neither he nor anybody like him could
peel you apart like you were some ripened fruit

Only one reason could really drive you from each other and it would be solely your own.

28.

When she did find out, it was too late. You²⁸ guess it always would have been. You told her about that day under that miracle of a sky years later, when he had faded from your life but still occupied a corner of hers.

The two of you were by a waterfall, but her eyes were a new shade of blue. She did not cry when you told her; it was too late.

He was someone else to her now. Plucker of silver strings, cradler of simple melodies. She looked at you mimicking sadness, as if you had just told her someone whose name she had never heard before had died. Nothing changed. The two of you did not know the same man.

When you watched her reaction that day, you understood. That between all of the years, something had been given up. You felt an insurmountable loss. You realized you had been carrying it for years, that hollow cell in your chest. It knew of all the untender ways that the two of you could no longer see each other.

It was something you were unwilling to let go of for so long. You loved to imagine yourself interwoven with her, tongues tied to one another, always so intimate. Together you had such a romance. Heartbreak is difficult to see if you are uninterested in it. When unacknowledged, though, it haunts. This friendship has been haunted for a long time.

She is so important that you tell her these things, despite that they can never be said. You still hope there might be something to save.

²⁸ Lily, suddenly too young.

29.

You²⁹ fell in love with Isaiah slowly across time.

For years and years you were vaguely familiar with him in the way one tends to be with their boyfriend's older brother. You were Daniel's girl, as their mother liked to say, to which both brothers would cluck their tongues and shake their heads at her outdated speech. You would only ever spend prolonged time with Isaiah in Italian restaurants, seated across from him with large bowls of linguini between you. He was never the focal point for your attention, given that his mother would shamelessly occupy the verbal landscape of the evening. She would reminisce and opinionate and chatter whilst waterfalling hours of wine down her throat. Her voice was cavernous and only responded to its own echo; nobody needed to say much to keep her monologues alight.

Of course, you were always interested in Isaiah. Mostly, predictably, because of Daniel and their dense psychological interweavings. Raised beneath the same roof, cosmically unlike—perhaps not so unique of a concept, but as an only child yourself, you were fascinated. You met Daniel through an uninteresting mutual friend. He was quiet, restrained, spoke infrequently but with thorough intentionality. He was brilliant in many ways and his voice was deep and blue as the sea. Isaiah was golden, always spilling fire, unpredictable, unruly.

Daniel was like a boyfriend on a bookshelf. You knew there was an expiration date on him somewhere, but you never had a good enough reason to put things to an end. He was compulsively likeable, secure, and unwaveringly loyal. Of course, you were bored. Some days being with him felt like sitting in a colorless room on an empty stomach. It was a safe, usual feeling, so you kept it in your pocket and never wavered on the decision for years.

Then, after half a decade of dating, Daniel asked you to marry him. You weren't sure what else to say, so you said yes. Just to prove to yourself that you could. Neither of you were making much money at the time, so you moved in with his parents to save for the future. The future, he would say, and it would sound like buttercream frosting so sugary that you just have to hurl.

You moved into the basement, the most spacious decision the two of you could have made. Baseball posers peeling from the wall, unflattering orange rug, sleeping on the pull-out

²⁹ Luiza Gold Arquette, born January 30, 1979.

of a fifteen-year-old softa. Daniel told you he and Isaiah spent most of their childhood down there, rehearsing on their string instruments for hours on end. As much as you pried, Daniel would never say much else about their adolescence. It was strange, pressurized, prepubescent boys sweating and suited beneath hot stage lights. From what you could gather, the two were both child prodigies—Juilliard pre-college, then recruited before they were teenagers for strange and ascetic youth orchestras that toured around the globe. For years, they travelled—no friends, no semblance of school, just plane rides and string lessons and way too many hours listening to the droning pitch of their mother's voice.

When you were with Daniel, he resented music. You would beg and plead, but he would never play his violin for you. He said his instrument was locked away in some corner of the attic where it should be. You think this was the only lie he ever told you. Isaiah would fill you in later about their midnight duets, together in that very basement, a very specific catharsis they could only ever find in each other.

It was the music that first drew you in. He was so musical in everything he did. The way he spoke, the way he moved, the way he would pour his milk into a glass. He was everything that Daniel had repressed himself out of being. Isaiah was only his own truth. Maybe it was cracked and melted and jagged in some places, but it was him. He was in tune with his desire, conspiring with the rhythm of his own body. He worshipped his passion. It took you years to realize all of this, but once you did, you became impossibly ripe with desire.

30.

When you³⁰ talk to her it is like trying to harvest the last bits of meat off a cherry pit. There is hardly any ripeness to curve down the back of your throat and boat-ride through saliva. Just red stains that scale across your fingers like a memory.

You get accepted to Scripps College in California, and there is not much thought that goes into the decision shortly thereafter. You will move to the West Coast, and you will not return home for an entire year and a half. Your parents, as it turns out, are not particularly sentimental about your departure. Neither are you.

On the day you tell her you've decided to go to California, her eyes grow big and she tells you she will really miss you once you go so far away. It is a kind thing to say, but between her teeth you detect the faintest tone of relief. As if she is glad to not have to keep the thing up for much longer. You agree that it is difficult to pretend something is still fruit once it has turned to stone.

³⁰ Lily, someone softer than you'll ever be.

31.

Once you³¹ graduated from high school, the two of you drifted softly outwards.

You remember your freshman year of college, coloring each envelope with vines and sunflowers before shipping it her way. The letters you exchanged were novel-length, pregnant with summaries and daydreams and longings. Some days you would receive two envelopes at once, both stuffed full of paper and tea bags and other pocket-sized things.

They were written, though, unlike a telephone conversation could be spoken. It was as if neither of you particularly needed a response; each letter its own package of a neatly contained narrative, separate and untangled from any other. You both suspended the rules of dialogue and instead embraced the prospect of a distant audience. Everything she shared you absorbed like a weekly installment in the newspaper. You did not comment, or ask questions, or follow up. You simply sent back your own musings, to be read and understood by her.

Over time, of course, the communication became thinner. Messages became less extravagant, and any phone call would run dry without much exchange. You began to understand that small intimacies had been the hearth of your friendship. How she always wore that emerald sweater on Wednesdays, or the warmth of a shared lavender bath, or shouting pop songs into the yellow strips of a highway. Tethers which became looser in grip over stretches of space and time. During the simmering, the two of you would often cycle through the practiced sentiments. I love you, I miss you, I hope to see you soon. They weren't empty words— just in the process of deflating, maybe.

Senior year of college, her birthday was approaching as the end of January drew near. For days, you wracked your brain to think of an adequate gift. Everything seemed wrong. What did she like? What did she want? You couldn't imagine yourself giving her anything that would actually add joy to her life. The day came and you sent her no package for the first time in the decade you'd known her.

You called her on the phone in the early evening. She answered, drunk on wine, words tumbling out of her mouth like tiny stones.

God, I love you, Lily, was about the only thing she could say.

Happy birthday, Elinor.

³¹ Lily, a universal transition.

You could feel your eyes prickling with the embryos of tears. You did not know how to celebrate her anymore. You hung up the phone. You could blame it on the bad weather or lousy signal, but she probably wouldn't remember in five minutes anyway. Or she would. She understood the gap just as well as you could— that melancholy divide that leaves you nothing else to do but simply ponder it.

32.

When you³² are eight, you bathe in the hot lights of center stage. You perspire beneath your three-piece suit, moisture collapsing down the sides of your small frame and into the ground below. You wear a baby blue cumberbund that is nearly always a shade darker by the end of the two-hour performance. Your younger brother's never seems to dampen despite that he remains by your side the entire time.

The two of you coast through the arrangements you have practiced in circles. His bow sails across the violin, his notes always steady, always reliable. Sometimes you are less predictable than your brother. Even though you are only eight, you recognize that the composers are dead and they cannot chastise you for toying with their intent. You like to think they would appreciate your curious flourishes, your contemporary attempts to make the music your own. It is not long before you realize that the composers are dead but your mother is not. She is very good at getting what she wants and your improvisational skills do not make the cut.

Your mother does not send you to school; she tutors you in academics for two hours daily, leaving abundant opportunity for rehearsal. She is in charge of everything. She cooks the meals, drives you to private lessons, and monitors the hours of the day. When she is displeased, she will convey it with an interruption of the routine. She will serve your lunch fifteen minutes late. She will have your father drive you to your lesson. She will cut your hair shorter than usual on the tenth day of the month. These acts are rendered violent because of her impeccable precision.

It is a household full of fear. Your mother and her whims are the centrifugal force about which everything rotates. You and your brother creep around her like ants, every move calculated so as not to disturb her. Some days, though, even when you are on your most regimented behavior, something will crack in the air and she will decalibrate. Her eyes will ice over, her footsteps will grow hot and stormy, she will become activated and unstill for hours. To go near her would be to prick your flesh deep enough for blood.

This is not something you speak of with anyone. Your father often simply drives away and returns a few days later, avoiding the thing altogether. You and your brother retreat into the inner sanctuaries of your own minds, places that protect you and allow you to float through the hours as if you are only in a fever dream. On one of her worst days she serves you and your

³² Isaiah, a name like silver.

brother broccoli and chicken, and when neither of you finish she slams the dishes to the ground as if they are cursed. They shatter and she begins to sob, picking the shards up with her bloodied fingers. You and your brother watch, wordlessly, until she screams at you to leave.

The mornings after are always quaint. The light is golden and settled, and she comes and kisses your forehead as you wake. You shuffle out of your pajamas and into a starchy shirt, one she bought for you. You and your brother release the instruments from their cases and flutter into a duet. You play together like doves in a waterbath while she sips at her coffee and nibbles at the crust of her toast. You beg your fingers to comply, though in moments of weakness they tremble with residual fear. It is okay, though, because trembling fingers sound like vibrato as long as you maintain a certain level of control. She smiles softly to herself as the melody balloons through the dining room— it is all just a concert for one.

33.

You³³ fuck Isaiah for the first time on the side of a highway.

The two of you are in his car, driving back from a family getaway upstate. Daniel had to leave for some job obligation a night early, but his mother insisted you stay the extra night. She even promised to make vegan penne alla vodka for the evening's meal, grinning from between wine bleached lips. You hadn't been vegan since the first few months you were dating Daniel, but you doubt that correcting her misconception could bring about anything meaningful. Accommodation is her lifeblood. She thrives off of providing nourishment and servicing to the slightest of details, more so as a demonstration of her own adequacies than anything else. The things she remembers about you as they reflect back onto her own remembrance. She is a performer at heart, and busies herself with fussing and accommodating to prove that she is capable of any role thrown her way.

The night goes by rather unmarked; you all play several games of scrabble, stuff your stomachs with pasta, and slink into bed early with wine-flavored breath and heavy eyelids. Maybe it is the alcoholic undercurrent, but your dreams feel particularly fluorescent that evening. Isaiah is there, seated atop a summery cedar porch. He rocks back and forth in a golden rocking chair, anticipating your arrival. He has set up a round of Scrabble and motions for you to join him. The two of you exchange wooden letters that stretch you til dawn. You wake up aroused, with no distinct feeling as to whether you'd won or lost.

The next day in the car you settle into his passenger seat. It is musty, smelling of coins nested into cupholders and cigarettes tossed out the window. For the first hour you both remain mostly silent. Something about being in that car, cloaked in air that is entirely his, feels intoxicating. Him him him. You feel delirious for information. Who sat here before you, how did he think while he drove, where did he wish this car could take him? Questions that thrum through your bloodstream and bolt down your veins. Surely he can hear them.

He answers with another.

Would you like to hear a song I wrote, Luiza?

You nod. The music filters out from the car speakers, lacy and soft fingerings over guitar strings. His voice joins in, sweetly cradling the words slipping from his mouth. You let the lyrics

³³ Luiza— resounding, ethereal, gorgeous.

wash over you, caress you, silky on your skin. It is a song named after a flower. You know, indubitably, that it was written for you. Sometimes these things are just known. You ask him to pull over. He anchors the car on a patch of asphalt marked “scenic view.” You look to him, his lips gentle and lush while resting his gaze on the honey dripping from mountains across the way. His eyes are still settled outwards the moment you lean in and take his mouth with your own. His lips are startled, but not even for a moment timid. He kisses you by pouring rubies onto your tongue and down your throat. He has a rhythm, a faith in his own movement, that drives you into the backseat, between leathery folds, against warm skin. The CD has only one song traced into its lining; over and over again, like some miracle, his melody swims though the air while the two of you plunge into one another with body and flesh and sound.

34.

When you³⁴ are seventeen you kiss your parents on their cheeks and board a plane to Los Angeles, California. It is the airport closest to the place you will live for at least the next four years, perhaps more. People there have salted skin and palm trees billow gently. You feel warm in your chest.

When you arrive at the college, you exhale for the first time in your life. GIRLS. Girls everywhere. Girls shitting in the bathroom, girls wolfing down rye bread in the dining hall, girls sneaking into your room at night, girls chainsmoking cigarettes in the sunshine on a Tuesday. You fall in love at least seven times on your first day. It is clearer than it has ever been. You love girls.

During the first week, your gaze melts the skin of a girl who sits three rows below you on the bleachers. She has legs long and smooth as candlesticks, and when she looks you in the eye you see the fruit ripening in her irises. You are about to reach out and speak in her direction when the presenter clears her throat into the microphone. Her voice is hoarse and sounds like sand grinding up against teeth. The monologue begins and it does not end for possibly years. She introduces herself with phrases like “gender equity” and “sexual assault”. There are images and infographics and statistics and vivid descriptions. She lists and describes all the scenarios that are considered “violations.” There are so many more than you think. Suddenly she is talking about age gaps and she is being very explicit with her numbers and years. You are trying so hard to focus on the presentation and to think away from him.

But it is a tornado
 and her voice vortexes in a spiral
 and all you can see is that miracle
 of a sky and you feel yourself being
 poked and prodded as you curl in agony
 and blood beneath the leathery folds of
 the back seat of the day of the year in that
 miracle of a sky.

³⁴ Lily in that miracle of a sky.

You wake up on a cot in the health center. Your roommate is there. You have only known her for three days but you love her already. She is so soft and openhearted and she smells like hot buttered corn. Her eyes swell with relief as you part your dry lips and croak out a hello. She tells you that there was an assembly and you sweated and panted and grew pale and all of a sudden your limbs went limp and you slid between the cracks of the bleachers. You are fine, thank goodness, just potentially a mild concussion. It is too early, now, but that night she will crawl into your bed like a stuffed animal and ask you why you went cold. Sensing your hesitation, she will tell you about her own year in a sky full of miracles with a man and you will feel so safe to finally, finally put it all into words for someone who will hear you.

35.

When you³⁵ are thirty-seven you fuck a girl named Luiza for the first time on the side of a highway. She is your brother's girlfriend at the time, and they have been dating for years, though you couldn't say how many. She kissed you after hearing your song on the car speakers, the one named after a flower. It is the song you wrote for a girl who was fourteen at the time you were writing it. She thinks, you are almost certain, that it is about her.

It is not long before you decide to marry her. Your mother is desperate for a wedding, you can see it in her teeth. Luiza is kind and fucks well. You are not sure what else to look for in a marriage, and time is only becoming more forgetful of you these days.

Sometimes it feels like you do love her. The way her hair falls towards her neck in thick coils, the way her laugh flutters through the air like April pollen. She is good at making omelettes and better at driving than you are. Most of all, though, she gives you lots of room. She accepts your absent eyes after sex and does not worry if a week goes by with very few words exchanged between the two of you. You think, maybe, she has her own hollow places to tend to.

You think of the girl, the one who is now twenty-one, more than you would like. The one named after a flower. She was only really there so briefly. But she was so bright, so warm, so luminous. You didn't think she could haunt you, but for some reason she does. It is hard to say, it is so hard to say, and maybe you can't say it at all. But sometimes you get a distinct pain in your chest and you can feel the weight of resentment she must have for you. She never came back, after all, except to haunt you.

You add her and her best friend to the guest list of your wedding. Well, her best friend when she was fourteen. You have no idea if they are still close; you have not spoken to either of them for some time. It would be good for them to see each other. It would be good for them to see you.

³⁵ Isaiah, a name that comes in tiny bells.

36.

The marriage comes in tiny bells.

The breakup with Daniel goes smoothly. He is a repressed man and deals with heartbreak well. Or perhaps he never had much heart really in it— just another routine he must now readjust. He will fill in the gaps of you³⁶ without much thought: a new baking class, perfecting the mechanics of his online dating profile, et cetera. He and Isaiah seem fine. Their intimacy never entailed much talking, anyway.

The most difficult element of the transition is the mother. She is greatly concerned with what the churchladies will think, since for quite some time much of their chatter has been about anticipating your union with Daniel. She is particularly concerned for her reputation, considering they are her dearest friends and she couldn't stand to lose their respect. You tell her that the decision you have made has very little to do with her, and if she needs to estrange herself from her family in order to maintain her most intimate relations, you would understand. To this she harrumphs and retreats sulkily back to her bedroom.

It was in fairly short order that Isaiah proposed. Only a few weeks since that first day in the car. You remind yourself, though, that you had known each other for years. He said he had always known the two of you would end up together, wrapping his palm beneath your thigh. It is easy to believe muted fairytales when they are slid down your ears in the middle of the night. Even if you know they are not true.

You also knew, or at least got the feeling, that Isaiah was running from something. Sometimes after sex you would glance over to him, lying on his back, eyes arched skyward. His brows would furrow with such an intensity that it was clear he was swimming through many secrets that streamed beyond you, over you, right through you. The marriage arrived so quickly that of course it was a symptom of distraction or negligence or something of the like. You didn't care. Who were you to judge someone for marrying you out of deficiency? You were no better. It didn't take much reckoning to realize that you were mostly intoxicated by the thrill. None of these things seemed like much of an issue.

³⁶ Luiza— a name for someone who is kind and fucks well.

Longevity is something you do not allow yourself to worry about. It intrinsically evades knowing, so why concern yourself with fabricated convictions—ones that take so much convincing to maintain? You are of the moment, of the rapturousness, interested in whatever timespan the universe has to offer for any given cycle. You think there is something within Isaiah that is somehow more compatible with this than Daniel. Though Isaiah will say scripted fortunes such as let's be together forever or you are my world, he does not say them with false seriousness. He does not say them superficially, either. He says them with a passion that has yet to find its own vocabulary, so it stumbles through cliches to keep itself alive. You hear him beneath the words.

37.

You³⁷ are hoping the flower girls are not allowed to attend his wedding.

You hold the invitation in your hand, rubbing your finger along the edges nervously. There he is, by the bay, clenching her shoulders with a look of pride smeared across his face, similar to a boy displaying the prized fish he just caught. I DID IT, MOM! Against all odds.

She is breathtakingly beautiful. Once your friend was looking at a picture of her and exclaimed, I wish I could make thousands of carbon copies of her and sprinkle them across the globe! You are critical of eugenics, but the point remains. Her image is resounding, ethereal, gorgeous. You used to shrivel at the sight of it.

On the other hand, he is looking older. His face is sinking, and the scruff across his cheeks is unflattering. His body is stiffer, more unsure of itself— his posture gives evidence to the deep uncertainties that have aged him in this way.

He stands beside her on the dock as the sunlight overwhelms his eyes. She is wearing a velvety dress, the color of dark wine, and he wears something much less notable. You wonder what the photographer was thinking while peering at them through the camera lens. Capturing the image of their union, the united essence that will supposedly carry them for the rest of their days. You think that if you were the photographer, you would have imagined an alternate scenario where he pushes her into the bay. She screams, skin slapping the icy water, golden hair gone limp with seawater. Her dress balloons to the surface like a parachute deflated. Makeup bleeding across her face like watercolor paints.

In this scenario, you are merely the one who documents, uncalled to action beyond your camera. You try to capture the choreography of it all, the waves and flailing limbs and shock. He quickly reaches his hand out to her, hoisting her up like a mop from the ground. It was an accident, it was an accident, he feels so horrified! He was only being playful, a juvenile shove, forgetful of his surroundings!

The two of them embrace and now damp cloth clings to his chest while her teeth chatter when the wind comes. He holds her tightly to his chest and she is speechless against his body. You can see the waves reflecting in his eyes, creating the illusion that his pupils unguilate, majestic and elusive. You do not need to wonder about his intent.

³⁷ Elinor, like eyes that grow wobbly in smoke.

38.

A razor coasts along a trail of strawberry stubble. There is no blood; you³⁸ are practiced at this. On this day, you are focusing on the things which level you— a clean jaw, your ruby tie iron-pressed, floss fishing between your teeth.

You are drunk by your own silence, the hum of nothingness which lacerates the brain. It is power, this quietude you are capable of. Here, you are impenetrable, unreachable. You are godly.

A knock on the door is instantly followed by the entrance of your mother. She does not wait for your permission. Why did she even knock? She is always doing that, hollow performances of boundaries.

Up until today, you have been living with your mother for the past thirty years. When you decided to marry the girl, your mother was profusely elated. She insisted you save up for married life and tucked all of your previous living fees into her glossy pink purse. After that, she began to do your laundry again, entering your room with wilted eyes, looking at you mournfully as if you were the last slice of smoked salmon on the plate. She would tousle your hair, stroke your scalp with her long fingernails, and fluff your pillows whenever you left the house. She would even call the girl every Saturday morning and sing orchestras into her ear— wedding invitations, weight fluxuations, tender memories of you as a child.

She enters the room now, her eyes watery crescents. She has carried in a single rose, yellow, paled as if left in the sun too long. You do not think about the curiousness of this choice. You are unamused, if not perturbed, by her emotional state. You think she looks hideous when she cries and wish you could just tell her this without inciting further tears. The powder on her face is moistening and the skin beneath it curdles into small wrinkles. You try very hard to picture her leaving.

She sets the flower beside the mirror and plants a kiss onto your right ear. Her scent of salt and mint hangs suspended in the air between the two of you. She whispers something of love into your cheek and briskly exits the room.

You do not indulge in any feelings of relief and return to your shave.

³⁸ Isaiah, metallic and brooding.

39.

I love you, Elinor is a nice thing to hear in the morning.

Pressed into your forehead, weaved into the tangles of your hair, the warm sensation that keeps your body suspended between dream and waking.

On this morning you unbraid your legs from your lover's. He is soft and kind and most of the things you would want from a lover. Most of all, he is understanding. You find this of peak importance.

You retreat into the bathroom connected to the bedroom. It is a dusty pink, painted in cloudy strokes, as if the walls are webbed with candy floss. One day in the winter you and the lover painted a pattern of stars across the leftmost wall, your own rosecolored Andromeda.

You plop onto porcelain and shuffle cotton down the length of your legs. The cloth is red and crusted. You nod towards it knowingly. There is always an accumulation of clues foreshadowing its arrival. The heightened claustrophobia. Cravings of salt rolling over your tongue. The constellation of acne across your forehead, still, in your mid-twenties, and the pleas to the universe that you will someday outgrow this pubescent punishment.

As is only natural, sometimes you look to the moon and ponder your alignment. Recently you have been bleeding on the full moon, pregnant with luminescent abundance. You think about the fullness of it all. Your body only spills out what it already possessed in excess.

