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The Dells

Brittany Michele Fleming
Bard College

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The Dells

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

by
Brittany Fleming

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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The next time my eyes opened, I wasn't sure he had been there at all. My hands smoothed out the waves in the sheets, removing all evidence of another body. The sheets felt different.

Mechanically, the top sheet was pulled over my head to shield my eyes from the new sun. It was hard to tell if the sheet was on the top of my body or if it went through me. I couldn't feel the expected grime of promiscuity. My mind, clearly still hazy from sleep, tried to track my night, but came up empty. The sheets didn't catch on my lashes and wiggle my eyelids. I knew I had eyes because I could see through the sheet, the glow of the sun, shapes of my bedroom. But where was the skin around them to keep them in my skull?

I must have closed my eyes because everything was dark again. I didn't overheat with the sun shooting through the window like I did every clear morning. It was suspicious, but only gave me permission to go back to sleep for a third time, maybe.

A woodpecker shoved its beak into my ear and pounded on my brain. The sound was consistent, irritating, and unforgiving. What was it, and why was it the loudest thing I'd ever heard? Surely, my ears were bleeding at this point. The red-bellied fuck had finally broken in and gotten its revenge on me for all the mornings I yelled at it. My hands flew up to my ears where neither seemed to greet each other, but the pressure reminded me that there were no woodpeckers in the city. It must have been outside construction.

I had to make sure nothing was wrong. I could have hit a nerve in my neck that spread the disease of pins and needles all over. It wasn't my exact field of medicine, but I knew it was a possibility.

Every which way I turned my body, tiny little feet ran up and down my skin forever. I felt like an old television that lost signal. My flesh was pure static. It made my breath heave inconsistently, but panic always started in my hands. They trembled, but forgot to tell me. I did not know a face could fall asleep while fully awake.

One foot peeked out from the sheets, toes wiggling a greeting to the morning. It was frustrating to be confused by my own mind. My big toe pointed like a finger and nervously hovered over the floorboards. There was thick hesitation I didn't quite understand. Forcing myself through it, I pressed the toe against the wood, the bulbous skin rose above the nail, which must have meant I put weight on it. The pressure made the static go away for a second, but had no supplemental sensation.

There was no ground, or I had no feet, and my body fell out from under me. Relief passed through me momentarily because I felt the joints in my knees rub against each other, waltzing under my skin. I'm not sure what happened exactly, but I only stood tall for a shaky millisecond before losing whatever balance I normally had. I landed hard on my knees, which I knew from the ripple of pain that hit my bones. "Fuck!" I yelled at my stupid feet. Maybe they grew overnight and threw off the balance of the rest of my body.

With the medical background I had and the minimal knowledge I had of what was happening to my body, the most I could come up with was chronic paresthesia. Doctors put 'chronic' in front of mundane bodily occurrences in order to dance the line between hope and loss.

I hardly realized I was still on the floor. There was a pair of my underwear that had slid under my desk, by the looks of it. My fingers clawed for them. If I kept moving, feeling would soon return. The underwear, navy and dry, had a small tear at the seam. I expected the discovery

of evidence to relieve me of numbness like a recovered memory. I planned to claim feeling because it was absolutely ridiculous that I lost anything to begin with. Touch everything. Leave no empty beer bottle unturned. But I couldn't get off the floor.

A glossary of diagnoses fluttered through my brain. I was experiencing paresthesia, that much I uncovered, but I didn't know what could cause it in my particular case. If I had a stroke, I wouldn't be so functional. Sciatica was only common in heavily pregnant women, and judging from my lifestyle, my body wouldn't be able to hold a baby very long.

There was a knock on my door, which made me remember that I didn't actually reside in a void of pins and needles. The sound pounded in my ribcage. I think I stumbled back on my twisted legs. I turned over my shoulder to make sure my back was up against my bed. My ownership over my room seemed tainted.

"Hey, wake up," Watson said, not waiting for me to let him in. Our boundaries, as roommates, thinned over the years, and I was surprised to hear him knock at all. Barging in was more his speed. He nearly ran over me in his rapid step. Did I appear small to him? "Whoa, my bad." He balanced on one foot to steady himself.

"Morning," I grumbled. I wasn't sure of what words to share with him. In a way, I was angry with him. His presence was proof that I wasn't trapped in a nightmare. "Was Thor here last night?"

"I hate that guy," Watty said, "You're too good for him."

"Was he here, Watson?"

"Alright, alright! Just for a second. Think he got jealous and left." Watty jumped in my bed, like the monkeys Mama used to tell me about while tucking me in at night. I craved her

shrimp scampi, which I hadn't thought about in years. My mind rarely allowed the dish to see the light of day. Watty took a long whiff and said, "Smells like sex in here."

He inspired me to take note of the scent too. It wasn't sex, but rather, an overwhelming smell of fish. I almost choked. I looked between my legs. Not there. I checked under my fingernails. Nothing.

It scared me to move a muscle. I placed an anvil on my shoulders, ensuring my tense immobility. Watty's hands reached for me, but my mind buffered, and I didn't process the gesture in time. He picked me up off the floor. Being moved by someone else's hands activated my fight or flight. Watty, my best friend, felt foreign to me.

It seemed I was a little lost that morning. I removed myself so intensely that I got lost somewhere in between. All the trees look the same in a forest without paths. Maybe I walked barefoot over stones, twigs, and rough dirt. And I sauntered for so many hours that my feet bled and grew numb with each step. It was early spring, still too chilly to be walking around naked, which, surely, I did when I disappeared. Hypothermia could have been another explanation for my loss. I didn't feel like I had returned from the forest. There is too much to see there, especially in early spring. Birds I couldn't identify. The constant gamble with potential poison ivy because I never learned from my camp days. Not once had I seen an owl. Outside my window, the sound of an ambulance climaxed and faded away within seconds. There is no thick forest in the city.

To walk, I had to peel my focus from my hands and stare into the flesh of my legs. They wobbled with every step, and suddenly, I was a baby deer in the forest, learning to walk for the first time. I bleated for my mother when I did not succeed immediately. She needed to lift me up,

for I had landed on all four hooves. When a baby deer falls, its limbs appear snapped, yet they scramble to get back to standing, even without the mother's help. I wished I could grow antlers.

Constantly tripping over my own toes, I made it to the window, the glass separating my body from the offensive sirens that should have taken me away, if I wasn't so stubborn.

A few years back, the city planted trees in boxes, all along our street because it made the storefronts look more enticing. A conversation between nature and the material world. I was lucky enough to get the street view from my bedroom. The tree was at the curb, but grew all the way up to my immediate vision. It was spring, and the tree was not in full bloom. Full bloom is boring, but in bloom... in bloom is mesmerizing. Watching something grow a little more each day was something I had never taken for granted, even after moving to New York. The tree was at the stage where the leaves were still in half-cocoons of white buds. It struck me—what the tree was doing. It was cultivating strength.

“Hey, um, are you okay?” Watty asked. I could barely hear him over the static of my body. In the public sphere, he had to pretend to be selfish because that's how you get acting gigs in New York City. He pretends on the street, but I would forever see him as the day-drunken mess, making his home on the couch while awaiting news of his sister's illness. The person he cared about most in the whole world. Since her successful surgeries, I couldn't trust him when he asked about my emotional state. He didn't know how to thank me for funding his sister's flight to the states. But that's okay because sometimes all it takes is a touch. He hugged me for days. Watty said that there was no way to repay me, but he never stopped trying.

“For sure,” I said, no point in making him worry about something I understood to be a temporary issue. “Can you go water the plants for me?” And he did whatever I asked.

His concern was just a blip. No expression of love could top the raw, perennial strength of nature. My arm bent like the branches of the tree, but the tree was aware of her body. An intrusive thought begged me to ask Levi what species she was.

I had a desire to touch it, even though it was far out of reach. Pressure was a sudden foe to me. The window did not move up like I expected it to. It was stuck, or I was. I leaned into myself. In my head, I had to push into the glass to raise it up, but there was no indication of how much I put into the work. And then, my throat wrestled with breath, and my teeth ground against each other. That, I could feel in my jaw. In a quick burst, the top of the window shattered, glass falling into the street, and decorating my palm and knuckles with Avant Garde fashion. Blood streamed down my forearms. “W-Watty?” I stammered a call without turning my head away from the wound I couldn’t feel.

The door swung open, I heard. “Do you miss me — Oh, fuck!” His entrance was always loud, but I might have overshadowed him.

“Towel. Gimme a towel.”

“I think I’m gonna be sick.”

“*Towel.*”

Watty’s feet moved like he didn’t have to worry about where he stepped. He returned with a towel, but threw it straight at me instead of trying to really help. It swept over my head and landed perfectly on my injured hands. I took my focus off my hands for a brief moment to look at my feet and try to tell them where to go. We moved to the kitchen, which felt unfamiliar, but I didn’t have the time to explore.

Over the sink, my hands trembled. The fingers on my right hand curled in reaching for the glass stuck in the left. I could almost see the vibrations that my hand gave off, rippling into thick air.

Watty swallowed so hard that I could hear the thick saliva travel down his throat. “Are you- are you gonna pull out the pieces yourself?” he asked. Oh, Watty. It’s like he’d never seen what I could do on the field.

I thought I should take advantage of the numbness while it lasted. The lack of feeling would evaporate by the end of the day, and I wouldn’t have to worry about it again. Besides, I was used to remaining calm in emergency medical situations. I could handle it.

The light in the stained glass was quite beautiful. Maybe I could have gotten used to glass forever in my palm. But, my other hand had other plans and started to remove the shard from my skin. I watched my skin pull with the jagged edge of the lifting glass. Suddenly, I could feel loose flesh move around inside of me, adjusting to the gesticulation of the glass release. Something inside of me laughed at the movement.

With the removal, blood flowed out of the incision. My skin coughed into the sink, the leak making pitter patter sounds on the steel.

My hands took turns digging glass out of one another. It was nice to see how practiced they were in the craft, since I barely had any agency over them. Nice to see that they cared enough about me to do my bidding without question. Every small movement, underneath my skin, was a reminder that not all was bleak.

What a strange thing to watch fragments of my body move without me.

Again, there was a question of strength because I could not tell how much pressure to put on the cuts. Too much could create its own problem while too little would cause me to bleed out.

I calculated. When I first got my job, one of my players had a gash down the middle of his forehead after a collision gone wrong. I had to put a lot of pressure on that wound. Under my finger nails, I carried his blood home. The cuts in my hands weren't to that same caliber. If only I could gauge the happy medium. Before I could do anything, my plight was interrupted.

"I'll do it," Watty said, holding bile in the middle of his throat. "Come here." I would never ask that of him. His paling face showed the expression of the fourteen-year-old boy who passed out in History when his teacher showed the class a fictionalized retelling of the First Taranaki War. It only lasted a year and a day, but it was a lot for New Zealand.

My body flinched away from him. "No, don't touch me," I said, without meaning it. He saw through me, and took my hands anyway. I closed my eyes so I wouldn't have to see him touching me.

"Okay, I think it's slowed down enough to wrap, maybe," Watty said after a time, trying oh so hard not to vomit on me.

Each strand of the gauze mocked me since I would have been able to feel the tracts just twelve hours earlier. Really, what was the point of protecting my hands? You only ever protect things when there is a risk of getting hurt. My hands couldn't hurt, but I wrapped them for their future. I wanted to be able to play the drums again one day. Strange that that was on my mind. Strange because I hadn't been behind a drum set in maybe three years. God, I missed playing sometimes, and only sometimes, and especially when it was absolutely impossible to play.

"I have to go to work in an hour," I heard myself say.

Watty glanced at me, puzzled, and said, “You’re really going to work like this?” Watty moved to the states to be an actor, and sure, he got auditions, but most days, it’s just him, talking to himself in the mirror.

“Game day,” I said, thinking about the drums and not the ball.

“You’re wasting yourself.”

A part of me wanted to tell Watty what was happening, but then he would insist on doing everything for me, and I did not want to be relegated to newborn or handicapped. I was still under the impression that I would live one day in punishment and wake up grateful the next morning.

When I returned to my room, I convinced myself not to look for clues. What was the point in holding a magnifying glass to the night before. An echo was all I needed, and an echo is all I had. There wasn’t time to be afraid. There was a train and a bus to catch, warm-ups to conduct, and work to be done. Mama taught us not to be selfish, no matter what is thrown at us in the middle of the night or early in the morning. You have to look at the day ahead.

My uniform always reminded me that I was a fragment of a larger whole. A team. Every day, I put it on with pride, but on that morning, there was a distance between us.

I found myself flailing my limbs, as if to warm up before attempting the feat of dressing. First, getting my drawers open proved to be too much, as I accidentally pulled so hard that the top one ended up on the floor, crunching my toes. I didn’t feel that pain. My clothes threw up all over my room.

My bandaged hand held out the shirt in front of me, and the cotton taunted me because there was no way of knowing it was cotton from the touch. I wondered how it would feel over my body. I was thrown for a loop when it came to tossing the shirt over my head. I had figured

out this much: if I looked at whichever body part I wished to move, chances are it would move at my will. With the shirt enveloping me in sudden darkness, I couldn't make out where my arms were and which holes to shove them through.

I didn't have arms, but commanding them to move gave me a hint to their hide and seek. They hid beneath the sleeves of my uniform. I watched movements under the fabric like bugs under a mattress. My fingers were spiders crawling out of the hole in the wall as they emerged from the sleeves.

Putting on my shorts felt like a reward for all my hard work. I could look at my legs, sweep them through the holes, and all with barely a thought. Maybe I could get used to this new way of operating.

Putting on my shorts felt like a reward for all my hard work. I could look at my legs, sweep them through the holes, and all with barely a thought. Maybe I could get used to this new way of operating.

It was all taken away from me in seconds when it came to tying the laces on my sneakers. I couldn't figure out how to move my fingers and my wrists in time with each other to loop one string through the other. I felt the intention of stomping out of my room. The intention of slamming my door behind me. It only closed softly. Force was so misplaced.

Watty propped himself up on the living room couch. "Wrestling your demons in there?" he asked.

There were no demons to wrestle. Our apartment wasn't haunted, and I was sure that my room was especially cleansed.

I shook my head. "Can you tie my shoes?"

"Sure."

“I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

I thought that I would find my touch in the spring breeze. The season of rebirth. The white buds swayed against a slightly grey sky. Women walked by with their hair blowing in front of their faces. Some wore scarves that moved too, but I couldn’t imagine it being scarf weather. Usually, I had my scarves packed away at the end of March, and we were well into April. On the other hand, there were children eating ice cream on the stoop of our apartment. I didn’t recognize them from our building, which meant they were middle schoolers, posing on a busy street, and being just too damn old for the playground. I remembered it well myself.

When I used to sit on the stoop like that, I remembered every shift of weight provoking a scratch from the uneven texture of the concrete. Steps that should have been repaired a decade earlier, but would only crumble out of existence.

My foot traveled down one step, and I moved it so that the bone above my heel would scrape against the concrete. Once the skin was removed, I could feel the exposed flesh, screaming at me to stop whatever I was doing. I smiled. If I could feel underneath my skin, touch would return to the surface soon enough.

The only way I could walk somewhat normally was to look at the ground that moved my feet. The six minutes it took to get to the R seemed like hours. People kept yelling at me to watch where I was going, but I hadn’t even realized I was bumping into anyone. The nut man on the corner of Pierpont and Clinton poured out the old water the nuts had been boiled in. “Ah, shit. I’m really sorry about that, missy,” he said to me, but I didn’t know what he was referring to. He had to point to my ankle for me to take the hint. My skin bubbled. I shrugged and told him not to

worry about it. It would hurt the next day. All I cared about was getting to Court Street Station, and getting to work on time.

I found myself standing at the top of the stairs, afraid to descend into the underground. When I left the apartment, I had to use the railing to force myself down the stairs, otherwise, I'd fall to my death. In all my years of living in the city and taking the subway, I had never allowed my hand to graze the metal railing, the hub of all germs. I wasn't wearing sleeves long enough to burrow my hands in protection. They had gauze, but the germs would stick. My mind raced. The decision of whether or not to take hold of the railing sent me spinning, made my mouth dry.

Staring into the abyss of the subway entrance, the lights flickered until they burned out. There was a gaping invitation into darkness. The same darkness I witnessed as a child, when you are not allowed to tell adults what you've seen.

Mama was active, and Dad liked museums about the military. Each spring, we would split up; the girls with Mama and Chase with Dad. Dad took Chase to cities with history, where the two would fantasize about life before technical nonsense. Where everyone wrote with feathers and dressed up to go to the apothecary. Mama liked bodies of water, and each spring, she would take me and Chelsea to a different river or lake. Her heart lies in the Midwest.

The most remarkable vacation was to Wisconsin Dells. The Dells were known for their waterparks, but we didn't go to play on glorified slides. Mama went there as a kid, before any of the water parks were there at all. Her family took her and her brothers to the Dells, where they stayed on the Wisconsin River. Grandpa had a raccoon hat and danced around a fire. When Mama took us, we also stayed on the river, not to be bothered by the tourists who were there for the wrong reasons. They didn't have an appreciation for nature. The sandstone formations were

funny. They sat as if they were one rock on top of another, but they all stuck the same. Some appeared to be melting.

Mama, Chelsea, and I rented some kayaks and faced the river. We didn't paddle, simply waded. The Lower Dells was where I lost my way.

My kayak floated off to the side. The water was great because it was so still that I didn't think I would get separated from Mama and Chels. But once my eyes opened under that fateful sun, I realized they weren't around me. I was on my own. As a child, I never minded being alone, even in unknown settings. Getting lost between the dells didn't frighten me.

I was the only kayak for miles, it seemed, though I knew Mama and Chelsea were just on the other side of the dells. For just a moment, I was alone and free to explore, a feeling I would find missing as an adult. The dells were so different from one another. As I floated, I counted the lines of separation in their unity. Each stroke had a purpose, and I imagined nymphs running around the formation with a wet paintbrush outstretched. I let my fingers graze the sandstone, feeling the rough skin peel at the grooves of my fingerprints. It made my skin so raw that it was uncomfortable to bend my fingers after.

Two dells to my right folded upward, like a wave of land, forming a dark cave between the sandstone. The darkness was enticing in the rich daylight.

The subway came back into the light, and the amount of people pushing told me that the metal beast was upon us.

To my relief, my hand already gripped the railing, and I wasn't dead.

It was a Sunday. The R wasn't packed and unbreathable. It mostly held people younger than me, piling in for a cute afternoon in the city. Sunday brunch. I wanted a bagel with lox and

absolutely no food at all. The thought was disgusting, but also exciting, and maybe not disgusting really, but frightening, actually. I barely registered the three stops.

My feet had to walk more, and really, they were getting quite good at moving without aid. Not all was lost, as they were somewhat grounded by the constant static up and down my legs, face, and everything in between. Going to work on a Sunday was always rewarding when the suits were not in my way.

I used to hate the bus, but I didn't mind it now. I could plug in for the twenty minutes to the arena, and pretend I was going much farther away. The bus brought that out in me; the need to be a million miles outside the city. As if I were a runaway teen with fourteen bucks in my pocket. Each ride, I imagined the bus was going to take me to a place from my past. Tioga, PA. Sudbury, MA. Seward, AK. Anywhere, but the Dells. The daydream always lasted slightly under twenty minutes, as I was always shot out at the same stop in Harrison fucking New Jersey.

It was a heinous thing for a New York team to have a home base in New Jersey. Blasphemous. I didn't usually think about this stuff, always just excited to get to work. People who don't know me well think I hated my job. The people I am closest to think I cared too much about my job. I thought they should get together and talk about their conspiracies surrounding my ambition.

I sat in the window seat, my bag lazily thrown into the other spot so that no one would sit next to me. It was never a crowded bus from New York to Jersey on a Sunday. I watched the passengers wiggle earbuds into their ears. I'm sure they all listened to the sunny pop you hear on the radio. I listened to it too, just to be one with the traveler, but I felt fake. On the day my body betrayed me, I went to listen to my favorite kind of music. It was the type that transported me to

a cabin in the forest, sitting on an unpolished, wooden floor, with the rug that a grandmother made with her bare hands.

I plugged in. The buds went straight to my skull.

Whatever music my shaky thumb clicked on was cacophonous. Drums of a relatively timid song became the loudest rhythm in the world. My brain swelled under my scalp as the acoustic guitar screeched.

It was as though I had never listened to music before. It was almost unrecognizable to my ears. Acoustic folk transformed into heavy metal, and I thought my eardrum or liquified and slowly leaked out of my head. I screamed, but barely noticed. The surge of emotion broke free from my soul, yet, my focus was on telling my hands to rip the wired buds out of my skull.

An older woman approached me and seemed to put a hand on my shoulder, which I didn't shake off at first intuition. "Are you okay, sweetheart?" she asked like my grandmother. Old women never call younger, adult women *ma'am*, like they should, but it was okay for the moment.

I nodded and apologized for startling anyone. A man with crumbs in his beard stood up at his seat, thrust his fist into the air, and cheered, "Game day!" People don't usually care about soccer in the states, and when they do care, it's only about international teams they had no real affiliation with. So, when someone recognized and supported my uniform colors, I would egg them on in giddy joy for my boys. But, I was off my axis.

No music for my twenty minutes. Only the sound of the bearded man, laughing at dumb videos on his phone.

Walking into the arena, all my senses were stimulated. Coach had the "pump up" playlist blasting through the entire building. The bass pulsed through my body, in time with the prickling

throughout my skin. It was so rhythmic that the tingling of my disease seemed to fade away. I could breathe easier. I pretended my body was my own, just for game day. My head still hurt from my first interaction with music, but it was better when it wasn't feeding directly into my brain.

TP and Little Matty tumbled out of the locker room, shirtless, wet, and whipping each other with towels. I wanted to get whipped. At the sight of me, the boys scrambled to their feet like I was their drill sergeant. TP and Matty were my biggest fans. I suppose I liked them too because, for another moment, they made me forget my temporary condition.

Little Matty was the youngest on the team; just nineteen years old. He was nabbed from a Scandinavian country, and I didn't understand why he would leave to come to dirty Jersey. He didn't know how to act around the medics. Still trying to prove himself fit for the team, he never wanted his teammates to know when he was hurt. They already called him 'Little' and Matty was barely his name. TP was the complete opposite, acting as a true international player. He threw himself on the ground at the slightest touch in hopes of gaining just seven seconds of stoppage. In my two and a half years of being with them, TP had never actually been hurt. I think he liked my individual attention too.

"Hey," he said after a few moments of idle chat. "I'll see you out there." He winked.

I rolled my eyes. "I better not, T. Go warm up," I instructed. The guys hit each other all the way back into the locker room. They were like little kids, scolded for lurking out of their rooms after bedtime.

I went to the PT room to punch in. My partner field medic was a dumbass. Each shift we took on. I couldn't help but wonder how that clown made it through med school. One day,

Dummy told me that he was trained in General, with a specialty in Hand Surgery. So, his natural path was to be a sports medic for a game that requires no use of the hands!

“You look like garbage. What happened to your hands?” he said.

Speaking the words, ‘I don’t wanna talk about it,’ sometimes warrants a response just because you’ve made the conscious decision to speak first. Therefore, I said nothing to the idiot and went about my shift as normal.

For two and a half years, I had a routine for game day. It was a routine so ingrained in my muscles that I found myself moving without any cognition. I packed the bag to bring onto the field, tied my hair into a severely unflattering bun, and all in awe of myself for doing so in my state of in-between. The only aspect I forgot to think about was my regular. Tom, the mousiest player on the team, looked like he was intruding on his own appointment. He needed to get stretched out, specially by the medics before each game, or else his leg would spasm at almost any movement. I tossed him off to Dummy, saving all my touch for the game.

“Damn it!” Chase banged his newly damaged shoulder into an open kitchen cabinet. It shouldn’t have been a big deal, but he was so upset. He closed the cabinet and pressed a defeated fist to the wood.

“Chase, baby, it’s okay,” Mama cooed, “What do you need? Your pills? I can get them for you.” It was the wrong thing to say.

In his last hockey game, he dislocated his shoulder, and now had to make an unfashionable sling a part of his everyday wardrobe. It’s hockey. People dislocate their shoulders all the time. Chase kept insisting that it wasn’t even the worst injury he could have gotten on the

ice. He was lucky to never get a concussion. But the shoulder was his first big, game-changing injury, and Dad couldn't look at him without shaking his big head. With Mama and Dad acting as opposites in dealing with the injury, Chase couldn't handle either one.

“I can do it! Just leave me alone!” The vein in his neck pulsed.

Mama never knew what to do when Chase got angry. Most of the time, she left the room and used girl time with Chelsea as a distraction. When she vanished, it was just the two of us remaining in the kitchen, and I couldn't tell if he knew I was there at all.

I couldn't see his eyes. His hair dangled over his face, and a darkness washed over him. But then, he took a breath, straightened his back a little, and turned ever so slightly in my direction. “Charlie, can you help me?”

An instant rush of adrenaline shot through my body. I grinned so wide, I could feel the corners of my mouth tickle my ears. I had never been so excited to hear my name. How often does a child get asked for help? How often does she get asked for help by her older brother? I would do anything. Anything!

He re-opened the cabinet, adjusted his body, and learned from his first mistake. “My body treats me differently right now,” he said as he took an orange bottle off the top shelf. He pulled out one white pill and placed it on the counter. “You know how bad I am at taking pills.” Chase would gag and choke until it ended up spat into his palm. “Wanna take a spoon and crush that bad boy up for me?” he asked.

“Really?” I asked.

“Really.” Chase kinda smiled for the first time in a while. “Just don't tell Mama. She wouldn't want you handling this heavy-duty stuff.” He winked, making me feel like I was let in on a major secret.

The first interaction with the spoon caused the pill to crack into tiny pieces, but had yet to make the delicate dust Chase put in a glass of water. I looked up at him to make sure I was doing the right thing. He nodded, and held the top of my head with his hand. I got him the glass and sprinkled the dust over the water, watching each speck dance its way to the bottom. “Look at you,” he said, “You’re a natural.”

And he thanked me, which I stored in a locket to keep close to my heart. Because I made him smile when he hurt. It made me feel invincible, and then, all at once, immensely small. He took the glass, threw it back, let the crushed pill dissolve in his stomach, and waited for the aftermath to make him sick.

I don’t know how I got onto the field. It didn’t seem like I moved at all, but there I was, on the sidelines, watching people pile into the arena. It was never sold out, noticeable empty seats scattered amongst the crowd.

Dummy snapped his fingers in my face. “Hey,” he barked. “Get it together. The game’s starting in a few.” I had let him take just one of my boys and suddenly he thought he could command me.

“I’m here,” someone inside me responded.

It was hard to watch the colors of the uniforms blur and clash with each other. I felt motion sick. Little Matty scored a goal, and I forgot how to celebrate. Everyone around me cheered, but I was silent. Festivity seemed so distant. Time moved in a way I wasn’t familiar with. It was as though everyone in the world was let in on the secrets of the clock, and not a soul had bothered to include me. And everyone cheered for my ignorance.

The whistle blew. “Yo! TP is down!” Dummy shouted in my face, and I found myself back at the game.

The team wearing blue and white yelled at the referee while TP rolled around the ground, clutching his knee, grimacing. Instinctively, I ran onto the field when the ref gestured to us. “Alright, T,” I said, kneeling down to look over him. “What seems to be the problem?”

He swallowed. “I think it’s bad this time,” he strained. “I’ve never felt anything like this. Just, pain.” His acting was getting better. He was the best on the team at buying time, but I didn’t find it necessary since we were up two. “What are you doing?” he asked upon my own realization that I hadn’t put a hand on him.

“Yeah, sorry.” My bandaged hands moved towards his knee. It didn’t look swollen, but I had to pretend like it might be. Dummy looked at me with curious eyes. He watched every move I made and tried to mock them during practice. When my hands landed on TP’s freckled knee, I had no indication of the state of his injury. “You’re okay. Get up,” I said, feeling the gaze of so many other questions. The pins and needles were fading away, but it wasn’t supplemented with feeling.

“No, I’m not fucking around this time! I think I need to be taken out,” TP insisted.

“Just stop. I’m not in the mood today.”

My vision faded in and out in time with T’s wheezing. It didn’t ever occur to me that he might be telling the truth. My hand had been on his knee the whole time without any indication of injury or any hint of pure health. “You’re fine. Now, get out there,” I said, completely apathetic.

“Hey, are you sure? He looks like he’s in serious pain,” the idiot questioned. How many times had I cleaned up after him on the field? He almost let one player back on, sporting a full

concussion. Another time, he didn't catch a broken toe, which would have been unbearable during a play. How dare he question routine?

Dummy went to see if TP could stand. He looked uncomfortable, but he didn't keel over. "See?" I said, "Go kick Kansas' ass, T." He hung his head and slightly limped onto the field. I took a breath. The whistle blew, and all the standing players started running again. With the colors of both teams clashing together, they created a red and blue tornado to my eyes. I suddenly couldn't see anything, a migraine beginning to stab at my head.

From the sidelines, I heard a collective gasp ringing throughout the arena. I couldn't see what made them panic. "What is wrong with you today?" Dummy's voice shot in my direction, though I couldn't quite catch it.

My sight returned. T was back on the ground in the middle of the field. Dummy pulled on my arm, judging from the sudden shift in scenery. We had to grab the gurney. It was harder than the rest of my routine because it was rare that we had to use it at all. My hands mimicked Dummy's motions for once. How degrading. As we shuffled onto the field, he violently whispered, "Since when do you make mistakes?" Had I made a mistake?

Dummy took the lead on loading T onto the gurney. Looking at his knee made me sick. "Fuck, is that a fracture?" My voice shook. There was a lump protruding from under his skin. A bone, no doubt. Tears pricked the corner of his eyes. "Oh, T. Fuck, I'm so sorry," I said, leaving myself more unprofessional than usual. He couldn't speak, only moan.

Coach screamed at me. For a moment, the only thing I could see was the vein exploding out of his neck. A fractured knee could mean two months of recovery. I had taken TP out for the rest of the season. For the first time in all my years of hard work, I was sent home early.

I became aware. My eyes, though blinded with tears, could see myself more clearly than I had all day. My body moved without my mind, and because of this, I felt control fizzle out of my fingertips. Every person I passed knitted their brows together, judging the hollowness they couldn't see. They sneered, silently. It was worse than being yelled at. Strangers shout at strangers because there is no tether between them. The silent disgust transcends passing annoyance. It made me feel seen in the worst way. Shame curdled my blood, as much as I pretended I didn't care. I saw and held each one of their glares. There were too many people to apologize to. I couldn't keep track of all the bystanders I slammed into.

A force interrupted the rhythm of pins and needles, followed by the eerie cry of a child. "Watch where you're going! You just knocked over my kid!" a woman yelled. I looked down to see how I trampled someone who wasn't in my line of vision. How could I even apologize? Young kids don't understand adult apologies.

I barely remember getting onto the bus. My vision swerved like a truck avoiding a deer as I forced my body down the aisle. I collapsed into a window seat and could hear my breathing scream from of my throat. A surge of emotion did not cease the fizzling of my skin. If I didn't fix myself immediately, I would be fired, and that wasn't an option. Not after everything I did to get to this point. If I couldn't fix my own body, how was I to help people who actually need their bodies?

For the entirety of the ride, I watched my knuckles scrape against the seat in front of me. Repeatedly, I tried to tell them to stop, but the message got stuck in a vein. The fabric rubbed my skin raw. Flecks of skin peeled away from my bone. Winter hands in Spring.

My poor hands took a beating I couldn't control. Palms sliced open, knuckles scratched to the bone.

When I escaped the suffocating bus, I couldn't bring myself to go underground. I sat at Penn Station and, teary-eyed, called Watty to pick me up. I would have rather sit in hours of city traffic than have my numbed body get taken advantage of when I couldn't see the sun.

"You right?" Watty asked from the driver's seat, knowing very well that the answer was negative. I couldn't remember the last time I left work early. I don't think such a time ever existed.

Suddenly, I was sobbing and inconsolable. He begged me to tell him what was wrong. Between sniffles, I told him, "I think I have MS." It was something I really hadn't considered until verbalization.

"Sorry, but what is that?" he said.

Multiple sclerosis. I had run through every ailment, but that. It was the only thing that made sense at that point. The body was full of pins and needles. I had trouble walking. I wasn't particularly weak or fatigued, but vision problems had a check. The disease takes you by surprise, and, hell, I was damn surprised. I convinced myself it was a good thing to tell Watty. My silence caused pain for the people around me.

Watty wasn't good at dealing with the emotional release of others. He tried to be there for his friends, his sister, and strangers even, but the best he could do was, "Well, we can fix that, right? Hospital?"

"You don't get it, Watson! I'm seconds away from getting fucking fired!"

"That's what you're worried about?"

I couldn't breathe. I was going to get fired. I would die in this car, and who by my side, but the most useless person I could ask for. I didn't want Watty. Surely, there was someone else. It was like I had run a marathon and couldn't catch my breath for an entire year afterwards. I

slammed my hands on the ceiling of the car and begged for relief. Relief, until I realized that I was drowning myself in feeling. Submersion was sweet.

“Are you nervous?” I asked Levi in March 2009. I knew he wasn’t, but I wanted him to be so badly.

He shook his head, floppy hair almost batting me in the face. I ran my hand through it. It caught and snagged. Levi held my hand. He was the only person I ever let interlock fingers. Before him, I thought the bumping of knuckles was disgusting, uncomfortable, and an unnecessary way to show affection. “I think you’re nervous,” he accused. We stood in front of Mama and Daddy’s hulking, red house in Massachusetts. I wouldn’t call the house in Sudbury my childhood home, but it belonged to my adolescence. It had five bedrooms, a nucleus for family gatherings.

I was nervous for Levi to meet the gang. I didn’t think I was, until my feet refused to walk towards the front door. My toes wanted my fingers to embrace his hand laced in mine for as long as possible. It was Mama’s birthday, which Daddy always overcompensated for by inviting half of her family. She hadn’t been enthusiastic about celebration ever since Chase dipped. I mentally prepared Levi to meet Gramps (a man who truly didn’t think he was balding), Aunt Meggie (the overly emotional drunk who shared too much with strangers), and at least three cousins in the mix (all of which were boys between the ages of eighteen and thirty). He was prepared. I made him a slideshow just to be sure of it. It hardly mattered though, since almost nothing made Levi sweat. I envied him.

“What’s for dinner later?” he asked, always hungry.

“Dunno. Mom usually makes chicken parm when Gramps is here because he’s as picky as a second grader.”

“Dope.”

The front door of the house blew open, and Chelsea nearly busted her ass running out to greet me. She threw her arms around me. It was always awkward hugging her because of how her skin clung so tightly to her bone. “God, it took you long enough!” she squealed, and then pulled herself away to take a look at me, making sure I was real. “How was the drive? I can’t believe you drove from Michigan, you nut job.”

“It really wasn’t too bad! Driving was just an excuse to make Levi listen to my music for thirteen hours.”

Chelsea pressed her fingers to her lips and looked at Levi like she was trying not to scream. She was three years younger than me, still reading novels about love. When I told her I was seeing someone, she filled in everything I didn’t tell her with her own gleeful imagination.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Chelsea,” Levi said, extending a hand. “I’m Levi.”

My little sister pulled both of our arms and said, “You’re gonna have to tell the whole family how you met.” No one wants to hear that. “Oh, I’m so glad you’re both here. Gramps has already brushed his hair so much that his big, bald head is all scratched up, and Duke is trying to rope all the men into going hunting, which is gonna make his mom cry, and we do *not* wanna see Aunt Meggie cry on her third glass of wine.”

“Sounds like a carnival,” said Levi.

“Oh, you betcha. Also, everyone has been asking about your major,” Chelsea said, turning her attention back to me. “They’re too country to know what *sports medicine* is, and they

wanna know why you're abandoning your creative talents." She played finger quotes on the last two words. Levi smirked because he's asked me the same thing.

I hugged Chelsea from the side and said, "I guess we'll talk about it inside."

There was a rush of family members planting sloppy kisses on my cheeks and grabbing Levi's hands like he was already welcomed fully. I mouthed an apology to him, but he made nice with every single kook he came across.

I had to listen to all my female family members lie about how attractive Levi was. He wasn't. His hair fell in all directions, and the curls made it so he would never brush it. His facial hair was uneven, collecting around his chin in a way that made him look like a cartoon villain. His eyes were sweet, but too light. It made him look blind. Levi had a crooked smile that he tried to straighten, and that was the only thing you could see in pictures: his focus on his teeth. His nose was skinny, but the tip crossed the border of the next state over. And above all, something my family couldn't see was the dark trail of hair that ran all the way up his stomach. He wasn't cute, and they didn't have to lie about it because I thought he was the biggest stud in the world.

"Now, tell me what the hell sports medicine is," Aunt Meggie said, her wine sloshing over the rim of her glass.

"Yeah!" Gramps chimed in. "Last I heard, you were doing your drumming. Don't you want to teach the youth?"

"Sports medicine isn't gonna take you around the world," said Aunt Meggie.

I used to want to travel, but it was a desire that became more distant over time. "Well, there's no guarantee that music would take me overseas, Aunt Meggie," I said. I turned to Gramps, who was fixing the four strands of hair still on his head. "I'm not ruling out anything. I'm only a sophomore." I just needed to do something with my hands.

“You’re nearly at the *end* of your sophomore year,” Aunt Meggie clarified. “Don’t you think you should start narrowing it down? Where did you even come up with sports medicine? Doesn’t really seem like you.”

That’s what Levi, Chelsea, and anyone close to me said. Sports medicine didn’t suit me. Chase used to play hockey. Chelsea and I were dragged to every single one of his games, begrudgingly so. It was cold, loud, and I could barely tell which team was which. I didn’t play sports seriously as a kid, and I really only watched soccer every four years for the World Cup. Go team!

Despite his agreement with the outskirts of my family, Levi came to my aid. “Actually, she reads the paper every morning, but only the sports section. She has ever since I met her. Plus, she gets the hardcopy. Not any of that online stuff that everyone seems to be doing nowadays.” That wasn’t true. I read the *New York Times* every morning, but only the sections about art, music, and personal essays. Never did I think about touching the sports section, or any news about New York City. Nevertheless, Levi’s brave lie made me swell. I didn’t hold his hand, but my fingers traced the veins that bulge from his skin. They were so prominent, and I liked pressing down on them, releasing, and watching them pop right back up.

I left Levi to fend for himself and joined Mama in the kitchen. All I did was hug her and tell her I hated family reunions. “Your dad pulls them all together because that’s what he thinks I want, and I don’t have the heart to tell him that all I need my two girls,” she said. Then, she laughed and went on, “Well, I have one of them all the time, but you two together is all that matters to me.”

When I returned to the living room, Levi and Chelsea were talking by the piano that nobody played. Seeing the two of them getting along made my face hot with accomplishment. I

knew they would click, but the confirmation was soothing. She laughed a little harder when he spoke, as any teenager would at the attention of a college boy. His shoulders hung loosely. I liked seeing him in my familial sphere. He fit in. Levi made due with any social situation, but I would have been devastated if this was the final straw for him.

The glass of my internal monologue shattered at the sound of Aunt Meggie's oldest son, Trevor, blowing through the front door as the storm he proved to be, time and time again. "Ma!" he yelled. The wine in her system caused a slow reaction time. "Ma, you told Duke that Pop hit you? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I'm not apologizing for anything, Trevor!" she slurred at this point. Aunt Meggie and Uncle Dale were going through a divorce, and the eldest son had a hard time coping. He thought the world of Uncle Dale. But Trevor was thirty years old, and needed to grow the hell up.

Trevor yelled at Meggie for a long while, and I huddled between Levi and Chelsea. Wine splashed onto Trevor's flannel. His beer breath visibly landed on Aunt Meggie's face. Chelsea snickered and whispered, "Levi and I bet on how long it would take for this to explode. He said it would happen at the dinner table, but I called it during cocktail hour." Levi groaned a little, took a five out of his pocket, and surrendered it into my sister's palm. "Thank you," she beamed.

"Duke needed to know!" Meggie screeched. "Otherwise, he'd go on thinking his pop is a good man. I don't want him going off to college thinking that kind of behavior is okay!"

Mama must have heard the commotion because she rushed out, oven mitts on, and put her hands on Levi's shoulders. "Why don't you two take a break from the family. Show Levi to your room, sweetheart," she said to cover up the chaos.

I pulled Levi's arm and dragged him up three flights of stairs. "You have the top floor room? Oh, you must be the princess of the family," he said as we went to the furnished attic; a space all my own.

"Shut up," I said. I took the attic room because I liked the shape of the ceiling. Plus, my window was above the window next to the stove, which meant I could always smell when dinner was ready. We sat on the bed. I leaned up against the headboard while he pushed up on the foot of the bed. Our legs got tangled. "Thanks for telling everyone about the newspaper," I said, "It's a little thing, but it meant something to me. It's almost as though you like me?"

He knocked my knee with his foot. "Scoot over, I wanna take a nap," he announced. I wiggled over and let him fold into my body. My arm draped over his side. His shirt rolled up a little, exposing the thick trail of hair on his stomach. My fingers followed it up and down. "You know," he spoke quietly. "I wouldn't be so tired if you had driven more than four and a half hours like we agreed on." I snuggled up until his hair nearly suffocated me.

We woke up a little later, I'm not sure how long we slept. I woke to the smell of dinner wafting onto the third floor. Levi had a tickle in his throat, I felt it when he rolled over onto the crook of my arm. It wasn't a particularly comfortable position, but he wasn't a particularly generous person to share a bed with anyway. "You okay?" I asked when he rubbed his neck.

"Must be dry up here. Can we get some water?"

He was slow moving down the stairs, and we both couldn't figure out what was wrong. He ended each cough with a tight, short inhale. His health rapidly declined before my eyes, and I wasn't sure how seriously to take it because, through the choking, he insisted he would be fine with some water. I rubbed his back. It was all I could do to help. "Do you think you're allergic to my family?" I tried to make light of his sudden ailment just to keep his spirits up.

“No, asshole,” Levi wheezed, “You know. I’m allergic to—”

Standing at the top of the last flight, looking down at the front door, my nose captured and held a scent all too familiar to me. “Fuck!” I interrupted him and barreled down the stairs three steps at a time. “Mama!” I cried. “Are you making shrimp scampi?”

She jumped at my exclamation, throwing her wooden spoon into the air. “Yes! It’s your favorite, I thought I’d surprise you, but you’re the one giving me a shock! And, silly me, I burned the shrimp. Sorry for the smoke, honey!”

“Stop cooking and throw it out. Get it out of the house, now!” I ran back to the stairs where Levi had sunk into himself, resting his head on bent knees. His face was plagued with red splotches. He had clawed so violently at his throat that his skin turned bumpy with nail marks. I grabbed his wrists. “Epi pen. Where is your epi pen? Upstairs?” I tried to steady my voice to keep him breathing.

“Car,” he choked.

“Why didn’t you bring it in the house, fuckass?”

And through all that, he still managed to crack a smile.

I yelled at Chelsea to go to the car so I wouldn’t have to leave him, but my voice sounded so far away. With each haggard breath he took, my grip on his wrists weakened. His allergy was so bad that the fumes alone could trigger anaphylaxis. I should have told Mama ahead of time, but I didn’t think she would serve shellfish when Gramps was visiting. I couldn’t stop thinking of excuses for myself, and I felt like I was about to fall backwards down the stairs. Levi’s lips turned purple as his throat swelled. All it took was one damn inhale. I tried to breathe for him, but I couldn’t find my own life force.

His eyes glistened, but they weren't crying. They were red from lack of oxygen. I fixated on his pupils, and how dark they were compared to the cornflower blue surrounding them. Dark. Endless.

I paddled closer and closer towards the cave in the dells. The kayak wobbled a little, acting on the nerves that fluttered around my stomach. I tried imagining what the cave held before entering. An invitation like that wouldn't disappoint. Among the ripples of the Wisconsin River, I heard cracking sounds. Then, the laughter of a child my age.

II

I thought I had finally woken up. That for the first time in the history of mental health, a panic attack provided a release instead of imprisonment. My breath steadied, eyes opened, and found that I was still strapped into the old hatchback. The seatbelt was just to keep up appearances.

The realization that the seatbelt did not cut through fizzling skin made my blood freeze. Panic rooted deeper. The kind of panic that I was in complete control of. What my hands did, I couldn't say for sure. They grabbed at the seatbelt, trying to rip it out of the socket completely. I could go right through the windshield and not feel a thing. I could die, and not feel a thing.

I had to get out of the car. Overwhelming and vengeful, I could smell everything inside of it. A few years back, I had to pick up Chelsea from a party. She violently puked in the backseat and cried all the way home. The smell, though deep-cleaned, seeped out of the seats, as if it never left at all. Dirty rum and artificial strawberry. It was too sweet, squeezing the inside of my nose until I thought my nostrils were going to collapse into themselves. The seats weren't even cloth, where was the smell coming from?

“Stop!” Watty yelled. His hand was wrapped around my wrist.

“Don't touch me!” I didn't want to know what had prompted him to grab me. Not feeling his fingers wrapped around my bone made me want to jump out of my skin. If I couldn't feel it, it didn't belong to me.

The way Watty looked at me, I had never seen someone so horrified. Watson worried, but he never judged. Never looked like he didn't recognize the person next to him. Everyone was his

friend, and no one could startle him. The way his lips parted to show his perfect teeth, unsmiling, chilled me. He didn't recognize me.

I took a breath. "What did I do?" I asked.

He didn't say anything. Moving his hand near my face, I was terrified that he would try to touch me. To my immediate relief, it moved past me and flipped the mirror down. Then, I saw what he saw. My nose was completely scratched up. My nails shredded across the bridge, and blood prickled out from the lines I painted.

The rest of the car ride was silent. The only exception was the sound of my own breath. Every time we hit a stoplight, I thought the other cars would crash into us, but they did not. Regardless, each time, my breath slipped into the back of my throat, preparing for the end.

When we pulled up to the apartment, I said, "I need you—" A breath. "I need you to carry me."

Watty gave me another look that scared the life out of me. This time, it was pity. I was a baby bird that had fallen from the nest. You can't touch a baby bird when it's fallen out of its nest. Maybe I could stay like that for a little while.

He begged, "Tell me what's going on."

How do you begin to explain what can't be explained? The thought that crossed my mind before the panic was Multiple Sclerosis, but coming into reality, I knew I was making excuses for something, maybe making myself suffer. The suffering was conscious. Perhaps, deserved.

"Just, please, Watty? You know I wouldn't ask if—"

He sighed. "I know." I looked into his eyes, trying to locate the Watty that moved in with me a few years back. He wasn't hard to find. But my own reflection had devolved.

We parked on the street outside of our apartment. The building consisted of three apartments, ours being the one on the second floor. It shouldn't have been so daunting, looking up at the stairs that I wouldn't have to climb, yet, every ascending step curdled my stomach acid. "Watty, I don't wanna go up there," I said as he came around to open the passenger's door.

"I promise you, I didn't burn anything while you were at work." He laughed, but wasn't funny. His arms reached out for me. I hated his smooth arms. I hated them more than anything in the world. Arms shouldn't reflect the sun like his did. And his hands were just as smooth, which wasn't fair. Mine were still recovering from the winter. They never fully healed. By the time the dryness would patch up, it would be winter again, and my knuckles would split open. As those arms came towards me, massive like a radioactive being and so, so commanding, I wished more than anything for him to be wearing a sweater.

I felt my breath retract. He stopped in his tracks, and I couldn't tell if I had moved at all. "It's okay, just do it," I said, unsure of which one of us I was trying to convince. *It's just a hug. Just a hug from someone I've hugged many times before. A traveling hug that will take me to bed. A bed for sleeping.*

"Oh, god! Fuck!" I screamed. I almost didn't recognize the voice that came out of my throat. I'd never sounded so scared in my life. With Watty's touch, I lost all sight of myself.

Watty knew better than to drop me at my outburst, but he did match my panic. "What! What is wrong with you?" he said in equal shout.

"I'm limp, Watty! I'm limp!" How was I still speaking when my body was dead?

"No, you're not! Stop yelling!" he seethed, afraid of what strangers thought of him, because, of course, my pain was a reflection of himself. He lowered his voice and said, "You're not limp. Your whole body is tense, mate."

I cried. I cried because I became a puppet of bones, and I couldn't see who pulled the strings. "Get me upstairs, please, Watty. Quickly, please. Oh, god. Oh, god. Please?" All he did was nod, biting his lip. I couldn't pinpoint what he was trying to resist.

My apartment was not my own. When Watty opened the door with a shining 2, I didn't recognize a single piece of furniture. Everything that we bought together suddenly became objects under stranger rule. The light coming in through the window illuminated the glare in the mirror. There, I saw my head attached to my body, but it didn't ease the nothingness of being. The sight of Watty's arms around me made me squirm, unknowingly. I felt my lungs cry harder, wondering where I could feel safe again.

He took me to my room, but crossing the threshold only made me realize that it was the last place I wanted to be. It reeked. Burnt coffee, hair gel, and blood. My bed looked like a casket, and I wasn't ready to cross my arms over my chest.

"Not here! Not here! Not here!" I pleaded. Watty made a noise of discomfort. I wondered if I had hit him. I wanted to.

"Okay!" His voice was so strained like he had finally had enough of me. "Is my room okay? You can sleep there if you want."

Watty's room was hardly anything of himself. A man like him— one would expect him to leave his headshots out for all to see. But, no. Watty's décor consisted of his friends' accomplishments. There was a photo of his sister shaking hands with the director of the Aotahi program at the University of Canterbury. A painting by his best friend for his eighteenth birthday. Too many article clippings of what I had done for my team. I really thought I deserved all the attention I got for my job, but maybe I was wrong. Seeing everything hung up on Watty's wall made it seem like I was strolling through a museum dedicated to someone else.

Being put to rest in Watty's bed was a nightmare. I was wrapped in sheets I couldn't feel, in a bed that was not my own. I was a sarcophagus, hovering above the ground in a haunted tomb. Strangers would come from far, far away to gaze upon the phenomena. I wouldn't look back at them because my focus was elsewhere. And no, not focused on my lack of sensation, but rather, how clean Watty's ceiling was. No water damage. No discoloration. Not even a crack.

With every beat of the high tom, there was a pounding on the ceiling. My roommate, freshman year, was hardly in the room, pretty much living with her girlfriend by the end of April. That gave me all the permission I needed to hit the drum set whenever I pleased. We had the corner room, meaning I only had one set of neighbors to intimidate into ceasing their noise complaints, which they did. I didn't think we had downstairs neighbors, and if we did, I didn't care. So, in my mind, I was free to play at any hour, at any volume, without issue. Without issue, except, of course, the upstairs neighbor, who was incredibly bothered by the high tom.

Growing up with a younger sister and being a younger sister myself really prepared me for moments like these. Agitation warrants reaction. When the upstairs neighbor stomped on the floor to tell me to be quiet, I only played louder.

Every time he did this, the ceiling shook and expelled plastered dust. I constantly noticed new cracks. I knew it would break one day, and that day came at the very beginning of May.

The thing I love most about the drums is that the music has a body of its own. The snare rippled through my fingertips. The cymbal runs circles around my head while its cousin, the hi-hat, tries to keep up. The high and middle toms shake hands with mine, the bass holds the heart, and the floor tom holds us all together. The drums are the foundation for—

The ceiling crumbled right before my eyes. Just a little hole in the center of the room, but it was certainly enough to notice. I ripped my headphones all the way off and heard a guy say, “Well, this sucks.”

“What the hell, man? You broke my ceiling!” I said, centering myself under the hole.

All I could see was a pointy nose and questionable facial hair. His mouth moved. “Now, wait, let’s not get upset. You seem to be forgetting that your ceiling also happens to be my floor. I’ll be forced to basically be in the same room as you when you bang on those things,” he said.

“Maybe you should’ve thought about that before you punched a hole through it.”

“Maybe you should’ve listened to my noise complaints.”

“Well, that was never gonna happen. I’m in three bands, bucko! A gal’s gotta practice.”

He moved his face back so I could see it more clearly. I liked it. I wondered if he liked mine too. The boy grinned, and I felt like I was out of the dog house. “Three bands? How do you have the time?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t!” My neck ached from craning it upwards.

His hand came through the ceiling, or floor, and I reached up to shake it. “I’m Levi,” he said, “Nice to put a face to the noise.”

“Levi? I thought you were Brendan.”

“That’s my roommate.”

“Huh, you look more like a Brendan. It’s okay, though. Levi’s a nicer name. Douchier too.”

Over the last remaining weeks of school, Levi and I dealt with the hole as best we could. He went to bed early and would ask me to turn off my lights when he did because ‘the glow was too dramatic’ to live in the center of his room. I slept late and would shout at him before 10 am

because he sounded like he was wrestling his clothes as he got dressed. We didn't constantly push and pull with each other. Levi once dropped a note down the hole that just had the name of a song. He said the drums in it seemed right up my alley, and strangely enough, he was right. I stood on a chair to pass up a flyer to my last gig of the year, which he actually ended up coming to.

"Shit!" I heard him yell on the third to last day of the semester. I centered myself under the wound and looked up for him. Levi appeared, just as I expected. "Do you have a band-aid?" he asked.

I ran around my room trying to look for one and came up with a small, circular one that falls off three minutes after application. "This is all I got," I said, handing it up through the ceiling. He laughed, nervously. "What? Is it bad?"

"Well, it's not *good*. Nothing I can't handle." He very obviously evaded being seen, which made my shoulders tense.

"Let me see it."

Finally, he stopped pacing and sat down above me. He held his left hand like it would fall off if the grip faltered. "It might need a little more than a band-aid," Levi admitted. He released his knuckles to reveal bloody blisters all along his palm. Each one had a personality, a different shape and texture. They were quite lovely. "I have a diorama due for my Fluvial Ecosystems course like I'm in fourth grade or something. I just burnt the balls out of my hand while using the hot glue gun, and now, I'm thinking I might not be able to finish my final."

"I don't think a fourth grader would know what the hell *fluvial* is, but forget it," I mumbled. The more I looked at him, the more I saw. His eyebrows had floated down to his

eyelids. He didn't appear to be in pain at all. At least, not physical pain. Levi genuinely wanted to finish his project, I thought. "I'm gonna come up, okay?" I said, decidedly.

"What? Up here, like... to my room?"

"Yeah, I'll see what I can do about your hand," I said.

Levi's crooked smile traveled into the right hemisphere of his face. "Like you'd know what to do," he disbelieved.

I stood on the chair in the middle of my room and reached my hand through the ceiling. I held his injured one, feeling my way along the blistered palm. "I don't know what to do, but I could at least help you finish your project. You should be able to finish something you care about, ya know?" And when I felt how raw his skin was, Levi didn't flinch.

"Ah! Fuck!" I screamed, my hands burning through their bandages. Searing pain of wounds that weren't there. It was the only sensation I could grab onto, so I held it, unsure of where the phantom burns came from.

I couldn't feel my body keel over itself upon sitting up in bed. I only saw how my legs were folded under my knees, and how close my face was to my stomach. There was no feeling of discomfort with the way my calf touched the underbelly of my thigh because, for all I knew, they weren't touching at all. I held the air within my lungs and listened to my skin. I called out to my body and did not receive an answer.

Everything around me was terrifyingly still. Every noise stopped for a moment. The sound of the upstairs neighbor's girlfriend's heels on the wood flooring. The light whirl of the air conditioner. Levi humming. No— not Levi. *Watty* was in the next room, going over lines for some cheap audition he had coming up. It all stopped.

I picked my head up, or whatever it was that balanced on top of my neck. Do you have to feel your neck in order to move your head?

Article headlines screamed at me. There's something so disgusting about being called the "darling" of a specific area. I was the "darling" of the sports medicine department in med school. That sickly-sweet title earned me constant abuse from the other residents. I couldn't believe Watty had my award pinned on his wall. Every resident with rich parents got grants, and that's just the way it worked. Mine was earned for linking sports medicine with emergency residency, which apparently no one else was clever enough to figure out in the program. Go me.

With the only sensation manifesting in my phantom burns, I had some kind of control over my left hand. I found myself billowing out of the bed, knees landing hard, by the sound of it. I hated the grant, I wanted no record of it, even if I didn't have to see that photo on a regular basis. Balling up the pain and staring at my disembodied fingers, I launched my hand at the framed photo and tore it off the wall.

Next were the articles that taunted me. I wished my career accomplishments had never been written up in the first place. Now, I was going to be slandered for being the medic responsible for the injury that took TP out for the season.

My hand, a slab of meat on a feeble branch, flailed toward the clippings pinned to the wall. My nails peeled under the pieces of paper and ripped them out of existence. Each rip split my eardrums in two. I couldn't help but scream, like I was ripping layers of my skin off the wall and stomping on them.

"Jeez, you right?" Watty asked, bursting into the room. "Whoa, what are you doing?" He must have seen what I couldn't. I envied him.

“I don’t want these on the wall! I don’t want them in the apartment at all. I want them gone!”

Watty knelt down to meet me. He brushed the hair out of my face, which I hated. “Why?” he asked too simply.

I was crying again and could hardly catch my breath. My guard became flaking, dead skin. I couldn’t answer, but I didn’t have to. Watty imagined my words.

“You always do this. You fail at something once, just once, and then vow never to try again.” Way to psychoanalyze me to my face, Watson. “You don’t know what’ll happen tomorrow. This could all be over... whatever it is that’s going on.”

“Levi burned his hand, and he needs to finish his project,” I told him, eagerly.

There was that look again. The one that frightened me so much because I didn’t know what Watty saw. “Levi?” he asked.

“Wait, what?”

He sighed. “I think we need to get you to bed. Or to a hospital.” I was a lost cause to him.

Not yet. I could still figure it out myself. Shakily, I got to my feet and tried to walk. It was like walking on stilts, and I couldn’t see where the ground ended or began. Every four steps, I fell to my knees, but forced myself up. Exteriorly, I had nothing. On the inside, I felt every bone. Every tiny moving part that I took for granted every day of my life. I never realized how hard they worked.

I pushed myself into the room, feeling like my spirit moved through quicksand. My bedroom belonged to someone else. I didn’t know who robbed me, but nothing was the same as when I woke up the day before.

My uniform fell off my body. The way it gently trickled to the ground made me wonder if my body evaporated.

Who was it? The woman in the mirror? She had bruised skin, and the longer I looked at her, the more bruises appeared. Instead of fading away, they came to light, making introductions to each other, and seeing they weren't alone. I watched the woman's hands tremble, and looked down at mine to see the same. And my skin, all at once, was covered in bruises. A rotten peach.

Something stirred beneath my skin, but I couldn't figure out what it was. Looking at my reflection and seeing that I *did* still have my body didn't make me feel good. Like, when your friend tells you something you did when you were blackout the night before. You don't remember it, but it must be true because you can see fragments. The fragments are just out of reach, as was the skin I saw so clearly. Inside, my flesh trembled against its invisible walls. The same fishy smell, from earlier, wafted into my nose. Bile thickened in my throat. I flung myself over the trashcan just in time to avoid making a mess, but I think I hit my head on the way down. Something knocked loose.

From where I was on the floor, I spotted the shirt I wore last weekend, not last night. Last weekend felt better than last night. It was a revealing garment that Chelsea got me for my 26th birthday, and I was obsessed with the way the cut of the neck traveled past my breasts. Just as easily as my uniform dissolved, the socialite outfit attached itself to me. I knew that my skin was there because of the way the shirt held me all together in the past. That fabric sucked in parts of me I tried so hard to lose. And it hugged me without arms.

There's a difference between being numb and having nothing; being nothing.

As I attempted to get out of the hellscape apartment, Watty questioned me, warned me not to go anywhere. He thought he could control my body.

I heard something strange in his voice. Why hadn't I heard it before? Watty moved to New York from New Zealand, but almost every hint of his accent was gone. I remember he used to have it, when we first moved in together, I swear it was still around. When did it leave?

“And besides, I should wait by the phone in case someone calls in a body in the Gowanus,” he said, accentless.

A body in the Gowanus. That was a low blow. Before we moved out of the city, my third-grade science teacher always said he'd toss us into the canal if we misbehaved. I wondered what it would be like to be that body now. Brooklyn has tried and tried to clean it up. Their efforts, while well intentioned, proved to be feeble in the arms of the Gowanus. The water, so sickly brown, and thick with rotten stench. It's where everything good goes to die and everything putrid goes to thrive. My body, gowned in algae lace, swollen with decomposition. Fellow dead, bloated fish, caught in the tangles of my hair. What a sight to see. But, I didn't think I was meant to die in the city.

I imagined I looked like a doll, broken at the joints. Each step was angrily calculated. My eyes had to tell my feet where to walk, but it was so hard to find my center of balance. My spirit dove into my stomach, into a fog of thick, beating flesh. I couldn't see a thing down there. The hands of my soul blindly swam through my anatomy, but swollen organs gave false hope, giving leeway to my search, only to greedily fold over my knuckles. My exploration came to a halt.

In my rage and confusion, I didn't remember the excruciatingly long walk from my bedroom to the top of the stairs. All my focus narrowed into simply making my body work. When I could take a break from that, I was looking down at the daunting steps, wondering how I was to make it without injury.

My foot extended, hovered around that top step for a moment, and made contact. I'm not sure what about the stairs disagreed with my ankle, but before I knew it, I had been tossed from the top to the bottom. I watched my legs fly above my head as the floor became the ceiling.

The sounds of my bones fighting fractures, hitting the wood over and over again, I thought I'd never stop falling. I tried to lock on my flailing limbs, but couldn't catch them. Even when all the banging and clashing ceased, I still felt twisted. My knees ached from the tumble. Ached! Pain stung beneath my knee caps, and it was serene! Getting to my feet seemed effortless compared to when my knees were clear of bruises. The pain helped me feel.

The steps I took were still hesitant and clumsy, and, god, my knees burned, but it was so worth it. My ankle, the one that caused my chaotic descent, buzzed with discomfort, like someone held the nail of their pinky finger under the bone and simply poked the flesh. It was agony, but I controlled my limp.

I was about to step onto the stoop, but something caught my eye. The corner of the door frame looked mighty sharp. My toes poked out of my heels, showing how vulnerable they could be to injury. A message was sent to my knee. *Bend, coward.* My knee, so disappointed in me, screeched as the bone scraped against the tight, swollen coat of skin. It turned pale yellow at the force. *Now, push.* I liked directing. My joint released, and like a slingshot, my big toe collided with the corner.

There was an intense throbbing beneath my skin. A crack of the bone transferred the pain down my foot. I walked on it. My power surged into the ground. I felt I could break the cement. My step was a lightning bolt, and I would show Brooklyn just how much of an electrical storm I could be.

It wasn't always weather that shook the foundations of our house. The house in Mass was old and creaky. Chelsea, just ten when we moved, spent the first six weeks sleeping with Mama and Dad. She thought it was haunted. At the age of twelve, I knew I was miles more mature than her, and felt power in knowing the house was not haunted. More importantly, I would not be a burden to Mama and Dad.

I loved exploring the house. The odd cabinets with strange engravings. I loved the way the protruding wood felt against my fingertips. Someone very old must have made the etching because, in my mind, no one cared about birds anymore, but there were two doves on either side of the cabinet.

Mama and Dad left early to take Chelsea to a doctor. I didn't understand why she needed to see one. She was scared, not crazy.

I thought I was alone. Our house had a lot of personality with much to say. It was a chatterbox! Constant leaking pipes, footsteps that belonged to no one, small animals using the rood as a boxing ring. But not one of these sounds made me fear ghosts. What sent a chill down my spine – what made my blood freeze, was the sound of muffled crying. I thought I was alone in the house.

I climbed the stairs, wondering, just for a moment, if Chelsea was right.

It had been a few days since I had seen Chase, with little to no explanation regarding his absence. Sometimes, he'd fight with Dad, and then would crash at a friend's house for a few days. That being said, I did not expect him to be home.

Chase has always been one of those people you could drop anywhere in the world, and he'd be welcomed with open arms, making friends wherever he went. I didn't think I would ever

hear cries flush out from under his door. He sounded miserable, and I feared it more than any ghost. My hand, so small, weakly knocked on the door. Hardly any noise enough to combat choking sobs from the other side. Chase didn't answer. I felt like I should have gone to my room and pretended not to hear anything, but what if he was hurt and had no one to help him? He'd been working so hard.

Cautiously, I opened the unlocked door. He didn't hear me, and I caught him hunched over himself, sitting at the end of his bed with his back to me. "Chase?" I asked. I sounded like a field mouse.

The way he whipped around struck ghastly in my twelve-year-old heart. He was sickly pale. Red bags under his eyes. Red! There was a broken hockey stick on the floor, but I don't think that's what he was crying about. Tears and snot collected under his chin. Chase bit his lip and sucked in through his teeth. "What? What are you doing home?" His voice wobbled.

"Mama and Dad took— are you okay?"

"You can't tell Mom. Don't, please. Don't fucking tell her," he snapped, and I could see every vein in the whites of his eyes.

"Oh," I said.

"If you don't tell her, nothing ever happened. Got it?"

"Um, okay."

You never expect to see your older brother break. Chase was eighteen and strong. I thought he was strong. Seeing him like that was one of the scariest moments of my life. After I promised not to tell, though I wasn't sure what I had seen, he turned back into himself and sniffled. Before leaving his room, and pretending like nothing happened, I quickly went to hug him, just in case he needed it. His hockey arms threw me to the ground as soon as I got mine

around him. A nail, sticking up from the floor, punctured my hand when I tried to break the fall. Chase appeared horrified with himself, and his eyes welled up with more tears. “God, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry!”

It was okay. It was okay because the force was one thing, but seeing him so vulnerable made me so uncomfortable that I wanted to forget it all. I didn’t tell Mama. I didn’t tell Mama, so that nothing ever happened.

Crickets had something for everyone. A rural, barn-like ceiling that allowed me to pretend I wouldn’t walk out to city lights. A huge, open floor where we’d only dance if the drinks made us feel like it was the only option. Live music every night of the week with actually decent and authentic bands with drummers I envied.

My feet stepped out of the cab, and I noticed the blood pool under the nails. Sweet. But no guts. Over the course of the walk, my knees had blown up, each to the size of Pluto at least. My skin was a petri dish for earthly nebulas. A look commanded movement, and I was able to painfully stumble out of the taxi.

My favorite bartender worked on Sundays. And it was *still* Sunday. How lucky was I? His name was Oak because of course it was, and he looked like he killed his own meals and would pick up and ditch everything and everyone to live the rest of his life in Alaska. No, not Alaska. Alaska wasn’t for him. He slid an IPA down the bar for me to catch. I was indescribably thankful for the woman who caught it instead, and gently placed it in front of me. It was an IPA for Spring. Dad taught us at an early age what kinds of beer you drink at particular times of the

year. But did it matter? My skin didn't process Spring, so I could get a stout if I wanted. My privilege was immeasurable!

“Did you have a few before coming in tonight?” Oak asked, “It was Game Day, right?”

Game Day felt like it happened years ago. I, suddenly, wanted the team to dismember without me.

Staring at the glass of golden brew, I realized how hard I'd have to work to consume it. Bandaged hands moved towards the pint, and I signaled a grip to my fingers. I held it like a baby holds a bottle. Where the fuck was my mouth? I couldn't see it. I couldn't detach to look at it from afar. I looked at the glass, saw that it lined up with my cleavage, and took a chance in hoisting it up to my face.

My lips could not grant passage. The glass clashed into what I assumed were my teeth. A sharp piece of a tooth shot to the back of my throat, and slashed as I swallowed. Blood trickled down the stream of my esophagus, pairing uncomfortably with the crisp, hoppy liquid that attempted to ease my suffering. I felt my throat fight the sudden consumption, while eagerly accepting the first nourishment of the day. I could taste every aspect of it. The hops, the slight aftertaste of pineapple, the brewery, and the man who created the flavor. I went on a true journey. A journey that was ripped away from me as I coughed up the piece of tooth.

Oak, along with the rest of the patrons, was horrified. He leaned over the bar and whispered in my face, “Look, we have a reputation here, and I can't show special treatment to the regulars. So, if you're on something—”

“Jesus fucking Christ! I'm not on anything! Three shots. Now. Tequila.”

They appeared in front of me, and I chose to focus on the live music instead of the ghastly glares of strangers. It was bluegrass tonight. The first shot, I sloppily missed my mouth,

which I gathered from the drops that caught in my hair and glistened on my chest. The bass is always the best part of bluegrass. When the smell of tequila burned my nose, I knew I had gone too far up my face, and adjustments had to be made. The drummer was so suave, he exuded the essence of Levon Helm. The third shot landed perfectly. I hated being my own ventriloquist.

“Um, your man is up with the band if you wanna see him,” said Oak.

About a year ago, I made a dreadful mistake that I will continue to make through this night. I went for a photographer. At least his gallery didn't consist of tit after tit, but I vowed never to go for another one. He's the summation of everything I hate in a man, but who am I to resist long hair? The awful part is that I never learned his name. The first time we met, I called him “Thor,” upon instinct, and never called him anything else. I was pathetic, and he reminded me constantly.

I watched him through the glasses hanging from the bar. He glistened with the rhythm of the shine, but I imagined he was just sweaty from all that hard work of pushing a button and making a flash go off.

He must have seen me, in all my sloppy glory, because he sauntered up to me. He thought he was on a runway. “You look disgusting,” he said, and he meant it.

“Seriously, fuck off. I don't need this today.” But I thought about what I could do with him, and my mood instantly shifted. “Backroom?” I asked. Absolutely fucking pathetic.

“Why would I want to sleep with you after you totally blew me off at the party last night? Who was that guy anyway?”

I didn't even remember Thor being there. But I rarely remember him. We hated each other, we didn't rely on one another for anything, but sex. We didn't go to events together, would never think about telling our families about the other, and we were just downright rude.

He liked me because I had money, and he did not. I liked him because I hated myself.

Apparently.

“I can make it up to you right now,” I offered. He looked hesitant, which made me realize how desperate I was. My tongue swelled up as a preemptive fight to what I was about to say.

“Baby, it’s a waning crescent tonight.” I should have been put out of my misery right there.

There was a twinkle in his eye. A smug twinkle that made me want to scoop it out with a spoon. I looked down so I wouldn’t have to meet his gaze and saw his hand on my thigh. Maybe my loss was a blessing. I hated his touch. I needed it so badly. “Well, I always do prefer your body on crescent nights,” he said. Oh my god.

Thor bent down to place me on his back because he liked to make a scene. I don’t know how he got a hold of me, but spatially, my head rested in his neck. I captured my arms and told one hand to grab the other wrist. Once that was secured, he lifted me out of the bar stool. Instantly, my grip, proving weaker than I thought, released and I fell backwards. I squeezed my eyes shut to prepare for my skull cracking, and my brain exploded on the wooden floor of *Crickets*. But there was no abrupt sound. No vibration bouncing off the walls of my cranium.

Hanging. Upside-down. Thor’s hands pinched the pits of my knees. The pain seared to where my joints threatened to dislodge from my sockets. I loved it and wanted to die. One of the guys from the bar got up. Upside-down, I watched him stand in front of me. I had a face full of crotch. “Don’t touch me, don’t touch me,” I pleaded to the zipper of his jeans. My vision moved upwards against my will.

But then everything was stationary, and I found myself wrapped around Thor’s back once again. My body didn’t want me to die. It stayed strong without my help, and my grip had yet to falter. I was alive. As Thor carried me to the backroom, I felt endless. I couldn’t hear his slander,

harshly spat into my ear. I didn't need to dictate every single move. My body was there for me. She knew who she belonged to and she would keep my spirit grounded while I sought recovery!

Slam.

Thor tossed me on the pool table in the backroom. I was a ragdoll once more. The pool balls scattered, fled out from under me. I think I scored. I called stripes.

"You're such an embarrassment," Thor snapped while tearing off my shirt. He took his own pants off because even when I did have feeling, I wouldn't do that for him.

It was the hardest thing yet, to try and find myself in terms of his body. There was an anxiety that coated my bare skin, thinking that I might have to ask him if he was inside me. That would anger him. Thor insisted on going down on me because he liked to "pleasure the woman," but he only did it because that's what the erotic bloggers told him to do. I hated when he did. He needed an anatomy lesson or a map. I couldn't even grasp a memory of what it physically felt like. I couldn't pretend because he had no lasting impression. Fuck, I wasted a year of my life.

He flung me around like I was meat. I was meat in that moment. Thor liked me on top because he didn't feel it was right to look down on a woman. Why did I do this to myself? He licked his lips, and I could feel the breath catch in my throat. He was terrifying. Thor could see all of me when I wasn't completely sure I was there to begin with.

Rhythm. Something I could find in the beat of a drum in my darkest days, but not where my own body was involved. I couldn't look at him, and looking at myself was a thousand times worse. The hair on my arm stood up. I didn't know why. "Wait," I thought I said out loud, but he didn't seem to react. It made me want to jump out of my skin. Oh god, he was touching someone who wasn't me anymore, and I don't know if that's what she wanted!

“I need you to connect with me, baby,” he said as his tongue slithered around his mouth, threatening to get closer. Every single one of his taste buds puffed their own breaths. One of them screamed lunch, shooting warm potato salad into my mouth and nose. I thought your body was a fucking temple! I watched my hand slap him across the face. It left a blotchy print on his freckled cheek. Everything stopped for a heavy minute. The slap commanded silence. I’d never done that before. I don’t know why my body did it without my mind’s insistence. Maybe Thor would kill me. His gaze went straight to my tongue, making my mouth swell with saliva. And then, he grinned, and it seemed I would live to see another mistake. “That’s not what I meant,” he said, “But I liked it.”

My vision was knocked left and right. Forcefully, I was looking down on him. He was still so intimidating while giving me the permission to take control.

A scream tore up my throat, shredding the walls of my esophagus, and the previous taste of blood bubbled up with it. There was a pain unlike anything I’d ever felt. All of my organs were on fire. They were on the verge of fizzling out of existence. I was melting from the inside!

And just as soon as the pain entered, it ceased.

“Hey, not so loud!” Thor’s hand flung to my face. I thought maybe he was going to hit me, but I didn’t hear a slap. All I heard were my own words, imprisoned by my jaw. The bastard covered my mouth. His knuckles were hairy, but the hair was blond, so did it really count? And when it’s just one tear, sometimes its escape goes unnoticed. But I saw it catch on his knuckle.

As soon as I found stray breaths, Thor’s body shifted beneath me, and then pain shot through my interiority once more. It was like someone shoved a spinning blade up through my legs, chopping up everything that made me human. Could anyone see how brutally I was branded? I wanted to rip my lungs open and scream so loud that the Allegheny Mountains

crumbled in response. But his hand still blocked the passage and all that came out was a violent gurgle in my throat, dropping hints of existence through the small spaces between his fingers. He wouldn't let me scream. He didn't see how he was killing me.

My soul crawled through the rubble of my body and escaped through my mouth, hovering over the scene. I watched my fingers wrap around Thor's golden locks and hold his head up like I had decapitated him. My body would soon be nothing, but a final act of fury gave me strength. My grip on his hair looked like it fired through my spine. I must have used the threat of my demise to go limp in all but my claws. I fell back. I hope I didn't concuss myself.

An intermission. In the midst of chaos, I had the buttery relief of feeling protected. No one could hurt me up here. The movement below was too brash to ignore, but it was a nice breather.

The body pulled and pulled on his hair, hoping to tear off his scalp. Thor's mouth spat hysterically towards the body, but the room was filled with thick silence. The body fought the man, beating him on the outside as he did to her inside. Fighting looked a bit like lyrical ballet from where I spectated. The man's head hurdled towards the corner of the pool table. It happened slowly and all at once. The side of his head crashed into the corner with a splitting sound.

I was shot back into the body without warning.

The watcher's bliss vanished in the confines of skin. I was forced to take accountability for something I didn't feel I had ownership over. But being back in the body, I felt the guilt of a mind trapped inside. I was responsible for the blood running down Thor's ear.

He stormed out of the room, swearing and calling me *psycho*. There were gashes in my knees now, and I wept into the blood and pus. I didn't mean to hurt anyone. I thought I said that

out loud, at least, I wanted to. I didn't want to hurt anyone. It was the voice in my head. Echoing to no one.

It seemed as though I curled into myself because my vision dropped into a place of darkness. Maybe I just closed my eyes, but my breathing was stuffy, visibly blocked by skin or ground. If I held myself closer, I would capture the soul within the skin. I sounded like a beaten donkey or a deer that hadn't been shot properly. Get up. Get up! My ankles cracked as I got to my feet. I never wanted to use them again, but I didn't want to die in the backroom of Crickets, caked in Thor's fluids and insults. My big toe was purple. The same shade of purple as the sky after rain. To feel rain on my skin!

One of the women at the bar came into the room. I couldn't hear what she said to me. Both of my ears were infected. I watched her pick my clothes off the pool table. She dressed me, though I couldn't feel the fabric prick my freckles. I attempted to thank her profusely, but I don't know if the words actually came out of my mouth. The words were charged up until they had to hurdle over my lip. The hair on my arm rested at the sound of skin pushing fabric, up and down, a tsunami of comfort. The woman was rubbing my back. I knew it, and cried harder because it had been so long since I talked to Mama.

The woman offered to walk me home, which I accepted with a warning. *I have trouble walking, and I'm ruining my own life.*

"Can you take me to Levi's place?" I asked. That was wrong. I watched the lights on passing cars to realize I wouldn't be able to reach Levi's. Especially at the hands of a stranger.

I was my own displacement in the world! And I was taking everyone with me!

And I fucking hate the city. It was decided for me on the journey back to the apartment. Each car that moseyed down the street seemed to be going at the speed of light. Each one

brought me closer to death. Had my spirit departed from my body again? Because I thought I was in the middle of the road, but nobody honked at me or swerved into destruction, just to preserve my life.

The streetlights were pieces of sun that had fallen down to earth. My soul was bare, and the light would burn right through me if I didn't retreat back to the body. But the freedom! How far could I go without the body? I wished to be in Alaska. Where family wasn't complicated and everyone was strong enough to brace the cold. Getting used to the smell of gutting fish. I was so close. Nothing goes to waste when you kill it yourself. I remembered dried blood under his nails. He had to do it for everyone in the family since he was the only one with steady hands.

"Is this your place?" the woman asked, snapping me back.

No.

But Watty ran out and down the stairs, letting the gated door slam. The ringing of battling metal pushed me back. I couldn't get up, and I didn't know when I fell, but I let my tears clean my wounds. Diluted blood created channels on my legs, and I let the current take me away.

III

Hi, Doctor. It's so nice to meet you. Have you ever met anyone like me? I'm a doctor too, actually. Not a real one, such as yourself. I'm the kind that wraps legs and gives ice packs to overgrown boys trying to get stoppage time when they perform poorly. Now that I think about it, I'm not sure I'm a doctor anymore. You should have seen what I did a few days ago. All I want is for people to be able to do what they love, and I'm happy to pick them up when they need it. So, maybe, in that regard, we are the same, you and I. But right now, I'm afraid I failed.

I see so many people swirl around me. It's hard to tell who is real and who is just a vision from a memory. During my first visit to the doctor, I swear Dr. Mathis walked into the room, but he was my childhood pediatrician, and I think he passed away many years ago. I saw three doctors in a week, but not one of them was Dr. Mathis.

Watty came with me to each appointment. I made him sit in the room with me, and then, I'd forget I asked him to in the first place. I thought, if he gets the chance to leave, he will, and I'll be left bodiless on the streets of Brooklyn.

The first visit, my regular doc, has a painting of a frothy, December lake. "Take off your shoes, please," lovely Dr. Reed says every time I visit her. My legs swing over the exam table, and my toe dips into the lake. It's not as cold as I expect it to be, but perhaps I'm remembering that summer realm instead of what the painting wished to present. Yes, that's it. I lift my foot back out of the water, algae draped between my toes, warm and rampant.

She left the room to look at some paperwork. My breath quickened at the thought of finally getting answers. It was all so scary. I felt like a kid getting her first shot. The needle is

daunting, but the procedure is speedy. Getting the answers would make me feel like a superhero! Dr. Reed couldn't get back fast enough.

"I can't seem to find anything medically out of place," Dr. Reed said as I dried off from my little swim. She sought my attention, which was so hard to give. Watty, sitting next to me, had to snap his fingers because, at this point, we both knew I'd flinch at the deafening sound. I found Dr. Reed's kind eyes. She said to me, "After hearing you out and examining you thoroughly, I would like to refer you to a neurologist. You may have better luck seeing a specialist."

"Fine."

Watty peered at me, suspicious of my compliance. The truth is, I don't remember Dr. Reed examining me at all. Losing touch has stripped me of being present. If a neurologist can fix me, I'm on board.

"You can stay in the waiting room if you want," I offered him when he took me to Dr. Taylor, the neurologist.

He shook his head. "I wanna see what's going on with you," he said.

I lost track of my limbs, and my hand pinched his shoulder without my command.

"Watty, it's okay. You don't have to do this just 'cuz you—"

"Come on. That's not it."

But there wasn't any other reason for him to be by my side.

I was exhausted, but this doctor tickled my spirit. He seemed understanding, unusual for a male doc. And he had a full beard. If he forgot to shave his neck, it was well hidden. At first glance, I wanted him to go against all doctor-patient laws and tear me apart. Dr. Taylor, please, I

will do anything to feel you. I want to run my fingers through his beard. To get caught in a snag that threatens to cut off circulation in my pinky.

“Please listen to me,” I heard myself beg him. Dr. Taylor nodded, reaching for me. I watched his hand land on mine. If it made any difference, I might have taken hold of it and pressed his hand to my breast.

The motor exam was first. That’s not what I needed, but there’s a process to these things. I didn’t want to mess up and tell him to go straight for the sensory exam if he could catch something fundamentally wrong in the motor area. Dr. Taylor adjusted his glasses and watched my skin carefully. I wished I could see his skin. I bet it was simply submerged by hair. He made a curious, nonverbal sound and said, “I don’t see any involuntary movement in my initial inspection. No tremors. No contractions.” I wanted to trust him, but come on, my muscles aren’t trying to jump off my bones. That much was clear. “I’m gonna have you extend your arms, palms to the ceiling, and close your eyes. There you go.”

Day by day, it was harder to tell when my eyes were open and when they were closed. I see when I’m blind. I can go anywhere.

Shit, wait. I knew what Dr. Taylor was looking for. Without opening my eyes, I just knew what news I’d receive. “Pronator drift, right? I have it?” I asked. If one or both of my arms floated downwards, it’s a heavy indicator of spasticity, which was a hint towards neurological disease; a nice *fuck you* to the muscles some people work so hard for.

“You can open your eyes.”

My arms were right where I left them.

“Negative on the pronator drift,” Dr. Taylor said with a smile. “I’m going to examine your tone now, alright?” Examine whatever you like, Doc.

I watched Watty watch. This was all so out of his realm, I can't imagine how lost he must have felt. He confused easily and hated that about himself. If he didn't understand something at its first display, he instantly became nauseous. As he watched Dr. Taylor bend and twist my limbs, Watty must have had the cramps of a thousand menstruations. Hey, thanks for sticking around.

Flex. Extend.

Manipulate.

"What do you feel?" My desperation vomited. "Assuming we're using the MRC scale, gimme a grade. What is it? Grade three?"

Another dashing smile from the soap opera doctor. "Grade five. Completely normal," he said. Dr. Taylor moved across the room, tinkering with his tools until he pulled out a weighted hammer.

I prefer unweighted hammers. They're classic.

"They say doctors are the worst patients," Dr. Taylor said, as if I had said that out loud, and maybe I had. "What's your practice?"

"Field medic."

"Wow, that is exciting. Swing your legs over the table for me, please."

Regardless of my hammered feelings, we were moving on to the reflex exam. I was sure this would prove my loss. My head floated off my neck, as my confidence seemed to have lifted my spine. I didn't even have to look. Ready for my diagnosis, I—

Dr. Taylor had one dimple on the right side of his face. "Congratulations. Grade two." No way. No fucking way.

“That’s good?” Watty spoke for the first time. “But I thought the other grade— grade five— I thought that was the normal one.”

“We use a different scale here,” and Dr. Taylor went on to explain it to the medically challenged.

I drowned out his voice, my vision bleeding in and out. “Dr. Taylor!” I spat like someone knocked the words out of my mouth. “Can you do the reflex exam again? Just once really quickly. I wasn’t paying attention.”

He did, and this time, I didn’t take my eyes off it. The weighted hammer gently swung towards my kneecap. I braced myself, unsure if my bones would shatter or rest. There was a quiet knock against my skin, and I watched my leg extend and retract. I caught my breath. I thought that I was the one failing to send signals to my body, but it was my body who failed to send the signals to me.

Dr. Taylor repeated the motion on my left leg. I wanted to scream. Squeeze the marrow out of my knees and say, *fucking stop that and show the nice doctor how I can’t feel!*

“A perfect grade two,” he confirmed.

It wasn’t fair. “Skip the upper limbs and just move on to the sensory exam,” I said, “Please.”

He complied because doctors truly are the worst patients. The tuning fork shivered in his palm. I’m a doctor, I should have known that he was going to press it to my skin. I had to do it to countless soccer players. It’s what you have to do when they fake all their injuries. TP. This is the kind of thinking that ruined him. When the tuning fork winked at me, all I could see was one of the old farts I played with in college. He used a tuning fork for his piano because he was in tune with the old days. He’s dead now, and I’m barely here.

“Can you tell me if the fork is warm or chilled?” Dr. Taylor broke me away.

I didn't notice the piece of metal touching my skin at all. The temperature test would show him. No sensation. “I don't know,” I said.

“Your body knows.”

I looked down. Where the metal rested on my arm, the hair stood up all around. “Cold,” I whispered.

“Good!” Dr. Taylor lied when he said he cared? If he listened to me at all, he would have known I couldn't feel it. I don't know what my body thought it was doing— what it was reacting to. Dr. Taylor ignored my voice, holding the fate of my body in his gloved hands. He grinned. “We're moving on to non-discriminative touch. Tell me if you feel this.” He held a cotton ball, and I looked away.

I didn't feel it, but I heard a scratching sound. My fingers itched a spot on my other hand, which I assumed briefly held the touch of the cotton ball. Dr. Taylor congratulated me again. For what?

No matter what, my body betrays me. I've been so good to you. You go on runs, I feed you well, I give you pleasure. It seems that you don't need me anymore, but what are you without me? A machine? A liar. You lie to the doctors and make me out to be the fool. Body, why are you doing this to me? Was it me? Did I let you down? We used to be so close, intertwined without slack. Now, we hang by a thread. When will we separate? Will we ever come back together?

I was mute for the remainder of the sensory exam. My silence proved Dr. Taylor's apathy towards my condition. I've done sensory exams too. The whole point is to ask the patient what

they feel. When I didn't answer him verbally, he went ahead and listened to my puppet body. It was lazy and degrading.

The final test: pain. The only one I was certain of. He held a pin between his fingers. It was delicate, beautiful even. Dr. Taylor held my limp hand. Squeeze it. Collide my knuckles. Crush every little bone. The pin greeted my vein, pushing down until the lines in my skin formed a dandelion around the point. Make a wish. "Do you feel that?" he asked.

No.

"Sharp or dull? Can you feel that?"

My other hand curled into a fist. It catapulted to the other side, slamming into the top of the pin, and breaking skin. A sweet prick, tickling below the surface! "Yes," I said, smiling to the unprepared doctor. "Yes, I feel that."

There was a miniscule droplet of blood, sitting on my hand like the ghost of a mosquito made me his victim.

They left me alone in the exam room. I heard Dr. Taylor give Watty my results. He was my keeper, and I was inept. Like I couldn't handle it. I could handle it, if they gave me the chance. He didn't find anything wrong with me. Because he only listened to my body. I could handle that, if they gave me the chance. What I wasn't prepared for, however, was Watty's reaction behind closed doors. He muffled, "Dr. Taylor, please. There's gotta be something. She's not making this up."

There was nothing, but Watty believes me.

I want us back to normal, but he won't let that happen. Not when he still feels like he owes me.

Watty tip-toes around the apartment as if I am going to break at the sound of his existence because he knows he is not the one I would choose to be quarantined with. If he suggests another movie night, I'll dropkick him, I really will. And I don't know my own strength right now. I could kill him. The next time he opened his mouth, I thought he was going to present me with a horror flick that I've probably seen a million times. He didn't. He told me he made another appointment for me. Another appointment to be laughed at behind my back.

The final doctor was a gynecologist. I'm always a little suspicious of male gynos, and Doctor Ilya is no exception. I mean, he has his patients call him by his first name. Ilya, you're getting paid to examine my vagina, at least have me address you professionally.

My legs were craned out, and when I looked down the canal of my body, I saw Watty, sitting in the room like he was my keeper.

“What are you doing here? Stop looking at it!” I hissed.

Before all this began, that would have warranted a quick, witty reply probably centered around the one and only time we ever “friend-fucked.” Tiredly, all he gave me was an aggravated, “You asked me to come in with you, mate.” I'm sorry, I didn't mean it. And I'm sorry I've made you so tired, Watty.

Dr. Ilya poked his head up from between my legs. I didn't realize he was down there to begin with. I gasped, and one foot attempted to kick him away from me. He caught my leg, laughed, and said, “Whoa, there. It's me, your doctor. Remember?”

My head must have fallen backwards. My vision was to the ceiling. I've never seen a cleaner ceiling. Actually, Levi's grandparents' house in Alaska has the cleanest ceilings I've ever

seen. Levi's Oma kept everything spotless after the 1964 tsunami that wiped out half of Seward. I almost let myself go back there, let my sinuses be cleansed with the dual smell of fish and fresh air. But that would be a reward, wouldn't it? Nothing about this situation deserved compensation. So, I told my body to go limp if it wasn't already.

I heard Watty talk to Dr. Ilya, spouting the sexual symptoms I didn't remember sharing with him. She said that it killed her to have sex. That her insides were on fire. That she separated from herself and had to watch this man move her limbs for her.

"I've never heard of that STD," Dr. Ilya said with a slight laugh that made me small. I saw Watty's face drop, but not because of the insensitive joke. He thought that I was going to lose it. I didn't. I stayed quiet and let Dr. Ilya tell me, once again, that nothing was apparently wrong with me. My world went gray.

Time is certainly funny nowadays. I've concluded that you need touch to feel time. I have no idea how many minutes or hours pass from the time we leave the doctors' office. That used to rest on my skin. Feeling the air shift after 4:00pm, the vibrations of music beating within your body and knowing that each time it gets heavier, you are one second closer to the end of the show. Alaska is the only place where time does not exist. Winter is made up of fleeting sunlight, which gets everyone out of the house for just a little while, but no one counts the minutes. They work with no stopwatch. Chat without checking their phones. There is no agenda. There is simply being, and being with one another.

I don't know how much time passed between the visit with Dr. Ilya and getting back to the apartment. Watty's gaze was shaky every time he looked at me. I could tell he was itching to say something.

"I don't get it," he said finally. "You didn't say a word to that doctor, but you've been crazy with every other one."

I'm just tired at this point.

Exhausting the soul is different from a sleepy body. All I can hold is my soul, and knowing that it is trapped in my skin, that it won't fly away— it's not good enough. I babysit the part of me that has no chance of escape. It's something to do, instead of waste away entirely.

Watty, why are you still here? It's taken a lot less for people to leave.

I hate looking at him. Watty still tries to wear a smile while I'm busy working so hard on keeping myself together. That's all Watty ever has to do. His whole job is showing up in front of some greasy casting crew and smiles. Everything has always been given to him because all he has to do is smile. He's too powerful in that way. I've resented his teeth for so long now, but it never used to be that way. I want to swallow him whole. I want to drive him to the dentist and have them all removed from his mouth. Turn him into a gummy, hopeless man. It never used to be this way, I promise. But, right now, I would like his teeth on string. I would wear the teeth around my neck like a noose.

"Do you remember that time, I think it was junior year, when that doctor with the snake came to campus, and you were the first to volunteer to hold it?" Levi asked. I saw his reflection in the glass. He was almost a part of the exhibit.

I slithered my arms around his waist and rested my head on his shoulder. “Yeah, of course I do,” I said, “I looked fucking fabulous with him draped around my shoulders.”

“And then it crept up to your neck and you said, ‘If it kills me, it kills me!’”

“Yeah, well. I’m a risk taker.”

Do not tap on the glass. There was a young boy disobeying, trying to get a rise out of the imprisoned anaconda. “Hey, little dude,” Levi said, his warm tone of community couldn’t scare the kid. “Please don’t do that. Just think of how lucky we are to be out here while that guy in there is probably sad. It’s like he’s in a timeout, but no one’s here to tell him when he’ll be released.”

The little boy nodded and bit his lip. He stepped back a bit, but dipped his head closer to the glass. “I’m sorry, Mr. Snake. I hope you get out of your timeout soon,” he said.

We watched the anaconda move slowly around its prison. What a beautiful creature. I thought it would be funny to move like a snake. A creature with no arms or legs. It moves purely on rhythm.

Her magnificent scales folded over crunched leaves and mouse skeletons. Somehow, the bones didn’t pierce her rind. My eyes fell to her center. Her tumescent belly squirmed, expanding and deflating in an internal wrestling match. The bulbous sack moved up her body, getting closer to her mouth. Between her fangs, a reptilian tail snaked out from her throat. Her body heaved, upchucking the male anaconda. Sexual cannibalism.

I tugged on Levi’s collar. “Did you see that, L?” I asked, but he was looking away, over his shoulder, towards the back of the exhibit.

“What do you say we get out of the reptile house?”

“Oh?”

He threw his shirt over my head and walked with me blinded. I laughed into his skin, and our joy echoed in the reptile house.

Chelsea started towards the reptiles. I grabbed her elbow and watched her ricochet off my force.

“Can we skip the reptiles?” I asked. It hurt.

She frowned and said, “Is this a Levi thing?”

“Last time we were here together we were apartment hunting. Even though he didn’t wanna be in the city at all. Fuck. I just don’t—”

“It’s okay. We’ll go to the seals. They’re my favorite anyway.” She pulled me towards the center of the zoo. Her dress flew up with the wind, but she didn’t seem to notice. I wanted to punch every man, looking at her like they needed their goddam thirst to be quenched. That’s my baby sister, and we don’t have an older brother to protect us anymore. Dad had been dead for a few years, not that he would even notice the slime of man. It was just me and Mama, the only ones to protect the baby of the family.

I hated the seals. They’re cute and all, but they have no depth. They make funny noises, they make kids laugh, and they do absolutely nothing for me.

“Oh my god!” Chelsea squealed. She bent over the information plaque and followed the words with her finger. “Did you know some seals feed on other seals? Like, once they’re dead. That’s so dark!” It’s dark, but she twinkled anyway. My baby sister.

How many cannibals are out there?

“Why’d you wanna take me here?” Watty asked. His breath fogged up the glass. I couldn’t imagine all the germs he must have contracted with his face pressing against the ghosts of stranger hands.

I shrugged. “It’s like a rite of passage. Any time someone comes to visit, I take them to the zoo. I did my residency here, and my boyfriend at the time came to visit. I brought him here because he loves animals and nature and stuff. When I moved here for good, my sister visited me, and I kind of needed some new memories associated with this place. You just went through a stressful time. You’re out of it now, but you could use some new memories too.”

“Well, thanks.” He winked. Watty’s accent was so thick, I thought one of the zookeepers would mistake him for an escaped yellow-eyed penguin. He squinted at the anaconda. “I don’t know why you like this thing so much. It barely moves.” He tapped on the glass, which made my stomach flip. “Y’know what *I’m* trying to see? Where the hell are the tree frogs?”

Did they not teach the animal kingdom in New Zealand? “Frogs are amphibians, dumbass.”

“Okay? Whatever.” Watty puffed up his chest and bellowed, “Bring me to the tree frogs, m’lady!”

“Jesus Christ, Watson!” I turned to leave, but my feet got stuck, staring at the wall across from the beautiful anaconda. “No, no, no, no, no,” I panted. My chest, congested with fear, forgot what it was to have a steady breath.

Marmalade eyes stared at me from behind glass. My hands trembled so violently, I thought my wrists would snap. Silently, I begged the eyes to hide in its cave, but the creature was unmoving. All I could say to the animal was that I was so sorry. And when there was no inkling of response, I let out a blood-curdling scream.

“You right?” Watty’s voice lingered without the accent.

We were watching a movie or tv show or something on the screen. Every time I space out, I have to check my body to see where it is. I need to see if anyone has their hands on me. My leg was shoved between the cushion and the box of the couch. I used to do that when I had feeling. I liked to feel like I was in a hole. Or that someone was next to me, even when I was alone.

“I was just thinking about our trip to the zoo,” I said, wanting to stir a memory for him. Painful for me, but it made him laugh. I think he deserves to laugh.

He bared his perfect teeth and said, “Ah, the zoo. Pretty much your shrine to Levi. You amaze me, ya know? Obsessed with the animal that could actually kill you, but you have a full-blown phobia of those little—”

“Okay, um, Watty?” It was a mistake to bring it up. He always downplays what I feel. And what I feel inside, well, that’s the only thing I have going for me right now. I didn’t notice that my body curled up. I was hiding. “I need to go back to Dr. Reed,” I told him.

“Yeah? I don’t think so. You totally belittled her when she recommended seeing a therapist. I’m not taking you back.”

“Well, you can either take me to Reed or Levi. Your choice.” And since I knew he wouldn’t dare open the can of worms that is Levi Amsel.

Watty’s face changed to look at me in disgust. I’m not sure what was different. My head fell down to look at my lap where drops of blood splattered on my jeans. I sniffed. Not a nosebleed. I must have bit my lip so hard that I bled. “Watty, you owe me.”

“I see you left your ward outside this time. It seems like he’s doing a lot for you,” Dr. Reed said. Watty is my ward, when I think about it. At least, he used to be. Now, I’m afraid I may be the ward. “What did you want to talk to me about?” she asked, rubbing her gloved hands together.

And I told her. I told her that I think I’ve left some things unresolved. I told her that I didn’t want to see anyone about it, and that I wasn’t sure what I would get out of speaking little bits of truth, but it seemed right in the moment. I didn’t tell her exactly what it was. She’s smart and thought I was speaking of an incident that could have ripped my feeling away from me. At first, that’s what I thought I’d reveal too, but it wasn’t.

I tried to tell her what I thought I knew from the night I lost feeling. Maybe it would resurrect me. They say communication is key, and maybe I shouldn’t have kept secrets for that long. I told her what I thought I knew, but still, I hold nothing in my skin.

The doctors can’t find anything wrong with me, but it’s there. It has a home between my organs and the skin that keeps them all intact. It’s hacking up my insides. Trying to escape, and break all my bones, it is becoming a monster I have no control over. Best to cover it with a blanket and kiss it goodnight. Just for now. But, thank you for listening, Doctor. I have given you nothing.

IV

Actually, I sleep much better now. Before, I would put my head on the pillow at some ungodly hour, probably between two and three in the morning. Really when my body couldn't fake being awake anymore. But it was always some sick joke because once my eyes fell closed, my body would reject sleep. I felt everything. Everything was impossibly irritating. On my back, I felt my belly button all the way through my stomach. On my side, there was constant fear that my ankles could potentially touch, and that was unacceptable. I'd have to spread my fingers out because my half-conscious mind would consider them swollen even though they weren't. And everything, *everything* pulsed through the night. So, actually, I sleep much better.

It's hard to speak. I've never been quiet, or maybe I have been, but I feel a disconnect between my words and my lips. Someone else is pinching my mouth shut. I don't like the sound of my voice when it escapes the clutches. It's like watching a video of yourself and thinking, *is that really what my voice sounds like?* But there is no video. It's just me.

Every morning, Watty brings me a cup of coffee, which is mostly milk. That's it; coffee flavored milk. I used to drink it black, but, now, it's too much. I can only eat every three days or so. Everything is so heightened that taste becomes exhausting. It's a horrendous cycle I've developed. I get so hungry that I feel like my bones will break at the touch, and then I bark at Watty to fetch whatever I want. I'm sorry, Watty. I don't mean to be so demanding. I just get so hungry! Poor Watty has to scrape the food out from under my nails. My throat is raw from the force of my feast. My tongue tires. I blister. Then, I can't eat for three days. God, I get hungry.

It hasn't been that long since the loss. Three and a half weeks, maybe. I rest so much, but for what? I don't have a job anymore, I hardly leave my bed. I am no longer meat. I am a vegetable.

Sometimes, my body remembers that it exists. It thrashes in confinement, trembles with fear that nothing will ever change. These convulsions rattle my head too. I'd find myself screaming, begging for people I couldn't have. Mama has no idea what was going on. I don't want to scare her or let her see me as scared as I am sometimes. Make her think that she, somehow, failed me. Chelsea is halfway across the country in Oregon. She's writing! I'm so proud of her. I wonder what the weather is like in Tioga today, and if—

About a week ago, my body and my spirit really clashed. My fingers clawed at my phone, and dialed a number attached to a person I didn't want to speak to. I think my body thought speaking to him would make my mind feel better, but the ringing made me feel sick. When I heard TP's voice on the other end, I broke down. *I'm sorry for ending your season. I was selfish. I was scared. Please do not forgive me. I don't deserve it.* Because TP is the way he is, he did forgive me. His forgiveness didn't employ me again, but how could I even expect to work with a job that relies on my faithless hands.

I noticed it for the first time on the day I lost feeling. Watty's dull accent has been drained of any essence of joy. And that— that was my doing. Never in his life had he been ugly, but I watched the shift happen every time he brought me food or helped me to the bathroom on really bad days. Dark bags under his newly puffy eyes. They looked bruised. I am overdue for a pretty bruise. I should get moving.

I know he resents me. He looks at me the way Dad looked at Chase if he didn't play well in a hockey game. Like, *I love you, but you are making me carry the weight of the world. And you—you are that weight.* I am so heavy to him. I hope he can still land roles now that I've made him ugly.

He doesn't say much to me either, so I don't have to hear how I stole his accent. Sometimes, I watch my legs pace across the apartment, and Watty will say something dry like, "You decided to walk by yourself today? Wow, what do you even need me for?" I don't decide anything, and he doesn't understand that. If the body wants to walk, it happens, but I'm just along for the ride.

I can't believe I've turned Watty into a bitter being. It's all my fault.

The walls are thin, and I can hear him. He's been on the phone a lot recently. Hushed voice, so I don't have to hear how he talks about me. I imagined him wondering where he could dump me. Who his accomplice is in my disposal. My time in our apartment is rapidly running out. I would go anywhere he wants, but— Don't tell Mama! Please, please don't tell Mama. She doesn't deserve the burden. And Watty, you don't deserve it either, but Mama has already dealt with so much! From here on out, she should only hear news of her girls thriving. I am not thriving. No. My fingers handle everything like I'm practicing my fish gutting. Maybe one day.

He was on the phone again, but it was different from those other, secretive calls. He was talking to his sister. Watty was talking to his sister, and I knew because I heard his accent once more.

The desire to see the words come out of his mouth lifted me out of bed. It was such a nice day. The way the light comes into Watty's room, it gives me a title. I am the queen of dust sprites. They dance around me, twirl between my fingers. When I'm not wearing clothes, they

cover me. I look so lovely at first! The sun gives the sprites an angelic glaze. But then, I realize that the dust is a collection of my decay. That should make me any less lovely. The pieces of myself I thought I gave away, always come back to protect me. Maybe it was the dust that moved my joints to bring me to Watty. He took the phone away from his ear and pressed it to his chest. He looked at me as if I had told him all about the dust. Did I say it all out loud? Fuck, I can't tell anymore.

"I'm busy," he said. I'm not blind. I wanted him to tell his sister I say hi. That everything is going swell on our end. That she should visit soon.

I think I lingered too long because he hung up the phone in total exasperation. I felt like a kid interrupting a parent working from home. "I can't even talk to my sister without you needing something!" Watty snapped. He never snapped. And when he snapped, those Māori tones vanished, leaving nothing but a fickle echo.

"Where did your accent go?" I need to know. "It was just there, and now, it's gone. How is that possible, Watty?" He wanted to know why I cared. I can't vocalize what it got me out of bed all on my own. It was warm and draped over me like the Hokitika summer that I've never experienced myself, but always felt when I first met Watty. I didn't like it because I embrace the cold, but now that the warmth is forever gone, it was nice to have a taste of it. Even just for a moment. Even if I was the one to cut that moment short.

He rubbed his hands on his face. They were dry. So dry, but it's spring! Oh my god, he's been washing them too much. He thinks I'm contagious.

"I'm not contagious!" I screeched. My ankle is broken and I am able to walk on it. Pain tastes like maple pie to me. I love it so dearly! Watty gets to stub his toe and say *ouch* while I proceed to rip my toenails off with calloused fingers. They might never be able to scrub all the

blood out from the cracks in the floor. Is that contagious? Every day, I have to wake up and ask for feeling. Sometimes it is given to me through a dream. Mostly, memory is on my side, and I clutch onto it by the lapels. Is that contagious?

My affliction isn't being taken seriously. Watty wasn't doing anything for me. He's self-absorbed, thinking about the ways I could harm him. I would do anything to prove that I wasn't trying to hurt him. Anything.

It was such a nice day, and the way the sun shines through the windows makes the kitchenware gleam. The knives are quite dashing. The reflection winks, over and over again. My feet took me over to the knives, and Watty couldn't care less. *She's a toddler*, I'm sure he's thinking, constantly. My hand swiped the most talkative knife, the one that dangled above the stove and had dove carved into the handle.

The knife seemed comfortable in my hand. It didn't shake or threaten to slip out of the grasp I couldn't feel. It scared me. Why was my grip so strong? It was so determined, and all without an end goal.

I saw how the couch cushions folded around Watty's slender form. If I truly make him so uncomfortable, he doesn't deserve to kick back on the couch. I fumbled over to him, each step making my ankle crack. I tried to separate my spirit and my body because I couldn't tell which one was making me act up.

There was tension between the two of us when I sat down. We both couldn't breathe. And that, I could feel.

I dug the point of the knife into my thigh, ripping the denim strands to show immediate, open flesh. Watson half-screamed, half-gagged. He said some words I couldn't make out properly. The blood gushed out of my leg, but I really didn't think I made that large an incision.

It spilled, and pooled by my crotch, my other thigh blocking it from spilling all over Watty. He puked between his own legs.

He nearly tripped on his own vomit to get me the rags I called for. The way he moved through space made me dizzy. It was selfish of him. *Just sit down. Jesus, just sit down.* Watty became a ghostly figure dancing between flames. His body created doubles as he flailed in and out of my vision. I begged him to stop making it about himself. It didn't stop him from spewing useless words. We screamed at each other, and that effort made the blood pulse out of my skin.

When the blood slowed and dyed all of our rags mahogany in their drying state, Watty's breaths regained normalcy. It calmed my own heart to see him settle. *Enough with the dramatics,* I had the audacity to think after stabbing myself. It didn't hurt, necessarily, but I felt the wound sway in my head.

I lifted the rags off my leg, which the wound rebuked from lack of pressure. The slice where the knife hit was sanctimonious. I looked into the eye of my skin and saw so much! The cavernous echo called to me, inviting me to take a closer look. Quick! Before the flooding! Wet, glistening flesh. It was so plush and taunting. Without second-guessing, I dug my finger into the wound and pinched.

A scream flew out of my throat. Panic was met with pure joy. They shook hands.

But it wasn't enough. Like I was trying to stuff a turkey, I peeled my wound further. Ripping my leg apart to say hello to my bone. My body screamed and cried, begging and fucking begging me to stop. *You're insane! You're fucking psychotic! STOP!*

Alright. I'll stop.

There's nothing to find. Because now, oh, now my apathy poisons pain. I can't classify the feeling anymore. That just takes all the fun out of it.

I didn't feel the rain on my skin as I stuck my arm out the bedroom window. It was my favorite thing about living in Massachusetts. Whenever it rained, the frogs sang, and the crickets cheered, and even the rabbits got their fur wet. I tried to be with them. But at 5am, in June, the world was already light, and I couldn't feel the rain that poured.

"You're awake?" My door cracked open, and Chelsea poked her head through. I nodded, gesturing her in. She sat next to me, skittishly touching her hair. "I don't know why I'm up," she said, "There's something in the air. Has to be. You've never woken up before noon!"

Mama and Dad had to have been fast asleep. Mama, at least, was dead to the world. Dad would allow this to happen if he was awake.

I pointed out the window, telling Chelsea to follow my gaze. "Oh," she said. I looked away so I wouldn't have to see her romantic eyes fill with tears.

He thought he could leave without us knowing. The misted rain was his cover, shielding him from facing us. I woke up to the sound of him opening the door of his car. The trunk was packed. He'd leave in moments.

The frogs gave him a beautiful send off. Chelsea's sniffing made for a somber duet. "Chase will come back, right? He'll come back, won't he?" she asked with thirteen-year-old hope. I shook my head. "We have to go tell Mama!" She rose to her feet, but I pulled her back down and held her in my arms.

"She'll find out without us," I said. Chase didn't know we'd miss him. If he did, he wouldn't have left.

I gave my spirit CPR. My medical talents haven't left me completely. They reincarnated into a different practice. My spirit can breathe again. I wanted to fly away, but found myself trapped beneath a low ceiling. A steady, rushing sound played all around me. At first, it made me flinch, like maybe someone was performing tests on me. Watty finally had enough and handed me over to science. No, that wasn't the sound at all. I recognized the purity of open roads, the journey from Michigan to Mass. I could almost feel the waves of gravel beneath me, if I really tried to put myself in the passenger's seat. Levi at the wheel.

Opening the spirit's eyes, I was startled to see it wasn't Levi driving, but rather, Watty. He looked tense. I tried to touch his face, try to calm him down, but the spirit slapped her own wrists. I looked for the body because it wasn't in the passenger's seat like it should have been. Backseat. The body appeared to be flaking away. I was curled up, but none of my joints appeared to strain, despite how constantly I injured them to feel. My skin turned gray, and my eyes were scalding red, vaguely looking back at the part of me that detached. It had been so long since I last flew out of my body, I never realized how skinny I've become.

The spirit seemed to ask, "Did I do this to you?"

The body replied, "No."

I know we didn't speak out loud.

My spirit reached out and held the sallow cheek of the body. I don't know if I felt it. Fat globs of tears built in my eyes. One fell like syrup and rested on the bridge of my nose. My spirit soothed the body and took the tear away. It's okay. It's okay. It's okay because it has to be.

A red bandana knotted around my thigh. I wonder what the original color was. Every bump in the road made the fabric pulse with glistening moisture. I haven't healed yet. Maybe

Watty is taking me to the hospital, getting me stitched up. But that couldn't be it. The roads are too constant for us to be in city traffic. No sirens or honking or death threats.

The spirit kissed the forehead of the body, and I promised I would be right back. My spirit floated up to the window, taking note of the fleeting surroundings that Watty sped by. The thick trees, the kind that appear untouched by seasons, blending together in an oil painting. The sun was gone, stolen by gray skies to match my translucent skin.

"You're awake?" Watty's voice was so foreign to me, even though I just spent so long analyzing it. His voice, a thief of freedom, pushed my spirit back down my throat. I blinked into fruition. Our eyes met in the rearview mirror. "I don't really have a choice anymore, ya know? I love you, but I have to live my own life," he said.

My own voice clawed up from the barracks of my gut. "Where are you taking me?" I croaked pathetically. That, I did say out loud because Watty flinched at the sound. I didn't need to ask him. With hours in the car, the timeframe checked out. The vast difference from city to country. I knew where he was taking me. "We're in Pennsylvania?" Perhaps the only place I've ever been able to properly call home.

Watty's thumb tapped the steering wheel. He seeks normalcy. Normalcy until he can fuck off to Hollywood, where he can live the glam life he dreams of. And then, all I'll be is some crazy bitch who paid his rent. I hope when he thinks of me, he doesn't see this.

"Listen, I don't think, for my own sake, I can take care of you anymore. But don't worry, darling," he said, hints of his old tone lingered. "I'm not dropping you off at the nut house or a hospital or anything. I don't think you're sick. Maybe just scared of something? I've tried to be here for you, but this is what's best for both of us. Look at the trees, and go back to sleep, okay? We'll be there in half an hour."

I heard myself cry, and I don't know why. I can feel it all coming to an end. This part of my life... it's falling asleep.

My bleary eyes watched the trees like I was told. Shagbark hickories. I don't know how my eyes could have seen that. Maybe it was just a feeling. Their trunks have been scratched up, folded every which way, to the point where they hardly look like trees anymore. If it weren't for those magnificent leaves, they might have lost their classification altogether.

The trees lean against copious mountains. One almost looked like Huckleberry Mountain at its peak, the most famous amid the locals of Tioga. That wasn't our spot. I used to think they would find us up there, after a blizzard perhaps, blue lips. They'd think us dead, no chance of revival. They would look at our frosted knuckles and say, 'What an awful way to go,' and 'Poor things must have been in so much pain,' but joke's on them because we were alive, just simply resting. We didn't plan to die on Bluff Point.

"See that glacier?" I did. It looked like someone hit pause on an avalanche and never let it play again. We were overhead, but I could see the ripples of the ice that wanted to move so badly, but ultimately tired out. Levi said, "When we were little, my brother and I would sneak out and go to it. There was a story that all the kids knew growing up. Have you ever heard of the Qalupalik?"

"Uh, no? Sounds like an Australian rodent if you ask me," I said. I couldn't even look at him while he was talking. The plane was getting closer and closer to landing, and the view would soon vanish. I wanted to hold every image close to my heart.

Levi held the back of my neck, gently pushing me back towards the glacier. "The Qalupalik is an old Inuit monster. She's almost like a human being, she has the same form and

shit. But her skin is green, her teeth are all jacked up, and she lives in the sea. Legend has it, if a child gets too close to the shore the Qalupalik will take ‘em and drag ‘em out to sea.

“Me and Seb used to go down to the glacier really early in the morning, when only the halibut fishers were awake. Sebastian always told me he wouldn’t go, that it was a bad idea, but I threatened to go without him. He can fuck off over the border all he wants, but he still has those big brother instincts. He would never let me go alone.” His eyes glossed over. I thought I’d be able to see deeper into him, but he blinked. “Anyway, we’d look into the glacier to see if the Qalupalik hid any of the children in the ice.”

I found myself gasping like a kid. “Levi, that’s fucked!”

“I know! But I thought, hey, if we found anything, we could maybe save some folks, right?”

The plane craned to the right, and the glacier was soon out of sight. The feeling of it lingered. Levi’s knee bounced, and I wasn’t sure why. I rested my hand on it, ceasing the incessant movement. “Tell me more,” I said.

He swallowed. I’d never seen him like this. Frazzled. “Well, one day,” he continued, “It was after it rained, and we went down. It was still dark out. Seb was really mad at me that morning because he *knew*, he just knew it was the worst idea ever. But, holy shit, I was such a brat.”

“You still are.”

He flicked my temple. “I really forced him out of bed that morning,” Levi said. He ran his hands through his tangled hair. I don’t know how he didn’t get stuck in there. “We always split up, ya know. So, I’d take the left side of the glacier, and he’d take the right. He stopped

responding to my shouts, and I couldn't find him 'cuz the sun wasn't out yet. I'm telling you, it was the scariest moment of my life.

“But it got even worse when the sun did start to come up. It poked its head over the glacier and fell over Sebastian's body.”

“What?” I said. “What happened?”

“He slipped on some of the rocks. Cracked his head open on the way down. I really thought he was dead. I had like... an emotional blackout? If that makes sense. I don't remember carrying him into town, but that's what they told me. I only remember the smell of blood.”

Levi never told me that before. I could see the darkness under his eyes, how it must have affected him. Sebastian was okay, I knew that. He moved north of the Arctic Circle with a nice lady, and hardly spoke to Levi or their grandparents. Every once in a while, Sebastian called Levi. The conversation would always shake Levi for days, even if they talked about nothing in particular. Like hearing Sebastian's voice haunted him.

“I'm telling you this because, well, you're seeing my home for the first time,” Levi said, resting his head on mine. “It's the place I love most in the whole world. But it doesn't mean it was always easy.”

The plane landed and I didn't even feel its descent. Levi held my elbow as we walked down the aisle. It's an underrated touch. Everyone holds hands. An elbow grab is protective. He said, “Don't worry, I'm not asking you to tell me what happened with the dells. Just that I have my own version.”

“Thanks, L.”

I knew the visit would be heavy on his shoulders. Complicated. But when we walked out of the tiny airport, and I sucked in the 16-degree Alaskan air, I felt like I took my first breath ever. A breath of infancy.

The woman in the mirror appeared once more, but her body was swaddled in bed sheets so no one could see the bruises or gashes. I had to blink to realize she was me. I hate how disoriented she makes me feel.

I heard voices, mumbling, secretive and low. For a moment, I thought they were in my head. My angel and my devil. They're always gossiping about me, those two. Neither of them is on my side. Or maybe they both are. Regardless, I know they were trying to figure out what to do with me. Perhaps they were performing a tradeoff, like splitting a child between divorced parents.

My knee pulled towards my chest. The sheets hummed. The fabric hills sang a familiar song. I looked down at the floor. Ah. Grandma's rug on unpolished, wood floors.

"I think it's best if I leave while she's still asleep," Watty whispered from the kitchen. I knew exactly where he was. Right by the winterbourn plant next to the toaster. I know why he brought me here. I'm glad, I think. My soul is glad, and my body is just used up. "I'll call," he said, "So she doesn't think I completely abandoned her."

I couldn't make out what the other voice said in response, but he's always had a silvery essence that was only reserved for people who would listen to him. If he moved his head a little bit, I'd be able to capture the voice and hold it in my chest. And the smoky tones he saved just for me would run through my veins, returning sensation to my skin.

The door rattled as it closed. The sound used to be somewhat bearable, but so many years have gone by. And he wasn't ever one for replacement. At best, he'd oil the hinged, and the sound would cease for a week or two.

"Charlie," said Levi.

Nothing. No warmth of him saying my name. No feeling.

"I'm glad Watty met you," I said, "He convinced himself that you're dead. Couldn't say anything that would change his mind."

Levi sat down at the edge of the bed. Seeing him felt like seeing a ghost. Maybe he was dead after all. "That's the first thing you're saying to me in four years? Your roommate just dumped you here because he felt like he had no other choice, and that's what you choose to say to me? You know, he said you've lost your mind completely."

"He said that?" My voice was small, mousey. I had been kicked in the stomach with no help getting up.

"It doesn't seem like he knows you very well then," Levi continued. He still didn't look at me. I craved his eyes. "If you were capable of losing your mind, it would have been gone a long time ago."

Levi looks the same. Where I've aged, he's lingered under a timeless veil. It's what he deserves, spending day after day, caring for the forest around him. He nurses every plant, animal, and fungus. The father of Pennsylvania's Tioga State Forest. I remember when we first moved here after Michigan, he became such a public figure that all the regular campers knew him by name, and made him feel like he really provided for the earth. I was so proud of him. I still am. There was a woman who'd come around, every once in a while, with freshly baked bread, thanking him for taking care of the forest she grew up in. She's probably dead now.

I saw the point of Levi's nose poke around his shoulder, debating on meeting me halfway. I hooked on to where the ring used to puncture the side of it and used the invisible line to pull myself up. My body folded over his hunched back, and I breathed in his evocative piquancy. He smells of the lemon tree in the vestibule. The smell sent me back four years, when I could feel every stitch in his knitted shirt.

"I'm sorry," I said, knowing how long it's been. "Is this okay?"

Finally, he looked at me, his hair sweeping across my face. I remember how that feels. "Yeah." He reached around to readjust my grip. Carefully, he swung my body around to put his arm around me. I latched onto the memory of his arm. "I have your drum set in the basement."

"I can't play them anymore."

"Are you sure?"

No. Maybe my body would remember. She's fickle.

We found ourselves laying back on the bed, falling into the routine we left behind four years before. Nothing ever felt like an ending. Just a separation that misted over our lives until we were brought back together. I left him, terrified that my ambition would cause him to run deep into the Allegheny Mountains, where I imagined Chase was living with his own family. But, Levi knew I'd come back. His fingers drummed on my knee, and I could almost, *almost* feel the beat.

"You don't have to," he said, the tones of his voice matching the sun setting behind the clouds. "But do you wanna tell me what's going on?"

My own fingers combed the hair on his face. They were so thankful he hadn't gotten rid of the beard in all these years we've been away.

“I can’t feel anything, L,” I said. Next, my fingers brushed his chapped lips. “Not even this.” It was easier to speak around him. My words were more at ease. I knew they wouldn’t fall to the floor because he would catch them, putting each individual syllable right in his ear. “I can’t feel this, but nothing’s wrong with me,” I said. Our hands connected at the palms, each finger stretching to out-lengthen the other.

He doesn’t know what to do with my condition, but that’s okay. How should he? There’s so much I don’t know about it, and I might never find out everything. But in Tioga, with Levi, I can learn a little bit more.

It took me a few weeks to find my bearings around the old house again. I fell a lot at first because I’d wake up in a bed I had to get to know again, and my feet didn’t recognize the flooring. I thought I was in my apartment more often than not. Levi said sometimes I clawed at his arm in the middle of the night. I made him bleed once, and I cried all morning. He didn’t know why, and then he did.

I re-learned the little things. How long the toilet had to be flushed for before the toilet paper disappeared. The route from the bed to the kitchen, so I could find the coffee pot when Levi went into the woods for work. I used to get startled by the gossipy red-bellied woodpecker that had something to say at all hours of the day. I thought the thing would die by now, but Levi said they live for about twelve years. I’m not bothered by it anymore. I can almost feel the pecking vibrations between my ribs. It’s quite nice.

I take the longest showers I’ve ever taken in my life. Days seem to go by as I watch steaming water turn my skin pink. My skin is so mad at me. It’s what you deserve. It’s what you deserve for not letting me feel.

The water washes out my eyesight, and for a while, I think I'm drowning. I hear myself gasping, convincing myself that maybe I've had gills all along and someone kicked me to land. I scratch and scratch at my neck, thinking of Levi's throat closing, and mine doing the same almost a decade later. He hears me panicking and peels my body out from the shower, and I bury my head in his damp clothes, apologizing profusely for something I can't help. I look in the mirror to see the inflammation I've put myself through. Somedays, I am the cutthroat trout that lives in the river in the backyard.

"I haven't eaten shrimp scampi in nine years," I said one night, standing next to Levi as he chopped onions for dinner.

He laughed. It was gorgeous. I could see it move up his throat. "Did you think you could kill me from New York?"

And wouldn't you know it? I laughed too. I placed a hand on my chest and a hand on his throat, begging to feel the transference. It wasn't physical, but I felt something. Joy. Even if it was just for a moment.

The sound of Levi kissing my neck made me feel something too. The feeling of a memory. Almost six years of neck kisses. The first one being a drunken mistake over a loose cigarette neither of us smoked. The one after that being the promise that it would never happen again. And thousands more to follow. Ones that screamed, *I'd die without this touch*. For a moment, it didn't matter that I couldn't feel it in the present. I had the memories of those thousands of kisses, tattooed on my skin.

Then, his voice melted in my ear. "I haven't raised turtles in nine years either."

Watty always mocked me for my fear. Levi gave away his pets for my phobia. Turtles aren't scary. But what some humans can do to animals—

“I love you,” I said, “I’m sorry I left. I’m sorry it took me so long to get back here.”

The knife in Levi’s hand stopped chopping. The light from the window above the sink caught his cheek, darkened it as the clouds moved in. Thunder was coming. I wanted to feel the house shake. Levi looked at me like I was an imposter, my soul wearing my skin as a costume. We never talked like that when we were together the first time. It was unnecessary. Took up space. Things have to be different now. I used to be able to feel every part of him, and now, with the oncoming storm, I had to try to feel him elsewhere.

And like every word was its own strike of lightning, he said, “It’ll take some time, ya know. But I love you still.”

For weeks, we stayed up all night, catching up on all we missed over the past few years. My medical highlights, and Levi’s encounter with a cryptid cult. The time Levi saved a baby fox from a horrendous storm, and the time I got to watch the newest member of the team experience his first New York snow. Every high-energy concert I’d been too while he saw acoustic sets in the park. We needed every detail. I needed it. Stringing together the parts of our lives we missed, made me temporarily forget the condition of my current living.

On the third week of living in Tioga again, the yellow wallpaper started to wobble. We both wanted to have sex, but didn’t know how. I told Levi about my last experience with Thor. The searing and sizzling of my insides, like I was having an allergic reaction to sex. I told him what I remembered from the night I lost feeling, thinking it would make me feel better. Whole. It didn’t. Levi didn’t want to hurt me like that, but we both wanted to fall into each other’s bodies. When we kiss, I can only feel his tongue inside my mouth. I forgot how nasty the taste is because of how concerned I was with the lips when I had feeling, but when the tongue is all I have to

hold onto, I can taste every single bite of food he consumed over the course of the day. His tongue slipped into my mouth on the night I couldn't bear to keep my body from him any longer.

"I want to," I said while my hands did the busy work.

He pulled away so we weren't sharing the same breath anymore.

"Are you sure?"

I was not. My hands were. They stripped down his boxers while my legs gripped his hips with my knees.

"Wait!" I yelled. Not at Levi, but rather, at the machine acting on my behalf. Everything went still before I collapsed on top of him. "I'm scared," my voice whispered.

I think he ran his hand down my spine. It's what he used to do when I was upset. "Wanna talk about it?"

Yeah, yeah, I do. When you're a little girl, you're not allowed to tell adults what you've seen. You have to keep quiet when everything scares you.

The Wisconsin Dells were supposed to be the most beautiful place on earth, at least that's what they told me when I was ten, on the shuttle ride over to the river. And it was. The sandstone rose up from the current, pinched between the fingers of a giant. How could I not get lost in such mesmerizing structures?

There was no sense of danger as my kayak drifted further and further away from Mama and Chelsea. I liked exploring by myself. No one can tell me how to feel a certain way. Just my purified eyes on unblemished land.

The cave between the dells strung a noose around my neck, dragging me towards its endless dark. The only light showed the dance of the dust sprites.

There it was. The giggling of someone just like me; young and explorative. But the laugh was unlike what I often heard come out of my own mouth. I found joy in playing hide and seek with my brother and sister. A dog chasing its tail. An authority figure tripping on their way into class. An innocent laugh. The sound coming out of the cave was the impish echo of a little boy doing more harm than good.

The current gripped the nose of the kayak and brought me closer without the influence of my paddle. The cave approached to give me the hug of a distant relative, unrequited by my childhood essence. But I have to accept Aunt Diedre's hug, even though she only held me once as a baby. I allowed the cave to swallow me because I knew I would be able to leave.

It wasn't as deep as it looked. My kayak hit a halting rock early in its existence. The boy laughed, disembodied.

"Hello?" I called out.

"Sshh."

The light draped over the boy's face. His skin looked sunken in, holding onto his cheekbones for dear life. His eyes bulged out of the sockets, and his teeth bit his lips so hard he drew blood. He didn't look human at first, but only humans can inflict meaningless pain like that.

It was hard, initially, to see exactly what he was doing. He had something in his hands, his fingers jerking around in half-darkness. When the light extended over his body, I saw that he held a living creature. A yellow-spotted river turtle begged for its own release. The boy giggled as he held the reptile upside-down. I thought that was the worst he could do. Watch the poor thing scramble, slow moving legs, pawing at the air. But that wasn't all he was capable of.

"What are you doing?" I asked. My palms shook with sweat.

The boy seemed to be in a trance, barely recognizing my presence. I don't know why I stayed. Why I didn't paddle away at top speed. "I play," he said. In a startling second, he slammed the turtle down on its back, cracking the shell in thirteen pieces. Each scute disconnected. I clasped my hands over my mouth to stop from screaming.

The eyes popped out of the turtle because the boy squeezed its neck and tugged the body out of the shell. He dug his nails under the cracks he formed and yanked the pieces out of the turtle's skin. Blood splattered on the dewy rocks. I felt it hit my face, and he cackled with every droplet. Like fabric tearing, the boy ripped the spine out with the shell, rippling down the body of the turtle. I cried a victim's cry. The boy laughed and laughed.

My arms felt like jelly, but I mustered as much strength as I could to push myself out from between the rocks. The reverb from the boy's giggle pushed me further. He thought there was nothing wrong with what he'd done.

When the warmth of the sun hit my back, I thought I was free from the cave and everything in it. But an arm reached down from the top of the dell and grabbed under my armpit. I came face to face with a snaggle-toothed, straw-haired woman. Her tongue slipped through the gaps in her teeth. "That's my little boy," she said, "And if you gone run and tell another soul what you seen here... Well, you'd be ruining a poor kid's life." Her breath was hot on my tear-stained face. It took all the strength in my legs to keep me seated in the kayak. The woman's nails continued to dig into my skin like she wanted to reach bone. "And if you ruin my boy's life," she said, "Someone will come and ruin yours."

She dropped me into the kayak. My back scraped along rough plastic of the river crusader. The woman took her bare foot and kicked me away from the cave. Frozen in place, I let the current take control. I felt I was fading away, and the last image I held was a rundown house

above the dells. The boy and his mother must have lived there. I imagined they became one with foreign nature over the years. Removed from first-hand humanity.

The ripping. The tearing of the shell.

The boy could so easily evict an animal from its home. And the home was attached to the animal by blood and bone.

The worst part was turtles can't make sounds of discomfort. Of agony. They have to stay silent through their pain.

It was hard for Levi to comprehend it. He couldn't see through the eyes of my ten-year-old self. But he saw the way my breath caught in my throat, empathizing with the turtle as the boy clutched its wrinkled neck.

Maybe I was always meant to feel this way.

"Don't say that," Levi said.

You're right. I'll learn.

It's twisted. How a human can do that to another soul. Rip out their very essence, and smile when the blood drips from human hands.

I cried the rest of the night. The emotional release from exhaling a memory I'd kept to myself since it happened. The memory was an earthquake in my mind, causing the rocks to build up and cave in. Every single day, trapped between two dells, and not knowing why it's so hard to just tell someone about it. Why didn't I tell Mama or Chelsea? Hell, I could have told Chase before he ran away from our family! But I didn't.

“I think we need to go,” Levi said. He sat up straight because he could feel his spine, and his shirt rolled up so his forest of a happy trail could wink at me before I fell into a full panic.

“You deserve a fresh start.”

My body lifted me up to meet him. “Isn’t this a fresh start?”

He shook his floppy, bushy head. A kiss landed on my bare shoulder, forcing me to recall the memory of moving into this house. We had just graduated from UMich, and Pennsylvania was perfect for both of us. He started his conservation work with the state forest, and I started med school not too far from it. We always met in the middle. With a shoulder kiss.

“My grandparents’ house is empty now,” he said, “What’s stopping us from picking up and moving there?”

To Seward? To where I could breathe?

My skin is yellow-spotted. Algae grows under my nails. My shell is cracked, and I might be dead.

“Get used to the separation,” my body says to my soul.

“I know,” I say, “It’s the only way.”

I hover above the scene, the voyeur of my own sex life. My body is, now and forever, a machine I can’t connect with. She’s flexible and confident, and all without my help. Sometimes, Levi flops over and says, “That was the best we’ve ever had.” And maybe the body agrees, it’s hard to say. Up here, however, I can’t feel what they feel. To feel anything at all, I have to replay and replay and replay memories. While they progress below me, I’m constantly stuck, flipping

through the ghosts of sex past. I love him, but sometimes, I don't latch onto my memories with Levi. The body shouldn't have all the fun, should she?

But sometimes I get clumsy. I fuck up and land on one memory that I spent so long avoiding. It's been years now, so we know how to handle it. I trip and fall into that one night, and even Levi's sweet touch becomes alien. Thrashing and crying, he has to cover my mouth and hold me tight so the kids don't hear. And he talks me through it, detailing the first time I ever broke down in his arms. We call Chelsea, and she picks a memory from our childhood to bind us across state borders. Levi sweeps me up, slow dancing with my body to the song that played at the party where we first got together.

"I'm sorry, I messed up," I always say when this happens. "I just got a little lost."

He's too good. Reassuring. "Let's take a break. We can try again tomorrow. If you want."

It takes so much out of me. I didn't know a soul could feel so worn out. Every time I mess up like that, I think I should just kill myself. Why do I continue to put my family through this? They're so damn willing, so I relax. There would be such a mess to clean up. I wonder what it would be like to shoot myself in the face. Would I feel the moment the shell penetrates my skin? Trace the route it takes through my skull? Levi would have to clean up the blood and maybe one of the kids would find my body. Slicing my neck or my wrists would make even more of a mess.

What's the most selfless way to kill yourself? Someone's always gonna find the body. Sometimes I wish I could kill my body and keep my soul, but what would that even look like? Maybe a Viking funeral for myself. Sorry, I think this way from time to time.

I just take a deep breath. The Seward air is so cleansing. I can smell the tsunami all the way in 1964. It makes me emotional. How happy I can be. Seward, once destroyed, is on the mend.

Every day is the same. Levi goes to work. He brings samples of water from the glaciers and they decorate our house like there's hardly any threshold between the inside and outside worlds. When he's gone, and the kids are at school, I sit at the dock, immune to any temperature. The locals think I'm an anomaly.

Silently, I gut fish. The body has learned a lot since living here. She stabs the fish at the anal fin and carves all the way up to the jaw. Her fingers claw at the creature's insides, scooping the guts out with her nails. My body counts to twelve. Twelve fish to gut, and then she takes me home to rest.

It makes me wonder if I've become the boy from the dells. Or maybe everyone becomes him at one point or another.

It's actually more humane to do it this way. Keeps the fish fresh. With the stench gone, I forget I'm holding a dead creature in my hands. And I'm the one who killed it. Maybe it will blink and tell me it's not my fault.

I hope to be an Alaskan myth. A tale told by somebody's Oma for decades to come. They will fear my body, as I have grown accustomed to, but they won't know that my soul is the one to obey.

My grief has claws. Best put them to use. Just one more fish to gut, and I can go home.